

## **PASSION PERSONALITIES: SIMON PETER LUKE 22:54-62; JOHN 21:1-19**

“Failure” is a dirty word in our culture. Some years ago, “Fortune” magazine interviewed Kathy Moravich, a 5<sup>th</sup> grade honors teacher. She had a problem. She still had “gifted” 5<sup>th</sup> grade students stuck on 4<sup>th</sup> grade math. In fact, she had to spend her lunch hour providing remedial tutoring for several “gifted” students. What was going on? Kathy estimated that one-third of her students didn’t really belong in the gifted class at all. In fact, the truly gifted were held back because she had to slow down to accommodate the “semi-gifted.” And yet the gifted program in her school district continued to grow and flourish because of all the parents who desperately wanted to have their kids labeled as “gifted.” Indeed, some of the parents in that school district formed their own group called: Parents and Teachers of the Gifted and Talented. This group became politically powerful even nominating school board candidates to help them promote their agenda. Some began to get concerned – no doubt Kathy Moravich being one of them – that before long the entire student population in that school district would eventually be considered “gifted.” There’s nothing worse in the minds of some people than being average. Being normal is deemed failure by some. Be that as it may, all of us dislike – we even fear – failure.

Our Passion Personality today knew a great deal about failure: Simon Peter. We’re considering several people during the church season of Lent who turn up prominently during that one week period of time referred to as the Passion of Christ – Palm Sunday through Easter Sunday. But failure didn’t destroy Peter. In fact, his failures – in the hands of God – helped to shape him into the outstanding and godly leader he eventually became. Let’s focus on just three truths that emerge from Simon Peter’s story. Here’s the first one.

### **JESUS ALLOWS YOUR FAILURES.**

Simon was his birth name. Jesus gave him the nickname Cephas or, the Greek equivalent, Peter. Both mean “rock.” He was married because Jesus healed his mother-in-law and the apostle Paul writes in one of his letters about Peter’s wife traveling around with him. Peter and his brother, Andrew, were fishermen. It seems that the two of them had a kind of fishing business along with two other brothers, James and John, who likewise became Jesus’ followers. Simon Peter emerged as the leader of the twelve disciples. He was the first of the group to see the risen Jesus on Easter Sunday. After Jesus ascended back to heaven, Peter became the primary leader of the Christians centered in and around Jerusalem. He devoted the rest of his life to sharing his faith in Jesus. There’s good historical evidence that Peter died as a martyr during a time of intense persecution at the hands of Nero, one of the first century Roman Emperors.

What was Peter like as a person? When you put all the biblical information together, you get the picture of a man who could be strong when nothing was at stake and weak when everything was at stake. He often acted too quickly,

thought too slowly and spoke too much. That resulted in failure. Once, Jesus enabled him to walk on water miraculously, but then Peter lost faith and almost drowned. On another occasion, the Holy Spirit enabled Peter to see Jesus for who He truly was. Peter proclaimed, "... 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' Jesus replied, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.'" (Matthew 16:16-17 NIV) But shortly after that perceptive confession, Jesus rebukes Peter sternly. Jesus is predicting His coming suffering and death on the cross and Peter isn't having any of that. Finally, Jesus turns to Peter and says, "... 'Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.'" (Matthew 16:23 NIV) Ouch! Can't you just hear Peter mumbling to himself? "One day God speaks through me. The next day Satan speaks through me. What gives?" That touches on one reason for spiritual failure: ignorance of your personal weaknesses. That was Peter. Sadly, it also describes us and why we fail so often as well.

Peter's greatest failure was his denial of a personal relationship with Jesus. On the night Jesus was arrested, Jesus predicted all of the twelve disciples would cut and run. Peter protests, "... 'Lord, I am ready to go to prison with you, and even to die with you.'" (Luke 22:33 NLT) Jesus' response? "... 'Peter, let me tell you something. Before the rooster crows tomorrow morning, you will deny three times that you even know me.'" (Luke 22:34 NLT) Of course, Peter refused to believe himself capable of such a thing and said so. Later that same night, Jesus is in the Garden of Gethsemane agonizing in prayer. Peter and the other disciples slept instead of praying as Jesus asked them to do. There's yet another reason for spiritual failure: an unwillingness to pray and access the power God alone can give you. Jesus is arrested and the Bible says "... Peter followed at a distance." (Luke 22:54 NIV) That's a poignant phrase, isn't it? You can do that both literally and spiritually – follow Jesus at a distance. And that reveals yet another reason behind spiritual failure: trying to follow Jesus at a distance. Like Peter tried to do literally that night, you can try to do spiritually: follow Jesus at a comfortable, safe distance. You want to get close enough to Jesus to cash in on all of that good stuff: sins forgiven... eternal life... answers to prayer, but not close enough to let Jesus change you from the inside out.

So let's read what happened next (Luke 22:54-62). It wasn't just the rooster crowing for the third time that reminded Peter of Jesus' prediction; it was the look of Jesus. Don't you wonder what Peter saw in Jesus' look that night? Was it anger? Disgust? Was it a "I told you so" look? No, I believe it must have been a look of profound love – a kind of love that could be, on the one hand, deeply wounded and yet, on the other hand, reach out to Peter with forgiveness, grace and patience. I believe it was Jesus' look that broke Peter's heart. He went outside and wept like he'd never wept before.

Jesus allowed Peter to fail. He knew it was coming. He even told Peter what he would do. Could Jesus have prevented Peter's meltdown? Yes, but He didn't.

Nor did He cause Peter to fail. But why didn't Jesus rescue Peter from this humiliating experience? Ultimately, God uses your spiritual failure and mine to draw us closer to Himself. When you commit a sin or you fail spiritually in some way, God shines a light on your weakness and inadequacy. He is faithful to shine a light on areas in your inner life where you stubbornly refuse to surrender to Him. Often, you and I don't like to face up to our capacity for sin and failure. But God knows better. And so God will allow you to fail, just like He allowed Peter to fail. It's not because He hates you or wants to shame you. His main purpose in allowing failure is to help you to stop trusting in yourself. Allowing you to fail is God's way of destroying sinful self-confidence in you and me. Peter needed to face the fact he was a sinner. Peter needed to stop trusting in Peter. So do you. So do I. Nothing reveals your incredible need for God and His grace more quickly than when you fail. Ironically, allowing you to fail can be a demonstration of God's severe mercy working in your life. Here's a second truth.

### **JESUS CONFRONTS YOUR FAILURES.**

Let's read another story about Simon Peter (John 21:1-19). That scene took place a few weeks after Jesus' resurrection. Peter and these six other disciples had endured both the brutality of Jesus' crucifixion and then the unbelievable joy of seeing Him risen from the dead. Now what? They decided to do what they knew how to do: fish. They fished all night but caught nothing. At first, they didn't recognize Jesus on the shore. But after their miraculous catch of fish, they knew it was Him. And, then, it was Peter – wonderfully impetuous, impulsive Peter – who jumps into the water and swims for shore. When they finally all arrive, the risen Jesus is there and He's made them breakfast on the beach.

Everything about that scene must have reminded Simon Peter of his failures. He was a fisherman by trade, but the fish cooking on the fire and the lapping waves reminded him that without Jesus he couldn't even catch fish very well! As he looked at the other disciples, he must have wondered what they thought of him. By now, they were aware of his cowardly denial. Jesus used charcoal to make the fire on the beach that morning. I'm fascinated by the fact that only one other time in all of the Bible is a charcoal fire specifically mentioned. We read it this morning – the Luke 22 passage. The fire in the high priest's courtyard the night Peter denied Jesus was a charcoal fire. Your sense of smell can arouse powerful memories, am I right? If I was in Florida and walked through an orange grove, I know that just the smells of those oranges would bring back a flood of memories when I lived there as a kid. Don't you think that as Simon Peter sat on that beach – the pungent odor of charcoal filling the air – that he recalled that awful night in the high priest's courtyard? That night he failed so miserably?

Jesus then asks Peter a question that must have felt like the blow of a hammer. "... 'Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?'" (John 21:15 MSG) No doubt Peter's heart began to pound, his cheeks burned with shame, his pulse quickened and his eyes misted over when he heard that question. "...

‘Yes, Master, you know I love you.’...” (John 21:15 MSG) Three times Jesus asked Peter the same question, “Do you love Me?” Three times Peter had denied even knowing Jesus. Three times Jesus gave Peter the opportunity to reaffirm his love and devotion for Jesus. No boasting, bravado and bluster now. No macho spirituality. I can’t read that scene without imagining the grief that must have welled up inside of Simon Peter when he said, “... ‘Master, you know everything there is to know. You’ve got to know that I love you.’...” (John 21:17 MSG) There’s a profound shift in that response. Peter’s old, prideful self-confidence was gone – the arrogance, the boastfulness, the certainty that his allegiance for Jesus was superior to everyone else’s. Now, Peter’s confidence was in Jesus’ knowledge of him – flaws and all, warts and all, blemishes and all.

Does the way Jesus handled Peter here seem kind of harsh or “in your face”? Jesus knew that when you truly love another person, you’re willing both to be held accountable by that person and to hold that person accountable. Yes, it was indeed a painful moment. Confrontation usually is painful. That’s why all of us want to avoid it. But true love will endure confrontation because it values the person and the relationship. How we need to remember that simple truth in our marriages... with our children... with our friends! How we need to remember that simple truth in the local church! Jesus’ purpose here was not to hurt Peter but rather to heal him. Peter had denied Jesus three times. Now he’s given the opportunity to reaffirm his love for Jesus three times. If Jesus had never addressed this issue directly with Peter, the effect of his denial would have continued to fester in his soul for who knows how long.

Furthermore, it needed to be done publicly to some degree. Why? Peter’s denial had been very public. So his restoration needed to be public, too. Those other disciples needed to know his past failure was truly in the past – forgiven and set aside forever. Simon Peter had been both forgiven and commissioned for service by Jesus Himself. There’s a lesson here for you and me. God heals your sins and spiritual failures not by allowing you to run away from them, excuse them or rationalize them, but instead by confronting them. He will allow you to fail when it’s for your own good. He will also confront you when you do fail, so He can restore you. But it’s a confrontation designed to heal not hurt, restore not destroy and renew the relationship not end it.

It seems that we hear about politicians getting involved in sex scandals every other day. Do you remember Donna Rice? She got involved with then Senator Gary Hart from Colorado. In the aftermath, Hart’s bid for the 1988 Democratic presidential nomination went down the tubes and so did Donna Rice’s reputation. She disappeared from the public eye for awhile. She became a follower of Jesus during that awful time and got married, too. Now she heads up a Christian organization called “Enough is Enough” fighting to keep pornography out of the hands of children. Here’s something she said about failure that’s worth hearing. “God loves us, but He doesn’t grant us immunity from the consequences of our choices. However, when we mess up, if we ask His forgiveness, He’ll redeem

those choices, using our mistakes as a 'door of hope' for other people.... God has brought purpose to my pain." Here's a third insight or truth from Simon Peter's story.

## **JESUS REDEEMS YOUR FAILURES.**

Feelings of failure come in many different shapes, colors, sizes and shapes, don't they? Maybe you feel as if you never met your parents' expectations. Perhaps you've committed a sin that seems unforgiveable to you. Maybe you struggle with a powerful addiction today – alcohol, drugs, pornography, money. You wonder if you can ever get free. It may be that your marriage has failed in the past or is failing at this very moment. Perhaps there's bitterness and brokenness between you and your parents or between you and your children. Maybe there's a business or financial failure in your past. Failure has a thousand faces. The fact is that all of us and each of us has failed somewhere at some time at some thing. The Bible says, "For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard." (Romans 3:23 NLT) We live in a world that doesn't forgive failure easily or well. But God isn't intimidated by your failures. That's why He sent Jesus into the world. He has the power to redeem each one.

The fact is that each of us is very much like Peter on that cool, fresh morning beside the Sea of Galilee. You and I are in great need of the healing touch of Jesus somewhere in our lives. Jesus said, "... 'But he who has been forgiven little loves little.'" (Luke 7:47 NIV) Surely, the reverse is true: the one who has been forgiven much loves much. That's Simon Peter! That's you and me, too. How can God redeem your failures? How can He bring good out of them? First, failure that gets redeemed allows you to be more compassionate towards others. You can identify with the failures and disappointments in other people's lives now in a spiritually healthy way. You can extend love, grace and acceptance to people who fall and fail. When that happens, you can be used of God powerfully because you become His channel of love and grace into their lives.

Second, failure that gets redeemed prepares you to serve God more effectively. As Jesus is restoring Peter, He says, "... 'Then feed my lambs... Then take care of my sheep... Then feed my sheep.'" (John 21:15, 16, 17 NLT) Jesus renews Peter's calls to serve Him. History tells us that Simon Peter went on to become the greatest leader among Christians in the first century with the exception of the apostle Paul. But it was a very different Peter now – chastened, humbled, God-confident not self-confident, filled with a new compassion and tenderness for others. Simon Peter is a picture of how Jesus redeems failure.

Third, failure that gets redeemed enables you to be filled with God's love. What does God really want to achieve in this life? It's not financial wealth, fame, success as the world defines it or comfort. God's ultimate goal is to get you to love like He loves. If you can learn how to love Him and to love others, the real purpose of your life has been achieved. In one of his letters, Peter writes, "Love

each other as brothers and sisters. Be tenderhearted, and keep a humble attitude. Don't repay evil for evil. Don't retaliate with insults when people insult you. Instead, pay them back with a blessing. That is what God has called you to do, and he will bless you for it." (1 Peter 3:8-9 NLT) That doesn't sound much like Peter before his monumental failure. But that's how he sounded after Jesus redeemed that failure. No matter how you fail in life, if you learn how to love God and how to love others with God's love, every failure will be redeemed.

One of my favorite stories is a true one. It's about "Wrong Way Riegels." On New Year's Day 1929, Georgia Tech played UCLA in the Rose Bowl. In the first half, a young UCLA player named Roy Riegels recovered a fumble. Picking up the loose ball, he headed for the end zone. There was just one problem. He lost his sense of direction and ran 65 yards towards the wrong goal line. One of his own teammates ran him down and tackled him just before he scored for Georgia Tech. Several plays later UCLA was forced to punt. Tech blocked the kick and scored a safety which understandably demoralized the UCLA team. At halftime everyone headed for the dressing room. As other players sat down on the benches or the floor, Roy Riegels put a blanket around his shoulders, sat in a corner and put his face in his hands.

Often, a football coach has a lot to say to his team at halftime. Not that day. Coach Price of UCLA was quiet. When the timekeeper came in and announced that there were three minutes before the start of the second half, Coach Price looked at the team and said, "Men, the same team that played the first half will start the second half." All the players got up and started towards the field – everyone, that is, but Roy Riegels. He didn't budge. Price looked back and called to him. No response. Price went over to where Riegels sat and said, "Roy, didn't you hear me? The same team that played the first half will start the second half." Riegels said, "Coach, I can't do it. I've ruined you. I've ruined the university's reputation. I've ruined myself. I can't face that crowd out there." Coach Price reached out and put his hand on Riegel's shoulder and said, "Roy, get up and go on back. The game is only half over." Roy Riegels finally did get up. He went back out onto the field. The fans saw him play hard and play well.

The truth is that each of us, like Simon Peter, has run a long way in the wrong direction. Spiritually, we're all failures. Spiritually, we're all a mess. But when Jesus comes into your life or He works in your life, He transforms failure. Because of Jesus, there's always a second half to be played.