

The Journey: Of Success and Failure

I'm really going to show my age with this one, but back in the olden days before there were 15 channels that showed nothing but sports on TV. Before there was live streaming of games on your phone. Before Fantasy football, and real-time stats, ABC had a show called the Wide World of Sports that ran from 1961 to 1999.

You could tune in every weekend and watch all sorts of athletic competitions. One week you would watch downhill skiing, another week you'd see gymnastics. The next time you tune in it would be horse racing, and the next time it was auto racing. You could see swimming, the globetrotters, a title bout, or an Evel Knievel jump.

For years they would run their opening credits with a certain tag line. "Spanning the globe to bring you the constant variety of sports." Anyone remember what comes next? "The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat."

Old ABC Wide World of Sports video.

The thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. That's not just a description of sports. That's life. It's also the life of following Jesus. As you continue your journey with your Lord and Savior, you will experience agonizing disappointments as well as heart racing moments of thrilling joy. You will experience setback as well as unexpected encouragements that come out of seemingly nowhere to help you get to where God wants you to be. You will fail. You will succeed. You will stumble and fall. You will grow and climb.

We've been travelling with Jesus through 10 chapters in Luke as he makes his final journey to Jerusalem and to the cross. As we go with Jesus in this journey we are also learning about how we can better follow him in our own journey.

Jesus' journey to Jerusalem was not a non-stop journey without detours and disappointments. In fact, his first experience right out of the gate was a failure. Listen to how the journey begins:

⁵¹ When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ⁵² And he sent messengers ahead of him, who went and entered a village of the Samaritans, to make preparations for him. ⁵³ But the people did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.

There is a Samaritan village that rejects Jesus. Jesus sent messengers to prepare the way, but despite their preparations the village did not welcome Jesus. It is significant that Jesus even sends messengers to a Samaritan village, because there were huge racial, ethnic and religious divides between the Jews and the Samaritans. We'll talk more about that next week, on Palm Sunday.

I. How Others Respond to Us

Our passage doesn't say why they didn't receive Jesus, other than this one hint "*the people there did not receive him, because his face was set toward Jerusalem.*" Remember, Jesus is on mission. He knows where he's going. He knows what his purpose is. Evidently, there was something about Jesus' purpose that didn't sync with what they wanted. They didn't reject Jesus, but there was something about his mission that they didn't like. They liked Jesus, but they didn't like all of his message. There was something in it they didn't want to hear. This brings us to the first lesson for those of us who want to follow Jesus on his journey— **not everyone wants to go where he is going.**

So much of the world today is like this Samaritan village. They like Jesus, but they want him on their own terms. They want Jesus without the baggage. They love Jesus but not the church. They want Jesus without obedience. They want Jesus without doctrinal truth. They want Jesus without judgment. They want Jesus without sorrow over sin. They want Jesus without repentance. They want Jesus without hell. And you know what. It's not really Jesus they want.

They want to look at the life and teachings of Jesus like a buffet. They want to pick and choose the parts they like, and leave out the stuff they don't. I like that part about "love your neighbor as yourself." I like that part about "For God so loved the world." I like that part about "I go and prepare a place for you." I like that part about "Do not judge, or you too will be judged." I'll take a second helping of that.

But I don't like that "weeping and gnashing of teeth." I can't stand that "go and sin no more." I don't really want to "remove the log from my own eye." That part about "what God has joined together let no one separate" is just too difficult.

We want a modern Jesus. We want to update him for our times. Here's the problem with that. **Jesus never offered to follow you on your journey. He invites to follow him on his.** Jesus didn't say, "I'll follow you wherever you go. I'll make you a success. I'll make your life meaningful." No, Jesus says to us. "Follow me, and I will give you abundant life, but you have to be willing to leave everything else behind."

Understand this, if you are following Jesus, people won't always get you. They won't always understand you. They won't always be happy with you. They'll call you names. They'll say things about you. It's not you they reject. It's him. Now, this doesn't mean you're not responsible when you're a jerk, but it does mean, when you are following Jesus, and people reject you, there's nothing wrong with you. That's between them and God. In John 15, the apostle records what Jesus told the 12 disciples in the upper room before they celebrated the Last Supper. Listen to some of what he says:

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first... If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also. They will treat you this way because of my name.”

Jesus doesn't leave this village because he didn't want to go there. He sent people on ahead. He tried to prepare the way but he wasn't going to let their desires and expectations run the show. Jesus knew who he was and why he was here. Nothing was going to turn him aside from his journey.

I can imagine the conversation, “I'm sorry, but that's not why I'm here.”

“Well, we're not interested then.”

Here's our first bit of take home application: **Don't let others determine where you are going in your journey.** You can't let the opinion and wishes of others get you off track or determine your direction. If you are following Jesus, other people don't get to decide that journey.

Jesus met resistance and rejection on his journey. We should not be surprised when we do the same. If we follow Jesus in our lives, then we're going to run into some of the same disappointments and struggles he did. And we're going to add a few of our own.

II. How We Respond to Those Who Disappoint Us

This passage is like a spiritual algebra problem. You know how there are equations within equations. Well, we have a lesson within a lesson here courtesy of James and John. The rejection of this village leads to a rejection of their own. It deals with this issue: How do we respond to those who disappoint us?

The greatest failure in this part of Luke 9 isn't the rejection of the Samaritan village, it is the angry wrath of James and John. Listen to verses 54-55:

⁵⁴ *And when his disciples James and John saw it, they said, “Lord, do you want us to tell fire to come down from heaven and consume them?”*

James and John are brothers. They are from Galilee. That's kind of like being from the backcountry of the Ozarks. What is it you call them, Terry? Hilljacks. They're blue collar fisherman. They earn their living by working with their hands and the sweat of their brow. They're rough and tumble guys and they are known to have a bit of a temper. In Mark 3, Jesus even gives them a nickname. He calls them the “Sons of Thunder.” And right here they show that nickname is well earned.

“Oh, you wanna reject Jesus do you? Well, we'll show you.” And they want use a bit of Jesus' divine, miraculous power to call down fire from heaven.

Here's what's going on in their fisherman brains. At the beginning of chapter 9 Jesus sends out the 12 disciples on a short-term mission trip and he gave them miraculous power and authority to drive

out demons, to cure diseases and heal the sick. In the middle part of chapter 9, they meet Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration. For them, this would be like us meeting Jesus and George Washington all at the same time. This was one of their heroes.

Now Elijah was famous for a couple of stories in the Old Testament where he called down fire from heaven. In 1 Kings 18, Elijah takes on 450 prophets of Baal and 400 prophets of Asherah. Elijah and the 850 false prophets both build altars and put sacrifices on their altars and pray to their respective gods to burn them up. The false prophets sing and dance, they cut themselves, and the whole time Elijah is making fun of them. "Shout louder. Maybe he can't hear you." Elijah even says, "Perhaps, he's relieving himself?" If you check out the Hebrew here, Elijah is suggesting that Baal can't hear them because he taking a dump. This is some first class trash talking going on here.

When it's Elijah's turn, he has the people douse his altar with 12 large jars of water. Then he prayed, and God sent fire from heaven. It consumed the sacrifice, the wood, the stones of the altar, the water, everything.

In a second story in 2 Kings 1, the King of Israel suffered a terrible injury, and he sent messengers to inquire of Baal if he would survive. Elijah intercepted the messengers and made fun of them or seeking the audience of a false god, and he tells them to tell the king he will surely die. This makes the king so angry that he sent fifty soldiers after Elijah. Elijah responded by calling down fire from heaven which consumed all fifty soldiers.

So, you know what James and John are thinking here when this Samaritan village rejects Jesus, right? They want to get in on this wrath of God action. "Hey, we can cast out demons and heal the sick, maybe we can call down fire from heaven too."

How we respond to the failure can be more important than the failure itself. We sometimes wonder, "Why did God let that happen?" "Why did God allow me to experience that?" Sometimes the answer is found in how we respond in the aftermath. Our greatest growth occurs not from our successes, but from our failures. John Maxwell, former pastor and leadership guru has a fantastic book called *Failing Forward*. One of his key principles in that book is this "The difference between average people and achieving people is their perception of and response to failure."

James' and John's response to this disappointment becomes a key teaching moment for these two disciples. "*Jesus turned and rebuked them.*" Oh, how I would love to hear what he said to them. We have to learn to respond to disappointments and failures in our journey the right way. This is true for all of life, but it is especially true in following Jesus. When follow Jesus you will make commitments other people do not understand. You will hold to values that others don't share. You will make decisions that

others ridicule. How do you respond when others simply don't get that you are on journey with Jesus, and that journey is taking you in a different direction than they want to go.

Obviously, our go-to response shouldn't be the same as James and John here— anger. It isn't bitterness and resentment. It isn't about revenge or getting even. **There is an important principle for us to remember, and that is people aren't the enemy.** These Samaritan villagers are not the enemy. Who's the enemy? Satan is the enemy. 1 Peter 5:8 says, *“Be alert and of sober mind. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”* People are not the enemy. They are victims of the enemy, but they are not the enemy. The people who oppose you, who reject you, who hurt you, are not the enemy. They have been devoured by the enemy. They are being used by the enemy, to try and keep you from the journey you are on. But knowing that they are victims of the enemy and not the enemy changes our whole outlook. It changes our response.

III. How We Respond to Failure

If James and John provide for us an example of how not to respond to the agony of defeat, how does Jesus respond to this disappointment? How does he deal with failure? He simply walks away. Look at verse 56. This is a short verse we might just skim right on over. *“They went on to another village.”* How did Jesus respond to the rejection? He moved on. He didn't get sidetracked. He didn't mope about. He didn't stay and argue. He just set his sights on the next opportunity. The lesson here is **don't let failure keep you from moving forward in the journey.** Failure in one stop on the journey is never a reason not to move on to the next one.

The problem we sometimes have is that we get stuck in our failure. We hit a bump in the road. We get knocked off our feet, and we don't get back up. We don't move on. We get stuck, and the journey comes to a complete stop. In *Failing Forward*, John Maxwell points out that successful people see failure as a momentary event, and not a lifetime epidemic.

Some of us sitting here this morning are stuck on a failure and haven't been able to move on. Somebody disappointed you. You failed somebody else. Maybe you simply failed yourself. And we can get stuck on a failure for years. It brings your journey to a stop. It brings God's work in your life to a standstill until you can follow Jesus to the next step in your journey.

Here's something a few of us really need to hear this morning. It needs to go in our ears, through our minds and then way deep down in our hearts. **Just because people reject you, doesn't mean Jesus rejects you.** This village turns Jesus and the disciples away, but Jesus doesn't love them any less. Jesus doesn't say, *“Well, if you guys had just done a better job, that wouldn't have happened.”* In

chapter 10 he sends them right out on another short-term missions trip. He still has a purpose for them. He still has a mission for them. He still has somewhere he wants them to go on their journey.

Jesus doesn't love you any less, no matter how people have treated you. No matter what anyone has said to you, Jesus still has a purpose for your life. He still has places he wants you to go on your journey. He still has things he wants you to do.

One of the most Christ-like things we can learn to do in our journey is to simply move on. Go to another village. This journey is viewed through the windshield, not the rearview mirror. Jesus' love and grace takes care of everything in the rearview mirror. Look to where God is leading you next.

IV. Finding Success

We've talked about the agony of defeat, but what about the thrill of victory? I want you to jump ahead a few verses to chapter 10. Verse 1 says, *"After this the Lord appointed seventy-two[a] others and sent them on ahead of him, two by two, into every town and place where he himself was about to go."* It doesn't say exactly how long, but apparently this wasn't a very long time after the Samaritan village rejected them. It's just a little bit further down the road. And the last time he sent people on ahead to prepare the way, it didn't go so well.

This time, Jesus doesn't just send out the 12 with power to heal the sick and cast out demons. He sends out seventy-two. At first glance, it might sound like this is seventy-two others apart from the twelve disciples. However, Luke 22:35 makes it clear that the 12 were included in this number.

Now if Jesus is sending them out by two's sending a pair to each town and village he plans on going to, that's at least 36 stops Jesus plans on making. He most definitely did not let one village stop him.

Jesus spends 15 verses giving the 72 their commission, but the response to their sort-term missions trip is covered in only one verse. Look at verse 17, "The seventy-two returned with joy, saying, 'Lord, even the demons are subject to us in your name!'"

They return giddy with excitement. They are overwhelmed with joy. Their trip was a rousing success. They surprised even themselves. Here's another important principle and that is **success follows failure**. Our greatest successes rise from the ashes of our most heart wrenching disappointments.

Here's what this means. **Just because you failed, doesn't mean you're a failure**. So, don't let your mistakes and disappointments limit your future. John Maxwell writes, "Failure is simply a price we pay to achieve success." Thomas Edison once said of his many failed attempts to invent the light bulb, "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work." Do you know the average number of

failed businesses for successful entrepreneurs? It's 3.8. They fail almost 4 times before they succeed. It's no different in our spiritual journey.

Sometimes, our greatest successes follow our failures. Our failures fertilize and our tears of disappointment water new growth. They become the foundation for new and better things. Sometimes we succeed not just despite our failures, but because of them. In fact, if you're not failing in your journey, you're following.

Much of our lives are spent making mistakes. It's what we do with those mistakes that matters. What do we learn from them? How do we build on them? Where do we go after we've made a wrong turn? Every mistake is either a brick in wall that holds us back or a paving stone to something better.

Nobody likes to fail. But if we're honest, we understand that failure is a part of life. There is no success without some amount of failure. Russell Westbrook fails 6 out of every ten times he shoots the ball. Yadier Molina fails six out of every 10 at bats. Yet they are considered some of the best in their respective sports.

What we need to realize is that our success isn't found in our ability and in our strength. We don't succeed because we are so awesome. It is through our mistakes and failures that God grows us to where he wants us to be. **Our brokenness makes room for God's success.** It is through our brokenness and that his love and grace pour out of our lives. I really like the lyric of a Switchfoot song, "wounds are where the light shines through."

There once lived a water carrier in India. He used two large pots for his task. He suspended a pole across his neck and attached a pot at each end of the pole. One of the pots had a big crack in it while the other pot was perfect. The perfect pot always delivered a full portion of water from the stream to the master's house, while the cracked pot arrived only half full each day.

For two years this water carrier made the same journey. The perfect pot became proud of its accomplishments. The cracked pot was ashamed of its imperfections and miserable that it was able to accomplish only half of what it had been made to do. Finally, one day by the stream, the cracked pot spoke to his owner about his failure, "I am ashamed of myself, and I want to apologize that I have only been able to deliver half my water to your house. There is a crack in my side which causes water to leak out. Because of my flaws, you don't get the full value from your efforts."

Then the water carrier replied, smiling, "As we return to the master's house, I want you notice the beautiful flowers along the path." On that trip from the stream, the cracked pot looked around.

"Did you notice there are flowers only on your side of the path, but not on the other pot's side?" the master commented. "That's because I have always known about your flaw, and I took advantage of

it. I planted seeds on your side of the path, and every day while we passed these spots, you watered them. Now for two years I have been able to pick those beautiful flowers to decorate my master's table. Without you being just the way you are, I would not have this beauty to grace his house."

It is the way God works.