

# FAILURE IS NOT THE PROBLEM

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So I want to talk about failure tonight. And failure seems to have a pretty wide experience. Right? We have the little failures that nobody seems to notice but us, and then we have the big, old, take-you-down-to-your-knees failures that everybody notices, and you get to live those out publicly in really wonderful, glorious technicolor. [Congregation laughs] Right?

And I want to talk about that. Because this year is about living an audacious life. And I think that there is a benefit to our soul to have failures.

When I was a kid, we went to Yellowstone. And it was like a year after they had this fire. And we went by it, and you could see little saplings that had started up already. And so, for my whole life now, every time we go to Yellowstone I get to see where the forest is. And the older I get, the taller the trees get. But it's a healthy, appropriate part of the whole ecosystem when there's a fire.

And, yes, it can be devastating. And, yes, I'm not making case for we need to burn everything down. But I do want us to look at our policy on failure. Because whether we realize it or not, most of us have a "policy" on failure. And the policy can be pretty extensive. But it can either be from "No failure is acceptable" or "Failure is just a part of the day." And I want us to look at how you live that.

Jalen Hurts, the quarterback for the Philadelphia Eagles who lost the Super Bowl 10 days ago, said this after the game: *"You either win or you learn."*

Right? Very enlightened comment, right? Very enlightened comment! You either win or you learn! Fabulous! Right?

The great football coach Knute Rockne 100 years before said it this way: *"Show me a gracious loser and I'll show you a failure."* Okay? So in a hundred years, we see a little evolution of thought. A little evolution of consciousness. A hundred years ago, if you lost, you were a failure. Now if you have a failure, it's a learning experience, right?

He went on to say, *"We count on winning. And if we lose, don't beef. And the best way to prevent beefing is -- don't lose."*

Now, how many of you would rather win than lose? The majority of us, right? We would rather win than lose. But I want you to see in our culture today, we pretty much have a "no loser" policy. Right? Right now in our culture, we have a policy -- especially when it relates to kids -- that everybody's a winner. Like, everybody's a winner, right?

And my question is: Really? Right? Like, really? Like, how do you live that one? Because if everyone is a winner, then winning doesn't mean anything anymore. It really just means that everybody participates.

And I want us to really ... I know this is going to seem ... I don't know how it's going to seem. [Congregation laughs] But we don't all win all the time! Like, sometimes we lose! And if everyone is a winner ...

You know, I believe that -- whether we win or lose -- we are people of great value and I believe that we should be loved. And I believe that. But I think that, if every ...

So I've been a minister a long time. Long time! And over the course of my career, I've done a lot of talks. Like, on any week, I do multiple talks. I mean, *"Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah!"* It's always coming out of my mouth, right? [Congregation laughs] And on a regular basis, I do good talks. Like, I'm proud of the work I

do. I take it seriously; I want to make a difference in your life. [Congregation applauds] Nah ... Thank you. I take it seriously; I want to do a good job for you. I want to make a difference in your life.

But sometimes, they're stinkers! Right? And if you tell me a ... [Laughs] Like, when it's a stinker, and you say it's a good talk ... Like, I think you're so concerned about my fragile ego that you think you have to tell me it was a good talk.

And early in my career, my ego kind of was that fragile. I was devastated! Like, I was devastated when I didn't think it was a good talk. And the older I got, the more I realized that -- to live a creative life -- you have to be able to tolerate it not working.

Like, I always thought it'd be easier to be a painter. Because if a painter paints something, and it's not working, they didn't do it in public. Right? They can just paint over it and try again! Right? I thought that sounded easier than in my job, where -- when I do it -- you all know. [Congregation laughs]

And there seems to be three responses when it's a stinker. The first response is people that just won't look me in the eye. [Congregation laughs] Like, they just want to get out the door without having to make any contact with me at all. It's like, they know it was bad; I know it was bad; and how do I get to the car as quickly as possible, right? [Congregation laughs]

Second response is: They'll say, "*Oh; good talk.*" And then I think, "*Well, maybe there was a sentence of a paragraph that might have meant something to them.*" So I give them the benefit of the doubt. But deep down in myself I'm saying, "*Did they really hear it? Were they awake?*" It wasn't a good talk!

And my favorite is when somebody says, "*You'll get 'em next time.*" [Congregation laughs] Right? Because in, "*You'll get 'em next time,*" there's an acknowledgement. They can look me in the eye, and we're not playing an ego game here. I know it wasn't very good. I mean, it wasn't that I didn't try. But sometimes, you know, I think a joke is going to be funnier than you think it is, right? Or the point just doesn't work!

So I have come to make peace with the fact that it's about a 50/50 shot whether it works or whether it doesn't work. And I can live with that, right? And I hope that, over the course of my career, that I get more good ones out than I do stinkers. But some weeks ... [Laughs] ... it doesn't always feel like that!

And so, what I want to talk about today: Have you developed personally to the point where you can make a mistake -- a big mistake, even! -- and know that your value is greater than that? Or are we so in service to our ego that, every time we drop the ball, it becomes a crisis of personality?

Because I think, as a world, spending that much time and energy serving our ego isn't helpful. It's not good! And when you can admit your mistakes, your failings, your drops, your stinkers, it's just so much easier for everybody involved.

Will you turn to your neighbor and say, "*You know, sometimes I make mistakes.*" Will you say that?

[With congregation] "*Sometimes I make mistakes.*" Now, the person sitting to you -- like, if they came with you -- is not surprised by that! [Congregation laughs] That's, like, not big news! I mean, that's like, "*I know! I live with 'em every day! And we survive them, and it's okay! And I still find you adorable!*" Right?

But it's that unwillingness to admit our mistakes or our failings that causes so many problems.

You know, as a minister, there's really two sides of my job. There's the speaking and the Sunday service or the Wednesday service -- or the worship experience -- and then there's the running-the-church part. And to be successful, you really have to be able to do both sides of it. Because if you're really good at the speaking part, but the church isn't run very well, it doesn't last very long. It's not a good thing.

So one of the things I've tried to do is take executive development courses and things to just allow me to be better at the business of church. Because, you know, at some level it is a business, right?

So one of these executive development courses: they broke us up into small groups. And we had to define success and failure. And honestly, I don't remember what we came up with as the definition of success. Right? It was just, "*Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.*" The definition of failure that the group was coming up with was, "*It's a learning experience.*"

Now, okay. Right? It's a learning experience. Ehhhh. All right. I said ... Because you know, it's me. I said, "Well, in my experience in business, it's not learning fast enough." Like, in a changing world, for us to succeed, we have to learn fast. And if we're not learning fast, we're in the process of potentially failing.

And as I presented my idea, and I made a case for it -- because, you know, I can -- we spent some time that afternoon talking about six questions that we'd come up with. And I want to share those with you, because they took the workshop in a different direction. And the presenter thought it was a better direction. At least that's what he said to my face.

So I want to share these questions with you, right?

And it's: **How am I challenging myself to learn every day?** Because if we are going to live our best life -- if we are going to get the best out of ourselves -- how do we challenge ourselves to learn every day? Because the world is changing, and it's changing at an accelerated rate. So how do I challenge myself every day to be learning? That was one.

**Who am I not listening to, but should be?** Because it's always easy to listen to the people who agree with us. Right? It's just easier to listen to the people who tell you that you're right. And in any organization -- any situation -- I believe that we can't just listen to the people who are easy to listen to. We have to listen to the people who are hard for us to listen to. Because oftentimes, they have a point that we clearly do not want to hear.

The next question was: **What new information is available to me now?** I love that question! Because it invites us just to take a step back and not just listen to the noise, but say, "What is the new information that is available to me now? And am I willing to access it?"

**What am I not paying attention to in my organization that could be problematic?** Because in my experience -- in most organizations -- there's always somebody that's talking about the problem before it blows up. There's always there, you know, saying, "Wait! We've got to pay attention ... Ooop ... Anybody? Nobody?"

You know, in Southwest Airlines. How many of you were aware that Southwest Airlines had a bit of a problem over this Christmas season, right? [Congregation laughs] And what's interesting is: The pilot's union had been saying this for years. That there's a problem, right? And if we don't want to listen to that, then we get issues ... like thousands of people not getting home for Christmas, or not getting back to work in January. Right? So that's part of it.

And the last one is: **Where am I resistant to learning?**

And I want you to look at this. Because I think that, as a community, we have an opportunity to actually challenge ourselves. And really what it is: It's challenging our ego to embrace the failures, but actually to learn at a deeper, more profound level instead of just assuming that, by the time we graduate from high school, we have already got it all figured out. Because I don't think we do!

Malcolm X said it this way: "*Children have a lesson adults should learn: to not be ashamed of failing, but to get up and try again. Most of us adults are so afraid, so cautious, so 'safe,' and therefore so shrinking*

*and rigid and afraid. That is why so many adults fail. Most middle-aged adults have resigned themselves to failure.*" That's a tough comment!

I wonder how many 40-year-olds would be willing to learn to walk again. One of my wife's clients had a stroke. She's 75. And it was devastating. It was a devastating stroke. And, at 75, she had to decide if she was going to learn to walk again. And, at 75, she said, *"I don't care what it takes; I want to learn to walk again."* And she had to risk -- every day in therapy -- every day getting up with falling and everything that it takes. And she was willing to do it, because she had a clear sense that it was possible.

Do you know the average baby -- the average child when they're learning to walk -- falls 17 times an hour? [Congregation murmurs] That's some boom! Right? And what I want you to see is that, as we get older, we get more and more safe. We get more and more that we shouldn't fail; that it's got to be just right. And it's got to be perfect every time.

But life is messy! And I think our soul actually needs to fail on a regular basis so that we learn that we're not in service to our ego. That we came to express our spirit. And that our spirit really doesn't care if we fall down once or twice, because our spirit knows that we came for something better than just to glorify our personality. And I know your personality is charming! [Congregation laughs] But hopefully, we are infinitely more than that.

You know, I played sports most of my life: as a child, all the way through college. And one of the things that I remember is playing Little League at 9 or 10. Playing first base, because I was always tall. And the other team was at bat, and one of the moms from the other team yelled out at her son, who was walking up to the plate, *"If you don't get a hit, no dinner for you!"* [Congregation moans]

Wow! I mean, I was on first base and I was traumatized. So ask me if he got a hit! No! He didn't get a hit. He went back to the dugout crying. And the whole place was in ... I mean, we were all going, *"I'll feed him!"* Or, *"I've got a buck for a hot dog!"* or whatever it was. Because it was traumatizing! Like, over and over again, it was traumatizing.

Do you know what a great batting average is? Like, anything over .300! Anything over .300 is a great batting average! And that means that you're going to fail 70% of the time! We have to make peace with failures.

Now, does that encourage failures? No! But it actually allows us to endure them in a more creative, sustainable way. To live a greater, greater and greater life. That we have to open a space to be more than that.

And the other side really doesn't work, as well. When little Johnny's going up to the plate and you say, *"Johnny! You can hit a home run! I believe in you! You can do it!"* And little Johnny on the inside's going, *"No, I can't!"* Right? Little Johnny just wants to know that he's going to be loved whether he hits it or he strikes out!

So we don't need a home run! We just need to know that we're loved no matter how it goes! Unconditional love really is the transformative tool that allows us to move from ups and downs of our wins and our defeats into a life that is meaningful. Where we're no longer just in service to our ego, hoping we look good enough to not be shamed by the people around us. Where we just get to be loved just the way we are.

Paula Coelho said this: *"The secret of life is to fall seven times and to get up eight."*

Falling is never the problem! The problem is when you give up on yourself; when you give up on your dreams; when you give up on the possibilities. When you give up and you stop getting up because you're afraid if you get up you could risk falling again.

And I guarantee -- I guarantee! -- that if you're living your life at your most creative, dynamic level, you are going to fail! It is a part of the process! You actually need to embrace it so that you can get over yourself and be your most creative self.

J.K. Rowling said it this way: *"It's impossible to live without failing at something unless you live so cautiously that you might as well not have lived at all, in which case you have failed by default."*

[Applauds] I love that! [Laughs] Right?

I want us to give ourselves permission to live a life where it's okay to have a big vision! To know that we're swinging for the moon! And even if we only get halfway, we still hit it out of the park! That our lives are not defined by small, little, wounded egos. That we are here for something far greater than that!

Ellen DeGeneres said this: *"When you take risks, you learn that there will be times when you succeed, and there will be times when you fail, and both are equally as important."*

Oprah said it this way: *"Failure is another steppingstone to greatness."*

And Michael Jordan said it this way: *"I can accept failure. Everyone fails at something. But I can't accept not trying."*

So tonight, I want you to look into those areas in your life where you have lived too small. Where you have challenged yourself to do life perfectly organized and see that there is more creativity; there is more passion; there is more aliveness. That when we take this discussion in a spiritual direction, I believe that we all have high goals, high desires. And as we commit to them -- as we truly commit to them; as we turn them over to God; and daily, as we listen to guidance and direction; and as we begin to take action toward the desires that we want to achieve, there's going to be times when it doesn't work. And that's okay! Because our faith is not in the short-term step; it's in the long-term result.

See, whatever is the most important thing to you -- whatever that is! -- it doesn't matter how many times you take the wrong turn as long as you get to the destiny; to your purpose; to your vision that you've been holding all the time. If every step has to be perfect along the way, you spend so much time in each little step that you forget about the real thing that was the most important to you.

Will you say with me, *"I forgive myself for every failure!"*?

Together: [with congregation] *"I forgive myself for every failure!"*

One more time: [with congregation] *"I forgive myself for every failure!"*

*"I give thanks for everything I've learned!"*

Together: [with congregation] *"I give thanks for everything I've learned ..."*

*"And everyone who has loved me along the way."*

Together: [with congregation] *"And everyone who has loved me along the way."*

*"And I commit ... I commit to the greatness of God."*

Together: [with congregation] *"I commit to the greatness of God."*

Can we take that into prayer?

I want you to open your mind, your heart, your soul. And I want you to see all your failures. All of them! And I want you to see if you can look at them without shame. Just to be with them. And realize every one of those failures and every one of your successes has brought you to this moment of who you are today. And when you look at your successes and when you look at your failures, you are looking at the

past. And when you turn your vision to the present and to the future, there is no limit to who you could be.

So we make room for all the steps: the entire process of our soul awakening. And tonight, we give thanks that I truly am more than my successes and I am more than my failures. And so it is. Amen.

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