

How does a Healthy Christian Respond to Failure?

Paul, the Sinning Saint

Much of the suffering of this life is the result of circumstances over which we have little control. A broken world has its pieces scattered everywhere. Few of us can find a space that is not effected in negative ways. But it is the part of our pain that comes from our own hand that presents a special problem - when we have no one to blame, when we can not play the victim card, when we are forced to look inside ourselves with fear of what we might see. How does a healthy Christian respond to personal failure? I am not going to suggest that I am a model of spiritual health but I think I can identify a healthy Christian. I am a Christian in large part because of a letter that I read from a prisoner. This man suffered greatly because of his sins and the sins of others. His attitude and sense of hope in the face of failure impressed me greatly. I am referring to the Apostle Paul.

My early Christian experience was spent pouring over Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 6-8. I literally wore out the pages in my Bible as I tried to understand the significance of Paul's teaching on dying with Christ through faith and living in the power of the resurrection. I knew that the truth of chapter six was important but I did not experience its freedom. Was I a substandard Christian? Was I a Christian at all? I certainly was defeated, frustrated, and confused. I found myself identifying with Paul in Romans seven where he confesses the frustration of living under the law, "wretched man that I am, I do that which I do not want to do and I don't do the things I know I should." It was not until I read Paul's letter to the Philippians, the third chapter that I found comfort. In verses 13-14 Paul bears testimony to his own process of striving but not yet achieving the glorious state of the life of resurrection freedom. Paul's testimony offered a window into the life of a healthy Christian who was responding to personal failure with hope, courage, and peace. After reading his words, I also found new hope, courage, and peace. This is what the Apostle Paul wrote in verses 13-14 "I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead. I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

1. The courage to look into our failures and see ourselves.

Paul begins by referencing an audit of his soul, "I do not *regard*." The word is often translated "reckon" "to assess or keep score." The context indicates that the "it" is the resurrection power of Christ spoken of in Romans six. Paul is saying, "I have failed to experience my potential in Christ", "I have fallen short of my calling as one who bears the image of God", "I am not where I could be." Now this is not what I would expect to hear from an apostle who was struggling to be respected within the Christian community. I might expect that if Paul had any failings, he would overlook them but certainly not parade them in print for the whole church to read. On second thought, when we come to understand Paul's

theology of the Christian life, we realize that his humble confession is in keeping with his understanding of spiritual power through human weakness. It is in his humility and sense of need for grace that Christ's Spirit is most alive in him. In I Tim.1¹⁵ "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of all." It is significant that Paul uses the present tense "am" not the past tense "was". We do not know what sin or sins Paul had in mind. He does not get specific but he does reveal a vulnerability that comes from an understanding of the radical grace of the gospel. Paul was not afraid to look deeply into his life because he understood that where sin abounds grace does all the more abound. Paul did fear that he would run in vain and after preaching grace to others he would be found clinging to his own righteousness for the well-being of his soul. In Romans seven, verse twenty-one he confesses "I find then the principle that evil *is present* in me, the one who wishes to do good." Again, the evil "is present" not "was present." Paul was in process. He had spots on his record. He was in need of grace.

Paul did not find that discipline in keeping the law was his goal. Integrity for Paul was not holiness before the law but humility before the law. The law was not given to make him holy so much as make him humble. This was the point of the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus reviews the Law of Moses as the Jewish leaders had understood it and then corrects their understanding with his own interpretation of its demands. The point of the Law was to expose the human need for a Savior who would grant grace to those who had no real righteousness of their own according to the flesh but could have a perfect righteousness of faith through trust in the resurrected Jesus of the cross.

Intimacy is built on brokenness more than discipline.

It might be noted at this point that there are two radically different paths to the sense of connectedness that builds Christian community. Paul was building community by connecting with his brothers and sisters in the faith as well as with God, by being vulnerable and exposing his common need for grace. It was not his victories over sin in the flesh through discipline that bound him to the Christian family. It was his brokenness and his openness to the grace of God in Christ that drew him near to others. This powerful point is illustrated in the parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk.15). As you recall, the Prodigal returns home to an intimate reunion with his father after a life of foolish rebellion in a distant land. He humbles himself in repentance and it is in that state of humility and vulnerability that the father meets him, greets him, and communes with him. The parable contrasts the Prodigal with his older brother who was counting on his disciplined life to bind him to the family in a sense of celebrated community. The older brother does not even go into the party that is thrown for the Prodigal but stays out, is left out, and is disconnected from both the Prodigal and the father. There is a lesson here for us about the connecting that builds community. It comes not from our disciplined outer life so much as from our inner and outward brokenness. Too often, God's people poison the well of intimate community with their prideful emphasis on disciplined management of life and judgmental attitude toward those who have failed. It is not without reason that King David said, "Let us now fall into the hand of the Lord for His

mercies are great, but do not let me fall into the hand of man.” (II Sam.24:14). A crowd of “life managers” makes for a superficial church, a place not safe for struggling saints in process. I remember a T shirt that I saw in a clothing store in Bolder Colorado. It had a picture of a man with his arms stretched toward heaven in prayer with the large words, “Jesus Save Me” with the fine print following, “from your followers.”

How can I conduct an audit of my soul? How can I assess myself honestly? Looking into the mirror is not the challenge so much as what I choose to see when I look there. An emotionally ill person is so, not only because he or she fails to experience reality, but more because he or she fails to identify reality. In my own spiritual audit I was forced to see a deeply rooted pride that was disguised by a humble exterior. I did not feel superior to others and more often than not deferred to others. This left me feeling humble and it gave the same impression to many who observed my life. But my pride was a serious problem, more serious than the kind of pride that compares self favorably with others. It was the pride that stands independent of God, resisting the moral law of God and also resisting the radical grace of God. It was the pride that maintains a certain spiritual autonomy that cuts to the very core of genuine Christian faith. I had to face the fact that I was in my flesh addicted to spiritual rebellion and independence. My outward problems and sins were serious enough but they masked a deeper challenge to my relationship with God and others. It would require a painful and persistent audit of my soul to expose the root of my soul’s sorrow.

This audit would require the help of others who would create a safe place for me to explore the region of my soul that was hidden from view. It was hidden from others and from me. The audit would also need the probing questions and careful listening of others who were genuinely interested in my soul’s health. As I reflect back on my experience I can identify four commitments that I now see as important in the process of a personal audit of one’s soul. One, I must seek community where I have the courage to be open and the willingness to hear critique. Two, I must assume that I have a blind spot that I can only know if I work hard to hear those who see me in a way that I cannot. Three, When criticized, I must not hide behind an “illegal procedure” call, deflecting attention from my need to hear what others see in me. Four, I must be slow to make a final assessment of my problems and their solutions.

What keeps me from seeing myself honestly? It is the very pride that I need to have exposed. Thinking and acting like I have arrived when I haven’t. That is the greatest obstacle to the audit process. There were two tricks that my pride uses to defend the trap door to its hiding place deep in my soul. One, it insisted on what I now call, “Christianity lite.” This starts with “law lite” which says, “I can manage life because it is only the sins that I can control that count.” This leads to “sin lite” which says, “I’m not that bad. I live a fairly disciplined life.” Next comes “repentance lite” with the response, “Yes, we all sin now and then. It’s no big deal.” “Grace lite” follows, saying, “I just need a little more discipline in some areas with a new strategy and support system to better manage life.”

The second trick schooled by my pride is the tendency to “cook the books” of my life story, to edit the internal audit, so to speak. The way I tell my story is revealing. I can exaggerate my faults or marginalize their presence. I could for example manage selective parts of my life quite well. When I looked inside I preferred to notice the areas of strength, my success stories. I did not have a temper, I was not materialistic, I was gracious and generous with others – audit complete. What I refused to see was an independent spirit, a self-protective defensiveness, a willingness to compromise my Christian values to medicate my pain, and a self-centered agenda that was cleverly disguised by outward devotion to ministry. The courage to look inside our failures and see ourselves is important but it is not enough.

2. The courage to look at our failures and see opportunity.

When forced to face our failures, weaknesses, and sins we can easily be overwhelmed and discouraged. Two types of people miss God’s blessing – the victims and the proud. The “proud” have a false hope. They sense that they can manage life. They act like they have arrived when they have not. The “victims” on the other hand have no hope. They live in pity. They feel that they can do nothing right. They feel like its over when it isn’t. When Paul says, “forgetting what lies behind” he is refusing to see himself as a victim while at the same time he is fully aware that he has not arrived. Paul’s theology of the spiritual life found God’s strength in human weakness. He saw his spiritual lack as an opportunity for a display of God’s grace and glory as well as an opportunity to share the suffering of Jesus.

I received a powerful letter from a member of my congregation shortly after I resigned my position as a pastor. In the letter I was reminded of a point that I had made in a sermon just a few weeks earlier. I had forgotten this point and it was just what I now needed to hear as I felt like a failure, a victim, and excluded from any place of significance in God’s kingdom. My friend encouraged me to see failures, injustices, suffering, and pain as an opportunity to live out certain attributes of God that could only be fully appreciated in such circumstances. Attributes like, courage, grace, patience, hope, love, faith, etc. are most meaningful in the face of hard times and failure. The effect of this letter was to encourage me to never feel sorry for myself, to never blame others, to never sense that the most important challenge for me was to be understood and treated fairly. The challenge was rather to realize how my circumstances no matter how painful, could provide an opportunity to respond in a way that would express certain virtues of the indwelling Christ.

Spiritual formation is more a function of repentance than appearance.

My response to failure, not the appearance of a blemishless record, is the key to our testimony. Everyone of us will fail in many ways. Everyone will not however respond to failure in the right way. The response not the failure will determine who will grow spiritually. Failure brings special opportunities for obedience but it will take faith and courage to grasp those opportunities. Appearance, a clean outward record is not the key to our testimony. It is not true that once we loose face or fail in life, it is over. We should not

conclude that it is over when it isn't. Sometimes the failure is simply an opportunity for brokenness, repentance, a deep experience of God's grace, an opportunity to grow. "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mat.5:3).

3. The courage to look outside our failures and see Jesus.

"I press on toward the goal for the price of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." (vs.11). These words tell us that Paul, while fully aware of his shortcomings is committed to move on with his life motivated by a vision of Christ Jesus. He realized that the passions of the flesh are powerful and cannot be curbed except they be overshadowed by an even greater passion. Our lives are governed by competing passions. We have strong desires of longings to find security, significance, and serenity by self-protective strategies apart from God. I am wrong to assume that more money, recognition, and greater influence is key to a deep feeling of wellbeing. I know people who have those things and are not secure, happy, or fulfilled and I know people who have none of those blessings and are very settled in life. The selfish passions that motivate me to "find my life" apart from God are in competition within my spirit with other passions. There is within me a desire to follow Christ's challenge to "lose my life" for Christ so that I might find it. These competing passions are at war with each other. My behavior will indicate the state of the battles in the war within my soul for my behavior will be a response to a deep passion or passions.

The lesson for me is that I must acquire an image of God and myself that is powerful enough to arrest my passions for immediate gratification and motivate me to forsake all to gain Christ.

Curbing sin in life is more a function of love than law

How am I to experience real change in my life? How can I curb the desire to live for myself and not for Christ? How can I change sinful habits that never seem to fully disappear? For many years in my own Christian life I felt that what I really needed was more discipline. I thought that my problem was a lack of technique and discipline to follow Christ. I was searching for a solution to this problem and found that there were seminars and books that promised to solve my problem. As attractive as some of the advice seemed to be, I was usually left discouraged by the fact that it seldom produced the desired results.

As I studied the teaching of the apostle Paul I was struck by his emphasis on our identity in Christ and the importance of experiencing the presence of God's love as an empowering presence. His words in Ephesians 1:18-19 make this point. "I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened, so that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what is the surpassing greatness of His power toward us who believe." It is not the law of God that holds the key to progress in practical holiness so much as the love of God experienced deeply in our lives. The strength and object of our passions will determine our posture in living. It is our love for God that

curbs our appetite for selfish indulgences and it is our experience of God's love for us that awakens our love for God. Experiencing this love is something that we can pray for but ultimately God has to grant to us through the ministry of His Spirit.

So how are we to respond to failures in our lives? In short we are to see failure and the suffering that follows as, among other things, an opportunity to know and show the nature of God.