

## **Introduction**

We honored our graduates earlier in the service. They stand on the edge of their adult lives now with a whole host of activities, experiences, and events ahead. I obviously don't know everything the future holds for them but I do know with certainty one thing it holds.

In 1902, the poetry editor of The Atlantic Monthly magazine returned a stack of poems to a young poet with this explanation, "**Our magazine has no room for your vigorous verse.**" The poet was Robert Frost. In 1894, a rhetoric teacher wrote a note on a 16 year-old student's report card: "**A conspicuous lack of success. He probably won't amount to much.**" The student was Winston Churchill.

Frost and Churchill illustrate one thing we know for sure the future holds for us all, including our graduates - failure. We're going to fail, which is where our text comes in. It teaches us the right way and the wrong way to fail and that's what I'm going to preach about today.

## **All of Us Fail**

Earlier in Acts 1, Jesus commanded His disciples to wait together in Jerusalem where they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit. According to verse 15, Peter and 120 other "**persons**" were doing just that. Peter stood up in their midst one day and initiated choosing one of them to replace Judas Iscariot, recounting what Judas did in the process. He betrayed Jesus, hung himself, and burst open when the noose broke and his body fell to the ground. That happened, Peter said, as David prophesied it would in Psalms 69 and 109.

Verses 15-20 are an instructive text. They present two men, Peter and Judas, who had something striking in common.

Judas had the special privilege of being one of the original 12 disciples. His name is synonymous with betrayal though just as Benedict Arnold's is. For 30 pieces of silver, he betrayed Jesus by leading the chief priests and elders to Him.

Then there's Peter. He too was one of the original twelve disciples but was even more privileged than Judas was. Along with James and John, he formed the inner circle of friends with whom Jesus was most intimate. Yet, he also betrayed Him. After Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, he denied being a disciple of His not just once but three times. The third time, in Matthew 26:74, he cursed and swore and declared, **"I don't even know the man."**

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what Peter and Judas had in common. In 1990, Stephen Pile wrote a book titled *Cannibals in the Cafeteria and other Fabulous Failures*. That's what Peter and Judas had in common. They were fabulous failures. They both failed and they failed miserably.

And so do we. All of us have failed many times before and will do so again before we die. Some of our failures are sins. We try to live up to God's expectations and commands but don't. Some are defeats. We try to accomplish something worthwhile or good but don't. And some are mistakes. We try to act responsibly but don't. I'll never forget my first and only spelling bee – in 4<sup>th</sup> grade. I misspelled the very first word in the very first round, absence, **"a-b-s-e-n-s-e."** It was a defeat.

There's no denying it. All of us have failed and will continue to fail until the day we die. The issue isn't if we'll fail, because we will. The issue is how we'll fail. It will be in one of two ways.

### **Fail at Failing**

The first way is to fail at failing. That's what Judas did. He got down. He deeply regretted what he did and thought it was unforgivable. He then, as a result, gave up. He hanged himself and died. That's what Judas did and so do countless people today.

First, they get down when they fail. They allow destructive feelings like anger, guilt, resentment, discouragement, humiliation, or fear to grip them. Those feelings are usually intense and exaggerated.

People get down for two reasons. One is that they personalize their

failure. They make their sin, defeat, or mistake their identity. Since they failed, they think, they're failures, a thought that assaults their sense of self-esteem. They must not be persons of value and worth, they conclude. People get down for a second reason. They socialize their failure. They want others to respect or praise them and now fear they won't because of it. They imagine people will now have lowly opinions of them that they'll never get over. Their failure, they think, is a stigma, a permanent marker, that will forever taint how people view them.

Personalizing or socializing failure gets people down. It puts them in the grip of destructive feelings, which then directs what they do. They give up. Giving up is a natural expression of getting down. People throw in the towel and stop trying. They call it quits and drop out. They turn their backs on the worthwhile or good things they need to do and can.

I mentioned missing the first word in the first round of the spelling bee. I personalized and socialized that failure, felt humiliated as a result, and never entered a spelling bee again.

That's trivial though compared to an acquaintance of mine who experienced every law student's worst nightmare. He failed the bar exam. Humiliated and thinking he was an abject failure, he never took it again. He began working for a Title Company instead and never did fulfill his life's dream – becoming an attorney.

He along with Judas Iscariot is the **"poster child"** for failing at failure. He got down and gave up.

### **Succeed at Failing**

May you and I not do the same. Let's not fail at failing. Let's succeed at it instead. Peter, by way of example, reveals how we do.

Notice what our text clearly implies. Peter was the leader of the band of disciples that Jesus had left behind on earth. He was the one to whom they looked for guidance, inspiration, and help.

That's surprising though considering the magnitude of his failure. The truth is that his sin was just as heinous as Judas' was. In his book

about the disciples, William McBirnie writes: **“Peter sinned as grievously as did Judas. Judas sold Jesus. Peter cursed Him. There is no essential difference except that Peter repented and Judas did not.”** He’s absolutely right about that.

Here’s some food for thought. Suppose that Judas had repented. He would have been one of the 120 persons in our text. Also suppose that Peter hadn’t repented. He would have been the one being replaced. The only difference between Judas and Peter, and it was a monumental one, was this. Judas failed at failing. He got down and gave up. But Peter succeeded at failing. He got up and went on.

And so should we. We should succeed at failing by doing two things.

First, we get up. We don’t let destructive feelings like anger, guilt, resentment, discouragement, humiliation, or fear strangle us. We remain optimistic, confident, and calm instead. We do that by keeping our failure in perspective.

Author Erma Bombeck was one of the most influential Christian women in America from the late 60’s to the late 90’s. A popular college commencement speaker, she often rehearsed her failures to the graduates and then said this: **“What you have to tell yourself is, ‘I’m not a failure. I failed at doing something.’ There’s a big difference.”**

She was right. Individual incidents of failure don’t make us failures. Peter’s three failures didn’t make him one and neither do ours. Failing and being a failure are two entirely different things. Every failure is just one step in the marathon we call life. It was for Peter and is for us as well. It doesn’t mean we’re losers. It just means we haven’t won yet.

Knowing and believing that, we don’t personalize our failure. We don’t make our sin, defeat, or mistake our identity. We separate our identity from it by thinking straight about reality. Fact – I failed. Fact – That doesn’t make me a failure, a conclusion that leaves my sense of self-esteem intact. We don’t personalize our failure.

We also don’t socialize it. For one thing, being friends of Jesus, we play to an audience of One, Him, not many. His opinion of us, not the

opinions of others, is what matters to us. We seek His approval and praise, not theirs. For another thing, we recognize how short-lived and insignificant the opinions of others are. Whatever their opinions are, they're something to which they'll give only fleeting thought and passing concern. Besides, we know that what others think about us isn't necessarily the truth. We are what we before Jesus not them.

That then is how we get up. We keep our failure in perspective. We don't personalize or socialize it. We stay confident and calm, which in turn directs what we do. We go on just as Peter did by doing two things.

First, we learn from our failure. In a *Peanuts* comic strip, Charlie Brown builds a beautiful sand castle on the beach. He then stands back to admire his work, whereupon a wave suddenly consumes and destroys it. Looking at the smooth sand that had been his castle a moment before, he declares, "**There must be a lesson here, but I don't know what it is.**" There is a lesson here when we fail. But let's not be like Charlie Brown. Let's learn what that lesson is.

We do that by examining our failure to determine its cause. There are three possible causes. #1 - Circumstances beyond our prediction and control. #2 - People with power who lack competence and/or character. And #3 - Our own lack of competence (ability) and/or character (effort). If we caused the failure or contributed to it in any respect, we identify how we did by asking and answering two questions. What did we do that we shouldn't have and why did we do it? Was it a matter of competence or character or both? What didn't we do that we should have and why didn't we do it? Was it a matter of competence or character or both. You can see what we're doing here. We're learning from our failure.

We go on by doing a second thing. We pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and get back in the game - in one of two ways.

One way is that we try to do the same thing again. Having learned from our failure, we realize that we have the competence to do it. So we try it again. That doesn't mean that we just work harder and faster though. We often have to change course as well. We try again in a

smarter way. We don't do what we did before that we shouldn't have. And we do what we didn't do before that we should have.

We can get back in the game a second way. We try to do something different. Having learned from our failure, we realize that we aren't competent to do what we tried. So we try to do something different – just as worthwhile or good, but different.

That then is how we succeed at failing. We get up and go on. A law school classmate of mine named Edward took the bar exam with me and failed it. He got up though. He didn't personalize or socialize the failure but after the initial humiliation stayed confident and calm. He also went on. He learned from his failure, recognizing that he didn't study hard enough for the exam or in the right way. He then studied harder and smarter, after which he took the exam and passed it. He is today the founding partner of a successful and respected Akron law firm.

The ultimate application of what I've preached about today is to the most serious of all failures – our sins. Listen to the counsel of Richard Foster in that regard: **“But when we do fail, we do not need to give excessive time to mourning the loss. We need to make confession, get up, and start again immediately. The issue in holy obedience is not whether we failed or succeeded yesterday or this morning, but whether we're obedient now.”** He's right. If we sin, we don't get down and give up as Judas did. We get up and go on as Peter did.

## **Conclusion**

I close this morning with a two question survey. First, how many of you know of someone whose name is Judas? No one does. Second, how many of you know of someone whose name is Peter? Everyone does. The lesson is clear. Don't be a Judas. Don't fail at failing. Be a Peter instead. Succeed at failing. Our destinies depend on it!