

HOW TO BE A FAILURE

Dr. George O. Wood

Today I want to share some about our church, about our involvement in it, about our commitment to the Lord in it. I title it "How to be a failure." The scripture is from Numbers 13-14. Without reading the passage in advance I would simply encourage you to keep your bibles open to that section of the scripture.

We recognize as we look at that topic – How to be a Failure – that the chief way you can be a failure – it's not the main message this morning but it's the main message of scripture. That is, the greatest failure you can make is to live life without a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as your savior and Lord. If you're here this morning and you're not in relationship to Jesus that is the greatest failure of all. When you're in relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ then we can look at some of the other failures that are possible. But if we fail on that level we've missed it.

As I was sharing witness with a person this week it really struck me how the scriptures ask us the key questions in regard to our relationship with Jesus Christ.

The first question of the Old Testament is a significant one. It's the question which God asks and he asks it of the first man and woman and he asks it of every man and woman who has ever entered earth: Where are you?

Where are you in relationship to God? Where are you in relationship to yourself? Where are you in relationship to peace? To forgiveness? Where are you in relationship to your sin?

The first question of the New Testament is the question asked by men: Where is he? Where is he that is born the king of the Jews? It is asked by the wise men. That question is still asked by wise men for when God comes to us and asked Where are you, it is a tremendous blessing to be able to come back and to say, Where is he? And to indeed find the answer: he has come.

To look at the key questions for example like Jesus asked. It seems to me the key question which he asked was, Who do you say that I am? The key question which the disciples asked of him was, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." They asked this question of him when many were forsaking him because of his teaching, To whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."

So as you look at your own personal relationship to the Lord Jesus Christ or the lack of that relationship, God is coming to you with questions from the scripture: where are you? Where is he? Who do you say that he is? To whom will you go?

To cement that relationship first with Jesus Christ is what the church first of all is about.

When we're brought into that relationship then God calls us into a fellowship where we now not only know a commitment to Jesus Christ but know a commitment to one another. God has designed in a church that we be placed in family. Just as a child, when the child is born, it is not just kept in a room and isolated from people and left to grow up. So we, when we come to Christ, are meant to be part of other believers. There is joy in this and there is pain in this. There is also I think, when we look at being associated with other believers, real struggle in

HOW TO BE A FAILURE

seeing brought together the local church as the Lord Jesus Christ would want it to be. A vital growing fellowship of people who are finding in Christ real unity in spite of differences which they have had as people and even as Christians.

I feel this morning toward you what Paul felt toward the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 1:8 where he said of them “Your faith in God has gone forth everywhere.” This last week an article which I wrote about this church got distributed to some 22,000 ordained and licensed ministers in the Assemblies of God in a magazine entitled “Does Jesus want his church to be this way?” I boasted about you to the world. Here are some of the things I shared, some of the dreams that we have for the church in which you as a part of the church are sharing in.

Our church seeks not a specialized ministry to one age group or even a few age groups. Babies to senior citizens, in the name of Jesus, we say come.

Our church seeks not a specialized ministry only to the married but also to the single.

Our church seeks not a specialized ministry along denominational lines.

Our church seeks not to separate believers from one another on doctrinal questions that all fair-minded Christians acknowledge that are not essential to salvation.

Believing that the unity of the Spirit precedes the unity of faith we welcome eternal securitists and non eternal securitists. Pre-tribulationists, mid-tribulationists, post tribulationists and pan tribulationists (everything is going to pan out all right). Calvinists and Armenians. Since our Baptist, Methodist, Lutheran, Catholic and Pentecostal brothers and sisters are going to worship with us in heaven if together we have believed in our hearts and confessed with our lips that God has raised Jesus from the dead why should we not now begin to fellowship and worship together?

God has placed us as living stones in his body. We are not pre-fabed, pre formed, construction material. We are quarried from the real stuff of life. Fitted into one another to make the beautifully colored and variegated mosaic of God’s church. One of the necessary functions of God’s fitting together is the chipping and the sanding away of our sharp edges. God is using the difference in my brother and sister as a cutting instrument, loping off my impatience, judgmentalism, smugness and spiritual ego. God has not called his church to be a cookie cutter with all the cookies neatly rolling down in sameness down the conveyor belt.

That’s kind of a dream that we’ve had that God would put us together in spite of our differences and we rejoice that God is indeed doing this and wants to do more of it in the days ahead.

I’m finding however as I continue to minister in this community and this church that there are enormous difficulties in seeing the kind of a church brought into existence in our community which is what all of us dream. The church that people are close to the Lord and really close to one another. There are all kinds of things that make it difficult for us to be close to one another. So we have to work so we have to work especially hard and pray especially hard that God will form us in a very close way because this southern California community mitigates strongly against really feeling close to one another. I made a list of some of the kinds of things that I see go on.

HOW TO BE A FAILURE

Mobility. If you're going to be a part of this church don't wait for somebody to come to you and introduce themselves and welcome you. Take the initiative yourself. Next Sunday they may be gone and there will be a new person in.

Out of our congregation I've noticed that out of 123 persons whose picture were in the church directory as of January are now no longer in our church. Add all the people who didn't get their pictures taken, which were many, and all the people who have come in since then we are about in attendance the same as we were in January. That means that within about 6 months period of time we have gone through approximately 25% of our congregation being displaced and 25% coming in. That's the greatest change over in the 7 years I've been at this church. I went into this time with tremendous depression as I began to see what was happening.

Then I really became encouraged because I saw God was answering people's prayers. I ran into one last night who said, We prayed as we left the church. And it was tremendously reassuring for me to recognize that some of the people who had been the real pillars of this church as they left were praying, God, send other people in our place and continue to bless the church. And that has happened.

But just the mobility makes community exceedingly difficult. People are on the move.

What God has allowed to happen over the course of years with other people has kind of got to be Instant Church. We need to come instantly together. If that were the only struggle that we face then that would be manageable. But we get things like the fact that all of us live in kind of spread out areas. Even our own communities that we live in, our neighborhoods are not close together. Let alone that we live in all kind of number of towns that are represented in this congregation. Therefore we lack some of that community identity. Then we have within this church such wide backgrounds of people and ages and church affiliations and educational backgrounds and all that we've prayed for.

Coupled with all of that is the difficulty of involvement because there are persons who are working full jobs, holding another job in addition to that. Their wives may be working. Or working and going to school. And caring for children. And taking off on the weekends. And being involved in recreational activities. You name it. To be really put together and to see a staff of workers and ministers that are faithfully and regularly in the church associating with one another on a continuing basis that is a prize we strive for. But it's one that is against great odds.

I share this with you because if we're really going to be the kind of ministering agency that God wants us to be then all of these things kind of have to be overcome and we have to continue to see a desire among all of us within this church to be ministers to one another. And to be tied in to one another.

When I look at what it takes to really see the sort of identify of people that the early church had, how they met in one another's homes, how they loved one another, how they knew one another. I look at that as a goal and realize that that also is a vehicle by which we reach others for the Lord Jesus Christ. That we don't put them down in a cold, stainless steel nursery of a church. But we bring persons into living and loving relationship with other persons.

With that kind of long introduction I go to the scriptures, Numbers 13-14. I kind of have a promised land before me of what I want to see God do in this church, how he wants to continue

HOW TO BE A FAILURE

to have this church reach out to persons with the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. How he wants us to be close knit to one another. I recognize as I look at this that there are ways that we can fail. There are three ways it seems to me that are pointed out in this scripture today that the people of God in the Old Testament failed on. These ways of failures are guaranteed to work every time you try them. They'll work in this church and they'll work in your own personal life. If you're struggling with an issue as to whether or not God wants you to go ahead with a personal project I have a way that will always guarantee in every situation you'll fail if you follow what I say.

The setting of Numbers 13-14 is that there have been twelve spies that have been chosen to go out and survey the land. To make a determination about the promised land.

The first way to be a failure is reflected in this phrase: Look at the size of the task. Or, Look at the size of responsibility that is being given to you.

This dimension of failure has several marks to it. Verses 17-20 we find the spies have set out and they are to observe the land. There are seven things that they are to watch for. In respect to the land they are to notice whether the land is good or bad. Whether it is rich or poor. Whether there is wood or no wood. Whether there is fruit. Four things they are to look for in regard to the land.

Two things they are to look for in regard to the inhabitants of the land. Whether the people are strong or weak. And whether or not they are few or many.

And finally a seventh thing they are to look at is the cities whether they are camps or strongholds. A stronghold would be something with a wall around it. And a camp would be something easily taken and infiltratable.

The Lord allows them the prerogative of going out and making a judgment as to whether or not the land is in accordance with what he had promised. He says investigate.

So too when we set down and look at the challenges that God gives us in life whether it's individually or as a church. We can do the same kind of thing the spies did. We can notice on the balance side of the ledger all of the things that look good and on the negative side we can see all of the things that potentially look bad. I think we can often do that about the work of God and about our own individual lives. When we look at it we can say there are so many pluses. Yet there are so many minuses to this particular thing. So we observe.

When we begin to look at the size of the task, the report of the spies comes back in and they say in verses 21-30 their report. What happens especially should be noted in verses 27 and on. They came and told Moses "We came into the land to which you sent us. It flows with milk and honey and this is its fruit. Yet the people who dwell in the land are strong and the cities are fortified and very large. Besides we saw the descendants of Anak there. ..." There are two dimensions to this report that I notice. Verse 27 is the positive thrust of the report. "The land is what you told that it was." But then in verses 28, 29, 30 the emphasis is upon the fact that the enemies are there and they are extremely large. So if you mathematically work out the proportion of their report you'll find that about one fifth or so of their report concentrates on *it's a wonderful place*. And the other four fifths concentrates on *yet, or but or look at the obstacles that are there*.

HOW TO BE A FAILURE

What these spies go through is what the people of God have always gone through. Whether it's the Old Testament age or the New Testament age or now. When you look at the challenges that God places before you and wants you in the spirit to leap up and do, you can always say as you look at them, Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could do that? That would be fantastic if that would come to pass. Yet, but, look at all the obstacles that are standing in our way.

The world always seems stronger. It always seems that we're bent at looking at the obstacles and the obstacles grow larger and larger and larger.

Paul has the experience at the city of Corinth of the Lord saying to him, "I have many people in this city." Yet Paul himself says that while the Lord set before him an open door he had many adversaries. Many people/many adversaries. The Lord always gives us a challenge and task to do in our lives, a task that calls forth everything in us. But as we look at it we can back away from it because we become fearful.

So the response in verses 31-33 is as follows. When the spies gave this huge report about the big people in the land, Caleb quieted the people before Moses and said "Let us go up at once and occupy it. We are well able to overcome it." Then the men who had gone up with him said, "We are not able to go up against the people for they are stronger than we."

Notice that. In the first report they simply said the people are strong. Now when Caleb is urging them to go up to the land the ten spies respond back with the word "they are stronger." Not the enemy is not only big, he's bigger. So they brought to the people of Israel an evil report of the land which they had spied out saying, "The land through which we have gone to spy it out is a land that devours innocent inhabitants." That's kind of a contradiction with verse 27. They just said it's a land that flows with milk and honey. Now all of a sudden it's a land that swallows everybody up. You're going to get lost in it and you're going to cease to exist. It devours its inhabitants.

"And all the people we saw in it are men of great stature. ... we seem to ourselves like grasshoppers so we seem to them." In other words before the people were strong. Now they're giants in the land. As they contemplate the challenge and seriously think of getting it done, the obstacles grow larger and larger and larger. They're not looking at it through faith.

When we have faith that God is going to perform something what is produced in our heart? Quiet. Caleb quieted the people. But when we lack of believing that God is going to come through what's the result? Fear. Loud cry.

As we look at the challenges which God gives to us, we can either see the potentials or the problems. To the degree that we focus in on one or the other to that degree so it will be according to our faith. If all you're looking at in regard to what God has called you to do are the problems and the insurmountable obstacles you'll never get that done.

That's my great failing and the way the enemy likes to work me over in temptation. If he can get me to just making a list of all the problems and then I start backing off from all the promises and the potential then he's got me defeated before I even start at the work.

HOW TO BE A FAILURE

Paul's writing to the Philippians really shows how he gets it together. He's in jail and he can add up all the problems that are before him and then he comes out with this incredible statement "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

So if we look at the size of the task and when I look at what God has called us to do as a church family it staggers me. I realize that a sure formula for failure is to just look at the size of the task and it somehow becomes bigger than the power of the Holy Spirit in us to accomplish it.

The second way to fail is to look at the little bit you have.

We look at the task and then we start measuring our own resources. The spies I think put it well. They said, "We are ourselves seem like grasshoppers." Notice they didn't say we were grasshoppers. We just seemed like it.

I suspect if archeological research ever gives us any help on this. If they do a skeletal study of persons who were in the land of Canaan in the fourteenth century before Christ and measure the skeletons of the Canaanites against the bones of the Israelites that came into the land probably the height differential couldn't have been more than 1-6 inches. But they looked at men who were slightly taller than themselves and said the proportion is no longer 1-6 inches. The proportion is one inch, a grasshopper, to about 9 feet. As they contemplated the opportunity their resources grew very small. And this word of we are so little is coming from persons who shouldn't be saying this about themselves. They are some of the first people in scripture that really sell themselves short in an inferiority complex saying, God can't do it and we're not able.

Here are the twelve spies. We know from the Pentateuch that the number of men who were in this journey out of Egypt were 603,000 twenty years and above. So if you have twelve persons selected out of a crowd of 600,000, that's about one person chosen for every 50,000 people. I would suggest that in order to get selected for that kind of task one had to have some ability to begin with. And furthermore each of the names of the spies which are given to us in Numbers 13 have like a Hebrew characteristic of names, have a significant meaning to them. In biblical days they didn't call people George. Biblical names had meanings to them. You look at some of these guys names and say Wow!

One whose name simply meant Heard. That means when he said something he was heard – a person who was listened to.

Another person's name meant Judge. He had the bearing and the demeanor of a person who arbitrates disputes among people and have their respect.

Another whose name meant He will Redeem. A guy walking around with his life marked by the word He will Redeem should have had some faith that God would indeed keep his word as they went into the land.

Another whose name means God delivers. And another, God is my fortune. Another, God is my kinsman. Another, Majesty of God.

All these persons are walking around with these huge names. It doesn't mean a thing. You can have a tremendous track record in the past but it's the present which God calls us to fulfill. How often the Lord gives us a task when we are the least ready for it and when we are the most tired.

HOW TO BE A FAILURE

I think of the incident in the gospels and the feeding of the 5000 how it occurred after the disciples had been so pressed by the multitudes that Jesus promised them, Let's go aside for a place of rest. So they went across the sea and they came to the other side. People came and met them on the other side. They couldn't get away and after being up all night getting across the lake of Galilee had in the middle of their tiredness to have faith that they were going to feed the 5000. Same kind of a principle at work in respect to their calling as is here with the spies. They were to look at the size of the task – so many to feed and the little bit that they had (five loaves and two fishes). When you get those two things together it's a sure formula for failure.

Often it is in the kingdom of God that we don't live up to our potential as people because we really believe that we don't have much to offer. What could I offer the church? What could I offer the body of Christ? I couldn't teach a Sunday school class. I couldn't usher. I couldn't open my home for hospitality. My home isn't good enough. I'm not a good enough host/hostess. I'm a shy and retiring person and I couldn't go out and meet someone and make them feel at home.

We believe all these things about ourselves that the enemy is saying about us: "You don't really count... you're really pretty insignificant... you don't matter... there's not much you can do... the best thing you can do is to be quiet and be good and behave and go your quiet way." We're all a bunch of walking powder kegs for the Lord. We really are. God has placed within his body potential within us that if all of us live up to the potential then there's just no limit to what God can do. Jesus looked at the multitudes and said "The harvest are plentiful but the laborers are few." He saw that the problem was not that there weren't people out there to reach but the problem was in really drawing together the people that were already won and translating them into responsible people in the kingdom.

But often it is when we just have one talent we do what the person did in the parable of the talents. We say, That guy's got five and he's a triple threat person. Look at the pastor up there. He can preach or thinks he can but I'm not like the pastor." Thank God you're not. You don't realize how fortunate you are. Or we look at someone else and think they can sing beautifully or they always seem to have everything together and they're organized. And we look at ourselves and we say, They're five talent people or two talent people but I'm only a one talent person.

That's precisely it. That's where the whole kingdom goes or doesn't go. Most of us in the kingdom of God only have one talent. I'm convinced that everybody in the body of Christ has at least one ministry. God hasn't put you in this body, God hasn't put you in the total body of Christ without anything to offer someone else. There's got to be at some place in your experience some thing that God has called you to do within the body. You can read various passages of scripture to determine what it is. 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12. Romans 12 is a great starting place. There's something that we can do in the kingdom. But the trouble with the one talent man in the gospels was that he's the person who says I don't have much so I'd better just save what I've got and not spend it and not invest it.

Look at the little you have and become so discouraged. This is how the enemy attacks us by the way in our Christian life. "You can't make it... You don't have much to offer... Look at what you've got to go through... Look at the odds against you... Look at the emotional problems that you've got to work through..." and all that kind of thing.

HOW TO BE A FAILURE

The third way to be a failure that's reflected to us in this scripture. "All the congregation raised a loud cry and the people wept that night. The people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron. The whole congregation said to him, 'Would that we had died in the land of Egypt or that we had died in this wilderness. Why does the Lord bring us into this land to fall by the sword? Our wives and our little ones will become a prey. Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?'" This is in tremendous contrast to what they said in Exodus 15 when they came out of the Red Sea. They got to the other side of the Red Sea and said in 15:14-15. They're filled with faith.

When we have a real experience with God, we come up from a place of prayer, there's nothing in the world that can defeat us. Everything's going to be vanquished. That's exactly how the children of Israel were in this moment. They were on top. But they turn around and get into difficulty and no longer is the emotional feeling there that they had when they came out of the Red Sea and they're some hours away from the place of prayer. They get away from the Lord and lose their touch with him. Then everything else seems bigger and now instead of God being for them, God's against them. They've got it in mind that they're going to be a failure. And he's going to wipe them out.

So they leave the Lord out of the picture. Joshua and Caleb however come in and bring a report. They say in verse 7 and following, "The land which we passed through to spy out is an exceedingly good land. If the Lord delights in us he will bring us into this land and give it to us. a land which flows with milk and honey. Only do not rebel against the Lord and do not fear the people of the land for they are bread for us. Their protection is removed from them. And the Lord is with us. Do not fear them."

Here Joshua and Caleb we see in their report that they mention the name of the Lord three times. Each time they mention the name of the Lord it's positive. In the report of the ten spies they do not mention the name of the Lord at all. The only time the name of the Lord is mentioned by the people is in a negative reference. "The Lord's going to bring us into this land to kill us." That's what he's got in mind.

So when we leave the Lord out of the picture, we're sure to fail.

Joshua and Caleb did not underestimate the difficulties but neither did they underestimate the Lord. So the Lord comes to us and says to us about his calling upon our lives, Why are you afraid? Have you no faith? Don't you know if you really believe in me that whatever I've called you to do, you'll have the strength to do. You'll perform it. Don't look at the size of the task. Don't look at the little bit you have. Look to me. I'll give you the strength. I'll cause you to do whatever I've called you to do. I'll not fail you anything concerning my promises toward you.

We can say this in regard to the church and the ministries of the church. We can say this in regard to personal spiritual struggles we go through, tensions we go through with people and our work. Even the physical afflictions which we have. We can look at the size of the affliction. We can look at the little faith we have toward it and forget the Lord and just crawl off into a hole and suffer. But the Lord calls us to faith and to believe and to have an overcoming life.

I would close by saying to you something that the Lord said to Moses when he first called him. "Moses, what is in your hand?" Moses said only a rod, a stick, Lord. What can a stick do in the kingdom of God? A stick really can't do much. If it could I'd carry one. But that rod in the

HOW TO BE A FAILURE

hand of Moses as God anoints it becomes a tremendous instrument. It parts waters, it does miracles, it leads the people of God. So when God looks at you and you realize that he's placed you in his kingdom for a purpose and this church body for a purpose, he asks you the question: What's in your hand?

Only this little ability. Only this small little talent you've given to me.

What's in your hand? You can look at that little ability that you perhaps feel God has given to you. You can look at all that needs to be done and all the glamour people that may be doing it and say, This church is just loaded with workers and I can sit and be quiet. When in actual fact we all need to be a vital contributing part of the body of Christ.

The Lord says, what's in your hand? If you'll take what's in your hand begin contributing it and using it and letting the Lord use it, you'll find this tremendous thing that's happening to you, that you are experiencing the joy of giving. It is the givers who really receive not the takers. It's the givers who are blessed.

I'd encourage you as you look at your responsibilities within this body of Christ during these coming few days and weeks as we're beginning to close out the summer, and we're getting ready for a greater thrust in the ministry of the church than every before, would you seriously evaluate your commitment to this body of Christ. If it's something within the organizational context of the church that is needed or it's non organization, something the Lord lays upon your heart and says do it. Do it with all your heart. Would you do it for the Lord and the body of Christ that we can be what he's called us to be.

Lord, we know that our fear of failure is deeply rooted in our experience as human beings who have fallen short of the glory of God. You didn't make us that way. You made mankind in the beginning with the ability to affirm you and himself and look at the world and himself with wonder and thrill and dominance. It was you who gave man the charter to have dominion over everything. Give everything names. Lord, we recognize our position as humanity which fell from that. Instead of having dominion over things, things begin to have dominion over us. We seem weaker and smaller and unable to cope. But you have come striding into life, Lord Jesus. You with all of your power. You with the power to be risen again from the dead. You, who by your Spirit, fill the church with power. And you call us today to follow you in faith and to trust you and to be to this body of believers all that we possibly can be in your name and beyond that. So, Lord, keep us from looking at our inabilities and our failures and our personality weaknesses. Instead, Lord, let us build upon the strengths which you're place in our life and within this church so that we'll be faithful to you and do your work. In Jesus' name. Amen.