How To Handle My Past Failures

Failure. It’s instinctive to handle it poorly. At the start of any new year, it’s at the top of my list to review my recent past and to see what it will require to move forward. It’s impossible to see the future as a clean slate if I’m not at peace with my yesterdays.

What are the wrong ways to handle failure? There are at least two.

1. Underestimate it.

When I do, I fail to see it as God sees it. I minimize the size of it. I re-shape it to reduce it to something trivial when, in fact, it probably wasn’t. I might believe it to be such a small offense that I don’t need to confess it and ask for God’s forgiveness. At best, I ask for it casually like it’s no big deal.

When God’s Spirit convicts me, I am defensive. I remind Him that everyone has weaknesses. Perhaps I did it in secret and it was a sin of the heart. I reason that no one got hurt but I fail to see that the one who was offended was the only One who matters. I sinned against God. Fragile egos defend themselves. I fear I can’t survive the knowledge of my own depravity. Underestimating failures causes me to live with a calloused heart. I am not experienced by others as someone humble and gracious.

2. Overestimate it.

I fail to understand grace and believe my failure to be unforgiveable. I must first wallow in guilt, prove myself to be better than that, and convince God that I am sorry enough. My sin looms large and God’s mercy appears to be small.

My only experience with failures and forgiveness comes through the film of earthly relationships. Unfortunately, some people refuse to forgive. They are
prone to forever remind me of my failures. I wear them like scarlet letters. I fear that God will do what my human counterparts have done. I make sure to punish myself with condemning messages before God has a chance to. Though I say I believe that He has put my sins behind his back, never to take them out again to accuse me, my heart tells on me as I fixate on my guilt.

Overestimating my failures feels like a holy response. It is anything but. It is a denial of God’s mercy. It is a denial of the purpose of the cross. It’s choosing to live in unbelief regarding everything Jesus promised when He died for my sins as if He was the One who committed them.

There is a right way to handle failure. Giants of the faith did it well and most of them came out with their faith in tact. Every patriarch struggled with failure. So did King David, King Solomon, and the Apostle Peter. Proverbs says, “The righteous may fall seven times but still get up, but the wicked will stumble into trouble.” For reasons such as overestimating or underestimating sin, the unrighteous can’t move past his mistakes. He carries them over his shoulder and the weight grows heavier as they accumulate over a lifetime.

What can I learn from my spiritual ancestors about the right way to handle failure?

**See It As God Sees It.**

He will tell me how bad it was. No more, no less. He will pass on to me a spirit of repentance so that I may feel the gravity of it – one that matches His own but He will also pass on the joy of forgiveness and the expectation of a restored relationship. The apostle Peter was, for a short time, crippled by his sin of denying Christ. I’m sure he felt that he had disqualified himself from ever serving God again. Yet, Jesus orchestrated a moment on a beach when confession, repentance, and restoration became personal. They sat inches apart and Peter struggled through with the dynamics of a severed friendship; failure to hold eye contact, fear of rejection, fear of never knowing forgiveness but then fearing he wouldn’t be able to accept it if offered. Not until he accepted full forgiveness could he press in to explore redemption. And what a redemption it was!

The one who teaches me most about how to handle failure is King David. Many today struggle with the favor God continued to bestow on David. God
called him, in spite of such utter moral failure, ‘a man after my own heart.’
Didn’t God think David’s sin was serious? The label God gave David was
not related to whether or not he sinned. It was related to his response to sin.
The prophet Nathan was sent to confront, to bring conviction and judgment.
When faced with the truth, David immediately owned what he did. No
excuses or blame shifting. The next act recorded was David’s prayer of
repentance.

Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love;
according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions.
Wash me thoroughly from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin!
For I know my transgressions, and my sin is ever before me.
Psalm 51:1-3

God didn’t refer to David as ‘the king who disappointed me.’ David was not
Saul! The gravity of Saul’s sin was not that his sin disqualified him from
God’s favor. It was the refusal to see it, repent, learn from it, and shun evil.

You can be a woman or man after God’s own heart if you treasure Jesus
more than sin, more than your reputation, more than being right. I must ask
for the courage to see myself, and my sin, the way He does. Then, trust in
His unfailing love to forgive and wash away shame. The joy of restoration
is so much better than the pain of self-inflicted self-condemnation.

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