

Chapter 9

DEALING WITH FAILURE

PERFORMANCE FAILURE

Anyone who wants to achieve anything in life hates to even think about failure, let alone experience it. The reality is we all fail! Outcomes and events don't always go the way you plan them to go. You may not get the job you want, the grade you expected, or the playing time you thought you would get. We lose games, we make mistakes, we have bad performances, we have relationship problems, and we sin!



"I lost the game, that's all I know," the Lobos' Jordan Adams said following her team's defeat. Adams, who was in tears after the game, missed key free throws and threw the ball away on the Lobos' last chance play.

One Lobo player left the arena in tears, emotionally beaten once again by the only opponent who can single-handedly stop her: herself. – Brad Moore, Albuquerque Tribune

How does failure make you feel? Does it tear you up inside? Does it make you angry? Does it affect your confidence and how you feel about yourself? Does failure keep you from enjoying life? How do you define failure? This is a key question and your answer will have a lot to do with how failures affect you. Failure affects different people in different ways and in every case it is at least disappointing. I can tell you from personal experiences, failure can be so much more than disappointing, it can downright hurt. The more we really want something the more it hurts when we don't achieve what we want.

Just look at the faces of competitive athletes when they lose big games or have poor performances such as the athlete in the picture. This picture was taken after losing a key college conference tournament game played in her home town, in front of friends and family, which made the pain extra tough for her.

Failure seems to occur too often and in all aspects of life. Our failures affect our relationships – with friends, coworkers, teammates, family, and especially God. Our personal failures are often the root cause of our relationship problems. I know from personal experiences as a parent, for example, my personal failures and how I felt about myself as a result kept me from being the parent and husband I should have been. These failures, especially my conception of failure, unnecessarily robbed me of joy and affected

every aspect of my life.

Failure can be especially devastating for someone with a poor self-image because it exasperates the problem. Failure causes many to turn to alcohol and drugs and even causes some

to commit the ultimate act of despair - suicide. Failure can also be the best thing that ever happens to us! How we handle these disappointments and hurts will be a major factor effecting future outcomes and even more important – our ability to have joy and contentment in our life. How we handle failure will determine if we will grow from it, let it rob us of happiness, or destroy us.

There are so many ways we can fail. What can make these failures either constructive or destructive is whether they produce self-pity or conviction in us. Self-pity and conviction are two very different byproducts of two very different types of guilt and it is important we understand this difference. There is worldly guilt that is feeling bad because our weaknesses are exposed to others and this produces self-pity. A good form of guilt (a Godly form in a spiritual sense) is a genuine sorrow because we know we could have done better and this form produces a sense of conviction. There is a tremendous difference between conviction and self-pity! Conviction is constructive while self-pity does nothing to help anyone. Conviction is an understanding of what we did wrong or what we should have done right and is necessary to overcome our mistakes and failings.

For example, the game described in the caption can be one of the best days of Jordan's life. She has dreams of playing in the WNBA (editor's update – in the spring of 2003 Jordan made the roster of the WNBA's Minnesota Lynx) and she is already one of the best players in her conference as a sophomore. But there are a lot of very good players who will not be good enough to play in the WNBA. If Jordan uses that game as motivation to do whatever she has to in order to get to the next level, that game can be a turning point in her life. Her conviction will help her get even better and will help her overcome her weaknesses. Conviction will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

Jordan at the moment of this picture is probably suffering from worldly guilt and as the caption suggests – this type of guilt has affected her performance. It causes us to “beat ourselves up” mentally by dwelling on our mistakes, failures, and weaknesses and we all make mistakes, we all fail, and we all have weaknesses. Worldly guilt causes discouragement, even depression, and will have a negative effect on future performances.

Worldly guilt can cause us to more readily give up on achieving our goals because it can cause tremendous pain and we may feel the only way to end this pain is to quit or give up. I believe this is a major reason many individuals experience “burn out”. They get to a point where the rewards of their efforts do not emotionally compensate for sacrifices they have to make and the pain they endure.

Why can't I make more money, why can't I perform better, why can't I get along with my parents, spouse, boyfriend, girlfriend, coach, boss, coworkers, better are the attitudes that result from our worldly guilt and resulting self-pity because we blame ourselves for what we perceive to be weaknesses. I am saying perceived weaknesses because many times our feelings of failure are due to how we define success.

If you recall from reading the chapter “Who Am I” we often feel unfulfilled because we compare ourselves to others using standards of success that mean nothing to God. We form our standards of success by the peers we look to identify ourselves with and sometimes by very high standards we set for ourselves. Jordan feels like a failure after her tough game yet there is no one that knows her who would ever consider her a failure in any way and there are so many who would love to trade places with her and have the talent and opportunities she has. But during that painful moment her many blessings mean absolutely nothing to her because all she can think of is what she failed to do. Does this ever describe any of us?

We may feel like failures because our performance may not meet our own personal standards even though they may far exceed the expectations of others, a common problem for those

with a strong desire to achieve something with their life. So are we really failures? We need to define our standards of success by what is important to God and not the world and this will make a huge difference how we feel about ourselves. We also need to understand God's tremendous love for us is not based on what we do or achieve so our problem is not how God views us but how we view ourselves.

We too often judge ourselves using standards based on performance, status, possessions, wealth, and even sexuality and very often these standards are opposed to the standards the bible points out we should live by. Jesus would be considered a failure using many of today's standards for success. We may think we are failing because we don't own or earn much. Money and possessions may not really be that important to us so we lack the drive to do what it takes to make a lot of money. Maybe we tend to focus on helping others more than we do helping ourselves or maybe deep down inside we know money and possessions don't give us true contentment.

Our perception of failure is often the problem far more than whatever we did or whatever caused us to fail. The results of our perception can be emotionally painful because of extreme frustration, worldly guilt, poor self-image, depression, and even anger when we don't achieve the goals and aspirations that are important to us. Contributing factors that lead to our feeling of failure are events outside our control, not knowing how to deal with what we do control, imposed limitations, unrealistic expectations due to our personal limitations and weaknesses, and not being satisfied with what God has given us.

I want to first discuss unrealistic expectations because this may be a problem more than we realize. For example, if the smallest basketball player on the team makes their goal to be the leading rebounder instead of leading the team in assists or steals, they probably are setting themselves up for feeling like a failure. They may even have anger toward God for not being taller instead of being thankful for their quickness and other strengths. This is an extreme example and not so extreme examples may be what we expect of a relationship, playing time for an athlete, and other outcomes we dream of achieving. God has given all of us certain strengths and abilities and we need to be truly thankful for what God has given us. Too often we focus on and desire the strengths others have while ignoring our own. This can be like trying to put a square peg in a round hole.

God doesn't make mistakes! We all have a purpose for our lives and we have been given abilities and talents to achieve our purpose. Our challenge is to discover our strengths and how to put them to good use. This subject will be discussed in more detail in the last chapter of this book. Allowing ourselves to become unhappy with life because we focus on what we can't do hurts our spiritual walk with God and our witness to others because in effect we are saying "God, you really don't know what is best for me". He does and our frustrations will decrease the more we realize this.

Setting unrealistic goals and having unrealistic expectations are major reasons many individuals quit and give up on their aspirations. We set ourselves up to fail and then unfairly judge ourselves as a failure when we don't achieve our goals. I confess I really suffer from this problem at times. I am a big daydreamer and I often dream big dreams. I expect this book to make a real positive difference in the lives of everyone I give it to. The reality is many may not take the time to read it, others may not want to hear what it has to say, and for many the impact may not come to realization until many years in the future. I cannot begin to tell you of the grief I put myself through because of the times I feel I am failing in my efforts to be a positive influence on the lives of others just because I do not get responses from those I give this book to. I often expect too much too soon because my dreams are out of line with reality.

I can also get very frustrated with my personal limitations. If I could order a life I would choose a life where students constantly came to me for advice, especially spiritual advice, and my advice would change their lives forever. That is not my life. I am basically an introverted person and sometimes I have a very hard time saying what I want to say, especially to those I really care about, until I really get to know them. I have shed many tears because of this weakness because too often I feel like I failed to accomplish anything of real value with some of these students. I have to fight self-pity as much as anyone.

I have discovered many of my frustrations are classic symptoms of suffering from a “codependent” relationship brought on by my daughter’s drug addiction problems. I do want to mention this because so many families are affected by substance abuse and this creates a desire to “save the world” (not a bad thing at all!) but along with this desire there are often abnormal feelings of failure and frustration (this is not good!) if we do not receive constant reinforcement that our efforts are fruitful. Emotional detachment from the abuser is the key but not so easy to do so professional therapy could be very beneficial.

To sum up dealing with unrealistic expectations, our problem is we sometimes want to be someone we are not. We need to have hope that God can change us by helping us overcome our limitations and at the same time accept the fact that God will use other strengths He has given us and we need to focus on taking advantage of those strengths.

If anyone would understand the frustrations of personal limitations and unrealistic expectations it would be many college athletes. Most of these athletes have big dreams of what they hope to accomplish in college and maybe even beyond. For many of these athletes they have to come to grips with their physical limitations for the first time and the realities of their dreams. Because of the increased level of competition, speed, quickness, and size limitations become exposed. There are also new mental challenges such as learning new offensive or defensive schemes that also can be a source of frustration, especially for newcomers. Anytime anyone takes on a new challenge in life limitations can become exposed and these limitations can cause personal doubts, pain, anger, and other feelings of failure that prevent us from enjoying life.

Does this mean we should give up dreaming big dreams because of personal limitations? No it doesn’t because greatness starts with big dreams. There are many very inspirational true stories about individuals that overcame severe limitations to go on and achieve greatness. In fact most people actually sell themselves short in what they can do, especially when we consider what can happen when God is involved. What we should understand is God may have other plans for our lives or He still needs to mold us into what He wants us to become. We should know God is helping us if we truly want his help. If we can really comprehend this, our pain and frustrations will be greatly reduced which means we will have more contentment and peace in our lives – no matter what our circumstances and limitations.

Imposed limitations such as not having enough time or financial resources can be another source of making us feel like a failure. Frustration and anger can build up when more is expected of us while at the same time we are facing more constraints. For example, college students may have to deal with much higher academic demands than high school while at the same time they have less time to study because they have to work many hours in order to pay for college. As a Financial Aid Administrator I have witnessed many students suffer academic problems because of having to work too much.

Coaches don’t have enough time to give their players the personal attention they would like to have, professionals don’t have the time for professional development or the time they need to give the service they would like for their clients. Teachers don’t have enough time to give their

students, nurses don't have enough time for their patients, parents don't have enough money to help their children with college, and many just don't have enough money to pay the bills. Parents don't have enough time to spend with their children and close relationships suffer because there is no time to spend with each other.

What adds to a feeling of failing and accompanying guilt is when we are the ones creating the problems. We spend too much or we try to do so much that we don't have time to do anything well, including not doing what we need to do to build strong relationships. The most important relationship we often neglect is our relationship with God.

The limitations we struggle with as well as other challenges in life are effected by what we do control as well as by what we do not control and knowing the difference between the two will be a very important first step in order to know how to deal with these challenges. Knowing the difference is a major challenge in itself because we have less control over more than we realize we do. On the other hand we do have choices to make and these choices impact how effectively we handle our challenges. Once we know what we need to do we should have a conviction to do what needs to be done. Knowing why we fail to meet our expectations can help us cope with and even overcome our shortcomings.

Conversely, not having a clue why we are failing to achieve what we want or how to deal with our failures can really be difficult for us. We may think we are doing the right thing when in fact we are doing the wrong thing and not being aware of this can cause a great deal of heartache. How frustrating is it when a relationship that is important to you is failing and you do not know why and you don't know what to do. I can't begin to tell you how frustrating it was for my wife and myself not knowing how to deal with our daughter's drug problem. I can tell you what we should have done and what we now clearly understand helps immensely in dealing with many of our life challenges. And of course the bible points to the answer.

Proverbs 24:6 For waging war you need guidance, and for victory many advisors.

Although there are several scriptures in the book of Proverbs that tell us it is wise to seek counsel the scripture quoted stands out to me because our struggles often make us feel like we are in an all out "war", and the truth is we are in a war (see Chapter 12 – Be Prepared for War). Being in a war was how I felt when trying to deal with my daughter because of the choices she was making in her life. I now know after spending some time with Amy's therapists and drug counselors seeking professional counsel would have relieved a great deal of the stress we experienced, stress from not knowing what to do. What we needed to do was to develop a plan of action with the help of counselors with our daughter – if she did this then we should do that. Having a plan would not take away all our pain but it would have relieved much because we would know we were doing all we could do to help.

Professional counselors are trained to help us resolve conflicts and solve relationship and behavioral problems. Christian counselors can be especially helpful as they are trained to apply biblical truths to our lives. There are many other "advisors" we can go to for help such as pastors, professors, teachers, tutors, coaches, parents, mentors, and individuals who have been through what we are going through. Obviously we need to go to the appropriate advisors – your pastor may not be able to help you with your math or your math tutor won't help you improve your game if you are an athlete. All aspects of our lives are effected by our spiritual relationship so any advisor that applies biblical truths to their advice will help while those that give advice that is contrary to what the bible teaches will not be helpful to you, in fact their advice can be harmful.

What about what we don't control? So much of life is outside our control and this lack of control can cause a great deal of frustration and even anger for us. For example, good athletes will have horrible games even though they feel they are prepared mentally and in top form physically. It is not unusual to see athletes and coaches totally lose their composure because events out of their control don't go their way. College can be one example after another of thinking you have done well only to be crushed when you receive your grade.

There are many occurrences in life we don't control that do not seem fair or just. The best athlete doesn't always play, the best candidate for a job doesn't always get hired, and we may not get the grade we expect because whoever does the grading lets their biases overrule their sense of fairness. We aren't given the time or resources to do the job we are expected to do.

We may also think life is unfair because we are blind to our personal weaknesses and limitations. Maybe you are not working as hard as you can in practice and you do not see this as a problem but your coach does. Maybe you don't think you are being selfish in a relationship when in fact you are. Maybe you think you are doing a good job at work but your boss knows you can do better. Maybe you are not making as good use of your time as you can. Whether we are being treated unfairly or if we are blind to our faults the effects are the same – frustration and pain from not achieving what we so badly desire to accomplish.

So how do we eliminate the frustration and pain caused by our failures, weaknesses, and disappointments, whether we have control or not? First, understand nothing I, or anyone else can say will eliminate the pain of a motivated athlete who loses a big game or has a terrible performance. There will always be hurt feelings from a failed relationship when you really care about that person and frustration from not getting the grade expected when grades are important to you. It is nearly impossible to eliminate painful feelings resulting in failure to achieve something you passionately desire to achieve.

What I hope to do is share what I have learned and am still learning will reduce our pain and frustration and even give us some joy and hope for our future. The ultimate goal is to understand how to turn our failures into successes. Understanding how we can make our failures and disappointment work for us will help us recover much quicker and help us more effectively deal with challenges in the future. We can even be content during our toughest trials and failures.

The first thing we need to do is to turn to God and trust Him! Putting our trust in God is especially important when we don't understand why we are failing in our endeavors and when we have little control over events that impact our lives. The following Chapter (Expect to Win) is devoted to the subject of faith that comes from trusting God and expands on many of the topics discussed in this chapter. I really hope this chapter and this book contributes to strengthening your faith because having faith is so very vital to our well-being. Faith in God will give us peace and can even help us overcome many of our weaknesses. Our challenge may be to not sell ourselves short concerning what we can do while still being in touch with the reality of our limitations.

I admit telling you to trust God is very easy to say but may not be so easy to do. But I also know this is the key to making our failures work for us instead of against us and the key to having contentment and joy in our lives instead of misery when events don't go our way. God loves us and because of this love He wants us to turn to Him during our trials as the following scripture so clearly states.

1 Peter 5:7 Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.

In John 14:1 Jesus tells us to not let our hearts be troubled, trust in God and trust also in him. Isaiah 41:10 tells us not to fear or be dismayed for God is with us, he will strengthen us and

help us. These are the type of scriptures, God's truths that make a difference, which will truly impact our lives if we can believe in with all our heart.

Sometimes we need to be totally broken in spirit before we start taking God seriously and I know from experience failures and disappointments can crush our spirits. Being totally broken may be exactly what it takes to get past our pride and reliance on self so we can rely on and be used by God. Coaches sometimes will do all they can to crush the spirits of a player for the sole purpose of molding that player into the type of player the coach knows they can become. Often coaches are toughest on athletes they expect the most from and have the greatest potential. The coach may have to break the athlete of their self-centered attitude so that player can be valuable to the team and so the player will rely on the instructions and teaching of the coach. As painful as it may be to that athlete, once they are "broken" the coach will be more able to help that athlete reach their potential. We are no different!

God will allow us to be broken so we can turn to him and reach our potential that a spiritual relationship can provide. I believe this is what Jesus is telling us in the following scriptures because I believe being poor in spirit is the same as being emotionally broken.

Matthew 5:3 Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

We all suffer from pride. We all have a tendency to rely on ourselves too much and we rely on God too little. Unfortunately it is often tragedies, crises, and life's struggles that get us to really start looking to God. These events can work for our good (Romans 8:28) if that's what it takes for us to dig deeper to find out what we need to do to have a more beneficial spiritual relationship. My entire family knows this oh so well!

Our daughter is a much different person than she was before she was arrested due to experiencing a humiliation few have to ever experience. Because of this humiliation she has developed a sincere desire to know and turn to God. When we do a bible study together I am often amazed at the spiritual wisdom this young lady has, a spiritual maturity often lacking in many who have attended church all their lives. Because of a horrible time in her life, along with her choice to turn to God for help, she has experienced and is experiencing God's tremendous involvement in her life. She knows God is real and God loves her and she wants to love God back and honor him with her life. Her ambition is to be a Christian counselor.

My son has been an example how even disappointments can benefit us spiritually. He went from being a star All-State football player on his high school team to playing very little on a college team that literally gets their butts kicked every week. This has been extremely hard on him but I have seen a tremendous spiritual growth in Jeremy that means more to me than any achievements on the field. It has been his trials and disappointments that caused him to look toward God.

In my own life it has been dealing with my daughter that has caused myself to turn to God like I never have before. There were many times events have caused me to feel totally crushed emotionally. Being broken has caused tremendous pain but it has caused me to discover what a spiritual relationship should be all about, even though I admit I am not where I want to be yet, and I am discovering how to have real joy in my life. It has led me to witness first hand God's intervention in our lives, and that intervention has given me great strength and hope in all that I do. My wife has been a Christian all her life but because of our trials she has found a spiritual strength she never thought she could have.

It's the pain we suffer that increases our joy when God does intervene. It is the pain we go through that gives us happiness when our efforts are blessed and bear fruit. Which athlete will get more satisfaction out of a great performance – the athlete who simply used their natural abilities

or the athlete who suffered because of intense training and personal sacrifices in order to get where they are now? Who will feel better about getting a great job – the person who gets the job because of a relative or the person who made tough sacrifices in order to become qualified for that position? Sacrifices can be painful but they increase the satisfaction of the rewards.

Failure and the resulting pain is often what it takes to mold us into the type of person God wants us to become. C.S. Lewis, a well-known author, described pain as the chisel God uses to mold us into perfection. When life seems to be going our way we have little motive to make any changes in our lives. Even when life is not so great it is still easy for us to get into a “comfort zone”. It is failures and disappointments that cause us to reevaluate our goals and aspirations. Failures and disappointments do far more to build our character than our successes and God cares far more about our character than he does about our achievements. This is why Paul tells us to rejoice in our sufferings.

Romans 5: 3-5 We also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

God may be at the root of our failures because He is trying to teach us something we need to learn. We may have wrong motives, the wrong approach, or we may be trying to achieve something that is not beneficial to us. Parents who love their children, coaches who care about their athletes, and God who loves us because we are His children will use discipline to correct behavior that can have negative long-term consequences.

In Hebrews 12:5-7 we are told not to lose heart when we are being corrected by God. These verses state, just as a father who loves their son will impose hardship as discipline, so will God impose hardship on us as discipline because of his love for us. We may not see the potential harm of some of our choices but God does, just as children don't always understand the reason behind the discipline imposed by their parents.

Every athlete has heard the expression – no pain no gain. We are like an athlete in training. In order for us to reach our God given potential in life we may have to go through many failures and disappointments along with the accompanying pain. When we understand God is working on us through our failures and when we understand his love and power we should have a thankful attitude in us instead of an attitude of bitterness, anger, or self-pity. Just like an athlete understands the difficult training and pain they must go through to reach top performance we must understand God is training us to get the most out of life. Our training will be painful at times but the end result will be a more satisfying, joyful, and fulfilled life. In addition God is building our character, and character is often lacking in those that rarely experience hardships and failures.

1 Timothy 4:8 For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come.

Failure can be the best thing that ever happens to us when it causes us to become convicted of whatever we need to do to overcome our weaknesses. When we understand what caused our failure that is the first step to recovery. This is why repenting for our sins is so important when it comes to overcoming our spiritual weaknesses. Repenting is more than just being sorry (we can be sorry only because we were caught in doing wrong). Repenting is wanting to turn from our sin, wanting to change, wanting to do what is right.

We will never be convicted to make any changes in our life until we understand where we need to make our changes and it is our failures that can point the way. There are few activities

where failures are more visible than in sports. When an athlete makes a mistake sometimes it is out there for the whole world to see (or that is how it seems). Because of pride or self-doubt, this can be tough to deal with, just as any mistake that is highly visible to others can be. But we have to react with an attitude of conviction, and if we do chances will be less we will make the same mistake again, if we react with self pity the likely hood is another mistake will probably soon follow.

I had a conversation with Jordan's (the athlete in the picture) mom and I brought up my concern about her being so very hard on herself when she makes mistakes in her games. Her mom told me her daughter does learn from her mistakes because she hates making them so much. When she has this attitude of conviction then she is making her failures work for her. When she suffers frustration and worldly guilt she can take herself out of the game. When this athlete can prevent her mistakes from mentally taking her out of the game her strong desire to do well and her conviction of what she needs to do to prevent her mistakes will make her an even greater player in the future.

Even events outside our control that cause failures or disappointments can instill in us a sense of conviction. My son was underutilized (what parent of an athlete doesn't think their son or daughter is underutilized?) as a receiver during his junior year in high school. His football coach was focusing on developing the younger players (although he would never admit to this) because this was the first year of the program for a new high school. This caused a lot of frustration and even anger but it did convict Jeremy to hold nothing back when it came to training. He did many extra drills on his own as well as the drills and workouts required by his trainer. I doubt if there were many that outworked Jeremy during the off-season and his efforts and prayers led to an outstanding senior year. He earned numerous honors and he led the state large school classification in yards and receptions

In my own life I can easily recall the many mistakes I made and still make as a parent. I am convicted that a stronger spiritual relationship on my part would have prevented many of the problems our family has gone through. Instead of lamenting over my failings of the past I am convicted I need to work on strengthening my walk with God so I will have a more fulfilled and fruitful life in the future. We all have areas of our lives we need to work on and it is our failings and disappointments that make us aware of these areas. Worldly guilt will only hinder us while conviction will be the first step to helping us deal with the areas we need to pray about and work on.

We all know how much failures and disappointments can really hurt. But if the pain causes us to strengthen our relationship with God, keeps a check on our pride, convicts us of areas in our life where we need improvement, and equips us to handle the challenges of the future then our view and attitude toward failure should change. Instead of complaining, feeling sorry for ourselves or even feeling depressed, we should have a deep down inside satisfaction and even thankfulness because we know God is working in our lives to make us a better person. We should have optimism toward our future no matter what we are going through in our lives.

I once attended a luncheon where a former University of New Mexico's head men's basketball coach, Fran Fraschilla, was the guest speaker. He stated a philosophy he tried to live by and get his players to live by was to make adversity our friend. This comes from a coach who was fired as the head coach of St. Johns University after some very successful seasons and a coach who headed a program where the local community considers the coach a "loser" if the team is not consistently ranked in the top 25. In fact due to three seasons of not making it to the NCAA

tournament and some team discipline problems coach Fraschilla resigned from UNM (my guess is this was not his choice).

Because of his experiences and his job Coach Fraschilla knows what adversity is all about. At the time of this writing he is still looking for a job. But because of his attitude there is no doubt he will land on his feet and end up with a great job and be a little wiser and stronger as well. Adversity means having to go through many trials and having to face difficult circumstances. Being able to adapt to these circumstances is what will help you become a “winner” no matter what is happening to you. Those who adopt the philosophy of making adversity a friend are the types of individuals who bounce back time after time no matter how many failures in their lives. Those who do not are totally crushed when events don’t go their way and their defeats take any wind out of their sails for any future aspirations.

Making adversity a friend was what Paul was trying to get across in his letter to the Corinthians. In 2 Corinthians 12:7-10 he tells us he was given a “thorn in the flesh”. We don’t know what this thorn was but it must have been something that really bothered Paul because he called it a messenger of Satan that was there to torment him. He tells us three times he pleaded with God to take it away from him, but God told him his grace is sufficient and he told Paul his power is made perfect in weakness. Paul understood his thorn was there to keep him from becoming conceited because of how God was using him. When God made Paul understand the thorn was there for a reason Paul said he will boast more gladly about his weaknesses, so the power of Christ will be in him. Paul then states he delights in his weaknesses, in insults, in persecutions, and in difficulties because when he is weak, then he is strong.

We do know because of his trust in God Paul did not allow his weaknesses to hinder him. And he certainly did have weaknesses like the rest of us. He admitted he was not a gifted speaker and perhaps he was even boring at times. The book of Acts describes an incident where a man fell off a window ledge because he fell asleep during one of Paul’s sermons (Acts 20:9). Paul was even criticized for being timid in person, not showing the authority he projected in his letters.

Yet look how God has used Paul’s words! His letters (epistles) are an integral part of the bible and can anyone say the bible does not impact lives? If he would have focused on his weaknesses he could have given up his ministry. Instead he persevered and “fought the good fight”. His love for others and his love for God gave him the strength to continue on despite going through severe hardships. Not only was he able to keep going he actually knew what contentment and joy were all about (Phil. 4:12).

We need to think of a new definition for failure or who’s definition of failure are we going to let influence us. We should simply view failure as a life adjustment process. We should never forget the one person’s view of us who really matters, God, will never consider us a failure no matter how much we screw up in our eyes. We need to understand our perceived screw-ups are not that at all but simply events that convict us of what we need to do better or get us to change the direction of our lives, and most importantly to rely on God. Instead of feeling like a “loser” we need to know we are a ‘winner’ when our efforts don’t get the results we wanted or events don’t go the way we planned because of our relationship with God. We really need to know God is always in control. If we can always believe this, our pain will be minimized, our joy will increase, we will become stronger, and we will be better able to handle the future challenges of life.

Our failures also make us more valuable to the world. We will be more sympathetic to others going through tough times, instead of being judgmental. We will more likely want to and be more effective in helping someone when we can feel their pain and understand what they go

through. For example, a former drug addict will be a more effective drug counselor than someone who has never experienced the effects of drugs.

SPIRITUAL FAILURE

Most of this chapter has dealt with failure to perform according to our non-spiritual standards (performance standards) but the most devastating type of failure can be guilt due to our spiritual failures. Defining our spiritual standards of success without understanding God's gift of grace will affect the way we view ourselves, and we may not like what we view. Many Christians suffer from a spiritual form of worldly guilt and this feeling of not being a good enough Christian is one of the leading reasons many stop going to church.

Before I go on to discuss spiritual guilt I want to remind you of the two types of guilt discussed in the beginning of this chapter. There is a worldly guilt that makes us feel "remorse" only because we are caught or exposed and a Godly guilt that produces remorse because the Holy Spirit convicts us of our sins. The Holy Spirit causes Godly guilt while our pride produces worldly guilt. When we sin (not doing God's will) our remorse is a form of repentance, a true desire (a conviction) to turn away from sin, to do better. Worldly guilt produces a feeling of self-pity, a feeling of being "unworthy".

We feel we are unworthy because we don't pray enough or read our bible enough, or do enough for God. If worldly spiritual guilt is what motivates us to pray, read our bible, or serve God, our efforts will not be satisfying or beneficial to us or to anyone else! Spiritual guilt robs us of the joy and contentment God wants us to have as well as prevents us from being effective in sharing our faith with others. We will be so unhappy with ourselves it will be hard to care about anyone else. Others we know won't care to have a relationship with Jesus because they will see it hasn't done much for us.

What causes this worldly spiritual guilt? This type of guilt is a result of focusing on what we do instead of who we are and what Jesus has done for us. It goes back to the identity issue. When we as Christians focus on what we do the "law" of the Bible becomes very important and our identity gets formed by how well we obey. This is easy to do because we are constantly being taught we have to earn whatever we get so earning our status as a Christian by obeying God's law is understandable. Obedience is very important and this is why this subject was the focus of Chapter 6 (True Freedom). Should we try to obey the law – of course we should. The law is for our benefit and breaking God's laws will bring on natural consequences, even though He will forgive you if you "repent". You can be forgiven for alcohol abuse but the natural consequences of what has been done to your body will still remain.

Deuteronomy 32:46,47 He said to them, "Take to heart all the words I have solemnly declared to you this day, so that you may command your children to obey carefully all the words of this law. They are not just idle words for you--they are your life. By them you will live long in the land you are crossing the Jordan to possess."

1 Timothy 1:8 tells us the law is good if one uses it properly. This means we can use the law improperly. We use the law improperly when we form our value based on how well we think we obey God. A proud person will have a tendency to become a "legalist". A legalist is someone who focuses on the rules and commands of the Bible and may be more judgmental than loving. The Pharisees were a good example of legalists and Jesus rarely if ever had anything good to say about the Pharisees. A person who focuses on obedience does little to give other people a desire

for a relationship with Jesus because they think Christianity is nothing but a bunch of dos and don'ts.

A person with low self worth may focus on their inability to keep God's standards and they will then feel "unworthy". This feeling will keep them from having the relationship God desires because they often will feel unfit to go to God in prayer and they may shun reading the bible and the fellowship of other Christians because it will just make them feel more unworthy. Their guilt will make them feel like they are unacceptable to other Christians as well as God. Focusing on our perceived ability to obey God's laws puts us in bondage to that law and robs us of the freedom and joy God wants us to have. This is the point the apostle Paul is trying to make in Galatians 5:1-6.

He tells us it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. He goes on to say we should not let ourselves again be burdened by a yoke of slavery. He explains if we try to justify ourselves, in other words think we will be right with God, by trying to obey certain ceremonial laws like circumcision, we then obligate ourselves to follow the entire law. We make ourselves slaves to the law. We are told focusing on trying to be right with God by obeying the law alienates us from Christ and God's grace has no meaning to us. He explains these laws are not what is really important, but our faith expressing itself through love is what really counts. In Galatians 2:16 he said the same thing. He tells us man is not justified, made right with God, by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. He flat out tells us no one will be made right with God by observing the law.

Paul was especially concerned with focusing on the ceremonial law that required Jews to be circumcised. As you may recall from reading Chapter 7 (Who Am I?) this was required as a sign for those who were under the covenant God made with Abraham. But the requirements of the old covenants (including the sacrifices and offerings required under the covenant conditions God made known to Moses) were satisfied by obedience to God's laws, our new covenant is satisfied by our faith in Jesus.

The implications of what Paul was saying went beyond just ceremonial law. He is telling us we should not feel guilty for our inability to obey even the laws that are for our own benefit as well and this is very important for us to understand. If we could obey the law like God requires there would be no need for Jesus to die on the cross for us. Paul is pointing out a purpose of the law (also see Gal. 4:24) is to show us our need for Jesus. The law convicts (key word related to Godly guilt) us of our inability to keep it so we can then understand and accept why Jesus is needed as our Savior.

Romans 3:20 Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin.

Instead of feeling self pity type guilt when we fail to keep God's standards we should feel convicted to do a better job next time we face the same situation and also thankful and joyful for God's gift of grace. Grace is a very, very important term to understand. Other important and related terms we need to understand are justified (or justify) and righteousness as used in the New Testament. To justify means to 'acquit', and to declare righteous. In other words if you have been accused of something and a judge or jury acquits you, you have been declared not guilty for what you have been accused of. Righteousness means conformity with God's law. You read in Chapter 4, The Only Way, we are not capable of keeping God's law (Romans 3:23 – for we all have sinned ...).

Our crime then is not obeying God's law and the penalty for this crime is death (Romans 6:23 for the wages of sin is death...). Because of our faith in Jesus we are acquitted, forgiven, and declared righteous. It is like we never sinned at all! This is God's gift of grace – it is more than forgiveness because God doesn't hold it against us (Isaiah 43:25) like someone who says they forgive you but never lets you forget about what you did wrong. We can never earn grace – then it would be wages instead of a gift. As hard as you may try to earn salvation all you can really earn is death because we all sin, what we receive is eternal life.

Much of Paul's writing intended to help us understand God's wonderful gift of grace and the significance of Jesus. In Romans 5:17-21 he points out just as the one act of disobedience by Adam resulted in death for all of us, the one act of Jesus, his death on the cross, resulted in life for all those who accept him as their savior because of God's abundant gift of grace. The law was added so we could understand how much we fail to live up to God's standards. The good news is that the more we understand how far we are from being "justified" by our actions the more we should understand the significance of God's grace given to us by simply accepting Jesus as our savior.

Beating ourselves up with worldly guilt is pointless when we know we failed to keep God's standards. If God will not hold it against us why should we hold it against ourselves? We often feel good or bad about ourselves based on what we think others think of us. So when we sin it is easy to feel that we are not accepted by God, and we feel bad about ourselves because we think God doesn't want to have anything to do with us. It is our worldly guilt that will keep us away from God because we are not accepting what Christ has done for us – he took away our sins. So we are viewed by God like someone who has not sinned at all which means we are viewed as righteous as God! Think about what this means and think then how we should feel about ourselves. This is like a basketball player who goes 0 for whatever but is viewed by the coach the same as he or she made every shot. God loves us and accepts us just the way we (Romans 15:7) are so we should also accept ourselves!

2 Corinthians 5:21 God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

If anyone should have guilt about his past it would be Paul. He was a Jewish leader who intensely persecuted Christians (Galatians 1:13). He was an active enemy of those who followed Jesus and was responsible for putting many of those followers to death. Talk about someone who could have a guilt trip! Yet Paul was at peace with himself. He understood what the joy of following Christ was all about. Could it be this is why so much of what he writes in his epistles (letters) to various churches centers on God's gift of grace? You bet it does! Did becoming a Christian prevent Paul from sinning anymore? Does it mean we will not struggle anymore with disobedience? No, becoming a Christian does not mean we will not continue to sin. We all fail and we all sin.

Paul struggled with sin just like the rest of us. In Romans 7:15-20 he talks about his struggle. He tells us there are times he doesn't understand his actions. What he knows he should do he doesn't do and what he knows he shouldn't do, if fact even what he hates doing, he does! He confesses that nothing good lives in him. He states even though he has a desire to do good, he can't carry it out. Instead the evil he does not want to do, he keeps on doing. Now we know Paul is a guy who has a pretty strong spiritual relationship, yet he still struggles with sin. Does what Paul goes through ever describe us? I can tell you there are many times this description fits me

perfectly and I suspect you are no different. But Paul, as should we, recognizes it is his spirit that wants to do what is right but his sinful nature is what explains his actions.

Romans 8:5-10 gives us more understanding about our true nature and the Spirit. We are told those who live by their sinful nature, have their minds set on what this nature desires. These are typically desires that result in physical pleasure or self-gratification. These desires lead to a spiritual death (and too often a premature physical death). But the mind controlled by the Spirit is life after death and peace in this life. Those controlled by their sinful nature cannot please God or submit to his standards, in fact they are hostile toward God. But if we belong to Christ we will be controlled by the Spirit, that is how we know Christ is in us. This means our body is still dead to sin, in other words not exempt from our desires and the harmful effects of those desires, but our spirit is alive because of righteousness. Remember, it is our faith in Christ that makes us righteous, not what we do.

Does this sound like a conflict? If it does that could be because it is! Those of us who are Christians will go through this conflict. Galatians 5:16-21 tells us our sinful nature and the Spirit in us are in conflict with each other because what they desire are contrary to each other. These verses state the acts of this sinful nature are sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissension, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. And those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.

These scriptures do not say if you do any of these acts you will not go to heaven. In fact verse 17 states you will do what you do not want to do, which means we will do some of the acts just described, such as hatred, jealousy, and selfish ambition as much as we know they are wrong. Verse 18 tells us we are not under the same spiritual penalty for breaking the law because we do want to live by the Spirit.

I hope you now see the difference in the life of a Christian is not that we don't sin, because we do, but we are not controlled by our sinful nature, and this is a big difference. In other words it goes back to what is the driving force in our life and our overall actions will be a good indicator of what forces drive us (control us). When we are driven by the Spirit we will sin much less, and of course our lives will benefit, than someone controlled by their sinful nature. The Spirit gives us an inner strength to live the life God wants for us. When our heart is right, the Spirit convicts us when we are doing something wrong, helping us to live more obedient lives.

Being obedient is important because so much of what so many people do creates serious problems for themselves eventually. Many don't have a clue about how they are harming themselves or others, because sin affects the innocent as well as the guilty. Many do know what they are doing is harmful (or could be harmful) and they just don't care. The pleasures of the moment rule their lives or they just want to do what is right for them without any regard for anyone else. How else do you explain someone that knowingly has sex when they know they have a sexually transmitted disease, or explain drug dealers, thieves and other criminals. Their sinful nature is what controls their lives. There is no conflict with the Spirit with these individuals because obeying God is not even a thought.

The Holy Spirit is our supernatural conscious. The Spirit also helps give us insight and understanding when we study our bible, and this understanding is what helps form our spiritual consciousness because we develop an understanding of God's truths. Think of what an assistant coach, or graduate assistant, does. They are there to assist the athlete or the student on behalf of the coach or professor and that is what the Holy Spirit is for. Because of God's love and our willingness to follow Him, He will give us the assistance of someone far more powerful than any

assistant coach or graduate assistant – the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will train us and give us the power and strength to live the life God desires for us. Our Holy Consciousness will convict us and not condemn us when we fail to live up to God's standards. Yet, we too often condemn ourselves when we sin because of guilt.

Knowing we have this sinful nature without understanding God's love, forgiveness, and grace will prevent us from having contentment and joy. Understanding God's forgiveness and His love for us is the key to increasing our conviction and decreasing our guilt. Comprehending God's grace will set us free from the mental suffering that accompanies worldly guilt. We will not like, but understand the fact we sin. We should feel good that sin is not our controlling nature. We will fail and we will commit some of the same acts as those controlled by their sinful nature but we will not be under the same spiritual penalty (but we may still suffer the consequences) of death for breaking God's laws. We will be able to enjoy the power and freedom our relationship with Jesus brings when we understand that God views us as if we never sinned when we know and accept why Jesus died for us. This will allow us to move forward with joy instead of guilt. Our life will be guided by the Spirit and even though we will at times give in to our temptations we will know we are a child of God and our true desire will be to please our loving and perfect Father.

Dealing with any type of failure can be tough on us. I confess this is the chapter I have had the most difficult time writing because this is an area in my life where I struggle most. And maybe this is why it really sorrows me when I see others hurting for whatever reason and why I feel a burden to try to encourage that person. I can honestly say I can feel their pain. I know from personal experience how worldly guilt and regret from failure can take us out of our game plan, whatever that plan may be. I also know from experience failure can make us stronger and equips us to better handle future challenges – including spiritual failures. Using failures to make us stronger is a message I try to get across to student athletes who suffer because their team is losing or they are not playing enough or playing as well as they know they can. But this advice can apply to students who are struggling with grades, individuals going through relationship problems, and anyone going through any kind of struggle.

Maybe this chapter seems irrelevant to you because life is just always great. I really hope this is the case for you but the realities of life are that you will face hard times sometime in your life. There will be times you feel you are not doing anything right or nothing seems to be going your way and it's during those times I hope you remember this chapter. Maybe you think you have lived such a horrible life or have done something so awful you feel God can never forgive you. What can you have done that would be more horrible than being responsible for executing Christians like Paul was responsible for? And remember it is Paul who devotes much of his letters urging us to not let guilt rob us of our joy. Maybe you feel there are people in authority over you who are not treating you fairly. If this is preventing you from achieving your dreams commit this problem to God and know that if God is for us who can be against us (Romans 8:31).

Overcoming the hurt, frustration, and anger failure and disappointments can cause is not easy. I admit I am still trying to internalize what I have learned from writing this chapter but I also know without a shadow of a doubt that lots of prayer and spiritual growth will be what makes the difference in overcoming the negative aspects of failure. When we overcome these aspects we grow as a person and we will get so much more enjoyment out of life. We will expect to win and still have peace when we suffer setbacks.