

Living Well with Failure

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 17 March 2024

Preacher: Rev. Clive Jennings

[0 : 0 0] Living well with failure. George Bernard Shaw said, my reputation grows with every failure. It's an interesting one, isn't it? If you ask any business entrepreneur, they will tell you not only about their successes, but they will also tell you about their failures. The great victory. Victor Kayan, the international business entrepreneur, when asked to say, what was your greatest failure, didn't hesitate, and he said, Velcro. He said, I had the opportunity to invest in Velcro, and I never did it. In this morning's reading in our Lent journey today, we have this picture of judgment, the law, scandal, trickery, seeking to discredit Jesus, mixed with wisdom, grace, love, failure, forgiveness, and radical counter-cultural actions by Jesus, faced with the imminent stoning of this woman. It's all in this story this morning. And in our reading today, we also are faced with the harsh critic. In any community, and you've only got to look on the news that critics thrive on other people's failings and mistakes. Have you noticed that? You've only got to make a mistake, and suddenly everybody seems to just lump on, but never mind all the great things that's happened. But the one thing that you do wrong, everybody's ready to pick up the stone.

The news, people line up to be critical. People take the high moral high ground. And in our teaching today, there is more than one person who has failed in this story. But let's jump in and remind ourselves of the dramatic scene, as a woman is facing imminent death at the hands of the religious leaders and their followers. The first thing that strikes me is we're not told of the poor woman's name.

We don't know who she was. She is just recorded as a woman who has been caught in the act of adultery, of which the law requires her to be stoned to death. How was her sin discovered? Well, I guess that was pretty obvious. No mention of the man, of course. Probably he just walked away. The people who caught her and accused her brought her to Jesus. It's interesting. Jesus, at this time of that morning, was teaching in the temple courts. It's early in the morning. Jesus was surrounded by people who had come to hear his teaching. You couldn't arrange a more public stage for them to actually bring this woman before him. The religious leaders appear and present him with this woman and announce that the law says that we should stone her to death. What do you say, Jesus? You see, they knew the law. They lived and breathed it. Their lives were controlled by it. And Jesus knew the law too. Shockingly, the penalty for adultery was death. So why this confrontation? Why did they bring her to Jesus? Well, the leaders brought her so that they could publicly discredit Jesus. That's what it's about. They're to catch him out. It's a trap.

A perfect setup. It's a sting. You know, they didn't care about this woman. They didn't care about her. She was just going to be collateral damage, as far as they were concerned, in their aim to discredit Jesus.

That was their plan. And the religious leaders had heard reports of all the times that Jesus had shown grace. Grace to tax collectors. Grace to people who allegedly were unclean by the law. For those who were healed on the Sabbath. For those who they had judged as sinners. And so by placing this woman in front of the front of her, clearly guilty in their eyes, Jesus would show mercy and forgive her. And they could point the finger and judge him and be critical and claim that he is not a rabbi. And his teaching and action is contrary to their God's law. That was their goal. That was their aim. That was their purpose. But Jesus, who not for the first time, is going to turn some tables.

[5 : 0 2] He stoops down in our scripture and writes in the dirt. Now hold on to that. Hold on to that fact that he stoops down and writes in the dirt. Because I know what you're thinking along with me. Millions of others down the years are asking, well, what did he write? What did he write? But during that time in our scripture, they keep on questioning him. I would imagine it's probably more like goading.

Come on, give us that. Who are you? Yet Jesus bends down. Imagine the tension in that moment. That woman is knelt there. People are watching. What is going to happen? Because they probably knew what had happened from the past. Without Jesus there. Whereupon Jesus straightens up. Can you imagine the pause and the stillness? Everybody hanging and waiting on every word that Jesus is going to say.

Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her. And again, he stooped down and wrote in the dirt. Can you imagine the looks that are going around amongst the religious leaders? Let anybody who is without sin cast the first stone. You see, Jesus was saying to them, you know you're right about the law and you are right about the punishment. But before you bombard this woman with the rocks in your hands and judgment in your heart and in your mind, examine your own heart. Examine yourself before you make that move. Examine your own life. And more importantly, examine your law and your relationship with God.

They knew that if any one of them had thrown a stone, they too would have been guilty of blasphemy. And they too would have been subject to judgment of their law.

So slowly they all walked away. They dropped their stones and walked away. At this, who heard this, they began to go away one at a time. It says, interestingly, it's recorded, the older ones first. That's interesting that John records that. Because maybe their hearts were convicted first, as many of us are who were in older years, of what is right and what is wrong.

[8 : 00] Because we know our mistakes and we know the great forgiveness of God in our lives. Maybe many of them had committed adultery, failed in their own morals, maybe religiously or in other ways. Religious leaders aren't immune then and now. Maybe some had broken the law in various ways and failed too. Maybe the younger ones, look at them, they were in high arousal, ready and zealous to show others how holy they were in exacting the law on this poor woman. Young men may be lacking in discipline, may be sinful themselves. Yet one by one who were gathered, melted away, confronted by their own sin and confronted with a need for forgiveness.

The people who failed that day, that they failed to exact their law. They failed in discrediting Jesus. Their credibility failed because they left humiliated because of their action and their plans. This woman wasn't the only one who failed that morning. Yet she is the only one that morning who will walk away free and live well with failure. So here is Jesus. This beautiful moment of Jesus left with this woman.

I guess his disciples standing at a distance as they observed. What will he say? The man who had the power and courage to dismiss this baying mob on this day? The power of Jesus. We've just sung about it. We've just worshipped God and we've said, here was power in action then as it is now. Jesus straightens up and asks her, and I love the humour in this. Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?

No, sir, she said. And then we get these powerful words, which I don't know whether you've heard in your life, I have certainly heard in mine. Then neither do I condemn you. Jesus declared, go now and leave your life of sin. Leave it behind. Leave it at this point. Go and live a new life. You are free. It's a beautiful picture of the grace of God that in a moment this woman who was under judgment is given the opportunity to live well with her failure. Free to leave. Free to leave behind her what was certain death and very nearly an end to that new life that she has the opportunity to live with Jesus. [11 : 17] Jesus brings mercy, love, humility and grace into the midst of this conflict. He takes our failings, he transforms us, he restores us and I sensed as I wrote this, how many of this have been defined, been defined by our failures of the past that come to remind us again and again.

Go now and leave your life of sin. Live well in that failure. Perhaps you're hearing that afresh today. Maybe you, when you get to a point of failure, you have carried that for far too long. Maybe the evil one, as he will always do, will come at that point, not to remind you of great things that you've done, but will remind you of the failure that you never be defined by the failures because there is new life in Jesus. Have a new life. You see, in that scripture it says, for those who are in Christ, I've often, this is my prayer for so many that I pray with, for in Christ there is no condemnation. In Christ you are not condemned. There is new life.

And I would encourage anyone listening to this this morning, either here or on the podcast or wherever it is, if there is something that comes back to you again and again to remind you of a failure, give it to the Lord because in Christ there is no condemnation. And like the woman this morning, people, let people drop their stones and you walk away free. And if that is you this

morning, praise God that maybe you're leaving, leaving something here which you no longer have to carry for the rest of your life. Wouldn't that be a great moment? You can see a few people nodding. Do it.

The other interesting thing in the scripture is Jesus stood down and wrote on the ground. Now you may be thinking, wow, Clive's going to enlighten us with those words that Jesus wrote on the ground. I'm not. Because there is lots of people who have surmised down through the centuries.

[13 : 54] But maybe the most important thing is, is that Jesus as a Jewish rabbi bent down before a woman. He knelt before a woman. That is something Jewish rabbis didn't do. And especially in the presence of a woman. And one who everyone has branded a sinner. What does Jesus do? Jesus kneels at her feet.

Countercultural. Always Jesus countercultural. Gracious, loving, and courageous Jesus. He stoops or lowers himself let before this woman. And let me just tell you, this is a sort of disclaimer really, for anyone who will ever suggest to you that the Bible is misogynistic or against women. Clearly, they haven't read it or they don't understand it. Because Jesus did more in his three years of ministry, in public ministry, and since, and in any culture, in these thousands of years, to raise up women and their equality in his kingdom values. Amen? Amen.

What did the religious leaders talk about? And as they plotted and walked away, I'd have loved to have been with them, listening to their comments. What they'd set out to do that day, just torn and in pieces on the ground. Their credibility, zero. Jesus shows us, yes, there will be a judgment. Yes, there will be a death, but it won't be hers that day. And it won't come from these stones, because the death that will save us is from the cross. And that is what brings us. And that's where we are in this Lenten journey. That under Christ, there is no condemnation, because it's been paid for, and we can walk free. We can repent and come back to Jesus. Again, secure as we know. We don't know this woman's story after this dramatic encounter with Jesus. The Bible doesn't tell us. One can only imagine, or maybe you know, as I know, what it's like when sins are forgiven, and we walk free. Free at last.

Free at last to follow Jesus, unencumbered by anything that will drag us back, and brings us into new life, day by day, when our past failures no longer hold their grip on us.

So many people say that they are defined by their failures in life. No, the Bible says no. You come to Jesus, and there is new life, like this woman. A new life. We are born again in the power of the Holy Spirit. It breaks the power that holds us, and once ever had held over us, once we lived only to please ourselves. But when we have been forgiven, our motivation changes. I don't know whether you have experienced that in your life. When you know you have been forgiven much, there is much that we forgive others, because we know that deep forgiveness of what that means in our lives.

[17 : 16] We are raised to new life. Do you know that powerful forgiveness in your life? Do we know that maybe this morning we're giving thanks maybe for something that has liberated us from death to new life? Perhaps you've been challenged in attitude, maybe in character. How many stones may be, do we need to drop today? Many of the things that we have carried, stones ready to judge others that need to be dropped. The stones we prepare to cast in judgment when we have no right.

The thoughts, the comments, the glances. The thoughts, the glances.

The thoughts, the glances. The thoughts, the glances. The thoughts, the glances. The thoughts, the glances. The thoughts, the glances. The thoughts, the glances. I pray that this week, as we come to, next week, as we come to Palm Sunday, and move through that, we will know through our Lenten teaching, from dust to glory, that each and every one of us will find new life in Christ, a new freedom, a new encouragement, a raising up to all that we are meant to be.

Thank you.