

## How to Become a Phenomenal Failure by Pastor Marty

It is probably not a big surprise to anyone that we live in a society that promotes and idolizes success. Most of us are used to seeing books with titles like *How to Win Friends and Influence People* and *How to Succeed in Business* as well as every other possible “How to” title imaginable. We may use different words, but I expect that we are all guilty of referencing the quote, “if at first you don’t succeed, try, try again.” Even our sports programs suggest that success is important, leading to the adage, “Winners never quit, and quitters never win!” This dangerous concept is so ingrained in our thinking that we may find it almost impossible to avoid. Indeed, even the title of this newsletter initially suggests that I am going to present a way to get better at something. However, you have likely read enough of my works by now to realize that I like titles that involve a play on words. Still, I do not claim to have found complete deliverance from the pernicious desire to succeed, but it is my goal to avoid it as much as possible here. I trust that you will forgive me if you reach the end of this newsletter and feel I somehow succeeded in my attempt to describe how to be better at failing. If so, I will take some comfort in the fact that there are a countless number of instances in the Bible when God tells people to do things, and they make a complete and total mess of it.

***The Bible is full of instances when God uses people who completely mess it up.***

An excellent example of a person in the Bible who failed repeatedly is Peter. Depending on the denomination or the church you attend, you might have some exceedingly different convictions about Peter. According to Roman Catholic tradition, he was the first Pope in the very long line of popes—all the way up to the current Pope, Francis. They understand the

idea of Apostolic succession to mean that the current pope is the only one truly authorized to be the leader of the earthly Church. Some other liturgical denominations, such as the Eastern Orthodox or Anglican Communion, also rely on Apostolic succession, tracing the ordination of their bishops to the Apostles and to Peter; however, they do not put the same stress on a central authority. Most Protestant churches consider Peter the head of the early Church without consideration for special succession. In our case, we want to consider what we read about him in the Gospels and other parts of the New Testament. What we find is that more failings are recorded about Peter than any other disciple—including Judas. Perhaps Jesus chose to make Peter the head of the Church precisely because he had grown accustomed to failing. He really was a very ordinary Peter.

***Perhaps God actually chose Peter to be the leader because he had failed so often.***

When we consider instances of Peter failing at things, we are inclined to immediately think of the incident when he denies the Lord three times. However, I want to begin with a much more minor event: when Peter takes it upon himself to speak for Jesus in Matthew 17:24-27. This is very often an overlooked instance of failing. Those who collect a tax for the temple ask Peter if Jesus would also be paying it. Peter had already been following Jesus for a good period of time, so he knew that Jesus regularly opposed the traditions and rules of the Pharisees and Sadducees. He should not have taken anything for granted. However, he affirms that Jesus does intend to pay it—without checking with Him first. When someone presumes to speak for another person, it is taking a position of authority over the other person and considering the other

person in a position of subjection. Of course, the exception is when the other person has specifically granted that right, which makes the speaker more of an ambassador/representative than an authority; however, this is not the case here. Peter opted to speak for Jesus on his own. There may be circumstances where it is entirely valid to speak for another person, but Peter's presumption in this case was more hubris than anything else. We know this because Jesus is quick to correct his assumption the moment he enters the room. It also must have been a noteworthy error on Peter's part for the Holy Spirit to supernaturally reveal the incident to Jesus before Peter ever said anything about it. If Jesus immediately affirmed what Peter said, it might indicate he had acted on prior words or actions of Jesus. Instead, Jesus corrects him and then does a miracle to fulfill the obligation that Peter had made for them both. In other words, Jesus had to "cover" for Peter's impulsive error.

***Jesus first corrects Peter's assumption and then has to cover for his obligation.***

Another instance of Peter failing, not once but three times, is recorded in Matt 14:22-33. This is the passage where we read about his walking on the water with Jesus. We should not get so excited about his momentary success that we overlook the excellent instances of failing. The disciples cried out when they saw Jesus approaching the boat. He reassured them who He was, telling them not to fear. Peter then says, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water." Now, his wanting to walk on the water with Jesus was certainly not bad. However, if we think about his statement, we see two problems. First, Jesus had just verified who He was; if Peter hadn't been completely confident that it was Jesus, He would not have expected the ability to grant the miracle, nor would he have gotten out of the boat in the middle of a storm. Clearly, he knew it certainly was Jesus,

but he responds with a conditional "if . . . then" statement that sounds like he is calling into question His identity. Second, he attaches a condition to prove it really is the Lord; he wants Him to do a miracle. Peter may have had a good desire, but his statement of condition seems to be a form of manipulation. We need only look at the temptations in the wilderness when the devil says, "if You are the Son of God, turn these stones into bread" or "if You are the Son of God, jump off the temple" to see the same type of condition. Peter could simply have said, "Lord, command me to come to You on the water," and it would have been enough, for there is good reason to believe Jesus wanted him to step out of the boat. By using an "if . . . then" condition, however, he tries to force the result. Then, we see him fail again when he is out walking on the water. He turns his eyes away from the Lord and begins to fear. He had already seen Jesus calm a deadly storm with a simple command (Matthew 8:23-27), so he had every reason to trust Him now. Jesus felt the same way, for He asks him why he doubted. Although Peter stepped out in faith and walked on the water, we cannot overlook his attempt to manipulate the Lord and then doubting Him.

***Peter first tries to manipulate the Lord, and then he begins to doubt Him.***

Another example of Peter failing is described in the book of Galatians. Paul, who wrote most of the New Testament, explains in this letter that he had to publicly confront Peter at one point for racism (Galatians 2). God had already made a point of showing to Peter personally that He did not want the Gentiles treated differently than the Jews (Acts 10), and Peter actually made a pronouncement of that before the very first Church council (Acts 15). Nevertheless, he gave in to peer pressure and began to stop associating with the Gentile believers in a clear example of hypocrisy. This seemed extremely similar to a much earlier

instance when he denied the Lord once being associated with Him was no longer very popular. It is one thing to hang with Jesus when the sick are being healed and the dead are being raised; it's another thing altogether when a serving girl accused him of associating with someone on trial! Similarly, Peter began to ostracize and avoid his Gentile friends and associates when other believers did not approve of the company he kept. In fact, Paul explains that other believers were even led into this same sin due to Peter's actions. As the head of the Church at the time, he had to know that other believers would follow his example. By modeling prejudice, it spread through the whole group, and it took a newcomer to call him out about it. Thankfully, we know that he accepted the rebuke in humility, for he later not only affirms Paul as a beloved brother but also confirms that Paul's writings are scripture (2 Peter 3). We have to be careful to not let ourselves be distracted by Peter's humility and propensity to quickly repent for his sin; instead, we should take note that he does have a habit of failing more than the average disciple—at least as far as what we see written in scripture.

***From what we see written in scripture, Peter fails more often than average.***

Based on all of these epic fails, it might be natural to assume that Peter became a bit insecure about his own reputation. As human beings, we often have a tendency to hate failing, and this can lead us to avoid facing the truth and admitting to our mistakes (Note: see Congress). However, Peter seems to be quite accepting of his propensity to fail. One huge example is when he actually has the audacity to correct the Lord Himself. In Mark 8, Jesus explains that He is going to be taken away and killed. Peter interrupts the Lord to declare that he is not willing to let this happen. This was no small error on his part. Jesus had just begun describing the plan of salvation (Note: see the

Four Spiritual Laws) that would destroy the power of sin and death and open the way for eternal life for all people . . . and Peter exclaims his intention to stop it before Jesus gets past the step one. It says that Jesus turned to see His disciples, who were clearly listening to the exchange and waiting on His response. Since Peter was a natural leader, they were all ready to follow his lead. His intention to prevent the crucifixion from happening was such a major hindrance to God's plan that Jesus rebuked Peter in front of everybody—even referring to him as the devil himself! His outburst was so bad that Jesus had to make an example of him to the rest. We might tend to overlook this act because we identify with him, for no one wants someone we care about to die; however, Peter could have simply said, "Lord, I do not want this to happen to You" or asked, "Lord, can this be avoided?" However, it states quite plainly that he actually rebuked Jesus. I imagine that after the resurrection, when Peter understood the importance of the crucifixion, that he looked back at this incident with chagrin. If anybody knew how to fail phenomenally, it was Peter.

***If anyone was phenomenal at failing, it was certainly our own Apostle Peter.***

At this point, we need to be careful to stop and examine our hearts. Depending on our level of idolatry toward the concept of success, we might be tempted to feel bad for Peter or to try and defend him. We may discover that we have a tendency to think of him as a person more inclined to succeed than to fail. Granted, there are a few references in scripture to him doing some successful things, such as getting thousands saved with a single sermon (Acts 2), testifying boldly before the Sanhedrin (Acts 4), and even raising the dead (Acts 9). However, we should not allow those incidents to skew our view of Peter as someone who knew how to fail. This is especially true because we know that Peter fully embraced this trait in himself!

As we read the gospels, we find that there are some accounts described in some books that are not in others. All the gospel writers describe things from their own perspectives. We see numerous examples where John tells us of personal conversations he had with Jesus that others would not have known except by hearing it from him. Luke records details that he uncovered through personal interviews with witnesses. Matthew mentions incidents that were personal to his calling. Likewise, Church history tells us that Mark wrote his gospel from personal account he heard from Peter. This is important because Mark's is the only gospel that mentions Jesus rebuking Peter in front of the rest of the disciples. Peter himself had to have related this incident to Mark. Unlike the incident of getting out of the boat and then sinking, there was nothing "successful" about this exchange. The only point in sharing this incident with Mark was that he wanted to point out to him how much he had been wrong.

***The only point in Peter sharing this incident was to reveal how wrong he was.***

If our early supposition is correct—that we should try to get better at failing—then we need to identify the purpose. Failing just for the purpose of failing is not a very good reason. Instead, we should look at how it helped Peter and others. In Peter's case, he embraced his propensity to fail and went so far as to share the biggest incidents with others. What did this do for him? We find him so committed to Jesus that he willingly died for Him; he was so humble that he requested to be crucified upside down lest others picture him dying like Jesus and somehow elevate him as someone special; and he was so grateful at being corrected for his sins that he praised Paul, who had rebuked him in public. We also can look at two kings in the Old Testament, both having failed at times: Saul and David. Saul failed by sacrificing the offering in place of the priests,

sparing animals and people that God told him to destroy, murdering Levites who served in the temple, and even consulting a medium. He constantly avoided embracing and affirming his errors, so he continued on a path to destruction. David, on the other hand, became lethargic, stayed at home instead of going to war, committed adultery, and murdered a great man in his own service. However, David quickly admitted to his errors and embraced his own propensity to fail—and it led to the greatest kingdom in the history of all kingdoms. It would be great to think that other kings learned from David's example, but many of them did not. His own son Solomon knew very well all about his experiences, so we would think he would be quick to rejoice in failing. He himself stated that it was a true blessing to have a friend who cares enough to point out errors, and he even advises people to quickly admit to their weaknesses and faults. Sadly, he became so focused on his trying to succeed that he lost sight of God and eventually worshipped other gods to please his hundreds of wives. A desire for success and for approval is a very dangerous thing indeed.

***A strong desire for success and approval is an extremely dangerous thing indeed.***

I often tell people that we are going to fail numerous times in our attempt to live the perfect life God calls us to live, so each time we fail is one less we have ahead of us. I first heard this principle in relation to praying for the sick because we get better at it as we keep trying. It is more than just that, however, for there is something about not being afraid of failing that makes a person bold before God. The person who is not afraid to risk everything on stepping out of the boat is the person who can trust God without reservation. When we become willing to fail like Hananiah, Mishael, & Azariah were, then we will be able to relax in the confidence that the results do not matter. We are going to fail anyway . . . so let's fail phenomenally.