

LifeWay Bible Studies for Life Series for October 28: From failure to action

October 15, 2012

An interesting pop quiz for any Sunday school class might be to ask who can name all 12 disciples. Most people can name three or four but not all 12. With rare exception, however, nearly everyone who attempts to name the disciples will remember Peter. Of most of the disciples, we know very little from the Gospels. Peter stands out because he often was caught with his foot in his mouth.

However, Peter also stands out because, despite his failures, Jesus turned to Peter's faith as the model upon which Jesus would build the church (Matthew 16:18). In other words, despite his terrible failures, including his blatant public denial of Jesus after his arrest, Peter was able to find his way back to being a loyal and faithful follower of Jesus. Perhaps we, too, often take for granted the truth that our character is not defined so much by what our failures do to us as by what we make of our failures.

Peter, it should be noted, was not the only disciple who denied Christ. It would be fair to ask where the other disciples were even as Jesus was being questioned before the high priest. There is no record that most of them were anywhere to be found. Yet, Peter is the one who so boldly told Jesus—no matter what—he would never deny Christ and then proceeded to do so in such a humiliating fashion three times over.

Judas also denied Jesus, and he also was one of the original 12. He is notorious in Christian history, of course, because he literally sold Jesus out for a few pieces of silver and, at least according to the Gospels, never

repented of his terrible sin. He obviously regretted what he'd done to Jesus, because we know Judas later hanged himself.

It has been said that therein lies the greatest difference between Peter and Judas. Instead of taking his own life, what if Judas had stuck around, as Peter did, to see what Jesus could make of his betrayal. That could have been a whole other chapter in the Gospels about how God, in Christ, can transform our failures into platforms of redemption.

Eventually, all of us will deny the Christ we committed to follow. Some of our failures will be more public than others and some will have worse social consequences than others. No matter what, however, we all will eventually fail to make the right choice or even willingly choose the wrong thing that makes a mockery of faith in Christ.

Even ministers are known to sometimes publicly embarrass the Savior by making poor ethical choices. Where are those ministers now? In most cases, for one reason or another, they simply fade away, and we never hear from them again. In most cases, they leave the ministry altogether and choose another career path. Sometimes they do this out of shame, believing God could never use them again. Other times, they do so because the community of faith they were serving had no commitment to or mechanism for helping them find forgiveness and restoration.

A dear friend of mine once lost his ministry because of some immoral choices he made, especially with regard to the abuse of alcohol and drugs. He wandered aimlessly for years as he sought to find his way back to healing and wholeness. In time, he did find his way back, and his denomination did have a mechanism for restoring failed ministers. Today, he serves a thriving congregation. Many of those he serves have been attracted to his ministry specifically because of his open confession about his sin and the way God has made something totally new out of his life.

This is the way of Peter. Peter's failure and redemption should also encourage us in another way. Many people who are faithful to Christ now made their commitments to Christ decades ago when they were very young. It can truthfully be said of them that they have done most of their worst sinning since having committed themselves to Christ. Peter's worst sin was committed after he started following Jesus, too. The point being that, sometimes, we make commitments we fail to keep for any number of reasons, just as Peter did the night of Jesus' arrest.

Yet, Jesus doesn't just work with people who have committed to follow him and then never made a mistake. Jesus' specialty is found in redeeming the redeemed. Jesus works every day with people like you and me, who committed to follow Jesus decades ago and had to learn what that actually meant by making some of the worst mistakes of our lives after we made our commitment to Jesus.

Perhaps a better pop quiz for each Sunday school class would be to ask each follower of Jesus to reflect on the worst sin they can remember committing. Having recalled it, without necessarily naming it out loud in class, the teacher should then ask them to reflect on what God has done in and through them, not in spite of but specifically because of their worst failures. If most of us are honest, we'd have to say the best things God has done through us have been the result of what God's grace made of the worst things we have done.

In the springtime, as we walk along the sidewalks, the first new life we see is coming up through the cracks in the concrete. A crack is nothing more than a place where the light can get through, even in our character. It is not in our perfection that others see the most perfect witness of what our faith means. The most perfect witness of our faith, more often than not, springs from those cracks in our character where God's holy light got through and generated new life that never would have been otherwise, just as God did with Peter.