

Facing Our Limitations

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I hate making a wrong turn while driving. Even if I am going someplace I've never been to before, I feel that I should be able to get there without making any mistakes. Add to that my hatred of being late, and you have a lethal combination. If I'm alone in my car I can get really mad at myself.

Why does failure makes me so angry? Why am I surprised when I make a mistake?

The answer to these questions lies in a wicked fallacy that is planted deep in every human being. At some level we all think that we should be perfect. We don't like to think of ourselves as flawed, imperfect or prone to make mistakes. All these are signs of weakness and we would rather view ourselves as strong, capable, smart, witty and quick on our feet. In other words, we don't like facing our limitations.

And yet, we all have limitations. A good friend wrote the following about his ministry to college students:

“Last week was a tough week for a lot of us [in leadership]. Though God was moving powerfully, many of us felt like what we had to offer in ministry was not good enough. When I asked the leadership if they had had an experience that week of feeling useless in the ministry, about 85% of the 60 leaders raised their hands. I thought my Large Group talk was the worst I've given in 5-6 years (I actually wanted to give up 15 minutes into the talk, and by the end, I was a sweating mess), though people were blessed.... It is weird to feel like failures when God is doing all of this amazing stuff.”

Don't we all feel like this at times? Failure affects everyone. That's why learning to deal with our limitations is the key to avoiding a mental, spiritual or physical breakdown.

What limitations do you face? Is it time, money, your background, your language skills? What are the things that you feel restrain you or keep you back. What are the areas of your life that you repeatedly fail in, sins you repeat, mistakes you can't fix, problems that won't go away?

Nobody likes to be seen as weak, and so very few people talk about their limitations. As for me, when there is something I want to buy but that I can't afford, instead of admitting my financial limitations and not getting it, I'm more likely to use a credit card and go into debt. For others, when asked to take on a new responsibility in the middle of an already hectic schedule, they may say “yes” because it is easier than facing the limitation of time.

It is time for us all to take a healthy look at our limitations and see them as God sees them. He sees beauty in our weakness. He made us weak and limited and He loves us not because we're perfect, but because He is perfect and He is slowly perfecting us. The

apostle Paul writes, “I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6).

When Paul was going through one of the darkest times of his life, God spoke to him and said, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness’ Therefore I (Paul) will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ’s sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong” (2 Corinthians 12:9-10).

Many people equate weakness with losing, and therefore they avoid it at all costs. But losing is not always a bad thing. Pat Conroy writes in his book, My Losing Season:

“Winning makes you think you’ll always get the girl, land the job, deposit the million-dollar check, win the promotion, and you grow accustomed to a life of answered prayers. . . . Loss is a fiercer, more uncompromising teacher, coldhearted but clear-eyed in its understanding that life is more dilemma than game, and more trial than free pass. My acquaintance with loss has sustained me during the stormy passages of my life when the pink slips came through the door, when the checks bounced at the bank [and] when my mother lay dying of leukemia” (p 14, Conroy).

Both Paul and Conroy realize that being weak is not an embarrassing trait to hide. Instead it is a quality to cultivate and celebrate. What a relief to know that God values our weakness and uses our failures.

Since God created us with limits and weakness, does that mean that He condones our sin? No! God wants us to strive for moral perfection, for He said, “Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). That is why He told the adulterous woman whom the Pharisees wanted to stone, “Go now and leave your life of sin” (John 8:11). And He told the paralyzed man that He healed, “Do not sin any more, so that nothing worse happens to you” (John 5:14).

God created us to worship and glorify Him. To go on sinning would be totally dishonoring and disrespectful of Him. God receives no glory when we hurt each other, insult one another and rebel against Him.

So yes, try to live a life without sin. Try to obey God’s words of guidance and instruction, for the more holy your life is the more people will see God in you, and thus glorify Him. But we must always admit our weaknesses and confess that we are able to be holy only by God’s mercy and grace.

A few months ago I listened to a woman on the radio tell her story of killing a young boy by accident over twenty-five years ago. This woman was driving her car when the child jumped in front of her, giving her no time to steer out of the way. She was acquitted in court and no fault was placed on her by society. But in the courtroom of her own heart

she sentenced herself guilty, not wanting to let go of the shame and burden of having ended someone else's life. Years later, she still can't bring herself to have children of her own and every day she mourns the mistake of her past and uses it to punish herself anew.

Why can't she forgive herself? Why does she linger in the past? Why does she allow this experience to keep her from enjoying life and starting a family? Clearly it is because she has never fully accepted the fact that she is a limited creature, not intended to be perfect, not intended to be God.

God created us with limitations: we are limited to one place, at one time, with one life and one identity. You cannot go back and redo high school, even if it is done on Reality TV. When you make a mistake – even a terribly tragic one – you cannot go back and do it again. God has limited us to only living in the here and now and doesn't expect perfection beyond our limits.

In a sense it is true that we cannot be perfect exactly as God is perfect. But we can be perfect in our limitations, as God is perfect in his limitations – which are none. Don't try to be Superman or Wonder Woman. Don't think that you can do everything for everyone. In the words of Keith Green, the legendary singer-songwriter, "Keep doing your best, pray that it's blessed, and Jesus takes care of the rest".

Therefore, I will rejoice in my limitations. When I make a mistake... am late... break a promise... hurt someone's feelings... lose something... miss a question on an exam... play a wrong note in a performance... make a bad golf shot... burn something when cooking... forget something important... slam my toe on a chair... get in a car accident... or in some other way sin or fail, I will celebrate the fact that God is able to use that weakness and turn it into a wonderful display of His power. May that which once caused me anger and frustration be a source of joy, as I embrace a perfect God, who loves and uses someone as imperfect me.