

11. Saul's Pattern of Handling Failure or Christ's Pattern of Handling Failure

When people are leading others, there are times when those they are leading fail. This is true both in the world, and among Christians. Saul was the first king of Israel. One day, he gave a command. 1 Samuel 14:24 says, "And the men of Israel were distressed that day, for Saul had placed the people under oath, saying, 'Cursed is the man who eats any food until evening, before I have taken vengeance on my enemies.' So none of the people tasted food." Here, we see that even though they needed food, the people obeyed Saul

However, Saul's son, Jonathan, did not hear the command. 1 Samuel 14:27 says, "But Jonathan had not heard his father charge the people with the oath; therefore he stretched out the end of the rod that was in his hand and dipped it in a honeycomb, and put his hand to his mouth; and his countenance brightened." The reason Jonathan did not hear the command of his father was due to the fact that he was on the battlefield capturing a key position for Israel. Since he had not heard the command, Jonathan ate a little honey. Later, he was told about the command of his father.

Saul later made a rash statement to the people. 1 Samuel 14:39 says, "For as the Lord lives, who saves Israel, though it be in Jonathan my son, he shall surely die.' But not a man among all the people answered him." Saul was ready to prove that he was in control, even if it meant killing his own son.

Later, Saul chose to cast lots to find out who had sinned. When the lot pointed to Jonathan, 1 Samuel 14:43-45 says, "Then Saul said to Jonathan, 'Tell me what you have done.' And Jonathan told him, and said, 'I only tasted a little honey with the end of the rod that was in my hand. So now I must die!' And Saul answered, 'God do so and more also; for you shall surely die, Jonathan.' But the people said to Saul, 'Shall Jonathan die, who has accomplished this great deliverance in Israel? Certainly not! As the Lord lives, not one hair of his head shall fall to the ground, for he has worked with God this day.' So the people rescued Jonathan, and he did not die." Here, we see that Saul was ready to kill Jonathan because of his own rash vow. The people chose to protect Jonathan, because they realized that the plan of Saul was totally wrong. In the process, Saul lost the respect of the people and greatly hurt his own leadership of the people.

In contrast to the way Saul handled failure, we see that Christ handled the failures of His disciples in a totally different way. Instead of condemning them to death, Christ restored them and promised that they would continue to have an effective ministry in the future. We see that Christ demonstrated this forgiving and restoring attitude as He encouraged Peter, knowing that Peter was going to fail.

In Luke 22:31-34, Christ said to Peter, "Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat. But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren.' But he said to Him, 'Lord, I am ready to go with You, both to prison and to death.' Then He said, 'I tell you, Peter, the rooster shall not crow this day before you will deny three times that you know Me.'" In these verses, we see that Christ predicted that Peter would fail, but also promised that he would be restored and have a future

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ministry.

First, we see why Christ said Peter would fail. Verse 31 says, “And the Lord said, ‘Simon, Simon! Indeed, Satan has asked for you, that he may sift you as wheat.’” Here, we see that Satan asked God for permission to test Peter. Of course, we are familiar with the fact that Satan also asked for permission to do the same to Job in the Old Testament. Christ wants us to know that the desire of Satan is always to be allowed to test Christians, especially Christian leaders.

Second, we see that even before Satan was allowed to test Peter, Christ had already prayed for Peter,. Verse 32 says, “But I have prayed for you, that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren.” Christ knew that Peter would deny Him three times that night. However, Christ also knew that those denials would not be an indication that the faith of Peter had failed. Instead, Christ knew that Peter was weak and would be deceived by temptation. In fact, Christ said to Peter, and the other disciples, in Luke 22:40, “When He came to the place, He said to them, ‘Pray that you may not enter into temptation.’” Christ knew Peter would be tempted and deny Him.

Third, we see that Christ knew Peter would turn back to Him after he denied Christ three times that night. Later that night, when Peter denied Christ the third time, Luke 22:61-62 says, “And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how He had said to him, ‘Before the rooster crows, you will deny Me three times.’ So Peter went out and wept bitterly.” Even in Peter’s failure, Christ could look at him with compassion, because Christ had already warned Peter that he would deny Him.

Fourth, we see that even before Peter failed, Christ had promised ultimate victory to Peter. (As we saw, verse 32 said, “and when you have returned to Me”. Christ warned Peter of what was coming as Satan sifted him.) However, Christ told Peter that He had prayed for Peter and that Peter would turn back to Him after this time of failure. Here, we see that Christ focused on the future restoration rather than the present failure.

Fifth, we see that Christ promised Peter that he would still have a ministry after this momentary present failure. The last phrase of verse 32 says, “and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren.” Here, we see that Peter was told that what he would do that night would teach him some very important lessons. One of those lessons was the fact that other brothers will also need to be strengthened when they have a momentary time of failure. Christ assured Peter that what he would learn that night would equip him to help other Christians when they experienced momentary failure. He would be equipped to strengthen others when they went through similar times.

Sixth, although Peter knew what Christ said that night, we see that he still felt the Lord could no longer use him because of his failure. In John 21:3, we read, “Simon Peter said to them, ‘I am going fishing.’ They said to him, ‘We are going with you also.’ They went out and immediately got into the boat, and that night they caught nothing.” Peter felt that he was such a failure that all he could do was return to his life of fishing. This was not just a momentary decision, because it would take him three or four days to travel from Jerusalem back to the Sea of Galilee to begin

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fishing again. According to John 21:1-3, at least six other disciples seemed to have that same sense of failure and also returned to fishing.

Seventh, Christ chose to go to Peter to restore him, rather than just let Peter live the rest of his life with a feeling of failure. Jesus even allowed Peter to fail to catch any fish before talking to him. However, John 21:4-6 says, “But when the morning had now come, Jesus stood on the shore; yet the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. Then Jesus said to them, ‘Children, have you any food?’ They answered Him, ‘No.’ And He said to them, ‘Cast the net on the right side of the boat, and you will find some.’ So they cast, and now they were not able to draw it in because of the multitude of fish.” Christ showed Peter, and the others, that they could not even catch fish in their own strength any more, but He could do great things when He worked through their lives.

Eighth, Christ fed the disciples, and ate with them, before even talking to Peter. Christ gives us a good example of how to restore a weaker brother. Christ spent time with Peter, and the others, to let them know that He accepted them in spite of what had happened the night of His crucifixion. In fact, sharing a meal together provides an ideal time to restore a Christian who is feeling like he or she has failed.

Ninth, Christ asked Peter if he would really prefer to spend the rest of his life fishing instead of serving Christ. John 21:15 says, “So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, ‘Simon, son of Jonah, do you love Me more than these?’ He said to Him, ‘Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.’ He said to him, ‘Feed My lambs.’” Since they had just caught one hundred and fifty-three fish, Christ gently asked Peter whether he loved the fish more than he loved Christ. Even though Peter was afraid, after his three denials, to use the same word for love that Christ used, and used a less powerful word to let Christ know that he loved him, Christ told him to feed His lambs.

Tenth, since Peter had denied Christ three times, Christ repeated the question, “Do you love me?” three times. Each time, Peter answered “yes”, and each time Christ told him it was time to get back to serving the Lord. If we read 1 Peter 5, when Peter was writing to fellow elders many years later, the words he used in that chapter may indicate he was thinking of this very event as he wrote. Peter was restored, and just a few weeks later, preached the sermon, recorded in Acts 2, on the Day of Pentecost.

Some might choose to follow Saul’s pattern for handling failure. However, Christ certainly gives us an example of the way He wants us to restore Christians after they have experienced a time of failure. May the Lord richly bless you as you follow the example of Christ and restore developing spiritual leaders after they have demonstrated weakness in their lives.