**Stewarding our Failure / Fail Like a Duck**

Mark 14:29-31, 66-72; John 21:15-19

When the Lord gave me the idea to preach a sermon, I reacted just like some of the heroes of the Bible. Like Abraham’s wife Sarah, I laughed. Like Moses and Gideon, I began listing all the excuses—I mean, reasons—that I shouldn’t be speaking on a Sunday morning. I hold no degrees or ordination. I’m a nurse who used to be a financial advisor, and I have little experience with public speaking. I’m a good husband and father, a mediocre musician, and a pretty terrible hockey player. I have had more failures than successes in my life. He said, “That’s exactly why I want you to do this—you’re going to talk about failure.”

So with that positive topic in mind, I’d like to tell you about this woman I know who recently experienced loss because of her own failure. Mela was a single mother of eight—already a colossal responsibility. Mela’s life was, obviously, difficult. She would work all day just to sustain herself and her small flock, and when she returned home, she had to remain vigilant because her home was not in the safest neighborhood. I checked with her, and she quacked her agreement to let me show you a picture of her. [Show slide one, picture of Mela the duck sitting on her eggs]

Don’t let the fact that Mela isn’t exactly human distract you from her plight, because what happened to her has implications for us all. [Tell Mela’s story, with emphasis that she hatched a brilliant plan that was thwarted by things beyond her control.]

There are many reasons we fail in life and in our relationship with God. Some of them, like Mela, have nothing to do with our heart towards God, but involve things beyond our understanding at the time. Some, like Peter’s many recorded failings, may have to do with a lack of planning or practice, or even falling to temptation. However, the most important thing we can do is learn from the failure of people like Peter in the Bible to know how we should then live.

Today I want to focus on Peter’s big failure of denying three times that he even knew Jesus and how the Lord restored him and encouraged him after the resurrection. We will see three principles for stewarding our failures OR three reasons we tend to fail each with an application.

**1.** **FAILURE OF UNDERSTANDING**

**[Slide: Sometimes, we fail due to our lack of understanding of a situation.]**

Sometimes, like Mela, we do not get our desired results because of circumstances beyond our control that we did not understand. We do everything we know to do to achieve our desired results, but in the end, achieve nothing. We arrive at the Stanley Cup Finals, and the opposing goalie plays the series of his life and we fall short despite dominating the run of play. (You’re going to get a lot of sports analogies today. Think of it as a nice change of pace from the usual Lord of the Rings, Princess Bride, Star Wars and Marvel references.) You make the Super Bowl like the Raiders did in the 2002 season, only to face a team that already knows your entire playbook because their coach (Jon Gruden) was your coach last season, and you end up throwing five touchdown passes—two to your team and three to the opponents. And sometimes, what has worked in the past is not the best course for the future.

[Slide showing 1 Kings 17:3-4] Elijah the prophet fled from King Ahab twice in his life. The first time, it was because the Lord told him to do so after telling the wicked king that because Ahab had turned from God, there would be no rain in Israel. After this, Elijah fled to the place where God directed him, was fed by ravens twice a day, and he drank water from the brook until it dried up. After some time passed, the Lord commanded Elijah to return to face Ahab again, and we have the famous showdown at Mount Carmel where Elijah called upon God to rain fire down from Heaven, and he defeated the 450 prophets of Baal. Then, after receiving a threatening letter from Jezebel, Ahab’s wife, Elijah did what he did after his last meeting with Ahab—he fled into the wilderness.

However, this second time God hadn’t told him to do this. Subsequently, Elijah fell into despair because he believed himself to be alone. The Lord’s response to this is very encouraging—God did not condemn Elijah. He fed Elijah again (I think, like me, Elijah’s love language was comfort food), and told him to go to a cave in a mountain forty-days journey away, and Elijah obeyed. There, the Lord caused a mighty wind to break apart rocks, he caused an earthquake to shake the ground, and a fire to burn around him, but Elijah recognized that the Lord was not in those things, but in the still, small voice afterwards.

[Slide showing John 18:10-11] Or look at the example of Peter. Many times in his life, he acted without understanding, but with his heart in the right place. When Peter reached his hand for his sword and sliced off Malchus’s ear, Jesus did not condemn Peter, but instead used it as an opportunity to teach Peter that some things must happen, and that hasty action must be tempered with understanding of the larger picture—a great lesson for the man Jesus would designate to be the first leader of His people after His departure.

When we are faced with a situation in which we have failed because we don’t have a full understanding of the situation, like Mela, or because that’s what has worked in the past, like Elijah, or out of an overabundance of emotion, like Peter, know that the Lord is not angry with you, but wants to use this as an opportunity for you to gain greater wisdom. Ask yourself, “What is the lesson here?” For Mela, maybe it was, “Don’t build your nest near people.” For Elijah, look past the circumstances, no matter how dire they seem, to seek God’s still, small voice. For Peter, think before acting.

**[Slide: Sometimes, we fail due to our lack of understanding of a situation. God is not angry with you—He wants you to learn, and He wants to give you comfort.]** So, Dave, what are the lessons God is trying to teach you through your failures? (Dave should cover about 15% of us here.) Is He teaching you about your own natural tendencies, and to watch out to not default to those? Is He trying to teach you to be patient and listen to His still, small voice despite the raging storm that is your life?

**2.** **FAILURE OF DISCIPLINE**

**[Slide: Sometimes, we fail because of a lack of discipline or practice—we choke.]**

There’s another kind of failure, and unfortunately, it seems to be hard-wired into us, and actually into all animals that have higher levels of thinking. A 2021 study done on trained rhesus monkeys determined that any creature that can evaluate a reward has a tendency to choke under pressure. In the study, the monkeys had been trained to move a computer cursor accurately along a path, and if successful, it would receive either one, two, three, or on rare occasions, 20 banana flavored treats. The small, medium, and large rewards appeared frequently, but the “jackpot” reward of 20 treats only appeared about 5% of the time—and the monkeys knew what they were playing for. The monkeys averaged a 65% success rate on the small reward, 70% on the medium reward, and 75% on the large reward. Want to guess what percent of the time they got the jackpot reward? (Takes guesses) 45% of the time. The miss rate almost doubled when the pressure was on. The monkeys were overly cautious, and often ended up running out of time, causing their failure. They overthought the situation.

I’m going to take you on a trip back through time, all the way back to 1995. [Slide: Picture of high-school aged Bill in choir uniform] [Tell story of choking at high school choir competition, including audience participation and including 30 second testimony] So, we practiced more, and at our spring concert, I nailed it and I have the cassette tape to prove it.

[Slide with Acts 15:36-38] Or, take the Biblical example of John Mark. We don’t know exactly why, but it appears that when faced with adversity while on a missionary journey with Paul and Barnabas, he had a moment of panic and returned home. In a moment of trial, he choked. Because of this, when they next ventured out, Paul, not wanting someone who crumbled under pressure on his team, chose Silas as his partner, while Barnabas, the “Son of Encouragement”, took John Mark under his wing and gave him a second chance. Now known as just Mark, he must have done something right after his trip with Barnabas. Paul mentions him three times in the letters he writes after these incidents. [Slide with Philemon 23, Col 4:10, and 2Tim 4:11) It certainly seems like the relationship was restored, Mark became an important part of Paul’s ministry team, and by the way, he did write one of the four Gospels.

**[Slide: Sometimes we fail because of a lack of discipline or practice—we choke. But with practice, we can overcome our overthinking.]**

So, Dave, if you’ve choked in the past, get some encouragement from a friend and get back on that horse, because practice and discipline are the ways to avoid choking in the future. If you’re afraid of sharing the Gospel with someone because you might mess it up, you’re in good company—but the way to overcome that fear is to do it more often. And if you mess it up—do it again. And again, and again. Practice your 30 second testimony on your spouse, your kids, your pastor, your community group or discipleship group leader, and then put it into practice in your life with actual, live, non-believers. Make the disciplines of faith automatic. These are things like sharing the Gospel, reading the Bible at a set time, consistent prayer, consistent fellowship with other believers—practice them until you perfect them. Then practice more. As Alabama football coach Nick Saban said, "Everybody thinks you practice something to get it right. You really practice it until you can’t get it wrong." Jesus is worth your time and effort.

**3.** **FAILURE OF TEMPTATION**

**[Slide: Sometimes we can lose sight of our objective and fail God because of temptation.]**

(Looks up at slide.) Uh oh. I hope nobody wore sandals, because I have a feeling some toes might get stepped on. However, I want to point out that if you struggle with certain temptations and you know it, you’re in good company. Temptation is something common to all mankind, but 1 Corinthians 10 promises that God will always give us a way out to escape the temptation.

[Slide: Temptation is the intentional enticement of a person, by some bait—usually pride, always self-gratifying—to disobey God’s revealed Word. The [source] may be demonic or fleshly, but the object is always the distortion of God’s world and the defiance of God’s mission in the world-- Dr. Michael Milton] Temptation is defined by Presbyterian minister Dr. Michael Milton as “the intentional enticement of a person, by some bait—usually pride, always self-gratifying—to disobey God’s revealed Word.” Regardless of the source of the temptation, the sin resulting from temptation is placing our own desires above God’s. Whether we’re talking about that first uncontrolled burst of anger, seeing a beautiful person you’re not married to and taking that second look, having that third glass of wine, that fourth slice of pizza (teens are exempt from that one), that fifth time hitting the snooze button on Sunday morning before deciding to skip church for the sixth straight week—when we give in to temptation, we are disobeying God’s mandates on how we should live our lives.

[Slide with 1 Cor 10:13, Matt 26:41, James 4:7] The good news is that we can stop this behavior. We can control that anger, be thrilled with our spouse, and consider them the most beautiful person in the world, moderate our drinking, eat reasonably, drag ourselves to church, and even decide not to share that juicy prayer request because you know in your heart it’s just gossip. The key to doing so, to avoiding this temptation, is to remain focused on Christ. It sounds simple, but if you’ve given the Lordship of your life to Jesus, then you would never intentionally sin. It’s only when we lose sight of Jesus’s plan for our lives that we fall to temptation. The point of the enticement of temptation is to divert our gaze from God’s plan to our own.

[Slide with Heb 12:2] While understanding how not to fall victim to temptation is easy, putting it into practice is incredibly difficult, which is why only one man in the history of the world was able to reject temptation completely. In order to avoid temptation, we must fully, consciously, and without fail fix our eyes on the author and finisher of our faith. It requires the concentration of an NHL goalie watching the puck through the traffic of opposing players and your teammates. If you’ve ever seen an in-game photograph of a goalie, their eyes are always open in an almost inhuman vigilance. Or perhaps consider the steadfastness of the hunter in his stand, waiting patiently, binoculars in one hand and rifle at the ready. Or the attentiveness of a quidditch seeker, eyes darting all across the sky, desperately trying to find the golden snitch. (Darin, that one’s for you.) Each time you keep your eyes focused on Jesus and turn away from temptation, Heaven rejoices, and you should too. So, if you resisted temptation recently, pat yourself on the back for a job well done.

And if you’ve recently given in to temptation, you are in good company. The Bible is filled with fallen heroes who are later redeemed. Noah got stone drunk the moment there was enough wine to do so after landing the ark. Abraham gave into his fear when he told powerful king Abimelech the half-truth that his wife Sarah was his actually sister. His grandson Jacob was such a compulsive sinner that when he grew old and Joseph brought him before Pharaoh, he told Pharaoh, “Few and evil have been the days of the years of my life.” Rahab was a woman of the night. Samson broke all three tenets of his Nazirite vow - repeatedly. David had a man killed to cover up his infidelity. Yet, all of these people are mentioned as heroes of the faith in Hebrews 11, the closest thing we have to a Biblical Hall of Fame. Why?

[Slide: Mark 14:70-72] We look to the example of Peter again. Three times before the rooster crowed, he fell victim to temptation. Three times, he was asked by bystanders, “weren’t you with Jesus?” And three times, he denied that he knew Him. Peter fell victim to the temptation of placing his own safety over proclaiming Jesus as his Lord. When we saw Peter sin earlier in the Gospels, he sinned out of ignorance or out of zeal (or both). When he spoke before he thought, or acted with a sword when words were the answer, Peter rightly took those mistakes as learning experiences. But we see that when he fell to temptation, when he valued his own safety more highly than he valued the truth, when he let down the Savior of the World, the Creator of the Universe, the Kings of Kings and Lord of Lords, he wept. Bitterly.

See, all of the great people of the Bible mentioned above, including Peter, repented of their failures. Many of you know this story-- in Peter’s case, after the Resurrection, when faced with uncertainty about his next move, he first reverted back to what he knew—he went fishing. Some of the other disciples went with him. A man called to them from the shore, and when He found out they hadn’t caught anything, He told them to cast the nets on the other side, and they caught so many fish they couldn’t haul it all in. John figures out that it’s Jesus, tells Peter, and without hesitation, Peter puts on his shirt, dives into the sea, and starts swimming to shore. Typical Peter.

They had breakfast together, and Jesus then took Peter for a walk. Jesus asked him, “Do you love me” three times, which of course mirrors the three times that Peter denied him. Interestingly, the third time Jesus asked, Peter became troubled, grieved, upset, sad, sorry. Guilty. And now we see the truth of the matter-- Jesus did not want Peter partially restored, believing the words of forgiveness in his brain but carrying around guilt and shame in his heart. I believe Jesus did not want there to be any doubt in Peter’s mind or heart that he was forgiven. It wasn’t until that third time asking “Do you love me” that Peter’s outer veneer of toughness was broken, and the emotional mess inside began to leak out.

**[Slide: Sometimes we can lose sight of our objective and fail God because of temptation. But if we repent in our mind and our heart, we are restored to a right relationship with Jesus.]** So, Dave… I also believe that Jesus does not want there to be any doubt in your mind or heart that you are also forgiven. It is easy for us to say, “the Bible says God forgives me for my sins through Jesus’s sacrifice.” But do you carry around guilt in your heart that prevents you from living the joyful, Spirit-filled life that God wants you to have? The thief only comes to steal, kill and destroy, but Jesus came so that you can have life and have it abundantly. The thief uses that guilt to steal, kill, and destroy your joy, and like Peter, allowing the Lord to get to the heart of your problem and cleansing you of that guilt for past sins is the only way to have that abundant joy, and to truly fulfill your purpose on Earth as a part of Gods kingdom.

**4.** **CONCLUSION**

There is another form of failure—willful disobedience to God—that we don’t have time to get into. However, the remedy for that type of failure is a hard road to go down—you can either soften your heart towards God, and go through a process of restoration with Him, or harden your heart to Him, which is ultimately a road to destruction. Since I’m talking to the church, I hope that no one here is continually, willfully disobeying God. If you are, please don’t continue down that path. Instead, talk to me, Pastor Darin, one of the other elders, your community group leader, or your discipleship group.

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So, how does this practically play out in life? Like many folks across America, but I’m sure no one in this room, I struggle with my weight. I have no problem losing weight when I put my mind to it. In fact, I’ve probably lost 1000 pounds in my adult life. Unfortunately, I’ve also gained 1100.

I was taught when I was in high school as a 195 pound offensive lineman that I needed to do more pullups—pull myself up to the dinner table—to better benefit the team. I did go on to play a year of college football, but when I could no longer play, I continued to eat as if I was still playing, and my weight ballooned by the time I graduated college five years later. (That’s another story of failure for another time.) The initial problem was a failure of understanding—I didn’t realize that I couldn’t continue to eat the way I was eating while I was working out six days a week, and not suffer consequences. By the time I gained the personal knowledge that I needed to do more push-aways than pull-ups, I already had a years-long pattern of overeating ingrained into my character.

I was able to drop about half the weight I had gained on my own after I educated myself on better eating habits. However, the progression was slow and intermittent—I would do well for a while, then fall off the wagon because I lacked the discipline to continue on with my plan. I would get to a critical decision point, and I would choke because, frankly, I was miserable trying to discipline myself. So, I’d lose 20 pounds in a month, then gain 15 back the next month. I would reach a critical point where I could continue down the hard, disciplined path, or I could decide to take the easy way out that led to momentary happiness but giving back the progress I had made. Time and again, I choked, and I never made the progress toward health that I wanted to.

Then, one time, I was actually able to do it. I got some coaching and medical assistance to prevent me from choking and spur me forward. I dropped all the way down to one pound below the weight I played at in college. I could move better, I felt better, and I was sure I would be able to live that healthy lifestyle moving forward. But, as life does sometimes, a wrench was thrown into things. I had what I believed to be an asthma attack, and I was sent to a pulmonologist who placed me on big doses of steroids to try to solve my problem. The steroids caused me to quickly gain much of the weight back that I had lost, and before too long, I was back where I started. I was devastated and felt defeated.

I have since made a few half-hearted efforts to lose weight, and one or two sincere ones, but if I’m being honest with myself, I have often just given up. The voices in my head started telling me, “You’ve failed before, you’re going to fail again. You’re hopeless. You may as well enjoy yourself. Have that next slice of pizza. Have dessert.” I sometimes am able to fight off the voice in my head, but it seems overwhelming at times, and I give in to the temptation.

And then comes the guilt. And boy, does it come. The guilt is overwhelming, paralyzing. And I start telling myself that I am unworthy of being healthy, that I am destined to be one of those people who uses their powerchair to go through the drive thru at Wendy’s when I get older. You know the ones. My repeated failures lead me to want to give up and accept defeat.

But in the stillness, after my sin of emotional overeating is finished, and after the self-loathing has reached a lull, I hear the voice that Elijah heard after his personal storm. The still, small voice. The voice that isn’t angry with me, isn’t disappointed in me, and loves me just as I am. And that still, small voice loves me so much that He will not let me stay in my cycle.

That still, small voice asks me, “Bill, do you love me?” **{Slide: Do you love me?]** No matter where I was in my journey, the still small voice always asked, “Do you love me?” And like Peter, there was always a gentle instruction after my answer. When I initially gained the weight during college and the Lord brought it to my attention, it was, “Bill, do you love me? Learn to do better.” When I reached a critical moment and failed to follow through: “Bill, do you love me? Try again.” And when I reach the point in time where I quit caring, and quit believing I can ever overcome this: “Bill, do you love me? Lean on My strength, not yours.” “Bill, do you love me? Listen to My voice, not the voice of the adversary.” “Bill, you love me? Don’t give up.” “Bill, do you love me? You may fail, but I never will.” I have continued to fail, but I know that I cannot stop trying, because the Lord loves me too much to leave me here. I know I’m not defined by my failures, and that tomorrow is a new day, with new choices, new opportunities to follow Jesus, and another chance to succeed.

What is the Lord telling you? What is the answer to Insert Your Name Here, do you love me? That’s between you and the Lord, but I bet that whatever the answer is, it causes walls to crumble, breaks the chains that bind you to your failures, and provides the path forward. Let’s pray.

BENEDICTION

I want to give you a quick update on Mela, our friendly neighborhood waterfowl. She disappeared for a few months after her dead eggs were smashed, but I did manage to catch up with her. [Slide: Picture of Mela the duck with her ducklings.] As you can see, she learned from her mistakes, built a nest far away from people, and has a new bunch of ducklings following her around. Her failure led to her success. May we all learn to fail like a duck.