

Dealing with Failure

Men do not like to fail. We find much of our identity in our ability to not be a failure. Yet, if we are honest, our spiritual lives are often characterized by the very thing we dread—failure. Our resolutions and our aspirations simply do not align with reality. Habitual sins plague us and enslave us, leading to shame, confessions that are numbingly identical, discouragement bordering on despair, self-loathing, and worse still, doubt—a terrible, nagging doubt that maybe the sacraments don't really “work.” Exacerbating the painfulness of this cycle of failure is the fact that the world puts a premium on success, on winning. There are few labels more humiliating for a man than “loser.” No one wants to be a loser. We all want to win at whatever we put our minds to, and we secretly harbor contempt for those who fail. That is, until we fail ourselves.

The Root of the Problem

At the root of our fear and disgust with losing is a deep down belief that we are better and stronger than we really are. When failure says otherwise, when we are humiliated by our own faults, we recoil in horror. “Surely, I am better than this,” we think. The disappointment we feel at the manifestation of our true weakness can result in anger at both ourselves and at God. But why this anger? It is the voice of pride, and a subtle kind at that. At an even deeper level is a misunderstanding of what a successful spiritual life actually looks like. We think holiness consists in victory, in conquering all our spiritual foes, both internal and external. We believe that the measure of success is our victory, our feats of strength, our boundless determination. But this is simply wrong-headed, and the road to discouragement.

The Healthy Do Not Need a Physician

A priest once described Christianity as a “religion for losers.” And indeed it is. Jesus simply did not come for the healthy and competent and strong. Far from it. “The healthy do not need a physician,” the Master said. The ones who thought they had perfected religion were the Pharisees. Jesus Christ did not come for them, for they did not want him. He came for the broken, the weak, the sinful. He came for the losers. He came for those whom the world—and the proud religious zealots—deemed unfit, incompetent, and loathsome. He dined with publicans and sinners, much to the horror of more sensible folk. He healed the lame and the blind and the lepers, people whom the healthy and whole wanted to shut up and go away.

Even Jesus' own disciples were shocked at his behavior. Talking to a woman, and not just a woman, but a notorious Samaritan woman? Forgiving a woman caught in the very act of adultery? Scandalous. “Shall we tell them to leave?” they often asked. “No,” was always the reply, “It is for such as these that the Son of Man came into the world.” Christ's association with failure was simply offensive to the great ones of the day. How could the Messiah, the conquering deliverer of Israel, associate with such folk? But the truth is that Jesus is attracted to brokenness and weakness. He doesn't admire the strong. He loves the weak, especially those who know it. Those who catch his ear and move his heart are those who cry loudly like Bartimaeus in the Gospel, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” and who won't stop until they get an answer.

God Meets Us in Weakness

Jesus is God with us. He is the ineffable Divinity incarnate. But what is truly shocking is how often Jesus goes out of his way to identify and participate in our weakness and brokenness and pain. He chose to be born to poor parents who lived in a poor village. Not content with a ramshackle hut, he chose to be born amidst the dung and refuse of animals. His entire life was characterized by suffering and rejection, “a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief.” And his earthly ministry ended in the ultimate “failure” of the Cross. Here is the paradox hidden in these facts: Our Savior does not come to us in a position of strength. His entire life was an identification with, a participation in, the brokenness of our humanity. Jesus does not rescue you from drowning by tossing you a life vest while he remains safely on the shore. He rescues you by plunging into the depths of your misery and transfiguring it from the inside out.

Where True Strength is Found

So you have failed again? You are broken? Humble yourself. You should expect nothing less. For you are weakness and inability. Embrace that fact, and thank God that he has shown you a small glimpse of what you really are. For until you reach the end of yourself, until you collapse in a broken heap and despair of your own efforts and strength, until you can cry out in desperation with every fiber of your being, “Son of David, have mercy on me,” God will not rescue you. You see, the spiritual life is not about victory through effort. Our efforts are nothing, and less than nothing. It is true that God requires that we try, that we put forth effort, but always with the knowledge that it is Jesus who will give worth to our labors. His strength is made perfect in weakness. So give up on your own expectations and aspirations. Be content to be nothing, to be a loser, though it be painful to your pride. Struggle on until God sees fit to deliver you. And above all, never forget that God’s mercy is like a stream of water: it always rushes to the lowest place.