

WHAT JESUS SAID TO PETER**JOHN 21:1-19**

Malcolm Muggeridge was a British writer and commentator who became a follower of Jesus late in life. He made this interesting statement, “Christianity, from Calvary onwards, has been a sanctification of failure.” What did he mean by that? A sanctification of failure? Sanctification means to make something or treat something as holy or good. We don’t think of failure as something positive, good, or beneficial to anyone. Muggeridge was simply pointing out the fact there’s a whole lot paradox or irony in the Christian faith. For example, if you don’t believe Jesus rose from the dead, then His life and ministry looked as if it ended in failure. And yet God turned what looked like the greatest failure of all time into the greatest triumph of all time. Another example. The majority of Jesus followers around the world are poor rather than rich, uneducated rather than educated, and simple rather than sophisticated. And yet Scripture tells us God prefers using the most unlikely people to accomplish His will and purpose. Another example. Not one Christian yet has ever achieved a life of sinless perfection this side of Heaven. And yet God’s first and foremost method of drawing lost people to faith in Jesus is through the witness of Christians who still sin, who still make mistakes, and who are still deeply flawed despite the Holy Spirit’s presence in their lives. “Christianity, from Calvary onwards, has been a sanctification of failure.”

We’ve been considering together the real last words of Jesus. No, not the statements He made on the cross just before He died as important and memorable as they were. Jesus’ real last words are found in several encounters he had with individuals and groups after He rose from the dead and before He ascended back to Heaven. It was a period of about forty days. Today’s message is about failure and how Jesus sanctified it in the life of one of the Bible’s central characters: Simon Peter. If anyone was an example of how God uses failure to mold and shape our lives in eternally positive and good ways, it’s got to be Peter. Before we read the Scripture passage that contains Jesus’ real last words to Peter, let’s get acquainted with this man again.

You just gotta love Simon Peter! Here’s a guy who got up every morning and found a way to stick his foot in his mouth and then chew on it violently. When you read about what he said and did in the Bible, he was usually acting too quickly, thinking too slowly, saying the wrong thing, or talking too much. There was the time James, John, and Peter were with Jesus and all of a sudden Jesus began to glow with a kind of supernatural light as bright as the sun. It’s referred to as the Transfiguration. The Old Testament characters, Moses and Elijah, miraculously appeared with Jesus. Peter just started jabbering away, “‘Lord, it’s wonderful for us to be here! If you want, I’ll make three shelters as memorials—one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah.’” (Mt. 17:4 NLT) Just babbling away! While Peter was still speaking, God Himself interrupted Him saying, “‘This is my dearly loved Son, who brings me great joy. Listen to him.’” (Mt. 17:5-6 NLT) In other words, it’s as if God Himself said, “Peter, be quiet. Listen to Jesus.”

Then there was the time Jesus asked the disciples who they thought He really was. Peter stepped right up with the answer. “‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living

God.” (Mt. 16:16 NLT) Jesus congratulated Peter on his insightful answer. “You are blessed, Simon son of John, because my Father in heaven has revealed this to you. You did not learn this from any human being.” (Mt. 16:17 NLT) Can’t you imagine Peter just kind of swelling up a little bit with that compliment? But then a couple of verses later, Jesus explained he would be ultimately arrested, crucified, and raised back to life. Peter objected. “But Peter took him aside and began to reprimand him for saying such things. ‘Heaven forbid, Lord,’ he said. ‘This will never happen to you!’” (Mt. 16:22 NLT) How did Jesus respond then? “Jesus turned to Peter and said, ‘Get away from me, Satan! You are a dangerous trap to me. You are seeing things merely from a human point of view, not from God’s.’” (Mt. 16:23 NLT) Ouch! I can imagine Peter saying to himself, “I open my mouth and God is speaking through me. But I open it the next time and now Satan is speaking through me. I just don’t get it!”

Peter made a habit of getting it wrong. Yes, he was the one Jesus enabled to actually walk on the surface of the Sea of Galilee, but then he became afraid and began to sink. Jesus had to rescue him and then He rebuked Peter for his lack of faith. Then there was the night before the cross when Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane by the temple guards. Peter attacked one of them with a sword and managed to cut off the man’s ear. Jesus rebuked Peter instead of praising him.

But it was on that same evening Peter failed in a far worse, far more serious, and far more devastating way. Before the ear incident, Jesus told His disciples this was the night he would be betrayed and arrested. He predicted His crucifixion and resurrection and also told the disciples they would all desert Him in a few hours. Peter’s reaction? “Even if everyone else deserts you, I will never desert you.” (Mt. 26:33 NLT) But then, you recall Jesus’ devastating prediction, “I tell you the truth, Peter—this very night, before the rooster crows, you will deny three times that you even know me.” (Mt. 26:34 NLT) Peter couldn’t comprehend acting like that toward Jesus. “No!” Peter insisted. ‘Even if I have to die with you, I will never deny you!’” (Mt. 26:35 NLT)

I’m sure you remember the heartbreaking outcome, right? When Jesus was arrested, Peter followed him from a distance to the residence of the high priest where Jesus was interrogated. Peter warmed himself at a charcoal fire at a kind of public courtyard outside. Three different strangers approached him asking if he knew Jesus or had been with Jesus. Each time Peter denied being or even knowing Jesus. As soon as the third denial was out of Peter’s mouth, the Bible says, “And immediately, while he was still speaking, the rooster crowed. At that moment the Lord turned and looked at Peter. Suddenly, the Lord’s words flashed through Peter’s mind: ‘Before the rooster crows tomorrow morning, you will deny three times that you even know me.’ And Peter left the courtyard, weeping bitterly.” (Lk 22:60-62 NLT) Peter came face to face with the fact he was a total, absolute, and unforgivable failure.

So, it’s right here I want us to read Jesus’ real last words to Peter. This was sometime after the resurrection. The risen Jesus had appeared to the disciples several times, but He hadn’t told them yet what to do next. Apparently, Peter and some of the other disciples decided to return to their old profession – fishing the waters of the Sea of

Galilee. Does it surprise you Peter jumped into the water and swam to shore ahead of the other disciples? “Impulsive” was his middle name! I believe this encounter and this conversation between Jesus and Peter underlined two important truths we all need to understand in terms of our own lives. Here’s the first one.

GOD’S LOVE ALLOWS ME TO FAIL.

Everything about that scene probably reminded Peter of his failures. The sight of the 153 fish and the sound of the lapping waves reminded him of his inability even to catch fish without Jesus’ help. He was even a failure at his lifelong profession! I’m sure the other disciples were well aware of Peter’s cowardly denial of Jesus. They knew he’d failed badly. The first that Jesus made on that occasion was made out of charcoal. Why’s that significant? Only one other time in all of the Bible is a charcoal fire specifically and explicitly mentioned. The other occasion was the fire in the high priest’s courtyard on the night Jesus was arrested and interrogated.

Our sense of smell can bring back a memory of the past just like that. I recall when Cheryl and I went to Barbados on our honeymoon years ago. The first night we arrived we drove through some sugarcane fields on the way to the hotel. When sugarcane is burned, it gives off a very strong, rather unpleasant odor. As soon as I smelled it, I was back in India as a small boy with my missionary parents. That was the last time I had smelled that same odor. My sense of smell instantly awakened a memory I’d forgotten for years. As Peter sat there that morning – the pungent odor of that charcoal fire filling the air – he likely remembered all too vividly that awful night when he denied Jesus. He remembered he was an absolute failure.

“Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?” (Jo. 21:15 NLT) Don’t you think Jesus’ question felt like a slap in the face to Peter? Apparently, Jesus asked him that question right there in front of the other disciples. Awkward. Humiliating. Can’t you just see Peter sitting there by the fire with his head down, his heart pounding, his stomach turning, his cheeks burning, and his eyes tearing up? “Yes, Lord,” Peter replied, ‘you know I love you.’” (Jo. 21:15 NLT) No boasting now. No claims of being more faithful and loyal than everyone else. Just an honest, but subdued and thoughtful answer. It’s true different Greek words for love are used in this dialogue between Jesus and Peter. There could be some significance to that fact, but too much emphasis on that might also miss the point. The fact is Peter did love Jesus. The difference is he’s no longer proud of it. He’s no longer measuring his love for Jesus against the other disciples’ love and finding his to be superior.

Two more agonizing times Jesus asked Peter if he loved Him. And three times Peter affirmed his love for Jesus. “Lord, you know everything. You know that I love you.” (Jo. 21:17 NLT) Do you understand what Jesus was doing? Peter had denied being with or knowing Jesus three times. And now three times Jesus gave Peter the opportunity to reaffirm and declare his love for and devotion to Jesus. And the other disciples got to hear and witness it. The old arrogance and self-confidence was

missing. Peter's confidence was now in Jesus and in Jesus' knowledge of Peter's heart not in Peter's own self-knowledge.

What can we learn from this story and Jesus' words? First, when God allows you to fail it's an act of love not a lack of caring. I realize that might be a truth hard to grasp, but I stand by it. Does God cause you or me to fail at anything anytime? Of course not. We don't ever need God's help to fail. It comes naturally to each and all of us. But God will not always stop us from failing. He doesn't automatically step in and prevent it in every case. Why not? Because, secondly, God uses failure to draw you to Himself not push you away. The fact is we don't really like being around or with God as much as we assume we do. We invent ways to keep our distance from God. After all, we're sinners and always will be sinners this side of Heaven. Our hearts become hard. We suffer hearing loss when the Holy Spirit speaks into our lives. We drift towards self-reliance rather than being reliant on God. Self-centeredness creeps its way into our lives pushing out God-centeredness. When God allows you to fail, you're brought face to face with the painful fact you're weak, you're inadequate, you've got a dark side, and you're fully capable of putting your trust and confidence in yourself rather than in God.

Followers of Jesus have to face the uncomfortable fact we're still sinners saved by grace and will be until either Jesus returns or we enter Heaven. A lot of stuff in us still resists God, or thinks it knows better than God, or insists on living life our own way. Failure has a way of revealing that fact. It kind of rises up and slaps us in the face with that reality. And so God uses failure to get our spiritual attention. Through failure, God can speak into our lives, "My child, you can't trust in yourself. My son, you're making decisions without consulting Me. My daughter, you're trying to do too much in your own strength not in Mine." Failure can actually be redeemed and become God's gift to us. God can use it to underline how much we need Him, how much we need to stay close to Him, and how much we need to be on guard against the power of sin still in us.

Here's something else failure can do when it's put in God's loving hands. God uses failure to break the power of self-centeredness in our lives. Was Jesus being thoughtless and insensitive when He confronted Peter right in front of those other disciples? No. Sometimes real love can be painful. Peter had to face himself. Peter needed to change. The only way Peter was ever going to abandon his innate self-centeredness was to suffer a devastating personal failure. Despite the embarrassment of that confrontation, Jesus' purpose was to heal not to hurt. Peter had denied Jesus three times. Jesus gave him the opportunity to declare his loyalty to and love for Jesus three times. It would have been cruel to just allow Peter to let the guilt and shame of that awful denial just fester away in his soul never confronted and never forgiven. But did Jesus have to do it publicly? Yes, because Peter's denial had been public. Those other disciples needed to know Jesus had forgiven Peter and their relationship had been restored. They needed to know the past was the past. And, they also needed to know Jesus Himself had reinstated and recommissioned Peter for service in His Kingdom. It was love that allowed Peter to fail. And when God allows you and me to fail, it's also an expression of His love for us. But I see another lesson from this story.

GOD'S LOVE FLOWS THROUGH MY FAILURES.

Jesus said, “But a person who is forgiven little shows only little love.” (Lk. 7:47 NLT) I believe the opposite is true as well. If you’ve been forgiven a lot, you have the capacity to love a lot. There’s evidence that was true of Peter. When you fail, you’re better able to understand the failures and disappointments other people suffer in life. When God’s love heals you after a significant failure, you’re given a new ability to show compassion toward others who might fail. Yes, that demands some personal transparency and vulnerability which can be hard. The world we live in encourages us to cover up our failures, never admit our inadequacies, and then ridicules and shames us when they’re revealed. That’s one lesson I see in this story. Failure – when it’s given back to God and redeemed by His grace – can create a broken, humble spirit making you a wonderful channel of God’s love and grace to others. That’s an example of how God sanctifies failure – how He brings something good and eternal out of something painful. Our setbacks in life can be used by God to create a love for other people who have struggled, messed up, and blown it. I hear that truth in this Scripture, “He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.” (2 Cor. 1:4 NLT)

In John 21, Jesus gave Peter the opportunity to declare his love three times. That was the best way to address those three awful denials. Then, Jesus added three words of commission. “Then feed my lambs... Then take care of my sheep... Then feed my sheep.” (Jo 21:15-17 NLT) Those were incredibly healing statements. Why? Because when you’ve failed badly in some part of your life, one of the strongest negative feelings you have is that God doesn’t want to know you or can’t use you. Maybe you’ve failed at marriage. Maybe you’ve failed in some aspect of being a parent. Maybe you’ve failed someone you love. Maybe you’ve failed financially. Maybe you’ve committed a sin that seems unforgiveable to you. You’re shocked at yourself. And, then, the devil weighs in on you with his words of condemnation. “You’re useless. You’re such a waste. Do you think God wants to have anything more to do with you? Do you seriously think God could love you now?” My friend, have you ever been right there?

So, I see a second lesson from this story about Peter. God is pleased to use failures like you and me to build His Kingdom. Perhaps you need to visualize Jesus standing in front of you this morning. He asks you, “Do you love Me?” And you respond, “Lord, you know I love you, but I’ve failed. I’ve messed up miserably.” I want you to hear Jesus say something like this to you, “OK, then let Me love other people through you. Let Me make you a channel of My love and grace into their lives. Let them see what I’ve done for and in you. It will give them new hope and courage to face the future.” That’s how God sanctifies failure in and through your life and mine. No, God doesn’t cause our failures or plan for us to fail. Instead, He redeems our failures and somehow brings good out of them that we could never have imagined. I like how a well-known man of God from the past, Vance Havner, put it, “God uses broken things. Broken soil to produce a crop, broken clouds to give rain, broken grain to give bread, broken bread to give strength. It is the broken alabaster box that gives forth perfume. It is Peter, weeping bitterly, who returns to greater power than ever.”

Here's a third and final lesson from this story about Jesus and Peter. What does God really want you to achieve in this life? How does God define spiritual success? You're well aware of how this world defines success: become financially wealthy, have great influence and impact on others in some way, become famous, accomplish something outstanding, or build some great organization or movement. Some of those things can have limited value, to be sure, but none of them are what God really wants you to achieve. Here's a thought. Learning to love Him and other people like God loves is the achievement that warms God's heart the most. Maybe the greatest purpose of this life is learning how to love God and love others God's way. When you and I have learned how to love God's way, we're successful no matter how much or how often we've failed otherwise. When you read about Peter in the book of Acts or read the two letters he wrote that became a part of the New Testament, you begin to see the enormous and positive changes God made in this man. He had learned how to love. He loved God and he loved others. Yes, Peter failed and failed badly, but God turned him into a spiritual success. And God can do that in your life and mine as well.

In 1463, members of the City Council of Florence in Italy decided they needed a grand monument to enhance their city. They commissioned a noted sculptor to carve a giant statue which would stand in front of city hall. Someone suggested a biblical character would be most appropriate. Agostino di Duccio was chosen to create the sculpture. Duccio went to a quarry near Carrara and marked off a section of white marble he wanted cut into a nineteen foot slab. However, he had the slab cut too thin. When it was moved, it fell over and left a deep fracture down one side of it. Duccio declared the stone useless and demanded another one, but the City Council refused his request. As a result, that gleaming block of white marble lay on its side for the next 38 years – neglected, useless, and an embarrassment to the city of Florence.

Then in 1501, the City Council approached another citizen – another sculptor – asking him if he would complete the original and ambitious project using the same slab of broken marble. Fortunately, the then 26 year old man was none other than the budding genius Michelangelo Buonarroti. He was filled with energy, skill, and imagination. He locked himself inside his workshop behind the cathedral and chiseled and polished that stone for three years. When it was finished, it took 49 men five days to bring it to its place of display in front of city hall. Archways were torn down. Narrow streets were widened. But once on display, people from all across Europe began to come to see the magnificent statute of David after he'd defeated Goliath. It far exceeded anything the City Council members had envisioned. That giant flawed stone had been transformed from a massive waste of rock – a failure – into an artistic masterpiece.

You're a masterpiece in the making. Yes, you start out like that flawed piece of marble. You have a deep fracture in your life the Bible calls sin. And without God, your life is and remains a failure. But God, like the artist, sees beyond the failure, the faults, and the broken places in our lives. He sees your eternal potential. He sees what you can become in Jesus and because of Jesus. If you'll allow Him to use His tools – one of which is failure – He will transform you from a flawed creature into an eternal masterpiece of His love and grace. He did that in Peter. He can do it in you and me.