

Success and Failure, Part 2

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

17 March, 2024

Children's Talk: We All Make Mistakes

- When we make a mistake, it can feel like the end of the world.
- Since we failed, we have now lost our chance, and won't be able to have another one.
- But that is not how the Lord works: we all make mistakes, and the Lord always gives us a chance to fix them.

Then He said: "A certain man had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the portion of goods that falls to me.' So he divided to them his livelihood. And not many days after, the younger son gathered all together, journeyed to a far country, and there wasted his possessions with prodigal living. But when he had spent all, there arose a severe famine in that land, and he began to be in want. ¹⁵ Then he went and joined himself to a citizen of that country, and he sent him into his fields to feed swine. And he would gladly have filled his stomach with the pods that the swine ate, and no one gave him anything.

"But when he came to himself, he said, 'How many of my father's hired servants have bread enough and to spare, and I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and will say to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you, and I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Make me like one of your hired servants."'

"And he arose and came to his father. But when he was still a great way off, his father saw him and had compassion, and ran and fell on his neck and kissed him. And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and in your sight, and am no longer worthy to be called your son.'

"But the father said to his servants, 'Bring out the best robe and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand and sandals on his feet. And bring the fatted calf here and kill it, and let us eat and be merry; for this my son was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.' And they began to be merry. (Luke 15:11-24)

- Imagine you had to play a game of throwing a ball into a bucket. And I only gave you one ball, and once it was used, that was your chance gone.
- That would be a hard game to play. And could be scary.
- But if I keep giving you more chances, then it is easier to play, knowing that if you miss, you'll get another chance
- That is like the son in the story: he thought he had used up all his chances to be a good person.
- But his father was willing to give him more chances.
- It's also what the Lord does for us.

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We don't have to look far to find failure in life. Recently we have seen failure all around us in our own city. Durban failed us. When we see failures like this, it is hard to fathom why the Lord allows it, and why failure is so prevalent in the world. The point of this is not to get political, or to somehow resolve the political failure we see; but I do want to mention it because it brings home how close we can be to failures, and how much impact they have on our lives. And while most of the rest of this sermon will be on failures in our own personal lives, it has relevance on all the other challenges that confront us in life. We are going to try to get a new view of failure, a higher view, that will help us see how the Lord uses failure to lead to a different kind of success. Not that the Lord causes failure, but that even in failure the Lord is at work leading to something better.

Last week I asked the question, "what does success mean to you?" And I got some good answers. This week I have a tougher question: "What does failure mean to you?" Failure is painful. It hurts. It is shameful. It is disheartening. But there is a challenging passage in the Teachings of the New Church that pushes us to see things differently. It is talking about the difference between those who trust in the Lord and those who do not:

Those who trust in the Lord are constantly receiving good from Him; for whatever happens to them, whether it seems to be advantageous or not advantageous, is nevertheless good, for it serves as a means contributing to their eternal happiness. (*Secrets of Heaven* §8480)

What if every failure in some way can be used to contribute to your eternal happiness? And what if you could actually approach things that way, not just intellectually, but as part of your lived worldview?

We see an instance of this in the story of Joseph. Joseph was thrown into a pit and sold to slavers by his own brothers; he was sold into Egypt, where his mistress accused him of forcing himself on her and was put into prison; there he was forgotten, even after given a promise that he would be remembered by a fellow prisoner that he helped; at last he was freed when he was able to interpret Pharaoh's dreams, and was given a position of prominence in the Kingdom. Because of this position Joseph saved many who would otherwise have been killed in a famine. When his brothers apologized for the evil they had done to him, Joseph answered, "you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good, in order to bring it about as it is this day, to save many people alive" (Genesis 50:20). Joseph was able to look at all the things that had failed in his life, and see how at each step of the way the Lord had used it to bring about some good in the world or in his life.

When relationships fall apart; when the country seems to be going backwards; when you pour your heart into a project that gets cancelled or makes no money; when you fail to live up to the expectations you have for yourself; when you aren't the person you wish you were; are you able to allow for the possibility that while the failure itself may be bad, the Lord may bring some good from it? That while it was in some sense meant for evil, the Lord means it for good? How that could be the case might be hard to fathom in the moment. How could failure lead to good? How can it contribute to your eternal happiness?

One of the most important shifts that happens when we fail in one sense is that it opens our eyes to a different kind of success. Part of our problem is that we see worldly things as the measure of our success, and so as the measure of our worth. As long as we are succeeding by some worldly measure, we can feel successful; but when those worldly things fail, we can either consider ourselves a

failure, or we can find a new kind of success, one that we actually have some say over. This is what the Lord is getting at when He pushes us to look past earthly to heavenly treasure:

Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.
(Matthew 6:19-21)

No matter how successful we are in earthly things, they will fail us. No amount of money, or possessions, or competence, or personality traits, even skills and talents, will last forever. There will come a time that they fail us. When they do, we need to have a store of heavenly treasure that will be the measure of who we truly are.

That heavenly treasure is the goodness and truth from the Lord. It does not fail us. When your hopes and dreams come crashing down around you, you can still hold onto love for others in your heart. When life becomes chaotic and plans fall apart and there is no clear way forward, you can still do what is right according to the Lord's truth, even if at a total loss as to how to move forward otherwise. Love and Wisdom are not something that is dependent on circumstance, but an option that is available even in the worst of times. Think of all the many ways you have failed in life; as long as you can turn to these two things, and receive them from the Lord, you are still not a failure.

The idea that goodness and truth will not fail you might come as a bit of a shock. What about when failure extends even to these levels, when you have no more room for charity and no commitment to doing things the right way? That is a real failure, and if we stay there we fail in the worst way possible; but if we are willing that can just be a step on the path of regeneration. The Teachings of the New Church point out that temptation, or spiritual struggle, which is necessary for our

growth, involves utter despair over the possibility of success, or even the possibility of our own salvation:

For temptations are continual despairings of salvation, in the beginning slight, but in course of time grievous, until at last there is doubt, almost denial, of the presence of the Divine and of His aid. In temptations the spiritual life is for the most part brought to this extremity; for in this way the natural life is extinguished, because then, in the midst of the despair, the inmost is kept by the Lord in combat against falsity; and therefore this despair is soon dissipated by comfortings that are in the next place insinuated by the Lord; for after every spiritual temptation there is consolation, and as it were newness of life. (*Secrets of Heaven* §8567)

That is a bleak picture of a particular step of our spiritual process. It describes those times when maybe you don't believe in God at all; or if you do, you don't really think there's any hope that He can make a difference for you. It is not a fun place to be, nor even a good place to be; and yet, as the passage says, it can be part of the process of stripping away all the stuff of the natural world, all the delusions and the pride and the worth that you put into the things that don't really matter, stripping those all away so that you can simply acknowledge the Lord, and His goodness, and put your faith and hope in Him. The faith and hope that His love will not fail you, nor will his wisdom desert you. Even in failure, or rather, especially in failure, when the evil spirits are pouring falsities into your mind, persecuting you and trying to tear you down, there can also be blessing:

Blessed are you when they revile and persecute you, and say all kinds of evil against you falsely for My sake. Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great *is* your reward in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you. (Matthew 5:11-12)

These perspectives on failure, and what actually counts as failure, have practical implication. You might be wildly successful externally, but be failing spiritually. In which case you can't just comfortably sit in your outward success, you need to prioritize achieving spiritual success. You cannot become complacent. You might "fail" externally but still be succeeding spiritually. Not that that means you

should ignore an external failure; by all means you should work to fix it; but it will put it into its proper context. External things are bound to fail, and it does not by any means make you a failure. I remember hearing a story recently about two brothers, the one who lived a flashy lifestyle, high profile job, big house, big family with a consistent eye on success; and the other generally ok at his work, but with no ambitions to speak of. A young relative looked on the former as the successful, and was scathing of the latter. Yet in later years he saw things differently; the one who appeared successful was unfaithful to his wife and family, and the one who appeared not to have much success doted on his family and wife, and had a happy marriage. He was the truly successful one. What does it matter how external things appear, if you can be successful in the area of love and kindness?