

*how to cope
with ethical
and moral defeat*

Z FAILURE

Failure is a recurring experience in the life of every Christian. We have referred to this briefly in several earlier chapters. The effect of repeated failure can be detrimental. Reviewing a history of his ethical and moral defeats can be demoralizing to an individual, can destroy confidence and even the desire to try. Or, it can lead to rationalization. Rather than admit failure, a person may try to explain it away both to himself and to others, and fabricate a counterfeit appearance of righteousness in its place. Both of these reactions to failure are dangerously wrong. It is essential for moral survival and growth to understand failure and to deal with it appropriately.

I. THE CHRISTIAN AS FAILURE

Every Christian fails adequately to know and do the will of God. This is not only the problem of the unbeliever and the enemy of God, but also that of the most devout and mature child of God. Paul, for example, long after his conversion confesses and agonizes over his continued moral failure (Rom. 7:7-25).

No matter how much we care or how hard we try, we all fail miserably and frequently.

A. Christian Disobedience

Because of ignorance or weakness we often make bad ethical decisions and take bad courses of action. Our analysis of the issues may be faulty. Our interpretation of Scripture may be inaccurate. We may misread the Spirit's guidance from within. For any or all of these reasons we often choose a course of action that is evil. The tragedy in such cases is that our intentions may be excellent. As we carry out the mistaken and evil course of action, we may be fully convinced that it is good, right, and necessary.

In other cases, even though we realize that a type of behavior is evil, we decide to do it anyway, because it appears pleasurable or rewarding. The reverse also happens. Even though we realize that a certain course of action would be good and God-pleasing, we knowingly refuse to do it because it appears costly, arduous, or inconvenient. Deliberate failure and sin are particularly dangerous.

Scripture issues severe warnings against them (Heb. 10:26-31). Such sins reveal contempt for God's grace in Christ and rejection of His Spirit. They are a serious threat to saving faith and may even destroy it completely. A term often applied to this type of failure is "mortal" sin (1 John 5:16-17), because it is fatal to faith.

B. The Imperfection of Christian Obedience

That our disobedience is failure we can understand and accept easily enough. More difficult to grasp is the paradox that even our obedience is failure, and yet this is also true. Our obedience to God is never fully what it ought to be. It is always deficient, defective, tainted. Since our obedience as well as our disobedience is failure, there is a sense in which we are complete ethical and moral failures.

Our obedience to God is fragmentary and imperfect. Even when we do our best, we never do all that He expects and requires. This is very disturbing to God, for He is satisfied with nothing less than perfection. He never gets this from us, since

our performance is spotty and inconsistent. At times we may appear to be conforming closely to His will, at least externally. However, this will often be followed by relaxation of effort or a complete moral breakdown in some other area of life. We like to take comfort in the fact that, although we are not perfect, we are doing rather well compared, at least, with some people. But, this is false comfort. For compared with God and what He requires, we fall pathetically short.

The other serious problem with our obedience, in addition to its imperfection, is that it is contaminated. Our obedience to God is always tainted by mixed motives. Even when we do the right thing, it is always partly for the wrong reason. The power of sin, although forgiven and counteracted, is still present and active in us, spoiling even the best that we do. Our obedience is often grudging and half-hearted. We do what God commands, not because we want to, but because we have to.

In other words, our obedience is a response to His law instead of to the gospel, and this is unacceptable. Or, instead of obeying because we want to glorify God and help people, we may obey primarily because we realize that we will benefit from this or at least avoid trouble. Not faith and love but self-interest often dominates our motives. Or, we may begin an act of obedience with a proper motive only to have it replaced by one that is improper.

For example, I may be moved to help someone in a way that requires a large amount of time and money. Initially this may grow primarily out of genuine concern for this person. However, as the project continues I may find myself motivated increasingly by the appreciation and admiration that this act elicits, rather than by love. My motive has deteriorated. Mixed and tainted motives are a problem because God is not only interested in outward behavior. He is every bit as interested in *why* we do something as He is in *what* we do. For these reasons, even obedience which is externally successful is, in fact, a failure.

C. The Impact of Failure

Awareness of the inevitability of failure can have a devastating impact upon the Christian. Defeatism, irresponsibility, and despair are its usual products. Many Christians are overwhelmed and effectively disabled by past and anticipated moral failures.

Since we know in advance that our obedience will be a failure, why even try? Under these circumstances Christian obedience seems to be an exercise in futility. A Christian with this attitude would say that instead of trying to obey and to improve morally, maybe we should simply accept the fact of our helplessness and concentrate on being forgiven. In other words, we might as well forget about sanctification and be concerned only about our justification. Not many Christians express this feeling openly and strongly, but most recognize it as a familiar part of their personal experience. Failure discourages ethical and moral effort.

Still more insidious is the conclusion that since failure is certain and unavoidable, we might as well go at it with gusto. A Christian may say to himself, "Since I can't win morally, I might as well enjoy the pleasures of losing. If I can't please God, I might as well please myself, abandon myself to sin, and do whatever I want." Much reckless and irresponsible behavior on the part of Christians grows out of this point of view. Even many who have not acted out such feelings have been troubled by them. Failure encourages moral laxity.

The most dangerous reaction to failure is despair of one's ethical and moral ability. Despair of this kind can easily lead to spiritual despair, to the growing suspicion or conviction that saving faith is gone. A Christian may say to himself, "If I really believed in Christ as my Savior, I would not fail so miserably and so often. If I ever had genuine faith, it is obviously gone now."

A companion of this frightening thought is despair of God's mercy. The Christian may wonder how God can forgive him if he keeps on failing. "I sin over and over again. I tell God I am sorry but still keep on doing it, sometimes deliberately. If I were God, I would not forgive a person like me." Such a Christian may be certain God has given up on him and destined him for punishment. He may be convinced that there is no way he can get back on good terms with God. "He was generous and forgiving. He gave me many wonderful blessings and opportunities, but I have blown it. There is no longer any hope for me." Consistent failure can lead to deep despair.

D. The Cause and Exposure of Failure

The corruption of sin embodied in the old person is still very much a part of the Christian. Through faith in Christ the Chris-

tian is forgiven of it, and by the power of the Holy Spirit he is able to resist it and counteract it. However, it remains as a confusing and misleading force, a debilitating and enervating factor in the Christian's life. Every failure is symptomatic of this chronic spiritual and moral disorder.

God does not permit us to overlook or forget our failures or the underlying corruption from which they emerge. Through the message of His law, He continually reminds us of them. He keeps us aware of what is wrong with our hearts and lives as well as of the appalling consequences. He holds our attitudes and performance up against the revelation of His will, so that we become painfully aware of the discrepancies. As He does this, God is like a physician who relentlessly pursues the diagnosis of a patient and frankly discloses to him the full seriousness of his condition. In the case of a lingering or chronic illness, diagnosis is necessarily a continuing process. So is God's diagnosis of our sinfulness.

II. GOD FORGIVES FAILURE

God calls attention to our failures, not in order to discourage or demean us, but in order to prepare us for His help. Through His diagnostic work in the law He hopes to make us receptive to the remedial work of His gospel. Although God's anger at our sinfulness is very real, even greater is His love which makes Him eager to pardon.

A. Christ Paid the Penalty

In order to make forgiveness possible, God's own Son, Jesus Christ, personally paid the penalty for our sins. Because God takes our failures very seriously and because He wants us to take them seriously, He did not just quietly and painlessly erase them from the record. Instead, He insisted that they be paid for in full, with bitter pain, blood, death, and the experience of hell. All this His anger and justice called for. However, because He loves us and because we could never survive this penalty, He mercifully paid it Himself in the person and through the work of Jesus.

Although completely obedient to the Father's will Himself and entirely innocent of any wrongdoing, Jesus Christ accepted the

blame and the burden of our failures. In keeping with His Father's saving purpose, and moved by the same great compassion, He suffered and died for our sins. By His obedience and sacrifice He made forgiveness available to us. Not our own efforts to obey, nor our regrets for failing, nor the painful consequences that we frequently endure in this life on account of our sins, nothing that we do or suffer, is the basis of our forgiveness. Only because of Christ's loving and vicarious self-giving can we escape condemnation, and hope for pardon.

B. Faith Receives What Christ Provides

God never deals with us in a mechanical or impersonal way. Having provided complete forgiveness for us through the life and work of Jesus, He does not simply apply this to us automatically. He does not, for example, simply include it in the air that we breathe or the water that we drink. He does not just instruct a computer to remove all debits from our accounts. Rather, He approaches us personally in the various forms of the gospel. He tells us how and why He wants to forgive us. He offers us pardon for our failure and invites and enables us to accept this.

The forgiveness is not ours and does not count for us, however, unless and until we make it our own by faith. Only the person who *believes* is forgiven and saved. God wants to forgive us but will not do so unless we are aware of His offer and respond to it positively. There are at least three phases to the faith response. The first is that I realize I *need Christ* and His help—I am aware that I am sinful and lost without Him. The second phase is that I *want Christ*—I desire and long for Him and His help. The third is that I *accept Him*—I count on His promise, realize that I actually possess the One whom I need and want.

From the point of view of a Christian's experience, faith appears to be his own work and doing. It consists of things that he thinks, feels, wills, and does. Scripture, however, describes faith as a gift and work of God (Eph. 2:8). Through the gospel the Holy Spirit approaches him, not only with the offer of pardon but with the power to accept it. Without coercing him in any way, the Holy Spirit penetrates his mind and heart and enables him to believe.

The Christian lives constantly in this forgiveness as long as faith is there. Some incorrectly think of themselves as jumping in

and out of God's forgiveness. They feel that every time they sin they are cut off from God and His pardon. According to this interpretation, only when they consciously regret a sin and specifically ask to be forgiven of it are they restored to God and His grace. If a person dies during the interim between an act of sin and an act of repentance, he is lost, according to this view.

But there is a basic misconception here. What condemns a person ultimately is not sin, but unbelief. If sin condemned, all Christians would be lost, for its corruption remains in all of us even when we are not committing conscious acts of sin. As has already been explained, sinful behavior, especially deliberate sin, is threatening to faith and may destroy it completely. However, not all sinful acts destroy faith. As long as we have faith, even very weak faith, we are completely and continually pardoned. We have the assurance that we live in God's forgiveness twenty-four hours of every day. Even before we are aware of a sin and ask for pardon, He forgives. He lovingly and patiently puts up with our failures. He continues to love us and relate to us, as long as we have faith.

Obviously, this kind of arrangement is subject to abuse. However, it may also be productive of great incentive and strength for doing the will of God despite previous failures. This is God's purpose. Whenever we become aware of God's forgiveness, we also receive new strength from the Holy Spirit. The two—God's forgiveness and the Holy Spirit—always go together. You cannot have one without the other. God assures us of His constant forgiveness and urges us to keep returning to Him for fresh awareness of this, so that the power of the Holy Spirit will be released and activated in us anew.

This explains why the Christian must continually seek God's forgiveness in a spirit of penitence. It is not that he might be condemned for any unconfessed sin. Rather, it is through the expression of God's forgiving love in the gospel that the Holy Spirit reaches into the Christian's heart and life with strength. As we enter into God's forgiving love again and again, our love for God grows and our incentive to obey Him increases. As we experience God's patience with us and His pardon for our failures, the Spirit builds our determination to do better in the future.

Furthermore, He builds our confidence that we can improve. By the repeated application of God's forgiving love, the Spirit develops in the Christian an increasing sense of responsibility to

God and His will, as well as the kind of loyalty and commitment that prevent defeatism and easy surrender to temptation. Because the Christian has been forgiven so generously and so often, he wants to please God. Because the power of the Spirit accompanies that forgiveness, he knows that he can please God.

The following example from human experience illustrates the motivating potential of forgiveness. A certain husband cheats on his wife, even though she is warm, loving, attractive, and faithful to him, and even though he loves her as well. When she discovers this, she is angry and deeply hurt. Their relationship has been grossly violated and its survival appears uncertain. However, in spite of what he did, she still loves her husband, forgives him, and wants to save their marriage. He by this time is deeply remorseful, and is overwhelmed by her loving offer to forgive and forget. He accepts gratefully, and by this experience his love for her matures and intensifies. In their life together, every new experience of her love and forgiveness increases his affection for her, appreciation for her, and desire to be a better husband to her.

C. God Accepts the Efforts of the Forgiven Sinner

By faith we receive pardon which covers all of our failures. As a result, they no longer appear on our records. While regret for them remains, our failures no longer terrify our consciences. Most importantly, we have the assurance that our failures will not be able to condemn us at the final judgment. Everything wrong that we have ever done, all the opportunities for good that we have left undone, every corrupt motive and inclination, is obliterated by God's pardon.

Furthermore, in the place of all of our failures and corruption, the righteousness of Jesus Christ, His obedience and sacrifice, is applied to us. This makes us and our poor obedience acceptable to God. Covered by the righteousness of Christ by faith, we ourselves and our efforts to please Him are approved by God now and will be also at the judgment. For Christ's sake our good works will be recognized and rewarded at the judgment despite their inadequacies. His perfect obedience counts for us and compensates for everything that is lacking in our character and performance.

D. Forgiveness Disperses Pride and Despair

There is a proper kind of joy and satisfaction that Christians may feel as a result of their obedience to God. To have tried to do the right thing ought to make us feel better than to have capitulated to temptation. However, the old person would like very much to convert the joy of obedience into arrogant self-righteousness. It attempts, often successfully, to get us to smugly congratulate ourselves on our fine moral performance and to look with disdain upon others who do not appear to be doing so well. The fact and experience of forgiveness dispels this kind of pride. Forgiven persons have been made painfully aware of their failures and have been led to realize that only because of Christ's obedience and sacrifice are they and their obedience acceptable. The truth is that there is nothing in or about us of which to be proud.

On the other hand, because we are forgiven, despair, too, is unwarranted. Forgiveness is the assurance of God's pardon. It is also the source through which the Spirit's power surges into us. Furthermore, it includes the guarantee of our ultimate moral perfection. Forgiveness not only enables us to live with our failures, it promises us that we will not always be failures. The God who now forgives will, in the life to come, make us spiritually and morally whole and completely successful at knowing and doing His will. Disappointment over our present limitations and weaknesses is balanced by the prospect of our final victory.

E. Forgiveness Implies Contrition and Amendment

Although God's forgiveness is abundant and constant, it benefits only those who are contrite, who recognize and regret their failures. God forgives the believer immediately according to his need. However, before that forgiveness can register with him and be effective in him, the Christian has to face up to his failures, be alarmed by them and sorry for them. The solution of God's forgiveness will not mean much to the Christian unless he recognizes his problem and takes it seriously. Sin to which he clings longingly and which he intends to repeat cannot be forgiven. As long as a believer feels that way about his sin, what he is seeking from God is not forgiveness of sin but permission to continue in sin. This God will never grant.

As preparation for forgiveness, the Christian must first experience contrition. God Himself induces this through the message of His law. He keeps hammering away with the demands and threats of that law so that, instead of being blissfully unaware of his sin or friendly and comfortable with it, the Christian becomes concerned about it and sorry for it. Contrition makes him react to his sinfulness as an enemy to be fought rather than as a game to be played or a pleasure to be enjoyed. Contrition precedes forgiveness.

Amendment of life follows forgiveness. When by faith in Christ we accept God's forgiveness, we also accept the responsibility to do better in the future. (See chapter 8 for a complete discussion of this improvement.) Anticipation of improvement and commitment to improve are necessary elements in the attitude of the forgiven person.

As the Christian accepts God's pardon, it must not be merely because he wants to escape punishment but also because he seeks rehabilitation. Anything less reflects contempt for God's forgiveness and transforming purpose. God does not lift us out of the gutter of sin and clean us up so that we can crawl right back into it again. Rather, He cleans us up because He wants to lead us in a new and better direction. He makes this clear from the outset. Unless we are also willing to accept His gift and program of rehabilitation, we have not accepted His pardon, either. The two are inseparable.

Although Christians must be realistic about ethical and moral failures, we need not be overwhelmed by them. It is essential that we face up to them honestly and acknowledge their seriousness. There is no hope or help for us until we admit that we are failures. And yet if this admission is followed by acceptance of God's forgiveness, then hope and progress are possible. Instead of being a defeated and demoralized failure, the Christian, by virtue of his pardon through faith in Jesus, is hopeful and improving. He knows that God loves and accepts him, despite his failures.