

LESSON 6

How to Handle Failure

I remember playing outdoor games during my childhood with the other boys in our neighborhood. We had a rule that superseded all other rules; it was called “the do-over rule.” We used it whenever the outcome of a game did not go quite as well as we had hoped. Today, when I play golf, a similar thing occurs. Sometimes my golf partner would ask, “May I use a mulligan?” A mulligan gives a player a second chance to take a shot.

Most of us have yearned for a do-over or mulligan. Some of you reading this may have belittled yourselves or are even blaming others for your failures. Maybe your hurts stem from having a parent who was never home, a teacher who did not care, a spouse who was unfaithful, a drug dealer who got you hooked, a drinking buddy who did not know when to stop. The list could go on. But regardless of these past and present occurrences, God does offer a second chance. Restarting does not erase the past, but it requires that we deal with the past and move forward. Restarting is about renewing one’s life.

LESSON OUTLINE

Failure Defined
 Common Reasons for Failure
 A New Start
 Key Principles

LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. *Explain what failure is and is not.*
2. *Identify five common reasons for failure.*
3. *Describe how to make a fresh start.*
4. *State key principles to remember when serving God.*

Failure Defined

Objective 1:

Explain what failure is and is not.

One writer made the following observation:

To laugh is to risk appearing the fool.
 To weep is to risk appearing sentimental.
 To love is to risk not being loved in return.
 To live is to risk dying.
 To hope is to risk despair.
 To try at all is to risk failure.

But risk we must, because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing. The person who risks nothing does nothing, has nothing, is nothing. ("Ministry in daily life")

Failure is not determined entirely by the original mistakes we make. Failure is determined by how well or how poorly we respond to our mistakes. Let us look at a few examples. Being a teenage or unwed parent does not make one a "failure." That parent still has the

chance to do right by loving and raising the child in a godly home. Getting hooked on drugs or alcohol does not automatically classify a person as a “loser.” That person still has the opportunity to get help or treatment. A divorce also does not make one a “reject.” The divorcee still has the ability to live a full and productive life as a single person.

Knowing How to Handle Failure

Successful people know how to handle failure. Those who have made significant impact in life have known how to deal with major mistakes and disappointments. To illustrate, Albert Einstein struggled with math as a youngster, but he eventually formulated the famous equation $e=mc^2$. Isaac Newton felt the blow of an apple on his head before articulating the theory of gravity. Michael Jordan failed at making his high school basketball team before becoming a star in college and the NBA. Each of these men worked past their failures and achieved great accomplishments. They demonstrated that it is our response to failure and pain that determines our destiny.

The Struggle of Rebounding

Why is it that we have a hard time rebounding from failure? Here are three biblical reasons why we may struggle and not recover from our mistakes:

- The regularity of a sin. Our sinful nature is a strong force at work within us. We cannot beat it without supernatural help. A classic excuse is, “I just cannot seem to stop!”
- The reproach of our sin. We feel terrible after doing something we know we should not do. A typical statement is, “What I did was so bad. How can I ever start over?” At times like this we need to experience God’s forgiveness and cleansing.
- The result of our sin. Our blunders and mistakes can bring significant pain into other people’s

lives. We must trust that God can restore broken relationships and heal the hurt in our life and in the lives of those we wronged.

Do you feel God has placed you on the shelf because of something you have said or done? God still loves you and still wants you to serve and obey Him. You serve the God who gives second chances, a do-over, a mulligan. Notice what Lamentations 3:22–23 says, “Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”

The Case of Peter

If anyone ever needed a second chance, it was Peter. This inner-circle friend of Jesus denied Him three times the night Jesus was arrested. Peter had promised that he would never forsake Christ, but when the pressure was on, he acted as though he never knew Him. He was weak when he should have been strong. He was a man of broken promises. But was that the end of the story? No. Jesus still had plans for Peter and restored him. Later, after Jesus returned to heaven, Peter boldly proclaimed Jesus as the Son of God. He was willing to go to jail for his faith, and he did. The anointing of God was so powerful on his life that people brought their sick to Jerusalem so that, at the very least, Peter’s shadow might fall on them (see Acts 5:15).

God says to His people in Isaiah 43:18, “Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past.” This is great advice for all of us. It is time to stop dwelling on the past, as though nothing good can happen in the future. Failure does not have to be final. Embrace this perspective: we are never down; we are either up or getting up.

Common Reasons for Failure

Objective 2:

Identify five common reasons for failure.

While there are many reasons for failure, here are five of the most common ones:

Not Planning Ahead

God is a planner. He sets things in motion based on His infinite foresight and wisdom. We also need to plan ahead. Remember, Noah began building the ark long before it started to rain. The old saying—that if you fail to plan then you are planning to fail—holds true. Proverbs 27:12 reminds us of the same truth, “A sensible man watches for problems ahead and prepares to meet them” (The Living Bible). If you and I do not have a plan for our lives, somebody else will. If we are unwilling to make decisions, somebody will make decisions for us.

Over-Confidence

Remember the lesson of the whale—just when you get to the top and start to blow, you get harpooned! Proverbs 16:18 says, “Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall.” Paul also wrote, “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don’t fall!” (1 Corinthians 10:12).

Sometimes we act as though we have “arrived” when deep down we know we are far from it. Part of our problem is the fear of looking like a fool, of being humiliated. An article in a Chicago newspaper reported that the most frequently shoplifted item in America’s drugstores is Preparation H, a cream for people suffering with hemorrhoids. Apparently, many are too embarrassed to admit they have that physical problem, so they prefer to steal the cream rather than face humiliation at the checkout line. This is pride.

Fear

The fear of failure can also cause failure. When we worry about what others will think of us if we fail, we may not even attempt to do something challenging. Proverbs 29:25 says, “Fear of man will prove to be a snare.” One way I have encouraged myself to try new things is to tell myself that I am allowed to make one mistake a week—as long as it is not the same mistake over and over! I will discuss more about this toward the end of the lesson.

Giving Up Too Soon

Often, victory is nearby, but we give up too soon. The prophet Daniel tells of a time when he prayed for days and days without getting an answer to his petition. Then one day, in a vision, he saw a mighty angel who told him, “Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them” (Daniel 10:12). Although God had heard Daniel’s prayer and had dispatched an angel immediately, the angel was delayed twenty-one days due to a great spiritual battle. What would have happened if Daniel had stopped praying on the tenth day, or the fifteenth day or the twentieth day?

Ignoring God’s Advice

The Bible is the owner’s manual for human beings. It contains operating instructions and guidelines for work, home, finances, relationships, and health. It has the best advice in the world. When we consistently and stubbornly fail to follow God’s directions, we will suffer negative consequences. Proverbs 14:12 says, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.” We may try hard to be a success, but we sabotage our own efforts by not doing things God’s way. Remember what James wrote, “If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all” (James 1:5).

A New Start

Objective 3:

Describe how to make a fresh start.

Read the following Autobiography in Five Short Chapters, by Portia Nelson.

I

I walk down the street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk
I fall in.
I am lost ... I am helpless.
It isn't my fault.
It takes me forever to find a way out.

II

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I pretend I don't see it.
I fall in again.
I can't believe I am in the same place
but, it isn't my fault.
It still takes a long time to get out.

III

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I see it is there.
I still fall in ... it's a habit.
my eyes are open
I know where I am.
It is my fault.
I get out immediately.

IV

I walk down the same street.
There is a deep hole in the sidewalk.
I walk around it.

V

I walk down another street.

Successful people know how to turn every failure into a learning experience. Regardless of the failures you may have had in your life, here are three necessary steps to take to begin again.

Step 1—Stop making excuses

As we have already learned, much failure—though not all—is due to poor choices. Almost every problem can be traced to one of four things:

1. Something we did in the past.
2. Something we are doing now.
3. Something we allow to be done.
4. Something we are neglecting to do.

We begin the process of recovering from failure when we are honest and accept responsibility for the problems we have created. We must stop making excuses for our failure. We must stop blaming other people. We must stop seeing ourselves as the victim of our circumstances. Proverbs 28:13 says, “He who conceals his sins does not prosper, but whoever confesses and renounces them finds mercy.”

Step 2—Evaluate Your Experiences

The apostle Paul asked in Galatians 3:4, “Have you suffered so much for nothing?” In this case, Paul was referring to the cost the Galatians had paid to convert from paganism to faith in Christ. Sadly, they were on the verge of being led astray by false doctrine and legalism. Paul hoped that they would be mindful of their past, the price they had paid in becoming Christians, and the need to allow nothing to derail them.

Our past mistakes probably produced suffering of some kind—emotional, physical, financial, relational, etc. It is not enough to remember all the things that have happened in our lives; we must also seek to learn from our experiences. We must avoid falling into the same traps. John Maxwell observes, “Experience is not the best teacher; it is

evaluated experience that teaches us." Therefore, failure actually can be our friend if we learn from it.

So, how do we go about learning from our mistakes? We must ask ourselves three simple questions. The first question is "What have I learned?" It might be helpful to jot down in a journal lessons you have learned from recent failures. List things to do and not to do if you are ever in situations where you failed again. Note the consequences of certain choices you have made. Keep that record handy and refer to it often.

The second question is "What are my assets?" Think about what you have going for you. Do you still have good health? Do you enjoy freedom? Are you mentally sound? Do you have good friends who care about you and will not lead you into dangerous or foolish situations? Do you have the Lord? Do you have a loving church family? Do you have skills, talents, and abilities that make you stand out? The list is probably longer than you think. Even if you think you have completely ruined your life, you really have not. You can start over and build on the assets you have.

The third question is "Who can help me?" In making a fresh start, you need people on your side—good friends, accountability partners, spiritual leaders, a support group. They will offer you encouragement, support, prayer, and guidance. For instance, consider talking to one of the pastors at your church. Do not be afraid to approach pastors; they are there for you! Whomever you go to, be honest about your need to start again. Talking to someone trustworthy helps to diffuse any shame you might be feeling. However, be careful not to discuss your problems or past failures with ungodly people or anyone incapable of helping you.

Step 3—Act in faith

Changing in any area of your life will require faith—the affirmative confidence in God's promises that compels us to take positive action. Jesus said, "According to your faith will it be done to you"

(Matthew 9:29). Jesus' statement is simple but powerful; it means we get out of life what we trust God for.

Read Acts 3:1-5.

One day Peter and John were going up to the temple at the time of prayer—at three in the afternoon. Now a man crippled from birth was being carried to the temple gate called Beautiful, where he was put every day to beg from those going into the temple courts. When he saw Peter and John about to enter, he asked them for money. Peter looked straight at him, as did John. Then Peter said, "Look at us!" So the man gave them his attention, expecting to get something from them.

This crippled man had asked for something and anticipated getting help, but he got more than he expected—God completely healed him. Paul, in Ephesians 3:20, describes God as One "who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us."

So how does one start acting in faith? First, do not be a negative person. If you are depressed, discouraged, and distressed, it may be because you are mulling over depressing, discouraging, and distressing thoughts. The way you think often determines the way you feel. The way you feel often determines the way you act. So, if you want to change your actions, change the way you think.

Second, remember that Christ gives us the victory. Nothing can separate us from His love. Filled with the Holy Spirit, we can resist the devil successfully. We can overcome any problem as God equips us with wisdom, love, joy, and spiritual power.

Third, learn God's promises and claim them confidently! Of course, you will have to read the Bible to learn them. I suggest that you keep a record of Scripture verses that contain God's promises for peace, healing, financial well-being, marriage, guidance, and so on.

Fourth, make a conscious decision every day to depend on God. By now, you have probably discovered that some of your mistakes and failures were a direct result

of depending on your abilities instead of on God's. Some people never seem to learn that they need the Lord. They stumble, fall, and say, "I guess I just have to try harder!" This seldom works. Insanity has been described as doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results. The truth is that if we keep doing the same things, then we will keep getting the same result. So depend on God to help move you in the right direction.

Key Principles

Objective 4:

State key principles to remember when serving God.

If you are a committed Christian and maturing spiritually, it is likely you will not repeat many of your mistakes. However, no man or woman is immune from the possibility of future failure.

Maybe you have been told that Christians should experience only success, and that if you do not, there must be either sin or a lack of faith in your life. The truth is that while God is still in control of all things, life is full of surprises. Not everything you try—even for God—will always produce major accomplishments. Occasionally you may find yourself very disappointed with the outcomes of your efforts. Hence, there are a few important principles to embrace.

Do Not Be Afraid of Failure

The first principle is this—do not be afraid of failure. Sadly, some people do not attempt to do great things for God or even try new things because they fear failure. Maybe they have been disappointed too many times before or have been ridiculed by others. But often things seem impossible because we have never tried to do them.

The root cause for fear of failure is faulty perception; we feel that failure threatens our security and significance. But God has provided a way for us to overcome fear of failure. The apostle Paul writes, "For God made Christ, who never sinned, to be the offering

for our sin, so that we could be made right with God through Christ" (2 Corinthians 5:21 NLT). When we trust in Jesus Christ, we trade our failure for His perfection. God promises to give us strength to face temptation. However, if we sin, we must not hide it or delay dealing with it. Instead, we must go quickly to the Lord and seek forgiveness (1 John 1:9).

For those who fear failure in their endeavors to succeed in life or serve God, remember that the central purpose in the Christian life is not chalking up accomplishments or achieving certain goals; it is faithfully maintaining a dynamic relationship with the Lord and obeying Him. While it is not wrong to be successful, our worth in God's eyes is not dependent on how much we do. We do not have to prove anything to God or others.

Failure Is an Event, Never a Person

Your failing does not make you a failure. All individuals are going to make some mistakes if they are moving forward. The alternative is to stand still and refuse to take any risks. In one sense, failure is the price paid for progress. Studies have shown that the average entrepreneur fails three or four times before he or she is able to establish a successful business. While growing up on a farm, I remember one farmer saying, "Failure is good; it fertilizes everything."

Trust God's Promise to Prevail

You are not alone. God wants you to achieve His purposes for your life. The apostle Paul boasts of this promise: "Being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6). When you have failed, you will find that God is willing to start again wherever you are. No matter what your failures, Jesus still longs to be your friend and supporter. The Savior who died for you still loves you.

Reference

“Ministry in daily life.” 2004. InterVarsity Christian Fellowship. <http://www.ivmdl.org/quotables> (accessed July 11, 2007).

SELF-TEST

After studying the lesson, please read each study question carefully and circle the correct response. There is only one correct response for each question.

- 1. According to the lesson, successful people know how to handle*
 - a) money.*
 - b) failure.*
 - c) a job.*
- 2. We give up in our Christian walk because*
 - a) life is hard for everybody.*
 - b) we do not get any breaks in life.*
 - c) of the regularity of a sin, reproach of our sin, and result of our sin.*
- 3. If you fail to plan, then you are planning to*
 - a) trust God.*
 - b) let the Spirit guide you.*
 - c) fail.*
- 4. According to John Maxwell, the best teacher is*
 - a) evaluated experience.*
 - b) failure.*
 - c) experience alone.*
- 5. We get a fresh start by making excuses.*
 - a) True*
 - b) False*
- 6. According to the lesson, why is important to evaluate our experiences in dealing with failure?*
 - a) Self-evaluation helps us not to make the same mistakes.*
 - b) It gives us something to do.*
 - c) We will feel worse about our mistakes.*
- 7. Why should we seek people to help us after we have failed?*
 - a) We are incapable of thinking correctly when disconnected from others.*
 - b) They can offer us encouragement, support, prayer, and guidance.*
 - c) Seeking outside help is not necessary.*

8. *If you are depressed, discouraged, and distressed, it may be because you are*
 - a) *not saved.*
 - b) *not praying enough.*
 - c) *thinking such thoughts.*
9. *The root cause for fear of failure is a faulty*
 - a) *perception.*
 - b) *home life.*
 - c) *Bible study program.*
10. *A true statement about failure is that*
 - a) *a good Christian never fails.*
 - b) *failing does not necessarily make a person a failure.*
 - c) *God gets frustrated when we fail.*

ANSWERS TO STUDY QUESTIONS

Note: You can check your answers by using the answer guide. The numbers in the parentheses indicate which objective in the lesson to check.

1. *b* (6.1)
2. *c* (6.1)
3. *c* (6.2)
4. *a* (6.2)
5. *b* (6.3)
6. *a* (6.3)
7. *b* (6.3)
8. *c* (6.3)
9. *a* (6.4)
10. *b* (6.4)

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