

Introduction

I'd like to begin by quoting something that J. Wallace Hamilton wrote in Leadership Magazine: **“The increase of suicides, alcoholics, and even some forms of nervous breakdown is evidence that many people are training for success when they should be training for failure. Failure is far more common than success.”** He was right wasn't he? People fail more than they succeed. Consequently, all of us should train for failure as well as for success.

This sermon is a first step toward doing just that. I'm going to share in it one of the most important principles about success and failure that you'll ever hear. That principle, which Ezekiel 2:1-7 teaches, is this. **Success is never certain; failure is never final.”** Let's examine this text and learn what that principle is about.

Success Is Never Certain

Ezekiel was a prophet of God to Jewish exiles in Babylon in the 6th century BC. Verses 1-7 record his prophetic call. According to verse 1, God spoke to him, probably audibly, and told him to stand on his feet. He addressed him as a **“son of man”** in doing so, which meant in this context, a human being. That term reminded him of his frailty and thus his need to rely on God. As Ezekiel was being spoken to, the Holy Spirit entered into him in verse 2 and physically stood him on his feet, whereupon God continued speaking to him in verses 3-7. He declared in verse 3 that the exiled Jews and all Jews everywhere were living against Him just as their Jewish ancestors had. So He commissioned Ezekiel in verse 4 to say to them, **“Thus says the Lord GOD,”** that is, to speak to them whatever He would tell him to speak. He then exhorted him not to be discouraged if the Jewish exiles rejected his message, verses 5 and 7, and persecuted him for preaching it, verse 6.

That's was Ezekiel's prophetic call and I draw your attention to the last three verses of it, 5-7. Notice what they clearly imply. God called

Ezekiel to preach but didn't guarantee him that he'd succeed if he did.

That illustrates one of the fundamental truths of our existence. Success is never certain! No matter what we try to achieve or do, there aren't any guarantees that we'll achieve or do it. It's always possible that we'll fail. Did you know, for instance, that 80% of all accountants who take the CPA exam fail at least one of its four parts and have to take it over again, or that entrepreneurs average 3.8 failures in business before finally succeeding? Success is never certain!

There's a reason for that. It's because there are so many factors and forces that contribute to failure and success that we can't control. If you or I could control all of those factors and forces, then success might be certain. But we can't and so, it isn't.

I read about a Christian named Glenn Early who started his own construction business in 1973, which he devoted to God. He worked hard and the business grew. But two years later, a reputable general contractor refused to pay his company an \$18,000 debt owed it, and it went belly up. Early had to sell everything he owned, take out a second mortgage on his home, and close the business just to avoid bankruptcy.

Factors and forces beyond our control make success not certain. That's especially true when we attempting to effect change in people. Notice what Ezekiel didn't have control over here – the will of the Jewish exiles. God has given human beings the leadership over their own lives – the capacity and freedom to make their own decisions. They can think and act the way they want to. They can repent and be godly or not repent and be ungodly. That's why when it comes to preaching, teaching, counseling, evangelizing, and intercessory praying, success is never certain. You and I can't and God won't control what people think and do.

Avoid Failure

So, it's true. Success is never certain, which means that failure is always possible and what an intimidating reality that can be. Human beings have many different fears, one of the biggest of which is of

failure. Many of us fear it so much in fact that it paralyzes us. Tony Campolo explains it this way in his book *The Success Fantasy*: **“There is the constant fear of failure. And it is the fear of failure which elicits some of our most pathetic behavior.”** He goes on to say that it leaves us **“immobilized and incapable of taking the risks necessary for a fulfilled and successful life.”**

Campolo is right. Many of us fear failure, so much so that we spend our entire lives avoiding it. The way we avoid it is by not trying to succeed. That happens all the time in sports. A golfer hits an iron to avoid the traps instead of going for the flag. A quarterback throws a pass away from the defender instead of to the receiver to avoid being intercepted. A basketball player passes off instead of taking a good shot in the closing seconds to avoid missing. It’s clear what they’re doing. They’re avoiding failure by not trying to succeed.

But it isn’t just athletes is it? If we don’t apply for the job, we can’t be turned down. If we don’t get married, we can’t get divorced. If we don’t take the exam, we can’t fail it. If we don’t teach the class, we can’t bore the students. If we don’t start the business, we can’t go belly up. If we don’t share the gospel, we can’t be rejected. And so on.

The problem with that approach is an obvious one. If we don’t try to succeed, we certainly won’t. Howard Ferguson was a multi-million dollar a year real estate salesman and the most successful high school wrestling coach in the country at St. Ed’s. He said it as well as anyone: **“One of the quickest ways to become a loser is to want to win so badly that you are afraid to lose.”** He’s right. Spend our life fearing and avoiding failure and that’s just what we will be – failures. We won’t do very much for God, His kingdom, or the world around us.

Pursue Success

So, don’t avoid failure. Pursue success instead. That’s what Ezekiel did. As I’ve already pointed out, he didn’t have control over the results of his preaching. But he did have control over his preaching

itself and that's to what he devoted himself. He preached the message God gave Him clearly, concisely, creatively, and committedly. I spent four months last year studying his book and can tell you this. Its contents are extraordinary. He was faithful in his effort to succeed.

That's what it means to pursue success. It means to be faithful in the effort to succeed. On the one hand, we know we can't control success. So, we don't commit ourselves to that. On the other hand, we know we can control the effort to succeed. So, we do commit ourselves to that. We make sure that we're faithful in it. We do two things. First, we learn what we have to do to succeed. Almost everything we want to achieve or do has means that are known to be effective in achieving or doing it. We learn, therefore, what those means are. Second, we try the best we can to do what we have to do. We carry out the means we've learned as capably and committedly as we can.

A Friends pastor in Cleveland wanted to speak Spanish fluently. There was a large Hispanic community near his church and he believed that speaking Spanish would enable him to reach it for Jesus. First, he learned what he had to do to succeed. The means for learning a language are well known: sign up for language courses, listen to recordings, read books, associate with people who speak the language, get immersed in the culture, and practice, practice, practice. Second, he tried the best he could to do what he had to do. He carried out those means for learning Spanish as capably and committedly as he could. He pursued success by being faithful in the effort to succeed.

Mother Teresa gave us the perspective we need in that regard. She said, "**God doesn't call us to be successful but faithful.**" She's right. It doesn't matter what it is – learning a language, starting a business, running for office, raising children, playing ball, preaching sermons, evangelizing the lost, or loving God. We need to grasp what Ezekiel's prophetic call teaches us. God isn't calling us to be successful. He's calling us to be faithful – to make the effort to succeed as competently and committedly as we can.

Failure Isn't Final

We should do that without fearing failure at all and Ezekiel's experience teaches us why.

Notice the outcome of his preaching in 33:32. God said to him, **"Behold, you are to them like a sensual song by one who has a beautiful voice and plays well on an instrument; for they hear your words but they do not practice them."** The Jewish exiles found him entertaining, in other words, but didn't apply what he preached. It's clear what God was telling him, **"Ezekiel, you failed."**

But his failure wasn't final. He not only spoke God's message to the Jewish exiles but wrote it down as well. The result is the book in the Bible that bears his name and what a book it is. It would be impossible to calculate the number of people it has encouraged, instructed, and helped the past 2600 years, including Jesus. 3:27, for instance, is the prototype of one of His favorite formulas, **"He who has ears to hear, let him hear."** Jesus took it from Ezekiel. His book has helped me immensely as well. Chapter 18 alone has been a treasure to me. I use it all the time in counseling parents who take all the blame and thus the guilt for the way their children turn out.

It's true. The Jewish exiles didn't listen to and live out what Ezekiel preached. But it's also true that countless numbers of Christians since then did and still do. Yes, Ezekiel failed but his failure was far from final. He went on to succeed in spectacular ways that he himself never knew.

And that's why we should pursue success without fear of failing. It's because failure is never final.

So many of us don't seem to realize that. We think and act as if our failure is the end of the world. A friend of mine who got fired from a job that was over his head said, **"My life is over,"** but it wasn't.

That friend of mine and all of us need to understand what failure does and doesn't mean, and I quote Robert Schuller here. It doesn't mean we're a failure; it means we haven't succeeded yet. It doesn't

mean we've accomplished nothing; it means we've learned something. It doesn't mean we're a fool; it means we have a lot of faith. It doesn't mean we've been disgraced; it means we were willing to try. It doesn't mean we don't have it; it means we have to do it differently. It doesn't mean we're inferior; it means we aren't perfect. It doesn't mean we've wasted our life; it means we can start over. It doesn't mean we ought to give up; it means we must try harder. It doesn't mean we'll never make it; it means it'll take a little longer than we thought. It doesn't mean God has abandoned us; it means He has a better idea for us. Simply put, failure is never final.

Take Glen Early, the Christian I mentioned who started the construction business that went belly up. He started a new company two years after it did that eventually made Inc. Magazine's list of the 500 fastest growing companies in America.

I've said before that we live at the mercy of our beliefs. So believe the truth about failure. It's never final! We'll spend our life pursuing success instead of avoiding failure if we do.

Conclusion

I close with an anecdote and a quote. First, the anecdote. In a basketball commercial he did, Michael Jordan walks into an arena and the people are chanting, "**Michael, Michael, Michael.**" To which he replies: "**I've missed 9000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and have missed. I've failed over and over again in my life. And that's why I succeeded.**" That's the anecdote and here's the quote. J.M. Barrie said, "**We are all failures – at least, all the best of us are.**" My point is that the greatest of successes have failed. But what made them successes was the attitude they had. It's the same attitude you and I have to have if we're going to be successes. Just as they did, we must think and act as if success is never certain and failure is never final!