

Fear of Failing

2 Corinthians 2:14

But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place.

Triumph. Always. In every place. No dread of failure. Is that even possible? Absolutely.

Two Athletes, Two Motives

One August several years ago, seven football greats came to a microphone in Canton, Ohio to accept their induction into the National Football League Hall of Fame. Two of the speeches fascinated me. Both speakers had worked hard to achieve excellence – and both triumphed – yet their motivations could not have been more different: one highlighted his fear of failing; the other highlighted his faith.

The first of the two repeatedly mentioned his fear that he'd fail. That fear, in his words, kept him seeking perfection. Fear-motivated effort led him to break record after record and undoubtedly got him into the Hall of Fame. His fear pushed him to excellence. Admitting such fear took both humility and courage, but still, I was saddened – fear is such a heavy taskmaster. It's presence exhausts the heart. You could see the strain on his face. (He worked so hard to give his excellent speech.)

The other speaker focused not on fear but on faith. He began by thanking “My Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” It wasn't just his words; his face shone and his self was at rest. He also had sought excellence. But joy motivated his efforts. Joy, not fear. I thought of Eric Liddell's words in the film *Chariots of Fire*: “*I believe God made me for a purpose. But He also made me fast, and when I run, I feel His pleasure.*” The second speaker knew that pleasure. He knew the One who brings such pleasure.

Fear and Failure

Working hard does not come with a guarantee. Even our extraordinary effort may not get us the results we hoped for. Our abilities fade, or sometimes weren't even there in the first place. Excellence may happen...but human failure is a given. What happens in your heart when you fail? If someone notices your gaffe, how do you expect them to react? And what do you say to yourself?

Fear of failing takes different forms. Some of us hesitate to try and back off rather than attempting something unfamiliar. Passivity seems safer bet – after all, if we don't act we can't fail. For others, fear of failing triggers a frantic striving to win. Both positions have the same goal: avoiding exposure of our flaws. And both styles stem from fear.

We get scared. Our experience with others has made the risks of failure very clear. Everyone has borne the brunt of being scorned or shamed or shunned or punished when they've failed to meet another's standards. Some of us have memories that make our hearts cringe.

As the first athlete knew, fear of failing is an effective motivator – it drove him to excellence, but his achievements never got rid of his fear. Achievements won't get rid of our fear either. Fear motivates excellence at great cost: we never get to relax, joy stays a stranger, and the stability of our relationships varies with the quality of our performance. (Admit it. Most people love you more when you do well.)

God's Kind of Love

God loves differently than people do. We get to feel His love all the time. Our failures (or successes) have no impact on His love for us. Really, they don't. Here's the truth: God loves us. He loves *you*. He just does.

When our best efforts produce meager results, God still loves us. He is perfect, but He is not a perfectionist. We never need to perform for Him. This is crucial information. Knowing the consistency of His love will calm us when people scorn us. Consider this: when someone scorns us they are disagreeing with God.

What freed the second athlete from fearing failure? He must have known, *really* known, that even if his performance fluctuated, his Lord's love for him never varied in its intensity. Knowing God's kind of love throws fear out the window. John tells us so: "There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love." (1 John 4:1). God doesn't punish us for failure.

Jesus' dependable – perfect – love gets rid of our fear. When we fall short, He will never treat us with coldness or distance Himself from us. When we fail, His love will continue without hesitation. With Jesus, failing carries no risk. We may at times break His heart, but we can never lose His love.

While God loves excellence, He doesn't condition His love on its presence. If we know, *really* know, that we are loved no matter the quality of our performance, then we can pursue excellence with abandon, free from any fear of failing.

A Deeper View of Excellence

Excellence looks different to God than it looks to your neighbor or your boss or your dad. A game well played, a job well done? Both delight Him. But the excellence God loves best is an excellent heart.

Excellence reflects God's own heart. An excellent kind word. An excellent warm smile. Excellent patience with a sick child or a cranky friend. Excellent ears to listen for the heart behind a rambling story. Excellent hands that rest on the shoulder of one who needs our touch. An excellent effort (even if it looks somewhat different from what we had hoped). Excellence delights God. But Excellence may or may not lead to triumph.

A Deeper View of Triumph

Not only does God's love free us from fear of failing, a second startling truth adds to our freedom: *in Christ, we never fail*. I mean it. Jesus always leads us in triumph.

We tend to define triumph by human achievements, like my getting this blog into some “Blog Hall of Fame” or backing our boat down the ramp without swerving around and looking stupid. I love triumphs, and the Lord enjoys them with me. (I think He was delighted when I finally got the boat down to the dock.) But those human triumphs are not what God means when He says “triumph in Christ.”

Triumph in Christ happens each time He expresses Himself through us. He may not bring athletic or blog or boat-ramp triumphs (all human-effort successes), but He causes triumphs that last for eternity ... spiritual triumphs. His triumphs come through His efforts, not ours. Jesus never fails. And when we open ourselves to His work through us, neither do we.

Triumph. Always. In every place. No fear of failure. Is that even possible? Absolutely. God promises.

A Few Questions ... and a Suggestion

- What happens in your heart when your efforts fail? What do you say to yourself at those times?
- If you fail publicly, how do you expect other people to react?
- How do you expect God to react when you fall short of His standards?
- Would you take more “risks” if you knew that God will work a triumph through every situation He asks you to enter?
- Write down 2 Corinthians 2:14 (the verse at the beginning of this post) and put it in a place where you can easily read and re-read it. (Memorizing the verse works even better.) Then ask the Holy Spirit to remind you of its truth whenever you start to fear you'll fail. Here, read the verse again now: *But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place.*