

Series: GREATER THAN... May 27, 2007

**GREATER THAN MY FAILURE
John 20-21**

I. INTRO

- A. I will never forget the day, about 2 ½ years into working at my first church, when the Senior Pastor I was working with walked into my office one morning and said, “Ken, I’ve thought about this, wrestled with it all night—and I think you need to find some place else to work.” I was shocked, hurt—and determined to prove him wrong by the time I left. -In the process of proving him wrong—proving that I was a hard worker, that I was capable, that I was able to lead and go over the top, I started on this dangerous trail where work came first. I almost destroyed my marriage. I was more afraid of failure than God!
1. That’s just **part** of my failure file. The part many of you know about is the fact that almost exactly four years ago, I was fired as a pastor. It was pretty complicated, but the bottom line is that I **failed** as a leader. And because of that, my family got hurt and other people got hurt.
 - And if you want to know more about my failures? Forget it—I’m not going to **tell** you any more! Actually, I’ve failed as a Dad, as a husband, as a brother, as a friend, as a writer...I’ve failed **myself**—my **own** inner values and standards I’ve set for myself as a person and as a follower and lover of Jesus.
 - I’ve said those things specifically because I didn’t **want** to say them. Failure is not fun to talk about. It’s humiliating. It hurts. It brings up bad memories. It makes you feel bad about yourself. It truly is the ugly part of life. Yet, without my failures, I wouldn’t be who I am. If my failure file was empty, I wouldn’t be leading this church—in fact I wouldn’t even be here! My swelled head wouldn’t fit through the door!
 2. How many of you would be able to relate to me—or even **listen** to me this morning if I got up here and said, “You know, I can **barely** relate to failure. I’ve been pretty much successful at everything I’ve tried! My marriage is wonderful—just ask Lori! I’ve been a great Dad! Ask my kids! I’ve been a wonderful son, a great friend—my work record is stellar! I mean, it’s like I’ve got the Midas touch or something. Everything I touch turns to gold!?”
 - At this point, we’d have to pass the buckets. Not for the offering, but for a place to woof your cookies! Most people can barely relate to that—even though that’s what we put on our resumes! But no one knows the **dark** side cause we lock our failure file and swallow the key. Why? Because when we fail, it’s **humiliating!** When I got fired 4 years ago, not only was it public in our community—news of my failure spread everywhere. The Sunday after it happened, I got a call from someone out in BC! I **hate** failure!
- B. ...And yet. I’ve found that failure isn’t final. In fact, failure is the most common human experience there is. There are things you never know about yourself and about life until you fail. Until you get hurt. Something else. I found out that when it comes to failure, I have a **lot** of company! Truth is, the greatest people who have ever lived have failed a number of times. Sometimes—spectacularly! And...did you know that the Bible is jammed with people who failed?
- What I’ve found in my failure—and anything I’ve studied about failure--is that God is **way** bigger. Way **WAY** bigger. And there’s quite a difference between saying, “I **failed**” and

"I'm a failure." Can anyone here this morning relate to **failure**? That's what I thought. So, I want to talk about it for a few minutes.

II. WHEN YOU CRASH

- A. What I **love** about the Bible is its absolute honesty in telling people's stories. In case you didn't know, the Bible isn't just about people's stellar moments of achievement when everyone wanted a picture of them to put in their wallet; it's also about their moments of shame when people were wagging their heads—and their tongues.
1. If you trace failure back to its source, you end up with the very first humans God created. God spoiled them rotten! Gave them everything they could want, including himself. And then gave them each other. Women, imagine the perfect man—totally buff, handsome, brilliant—and selfless! Guys, imagine all the beauty, intelligence, grace and assets any woman has ever had—all stuffed into one woman! Wow! But for some reason, it wasn't enough. They blew the **one** "no" God gave them—thinking He was holding out on them. The failure was absolutely colossal.
 - You'd think, "Wow! People created perfect—imagine their kids! No weird relatives or evil influences on them. Yet one son kills another.
 2. And there's the downward slide from there. Noah, chosen by God to save the human race and the animal kingdom from annihilation—builds this amazing ark—takes him 100 years to do it. The last story about him has drunk in his tent—cursing the son who came in and watched him roll around on the floor naked.
 - Abraham? Amazing man of faith! And yet a man quite willing to lie to save his own life; a man who, when he knows what plan A is to establish the nation God promised he would become, sabotages his family with plan B. One man is father of both the Israelites and the Arabs. And the conflict he created has existed—and escalated for 4000 years!
 - Moses? Singled out by God and, through divine intervention, placed in Pharaoh's home and raised as his son. Moses decides, after all his training to be a Pharaoh, to try releasing his people from slavery on his own, murders a man, and spends the next 40 years on the backside of the desert doing the work of a 14 year old boy—tending sheep. Failure.
 - David? Chosen by God at an early age to be the next king. Kills a giant, becomes a military hero, treats the insane king who is hunting him down with absolute integrity. David is a man after God's heart! Yet in a single era of life commits adultery, murders a man and is publicly humiliated as a king and a father.
 - Solomon? Man! This guy has it **all!** Brains, looks, power, wealth! He can do anything. Really. God shows up early in his life, says, "What do you want? Just **ask** for it!" And yet he blows every single rule God ever set for those who would rule the Israelites—and he winds up far, **far** from God—worshipping pagan deities under the influence of his 1000 wives. I thought about that. Solomon must've taken stupid pills! Why would a really, **really** intelligent man marry 1000 women and think there's not going to be trouble in the ranks!
 3. Now, I could go on—but just let me stop there. Would anyone here grade these people I've listed as failures? "Nice try—but you get an **F!**" I wouldn't. They **failed**, but they were not **failures**. The Book of Hebrews in the N.T. has this list of people in it that everyone admires—some have called it the Bible **Hall of Fame!** Yet the Bible records where **every one of them failed!**

-Why does the Bible tell us that stuff? Wouldn't it be more inspiring and motivational if we just knew the good stuff? **NO!** Because it's not real and it's not honest—and it doesn't fit with what God has said about how he works: **My strength is made PERFECT in weakness!**

-Anyone here this morning who's not human. Like, you're a little above all that stuff? Good. That means that you will fail. In fact, from the moment we're born, that's how we **learn!** Anyone here who had walking totally nailed the first time you tried it? We all start **out** like that. How many times do you think a little kid falls before they learn to walk without falling? Shoot. I'm **still** learning that one. How many times will they go in their diaper or their pants before they learn that there are **potties** for that kind of stuff? Shoot, I'm **still**—no, actually, I've got that one down pretty well.

-It's part of the process of learning! Try. Fail. Try. Fail. Try. Fail—but not as bad. Try. Fail. That's life. That's how we learn to walk. To drive. To make friends. To spend money. But for some reason, we think that when we hit 21 or 32, or 48, or **Freedom 55** we should have it nailed. Moses was **still** making mistakes when he was over 80! Abraham was 86 when he blew it! And yet, even at that age, **failure was not final!**

B. So, what does God think of failure? Well, He's all for it. Maybe there's a **better** way to put that. He **knows** we're going to fail—and, even at the age of 55, or 86, He's there to help us back up—and you **are** a little slower getting up at 86! God's biggest thing when it comes to failure, I believe, is **learn! Don't waste it!** Melt it down, distill it out, write it on the back of your brain—because failure is too **painful** to waste!

-Let me tell the story of Peter—because Jesus, God in human form, was right there with him through the whole thing. So, let's watch what Jesus does—and we'll know how God works when we fail.

1. Peter was, from what we understand, this big rough commercial fisherman—and he seems to rise to the top almost immediately as the leader of Jesus' team. He's this, "Get to the point, show me the bottom line" kind of guy who actually says what everyone else is thinking. One day Jesus challenged him to go after people instead of fishing for perch and bass. My philosophy is to hopefully do **both!** -Jesus gave Peter his name—it means **Rock!** You've heard of the film, **Rocky 1,2,3,4,5?** Yeah? Well, it has nothing to do with Peter's name. Peter **was** a fighter, but he wasn't a **rock**—i.e. steady or dependable. One time he got kudos from Jesus for correctly identifying him as the Messiah—the Son of the Living God. When Jesus talked about the suffering that went with being the Messiah, Peter immediately rebuked Jesus, "No, Jesus! It won't happen like that!" And Jesus nails him—tells Peter he's aligning himself with Satan, not God!" Follow Peter's life, and it's like he's up—then down; up—down.

2. Move ahead several months from that point—and Peter fails again. Only this time he screwed up really bad, and, in essence, he quits. It's **final** failure—failure that is so bad and goes so deep—you're pretty sure you'll never get on your feet again. You've gone one failure too far. Let me set it up.

-The story of Peter in the last day of Jesus' life is a story of multiple failures. When Jesus asked him to stay awake and pray, he fell asleep. Three times. When the mob came for Jesus, Peter decided to fight and does an ear-ectomy on one of the guards. Jesus put it back on—and rebuked him. Peter bragged in front of the whole group of disciples, "Even if everyone else runs, I **never** will. NOT ME!" But he ran.

-We catch up with Peter while he's nonchalantly hanging out in the high priest's courtyard, warming his hands, while Jesus is interrogated. Three different people approach him and accuse him of being with Jesus. Three times, Peter denies even **knowing** Jesus—the third time with a whole string of foul language. It was a shocking failure.

-Then a rooster crowed—just as Jesus had predicted, right after his third denial. Suddenly the realization hit Peter like a freight train that he'd failed the best friend he'd ever had and done what he said he'd never do. Ever been there?

3. In John 21, Peter, this brash, bigger than life guy has had his soul, his confidence trampled deep into the muck. He's crushed by his failure, and he can't get back up.
 - a. In vs. 1, Peter tells 6 other disciples, "I'm going fishing." And this wasn't just a day in the Muskokas to help him think. Peter was saying, "The gig is up. I'm going back to my career." He took one of the family boats out of mothballs--and went fishing. And they caught nothing. Zip.

-Now, I've gotten skunked before--fishing. It's one thing to get skunked when you're on vacation. It's quite another when it's the first day of your new career!
 - b. Jesus has risen from the dead. And He's standing on the beach early in the morning, the mist rolling in off the lake. You can hear the squeak and thump of the oars from their boat. He cups his hands and calls across the water, "Friends, **haven't you ANY fish?**" Now, remember, Jesus never asks a question because he doesn't know the answer. He always asks questions to get at something important in our lives--to make a point. Jesus was saying, "Hey guys; are you bailing on me? So. How's the **new** career going?"

-Jesus said, "Maybe your depthfinder's not working. Why don't you try the other side?" They did--and the nets were instantly jammed with fish.

-Well, John, the apostle Jesus loved, said, "Hey, it's the Lord." Peter, always anxious to get to Jesus, throws his clothes on--and jumps in the water and swims to Jesus. Didn't walk this time. And it's **so** Peter--he leaves the other guys to row the boat in and drag in the fish.
 - c. And when they get there, Jesus had already made a charcoal fire and was cooking bread and **fish**. Wonder where He got them? And, of course, being typical fisherman, they counted their fish. There were 153 **large** fish.
 - d. Then Jesus begins to talk to Peter about his calling. The first question Jesus asks is, "Peter--do you **love me more than these?**" What do you think the word, "these" refer to? Well, what are there 153 of on the beach? It's the **fish**. Jesus is asking the embarrassing question, "Peter, do you love me more than the catch du jour? More than fish. More than the safety and tranquility of the life you had before me? Three times he asks him the question, "Peter, do you love me?" There is some **powerful** imagery in this passage.

-Remember how many times Peter denied Jesus? It was three times, wasn't it? Remember what Peter was warming his hands over when he denied knowing Jesus? It was a charcoal fire. Aromas can be powerful reminders.

- Anyone remember what happened when Peter was first called to follow Jesus? It was almost exactly the same scene—a night of all fishing—and no fish, and then the catch of a lifetime—right on the **other** side of the boat.
- e. Jesus lovingly restores Peter. At another time, he'd called Peter to step out of the boat and walk on the water in the middle of a horrible storm. And Peter sank—cause he took his eyes off Jesus. And Jesus calls him **back out of the boat**. He says, "Peter, don't chose safety. Don't regress. I spent three years of my life with you. Peter, I've trained you care for and lead people, not catch perch and bass! But you're going to have to get **out** of the boat."
4. Did Peter fail? Miserably. So, how is Peter remembered? As a failure—a colossal screw-up? No. Peter is legendary. He got up, he moved on, and he grew—and he never defined his life by his failure. See, when he screwed up, he learned something he would have to know to take the church through those first critical years of its existence.
- See, friends, the truth is that you and I can't be what God calls us to be in our own power. We can't. In fact, **becoming** what God wants us to be is a process. We are like little kids. We try. We fall. We try. We fall. We try. We fall. Sometimes, like kids, we go places we should **never** go and do things we should **never** do—and we get hurt! Like all little kids, we'd like to think, "I'm big! I can do what **I** want and be okay!" And we can't. You can't be what God wants you to be in your own power. That day, Peter learned how desperately he needed Jesus--all the time. His failure--and his humility--was the key to his success. Later in his life, Peter wrote about the place risking and failing has in life:
- So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up in honor. Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you. (1 Peter 5:6-7 NLT).***

III. WHAT TO DO

- A. Question. How many of you think Jesus was being harsh with Peter when he took him back to the time he had first called him; to the morning when had failed—same time, same smells, same circumstances. When He kept digging and probing into his heart--asking him, "Peter—do you love me...do you love me...do you even **like** me?" I mean, Peter knew he had **really** screwed up. Why was Jesus bearing down on him like this? Because if Peter was ever going to move on, he needed to **feel** his failure, **understand** it, and **move on**.
- A couple of weeks ago, I read a verse from the NT book of 2 Corinthians. Let me read it again: **Godly sorrow brings repentance that leads to salvation and leaves no regret, but worldly sorrow brings death (2 Corinthians 7:10 TNIV).**
- Do you see what it's saying? Godly sorrow—in other words, the sorrow God allows when we fail, when we sin, is **always** intended to lead to repentance, to change, to thinking, "I don't **like** this feeling! What do I have to do so I don't feel it again?" And God gives us the power to change. But there's another sorrow, sadness—**worldly** sorrow—and it's just destructive. A person feels it, get sicker, feels sadder, grows more hopeless, more bitter—and gives up.
- Peter failed spectacularly. So did Judas. How many of you think Jesus would've forgiven Judas? No doubt. He would've. But He never got the chance. Judas' sorrow—the awfulness he felt over turning Jesus in—led to hopelessness, despair, and suicide.

-Some people fail—but they get back up and what happens next in their life is spectacular! Some people fail—and the wallow in it, excuse it, blame—and never get out.

1. The teaching of the Bible is—***you and I will fail! Get over it! Confess, repent, apologize, clean up the mess—and move on!*** From what we see here in this passage, we need to ask some questions: What happened? Where did I get off track? Why did I fail? I mean, this wasn't ***totally*** someone else's fault! What part did I play? What am ***I*** responsible for?
 - Lori and I occasionally watch the show ***May Day!*** Whenever there's a plane crash or a ship that goes down or a huge freeway accident—there's always an investigation. Why, so they can blame someone? No! Finding out ***why*** a disaster happened tends to keep it from happening again!
2. I'll tell you what happens to us—and why what Peter said is so profound. Sometimes when we fail, our pride—and sometimes our shame—will not allow us to honestly dig through the wreckage and accept responsibility where we need to. It's so ***hard! Painful! Humiliating!*** And the tendency is to just want to speed away from the scene and not look back.
 - It was ***so*** important that Peter look at what happened. ***Own*** it. Look Jesus in the eye. He'd always been this strong, confident guy who knew what he thought and what he could do. I mean, he obviously thought he was taking care of Jesus! Before Peter crashed and burned, Jesus had said, "Satan is actively trying to ***sift*** you. Destroy you. I've prayer for you! My goal is that you get purified; strengthened."
3. Think about Peter's words for a minute: ***So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up in honor. Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about you. (1 Peter 5:6-7 NLT).***
 - a. Some people, out of pride, will ***never*** do that. John Maxwell in his book, ***Failing Forward***, tells the story of John Holiday, the founder and editor of the ***Indianapolis News*** who came stomping out of his office one day looking for the person who spelled the word ***height, h-i-g-h-t***. A worker checked the original copy said, "Uhh, Sir, it was ***you!***" Holiday said, "Well, if that's the way I spelled it, it must be right." So, that's how the newspaper spelled it for the next 30 years!
 - b. Rather than owning failure and analyzing it, a lot of people say, "Yeah, I failed, but..." Instead of figuring out what happened, they want everyone else to share the weight of it. Anyone ever done that? For some reason, it makes us feel better.
 - And when we're worried about that, we miss a really important part of moving on. Asking for forgiveness. Apologizing. Telling people we failed that we're sorry.
 - Why? We're too proud to humble ourselves—and so God can't lift us up. And it's too bad because generally speaking, people are incredibly gracious. When someone humbles themselves, says "I failed. Would you forgive me and give me another chance?" most people will.
 - c. In a little while, immediately following this service, I'm going to be dedicating a lot of children. Parents, let me say a word to you. One of the most important things you will ever learn to do in your relationship with a spouse,

if you're married, is to admit your mistakes and ask forgiveness. If your children don't see you model it, where are **they** going to learn it?

-And it is **so** critical that you learn to admit to your children when you've failed and ask their forgiveness. See, the deal with kids is that they **know** when we fail—they're just waiting for us to admit it. And it's not a big deal to them. Kids are **very** gracious. I'll tell you what kids hate on a long term basis, though; it's parents who fail, screw up—and never **ever** humble themselves. Refuse to admit it.

4. So, I thought it might be helpful for us to just say it together, since these words are **so** hard to learn and say. Let's try it. **I failed!** Again, with a little more heart: **I failed!**

-Now, here's the way it needs to work. Jesus makes it clear that how the person who's been failed responds makes all the difference in the world. Jesus' grace is incredible. Yes, he deals with Peter's failure. But when He and Peter are done, they're done. And Peter is **released** to move forward. So, if someone has failed you, show grace. Don't stick it in your back pocket like a sling shot so you can nail them later and keep them in line. **Let it go**—so **they** can let it go!

- B. John Maxwell makes a lot of points about failure in his book, **Failing Forward**, and I would encourage you to read it. The most important thing to know about failure is that, first, it happens to everyone; second, it's **not** final; and third, it's useful. You can learn a **lot** from failure. And you can come out the other end of it a transformed person.

1. There are some things that will help you **use** failure as a launching pad for something better. First, it is **so** important to realize that failure is not an **event**--it's a judgment we **make** about an event. Have you ever looked through history and seen how many people were regarded as failures at one point in life? Did you know that Einstein was expelled from school for being slow? Thomas Edison, one of the most brilliant inventors who ever lived was declared by one teacher to be too dumb and too thick to teach.

-Success is a **big** deal in our culture. Know what the main difference is between successful people and unsuccessful people? It has nothing to do with intelligence, wealth, position and opportunity. It has mainly to do with being willing to GET BACK UP AGAIN WHEN YOU FALL. **PERIOD!** And that's where God comes in. He's the One with the grace, the tenderness, the know-how to help you see yourself as a *person who failed*—not a *failure*.

-Right now you may be in the middle of a painful, humiliating failure of some kind. If you follow what Jesus says and does, you need to **own** it; be **truthful** about it. But then you need to get back up and move on!

-Jesus' word to Paul was, "My strength is made perfect in weakness." Some of you this morning feel like you're down for the count. I don't know what your failure is, or what God is doing through it or why it's happened. But you need to know that the last chapter of your life **hasn't been written yet!** So, don't give it a title. Don't write failure over it!

2. Another thought. When you've failed, you'll have to press through your fear—because it doesn't just go away. If you are going to be committed to and follow Jesus Christ, you are committing yourself to God-sized challenges in life.

-In other words, if you are going to take on the role of a spouse, or the role of parenting, or follow Jesus and become all He has created you to be—**if you are going to do anything worthwhile with your life**, comfort **cannot** be your ultimate goal of life. To succeed in life means risking failure, trying big things,

sometimes falling down--and getting back up when things don't turn out as you plan. **Period!** So, are you up for that?

3. One more thing about failure is that failure **itself** doesn't shape you and define your future. The way you **respond** to failure is what shapes you. Imagine if Peter had just gone back to fishing? I mean, that's what he was about to do. "I obviously can't to this **Kingdom of God** thing I've gone around promoting. So, I'll just be a good fisherman. Try to love God. Give my tithe. Help my neighbors." And that's why Jesus confronts him. Peter, do you love me more than the safe life? Do you love me more than catching world record bass? Will you be what I've **trained** you to be—because, if you will, **it will be dangerous! You will die in the process! Guaranteed!** But you don't want to miss the adventure. So. Will you get back up? Will you? You're a leader—but you have to **keep** getting back up." -For the record, this wasn't the last time Peter failed. Paul records that one time Peter chickened out when all of his legalistic religious right friends came into a group of Gentiles—and Peter caved; started treating his Gentile friends like they were defective—and Paul called him on it. Publicly!
4. The only comparison between Peter, the Rock—and Rocky Balboa—is that they both kept getting back up when they were knocked down! We all know that Peter stepped up to the plate to do what Jesus asked him to do—always getting out of the boat. If you read about his legendary life, Peter lived life **walking on the water**—this amazing, powerful, significant life. -A lot of this involved public preaching. Early church tradition tells us that when people wanted to heckle Peter as he spoke--they would crow three times like a rooster. What do you think **that** was about? Well, to remind Peter of his failure. But Peter had something much stronger than his failure--He had Jesus' words, "Don't be afraid. All authority in Heaven and earth has been given to me, and **I'll** be with you until the end."

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

- A. I googled failure and came up with a **lot** of interesting stuff. The failure file of our world is **full!** From New Coke—which, ironically, is seen as the failure that led to the success of Classic Coke—to the Bay of Pigs fiasco to the War in Iraq. There's a band called **Failure**. There's even a magazine called **Failure**. Any of you subscribe?
- B. What I didn't find by googling is the truth that, ultimately, failure is only calculated once. At the end of life. And it's not judged by any earthly standard I'm aware of. The only one who judges who ultimately failed—and who didn't—is the One who has **all** the facts. God. And, I'm here personally to tell you, based on my own example--**God is greater than my failure**. Failure is **not** final!