

## Lent 2021 – Counseling: Failure

On the Sundays in lent this year I hope to share simple reflections I've learned from being a Pastoral Counselor for over eight years. I call this sermon series, "Reflections from an Amateur Counselor and Hope from the Mighty Counselor."

Because these are sermons – which means they are about Jesus, I only hope my counseling reflections can point towards him.

I am not a trained professional counselor, I am a Pastor that has done counseling and has some counseling training. Big difference. These reflections are generalizations, because each counseling case is different, and they aren't singling anyone out in particular. I thought they might be helpful this year especially however, as we have seen a lot of people hurting, indeed, my office has been a bit more full this year, about twice as much, honestly. So I hope they can give some perspective and show our need for a Savior, but also the abundant grace he offers.

Today our readings are all about tests and temptations. And whenever we think of such things, close at hand are the thoughts of the possibility or the actuality of failing the tests or temptation. So, here at the beginning of lent, I thought we'd start with this premise: "Christ gives victory and value to failures like us." How's that for some self-esteem?

Counseling often goes like this, someone comes with a problem, we discuss it, agree on a plan and path forward, then I tell them to go execute that plan and they come back a week later and tell me all the excuses for why they didn't do the plan. It's a fun job, let me tell you.

It's very easy to become a bit jaded by all this. There are times when you want to shake them, "You want to know why your life is miserable!?! It's because you make miserably poor decisions and have zero will to act or change." But, while boldness is something I, perhaps, should employ more of, this is the response of a *jaded* counselor.

Because the reality is part of the job of the counselor is to then dig deeper to see what is paralyzing them from making healthy choices. Usually the destructive behavior is a symptom of something deeper, a need for love, dark spiritual or sinful conflict, cognitive dissonance, or even a history of trauma or abuse. Sometimes we've been able, praise God, to find some of that and work on it towards some victories, sometimes not. Sometimes we are able to open wounds and shine some healing light of Jesus in there, sometimes they leave the office noticeably unchanged and off to a referral appointment, or mad at me for not being able to fix them. In those cases I'm the failure I suppose.

But it isn't just the amateur counselors and their counselees that fail at times. As much as we like to raise our eyebrows at "those people" in our lives who make horrible decision after horrible decision, who are we to act like the same pet sins aren't tripping us up? And we pray, "Forgive me Lord, I'll do better." But the Mighty Counselor knows your heart and mind, he knows if you mean it or not. What have you done to fight back? Have you gotten someone to keep you accountable for the dark corners of the internet you frequent? Have you deleted that number, have you kept your tongue (or keyboard) in check? Have you given to the needy or worked to forgive the one who has wronged you? Have you tried to see the other side of the story?

In that respect, compared to the law of God, we are all failures. And this is why it is so hard for me to give counsel to those with feelings of inadequacy or failure. Because it's true! We are inadequate, we are failures. Our world advises us to tell everyone they are special, give them trophies for the most mundane tasks – and don't get me wrong setting simple goals for achievement is helpful. But at the end of the day if everyone is special, well, no one is. And then we come here and confess we are "poor, miserable sinners." Which is it? Special or failure.

I think both. The Hebrew term Segulah helps here. Segulah is translated as "treasured possession." It is used fairly frequently throughout the Old Testament, for example, here in Malachi chapter 3: 17 "They shall be mine, says the Lord of

hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him.”

And the thing about a Segulah that makes it so unique is that a Segulah doesn't have value in and of itself necessarily, it has value because someone wants it. My favorite example, sorry if you've heard me use this before, is my children's stuffed animals. They are dirty and they smell a little funny because they have been drug everywhere and you can't pry them away long enough to wash them. What would their animals go for on the open market? A dollar? Nothing? People might pay us to take them away! But if we were to lose one of them... can you imagine? I have retraced steps to a dentist office, here to Church, and we have searched car and house high and low when one of them goes missing. Why is it so valuable to us? Because it is valuable to them. That is a segulah, a treasured possession.

And this is where we find our value in the midst of our own brokenness and failures. We, before the law of God are failures, we cannot attain to his standards, we are fickle, we are selfish, we make bad decisions, we are too proud, or too negative, we are too angry, and not everything we do succeeds. We are failures. But we are still segulahs.

Our God made us and all people, that gives us and all people worth and value. And lest we think that's just a participation trophy our God has called us by the Gospel,

put his name upon us in baptism, and given His beloved Son to die for us. Would he do that for something he didn't care about? No he does that for his Segulahs. And the death of Jesus on the cross is no participation trophy so that we all could be special, no, no, because even as it was done for the whole world, it was done for you. Taste the fruits of it on *your* lips in communion, remember that the water was on *your* head, which is to say, if it was just you and not the whole world – he still would have done it.

And since the King has placed such value on you – who is anyone to say you are worthless? You going to say my kids animal is a piece of garbage? Oh our family might have something to say about that. And if you are going to go around saying that of others, or about yourself – well the King might have something to say about it. The King who, even moreso than Abraham, did not withhold his only Son from us, that we might be washed clean by his lasting sacrifice and be given a share in his victory.

Again, our readings today are about trials and testing, we pray that God would give us the strength to stand fast in them. But when we fall short (and we will) we take comfort in the One who, in our Gospel reading, passed every test, and as we will celebrate at the end of Lent, he triumphs over sin, death, and the grave. And he has done that for you.

So don't be afraid of failure. We are loved so greatly. We are a treasured possession. Why not get out there and live, and serve, and fight the good fight. Sure, we may fail, we may fall short. But is our Savior going to stop loving us? No. So we don't need to live in the seemingly unending, and frankly, boring cycle of failure, toxicity, bitterness, greed, and destructive feedback loops. We can be honest about our failures, and find value and meaning in a Savior who did what we could not, and died to wash us clean, and is risen to give us a hopeful future here and now, and into eternity. So there it is, "Christ gives victory and value to failures like us." Praise God.