

I'm sure many of us have followed the college admissions scandal in which parents paid to get their kids into some of our elite universities. You have to wonder what's behind that. Why would a parent think it would be good for their kids in the long run? I wonder if the problem is a false belief that any form of failure is catastrophic. One person, commenting on the scandal, said this, "Young people need to learn that you can fail. It's OK. You'll pick yourself up, and you'll survive." When was the last time you failed? Many of us stopped getting grades a long time ago, but when was the last time you got an "F" on the exam of life? My dictionary says failure is "nonperformance of something due, required, or expected."

Most of us have jobs. Sometimes those jobs demand things we can't perform. We try, but we can't. We live in fear that, sooner or later, someone will find out we're in over our heads. We could also talk about moral failure. As a single person, you set out to stay pure, but you've crossed the line. Or as a married person, you made a covenant, but you've met someone else, and you've crossed some lines you said you would not cross.

Perhaps for you, it's more about spiritual failure. You promised you'd pray for a friend, but you haven't. Or you set out in January to read through the whole Bible in a year, but it's March, and you're still slogging your way through Genesis.

Failure. Most of us take comfort that the Bible is full of failures: Noah got drunk, Abraham lied, Moses murdered, and David committed adultery. Some of us have even come to accept failure as a normal part of life. We recognize our God is a God of grace. We try to be easy on ourselves. "Nobody's perfect," is our creed. But, deep down, we still avoid it. Instinctively, we still desire to soar above it. If someone could write us a prescription for the avoidance of failure, who wouldn't take it?

I suppose there's only one man who never tasted failure. The Bible says Jesus was tested in every way as we are, but without sin. What can we learn from Jesus about how to deal successfully with the challenges life brings us? Last time I looked, Jesus didn't commission us to go out and fail in his name. He sent us out and equipped us with the Holy Spirit and called us to be faithful witnesses. I'm glad we serve a God of grace, but I wonder if grace can help us avoid failure as well as recover from it.

In Matthew 26 Jesus and his disciples have just finished the Passover meal. They sang a hymn and headed for the Mt. of Olives. It would be a long night; probably the longest, darkest night of their lives. In the events that followed, the disciples would experience the kind of failure that turns a life upside down. Jesus, on the other hand, though sorely tested, would stay true to his calling.

Before I begin reading, let me warn you, in this passage, we come to the Holy of Holies of our Lord's life on earth. This is a passage we should approach reverently, on our knees. As we journey through this story, we're going to start by looking at the failure of the disciples, and then we'll come back and look at the faithfulness of Jesus.

The Failure of the Disciples Began with Pride

Look at Matthew 26:31-35.

Then Jesus told them, "This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: "I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.' But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee." Peter replied, "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." "Truly I tell you," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times." But Peter declared, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." And all the other disciples said the same. vv. 31-35

The failure of the disciples began with pride. Jesus says, "You will all fall away." He even quotes the Old Testament Scripture to nail down his claim. Peter, always the first to react, cries, "Never!" Notice Peter sees himself as made of different stuff than the rest: "Even though the rest of these clowns may fall, it could never happen to me. I'll die with you, Jesus!"

Peter voices what many of us feel, but few verbalize. He's a determined sort. He's the guy who sets goals and keeps them. He's the leader who can't tolerate mediocrity. He raised his kids with the motto, "If a job is worth doing, it's worth doing well." Peter had spent his life proving he was different. He wasn't about to stop now. I doubt he even heard Jesus say that before the night was over, not only would he fall, he'd fall badly.

Peter isn't the only one who's proud. Fueled by Peter's self-confidence, they all get in on the act and say the same thing. We laugh at them because we know what is about to happen. But don't forget, they're absolutely sincere. They'd left homes, jobs, and families to follow Jesus. They'd been ridiculed and mocked by scribes and Pharisees. Jesus once said, "The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." I take it these men had spent many nights without a bed or pillow, cold and hungry, because of their commitment to Jesus.

Pride often finds welcome soil in the hearts of those most committed to Jesus. It can lodge in the heart of one who's never had a bad review, never crossed the line with another man or woman, and who makes it through the Bible every year. If the enemy can't get you to fall, he'll get you pat yourself on the back because you haven't fallen. He will get you to think it's your personal mission to show people how it's done. Pretty

soon, though you'd never say it, you believe it could never happen to you.

The Failure of the Disciples Continued with Spiritual Apathy

But that's not all. The failure of the disciples shows itself in another way.

Then Jesus went with his disciples to a place called Gethsemane, and he said to them, "Sit here while I go over there and pray." He took Peter and the two sons of Zebedee along with him, and he began to be sorrowful and troubled. Then he said to them, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me." Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping. "Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?" he asked Peter. "Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." He went away a second time and prayed, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." When he came back, he again found them sleeping, because their eyes were heavy. So he left them and went away once more and prayed the third time, saying the same thing. Then he returned to the disciples and said to them, "Are you still sleeping and resting? Look, the hour has come, and the Son of Man is delivered into the hands of sinners. Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!" vv 36-46

Jesus led them to a garden on the slopes of the Mt. of Olives. It's called Gethsemane, which means "oil press." It was a place Jesus knew well. It was here he'd often come alone to snatch a few moments of solitude and prayer.

Jesus knew Judas would soon come with the authorities. He told all but three of his men to sit while he went off to pray. He pulled Peter, James, and John deeper into the darkness of the garden. He asked them to stay awake; keep watch. But at some point in the following hour, they fell asleep. He came back an hour later, woke them, and picked on Peter. "Peter, are you asleep? Couldn't you watch for just an hour? Didn't you say you'd die for me? Couldn't you even stay awake for me?"

Jesus walked off again. Peter splashed a little cold water on his face, but before long they were all conked out. Jesus came back, and Matthew said, "their eyes were heavy." This time they were so ashamed they didn't know what to say. But Jesus left again, and their shame gave way to more slumber. Again, he returned, "Are you still sleeping and resting?"

The disciples' failure began with pride, and pride always results in spiritual apathy. It's the athlete who won the gold medal and spends the next four years refusing to do the things that won him the gold medal in the first place. It's the captain of the Titanic who fails to stay alert because nothing could bring that great ship down. The proud disciple doesn't need to stay alert; he doesn't need to pray.

Jesus says in v. 41, "Watch and pray that you may not come into temptation." These are commands in the present tense. The sense is "Keep

watching and keep praying..." The proud disciple isn't worried about temptation: "No big deal. I can handle it." Jesus says, "Oh, but you can't handle it. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak." We don't fail because we're not willing; we fail because of our flesh; we're just not made of the right stuff.

The Failure of the Disciples Ends with Desertion

As pride gave way to spiritual apathy, the disciples were primed for a fall

While he was still speaking, Judas, one of the Twelve, arrived. With him was a large crowd armed with swords and clubs, sent from the chief priests and the elders of the people. Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: "The one I kiss is the man; arrest him." Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, "Greetings, Rabbi!" and kissed him. Jesus replied, "Do what you came for, friend." Then the men stepped forward, seized Jesus and arrested him. With that, one of Jesus' companions reached for his sword, drew it out and struck the servant of the high priest, cutting off his ear. "Put your sword back in its place," Jesus said to him, "for all who draw the sword will die by the sword. Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?" In that hour Jesus said to the crowd, "Am I leading a rebellion, that you have come out with swords and clubs to capture me? Every day I sat in the temple courts teaching, and you did not arrest me. vv. 47-55

Judas came with an armed band of Temple guards. He kissed the Master. By the way, this was an insult because a Rabbi was always supposed to greet the student or disciple first. By kissing Jesus, Judas is saying, "I'm your equal." Nevertheless, I love the humility of Jesus as he greets him as "Friend" and encourages him to get on with his charade.

The guards grabbed hold of Jesus, and a fight broke out. Someone cut off the ear of the High Priest's slave. Matthew didn't tell who did it, but we know from Luke's gospel; it was Peter. This was Peter's last effort to prove his loyalty. It's like the final gasp of breath before he finally failed. He was not even very good at it! I mean, I doubt he was aiming for his ear! Our fleshly efforts do more damage than good.

Failure starts with pride, and then pride becomes spiritual apathy, and then, despite the efforts of our flesh, we fail. We have all been there. But, let's look at Jesus. Jesus stood true to his calling in the midst of the severest possible test.

Jesus Experienced Isolation

How do we describe what Jesus endured in Gethsemane? There are two words that sum it up. The first word is isolation. Jesus said, "You will all fall away...strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered." The shepherd will be without his flock; alone. All the more painful for Jesus as he just got done with a wonderful time of community around the table. He was alone physically, but he was also alone in spirit. He walked into the garden and asked for support, but the disciples failed him. His betrayer rubbed salt in the wound by kissing him. Finally, the guards

come and seize him, and the disciples all run like a gang of street kids when the police arrive. Someone has written:

**It was alone the Savior prayed
In dark Gethsemane
Alone he drained the bitter cup
And suffered there for me
Alone, alone, he bore it all alone
He gave himself to save his own
He suffered, bled, and died alone, alone.**

Have you ever felt really alone? There's the loneliness of a widow who loses her husband after 50 years of marriage; the loneliness of a couple who's taken a new job and moved far away from family and friends; the loneliness of the person who carries some private shame he feels he must bear alone. Put all the world's loneliness into a bundle, and it won't match the isolation of the Son of God at this moment. No one else can bear what he's about to bear. No one else understands.

Jesus Experienced Desolation

The second word is desolation. We see it in Matthew's description. He says in v. 37 that he "began to be sorrowful and troubled." The Message says, "He plunged into a sinkhole of dreadful agony." We see it in Jesus' own words: "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death." We see it in his body language. Other gospels say he sweat drops of blood. Matthew said, "he fell with his face to the ground" as he began to pray. Jews in those days stood to pray, but Jesus couldn't stand. He was completely undone. Luther once said, "Surely no man feared death like this man!" There's a mystery here. How could God fear anything? We tend to think of God as insufferable; emotionless. More than any other time, we see here the humanity of Jesus. Jesus, the man, groaned in anguish.

Why was he under such pressure? It was what he called "the cup" the Father was giving him to drink. A few minutes earlier Jesus had placed the cup of blessing in his disciples' hands. Now the Father was pressing a very different cup into his Son's hands; it was the cup of God's wrath. You see, he would take our place. In a few hours, his Father, his Eternal Friend would become his judge. Notice again the words of verse 27, "I will strike down the shepherd..." Who said that? God said that. God will strike the shepherd. The Father will strike his Son. That's why his Son was in such agony. His Father was about to turn against him, and Jesus did not want to go through with it. His whole life had been wrapped up in doing the will of God. He once said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me." Now everything in him screams to be released from the obligation.

Times of testing like this will come for every person who wants to follow Christ. There'll be times you feel utterly alone, abandoned, betrayed, forgotten. God seems light years away. There will be times when your soul is desolate; times when the pain is so great that, though you may not be near death, you wish you were. And though we won't have to bear the world's sin as Jesus did, there'll be times he calls us to lay our lives down for others when it doesn't seem fair. Husbands, you're

called to lay your lives down for your wives. Sometimes that kind of love flows easy, but at other times that's the last thing you want to do. What you really want to do is bail out. These are times of testing. When these times come, how will you stay true to God? How did Jesus do it? There are two things:

Jesus Stayed Faithful Because He was Rooted in Scripture

Look first at what Jesus said at the beginning and the end of this passage. In v. 31 he spoke to his disciples and quotes from Zechariah 13:7: He said, "It is written." And then down in v. 54, he said, "But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen this way." Again, in v. 56 he said, "But this has all taken place that the writings of the prophets might be fulfilled." He's likely thinking of Isaiah 53,

Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. Isaiah 53:4-7

Jesus knew Scripture, and in his time of need, he relied on it. He allowed Scripture to frame his expectations of life. This is the fruit of a man who knew the book, loved the book, meditated on the book and lived the book. When squeezed, what oozed out was Bible.

When we're in the oil press of life, what will come out of our mouth is what we've hidden in our heart. For Jesus that was the Bible. Does the Scripture frame your understanding of life? Our culture inundates us with hundreds of messages each day. Our culture tells us we're basically fantastic people, we deserve to be happy, we're free to run our own lives, our time and money is ours to spend however we wish. And our culture packages these messages so attractively. How will you see through that packaging unless you're in the Scripture?

What will it take for you to go to grow in your understanding of God's word? As a baby Christian, maybe that means you commit to reading the Scripture just 15 minutes a day. Maybe you've known the Lord for a few years, but you still have never read the Bible from cover to cover. Maybe it's time to do it. Some of you have had a Bible in your hands since you were a small child. There was a time you couldn't get enough of it, but lately, it has grown stale and dull. You still open it, but it tastes like dry toast. There could be many reasons for that but don't let it go on forever. Ask God to renew your love for his word. Find a new translation. Start memorizing verses. Go deeper.

Jesus Stayed Faithful Because He Prayed

But that's not all. Jesus also stayed faithful because he prayed. Again, there's mystery here. God prayed to God. God the Son submitted himself to God the Father. He depended on the Father, and his dependence was expressed in prayer. It was a prayer of agony. It came out of his deep sorrow. These are times when it's hardest to pray, but pray he did. I love how Hebrews put it. It states, "During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the One

who could save him from death" (Heb. 5:7). If we were in the garden that night, we'd have heard loud cries and horror-filled wailing from the mouth of God's Son.

It was also a prayer of intimacy. He said, "My Father." Mark tells us he cried out "Abba, Father." This was the most intimate way to address one's father. "Papa" or "Daddy" is the closest thing we have. The Jews never dreamed of addressing God like this, but that's what Jesus did.

This was also an honest prayer. He said, "Take this cup from me." He told God what he wanted. He didn't pretend it didn't matter. God invites you to tell him what you want. Make your requests to him! But there still must be a yielding. Jesus prayed, "Not what I will, but what you will." Jesus wasn't hedging his bets. He was submitting to his Father. His next prayer revealed that. This time he didn't ask for the cup to be removed, but said, "My Father, if it is not possible for this cup to be taken away unless I drink it, may your will be done." In the end, he yielded; he would drain the cup of God's wrath to the dregs.

If we're going to stay true to our call in the midst of testing, we'll have to stay alert for prayer. I find it funny that the thing that kept the disciples from praying was sleepiness. I've found if I ever have trouble sleeping, all I have to do is start praying, and then the sleep comes rather easy. Why is that? Because of the weakness of my flesh. And because the enemy doesn't want me to pray.

Like Jesus, we can pray "with loud cries and tears." Like Jesus, we can run to God and say, "Abba Father." Like Jesus, we can be honest: "Lord, not this cup, take it away." Like Jesus, God will give us strength to yield to him and say, "Not my will but your will be done." Do you know how to pray like this? Let me ask you parents: how will you prepare your kids for the trials, temptations, and failures that will inevitably come their way? Do you pray for them and with them? One day, when your children's life becomes an oil press, will they be able to say, "My mom and dad taught me how to pray in times like these. I saw them do it. I heard their cries; I saw their tears."

The story ends with these words, "Then all the disciples deserted him and fled" (v. 56b). Failure! Moments before, they'd been sleeping rather than praying. Now they were fleeing rather than standing by their Lord. Do you want to know what you're made of, what kind of courage you have? Look at these men. That is you and me. Like them, we're weak and fearful, more concerned for our own well-being than for Jesus.

But, notice, after predicting their failure, Jesus said, "After I have risen, I will go ahead of you to Galilee" (v. 32). In Galilee, they'd meet the risen Christ, and he'd send these failures into the world to make disciples. A few days later, the Spirit would fall on them, empowering them for

that job. You see, our failure isn't the end. Look at these men again a few weeks later, after the resurrection. Look at Peter at Pentecost as he stood before some of these very people, saying, "Let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). Look at he and John before the Sanhedrin, crying out, "Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4:12).

What a difference the presence and power of Jesus makes. I suppose failure will always be part of our experience this side of heaven, but he's able to turn your failure into faithfulness. He'll do it for you if you'll turn from your foolish pride, stay saturated with Scripture, and steeped in prayer. With that you can pass through the oil press just like Jesus did; tempted and tried but faithful to your calling.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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Catalog No. 1434-36FC