



“F” stands for “failure.” Have you ever received an F? The way teachers write it, red ink or blank ink, “F” looks so intimidating. A, B, C, D—they skip E—but F is different. Does “F” mean failure in life? How do you handle it?

This week we have one of the most intense episodes in the New Testament—two leading apostles in a public confrontation. I can’t believe this is in the Bible! The issue is failure. This is a text about failure and how to respond to it. Galatians 2:11-21 redefines our understanding of failure, identity, and behavior.

A Redefinition of Failure

“But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, ‘If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?’”
(verses 11–14).

Here’s the scene: Church potluck; Jews and Gentiles are eating together; eating together equals acceptance; reflects the Jerusalem decision that the gospel is Jesus plus nothing. Peter “the pillar” is at the center of this scene. What did Peter do? He was eating with Gentiles, but separated himself once *“certain men came from James”* (v.12). Why did Peter do it? He was afraid, *“fearing the circumcision party”* (v.12). What were the consequences of Peter’s action? *“The rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy”* (v.13).

This is a major failure for Peter. All the Jews in this Christian community, even Barnabas—Mr. Encouragement...nice to everybody...there for the first Gentile converts—fall into the hypocrisy and pride and racism of Peter. They follow their leader’s lead and get up from the table and separate themselves from their Gentile brothers and sisters in Christ. Now there’s a big “F” painted across Peter’s face.

Paul is also at the potluck. Paul watches this whole scene unfold. What will Paul do? He confronts Peter in his failure. He doesn’t go after the specific behavioral issues of Peter’s failure. He doesn’t

address the pride, the racism, the hypocrisy, the fear. No. Paul gets at the very root of Peter’s failure. Paul sees what’s going on here. *“I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel”* (v.14). In last week’s passage we established what the gospel is. Now Paul shows us how the gospel works.

How do we normally handle failure in our lives? How do we try to fix our failures? What did you do with that big failure? Sometimes we beat ourselves up. We sink, then try harder. We think failure is about that one specific behavior that we’re not good enough at and that we just need to try harder at, do better the next time.

Where have you failed? Where are you failing? Where do you feel like you have an “F” painted on you? What are you doing about your failure? Beating yourself up and trying harder won’t work. It won’t bring deep, permanent change in your life.

Paul redefines failure for us in this passage. What our failures, our sins are fundamentally about is that we’ve not kept in step with the truth of the gospel. Something other than the gospel has taken over and directed our steps. “In step” = *Orthopodusin* (*ortho*: straight; *podousin*: step).

The gospel has lines to it and everything about our lives, all of our steps, must be brought into line with the gospel. The gospel goes all kinds of places that the rules don’t go. In a dance class, the key is for the woman to follow the man’s lead; she doesn’t have to know all of the steps, she just has to stay in step with the man. The Christian life isn’t an exam, it’s a dance. The Christian life isn’t about getting all the answers right on the test, trying to do everything just right and avoid failure. Being a disciple of Christ is a dance. Jesus is leading, we’re following. We’re just keeping in step with the truth of the gospel as Jesus leads us. And when we fail, we need to come back to the truth of the gospel, come back to Jesus and let him get us back in step.

Jesus loves failures. Jesus meets us in our failure. Jesus knows all about your sin and your failure. Dominic Smart wrote, “Jesus... doesn’t just know what sin is like; he knows what your sin is like, for he carried the burden of it on the cross. Assuming your humanity, and on the cross assuming all its sin, he is able as the mediator in heaven to know what precisely your particular shape, size, color, hue, texture of sin is. And he knows it because he carried it. What a complete Savior we have in Jesus Christ.”

You need to Galatians 2:14 your failures. When you fail, don't beat yourself up, don't just try harder, Galatians 2:14 it. Go back to the truth of the gospel, apply it to your specific failure, let Jesus lead you back in step in the dance. This will bring permanent, deep change rather than temporary behavior modification.

Here are two examples of sin/failure in life: One is fear of man or people pleasing. This was Peter's issue—*"fearing the circumcision party"* (v.12). Fear seems to trigger all kinds of sin in our lives. Don't work harder at being confident or drum up a better self-esteem or better yourself. Instead, come back to the gospel. On the cross Jesus gave you both the greatest affirmation and the greatest criticism you'll ever receive. If you're secure in Christ, other people's approval won't hold any power over you.

Another example is anxiety or worry. Maybe the uncertainty of these times has caused you to fail again and again in this area. Don't think the way to fix your anxiety is to just try harder not to worry, or to figure out and solve your uncertain situation. Instead, come back to the gospel, let Jesus lead you back in step with the truth. Because of Jesus you have a Father in heaven who loves you. As this gets worked into your heart, your brain chemistry, you'll start failing less and less in this area. The best anti-anxiety medication on the market today is this truth of the gospel—you're a son, you're a daughter, you have a Father who loves you.

Galatians 2:14 your failures. Christian living is a continual re-alignment process. Your whole Christian life will be a continual process of applying Galatians 2:14 to your failures and problems. We've all failed, we will all continue to fail, we're all works in progress. Just like Peter. Be encouraged. This is yet another publicized failure of Peter's.

A Redefinition of Identity

Who are you? How do you see yourself? What's your identity? Where do you get your identity from? As our passage continues, Paul redefines for us the core of our identity as Christians.

There is debate about these verses. This is still Paul's speech to Peter. Paul is re-educating Peter not only about the true nature of failure, but also human identity.

"We ourselves are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners; yet we know that a person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, so we also have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ and not by works of the law, because by works of the law no one will be justified. But if, in our endeavor to be justified in Christ, we too were found to be sinners, is Christ then a servant of sin? Certainly not! For if I rebuild what I tore down, I prove myself to be a transgressor. For through the law I died to the law, so that I might live to God" (verses 15–19).

As humans we have an instinctive nature to be at rights with those we're in relationship with. We don't like friction or conflict. Who are you in conflict with right now? It feels so wrong. We have a big problem. Even if people aren't conscious of this, can't articulate this, they feel it. God is righteous; we as humans are not righteous. This creates tremendous relational friction. Created in the image of God, we're supposed to get our identity from God, but with so much friction between us, our identity is unstable.

In Galatia the way people were trying to build an identity was through law keeping, through keeping the rules, through trying to acquire a righteous record that would justify them before God and fix their identity problem. The Jews had the best rules around. Paul had spent his life trying to keep them. It didn't work. And Paul's reminding Peter, he's reminding the Galatians, he's reminding us that we're never going to justify ourselves before God and get an identity from him through keeping rules. **"A person is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ"** (v.16). This is Paul's first of many uses of the incredible term "justification" in this letter. John Stott says, "Nobody has understood Christianity who does not understand this word."

This was Martin Luther's breakthrough, the truth of justification that's presented here in Galatians 2. He called justification "the principle article of all Christian doctrine. Most necessary is it that we know this article well, teach it to others, and beat it into their heads continually." Do you understand this principal article of all Christian doctrine? Do you know what it means for your identity? "Just-as-if-I-never-sinned."

The way Martin Luther put it, in Latin: *simul iustus et peccator* = at the same time righteous and a sinner. This is the deepest understanding of who you are. This explains you: though you still sin, God has justified you and he looks upon you as someone who is fully forgiven. Moreover, he sees you as someone who has fully obeyed him because you've placed your faith in Jesus, the one who obeyed God in your place.

Your identity is a paradox. Other worldviews are too simplistic. They say you're one or the other—either you're a moral failure or you're a righteous person. Christianity says you're both. On the one hand, you are very sinful. A London newspaper asked G.K. Chesterton to write an essay on what's wrong with the world. He sent in two words: "I am."

On the other hand, you are completely righteous, justified. When God looks at you, because you're "in Christ" he sees someone with a perfectly righteous record. And nothing will ever change this identity you have before God. Nothing can take away your justification. J.I. Packer wrote: "What matters supremely...is not... the fact that I know God, but the larger fact that he knows me. I am graven on the palms of his hands. I am never out of his mind. All my knowledge of him depends on his sustained initiative in

knowing me...There is unspeakable comfort...in knowing that God is constantly taking knowledge of me in love and watching over me for my good. There is tremendous relief in knowing that his love to me is utterly realistic, based at every point on prior knowledge of the worst about me, so that no discovery now can disillusion him about me, in the way I am so often disillusioned about myself, and quench his determination to bless me."

Simul iustus et peccator. Despite his sin at the potluck, Paul is reminding Peter that his identity is still intact. Peter doesn't have a big "F" painted across his chest. When God looks at Peter he sees a big "J" painted over him: justified! "Just-as-if-I-never-sinned" "Just-as-if-I-always-obeyed."

For many people the traditional understanding of the Christian life is that you start with the gospel, you start with justification, then you move on to sanctification, growing in holiness, principles for Christian living, good Christian behavior. No! You never move on from justification. You need this deep truth of your identity beat into your head continually.

Here's what I want you to do this week and for the rest of your life: don't base your justification on your sanctification. Your identity, God's love for you, isn't dependent on how you're doing, it's dependent on what Jesus has already done for you. Tomorrow's a new day. Start it different. While your head is still on your pillow, remind yourself of your justification. You have a big "J" painted all over you. If you do this, you will spend the rest of your life realizing that you're a different person from who you used to be.

A Redefinition of Behavior

Actress Shirley MacLaine said: "The most pleasurable journey you take is through yourself...The only sustaining love involvement is with yourself...When you look back on your life and try to figure out where you've been and where you are going, when you look at your work, your love affairs, your marriages, your children, your pain, your happiness—when you examine all that closely, what you really find out is that the only person you really go to bed with is yourself. The only person you really dress is yourself. The only thing you have is working to the consummation of your own identity."

Unfortunately, many Christians behave like Shirley MacLaine's understanding of identity is true, that the only person you really go to bed with is yourself. Many Christians behave like they're all alone, all by themselves. And when we think we're all by ourselves in the Christian life, then a lot of our behavior becomes striving behavior. We become people who are always striving and never resting. Paul used to be a striver. Then he met Jesus.

Here's the rest of his speech to Peter. He's talked Peter through failure, he's talked him through identity, now he talks him through behavior. "*I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now*

live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not nullify the grace of God, for if righteousness were through the law, then Christ died for no purpose" (verses 20–21).

What Paul is saying here is that there's no place for striving in our Christian life because we aren't the only one living our life. Christ is also living our life. It's a three-fold explanation: Your old self has been crucified, Christ now lives in you, and this new life you live is moment by moment, lived by faith in Christ.

This verse, this truth of union with Christ, transformed Hudson Taylor. He went from being a man known for his striving to a man known for his deep rest in Christ. In a letter he wrote to his sister, he talks about a letter he received from a friend named McCarthy:

"When my agony of soul was at its height, a sentence in a letter from dear McCarthy was used to remove the scales from my eyes, and the Spirit of God revealed the truth of our oneness with Jesus as I had never known it before. McCarthy, who had been much exercised by the same sense of failure, but saw the light before I did, wrote: 'But how to get faith strengthened? Not by striving after faith, but by resting on the Faithful One.'

"As I read I saw it all!...I looked to Jesus and saw (and when I saw, oh, how joy flowed!) that He had said, 'I will never leave you.' Ah, there is rest! I thought. 'I have striven in vain to rest in Him. I'll strive no more. For has He not promised to abide with me—never to leave me, never to fail me?' And, dearie, He never will!

"The sweetest part...is the rest which full identification with Christ brings. I am no longer anxious about anything, as I realize this: for He, I know, is able to carry out His will, and His will is mine. It makes no matter where He places me, or how. That is rather for Him to consider than for me; for in the easiest positions He must give me His grace, and in the most difficult His grace is sufficient. So, if God places me in great perplexity, must He not give me much guidance; in positions of great difficulty, much grace; in circumstances of great pressure and trial, much strength? No fear that His resources will be unequal to the emergency! And His resources are mine, for He is mine, and is with me and dwells in me. All this springs from the believer's oneness with Christ."

Our behavior will look different, our striving will cease, when we come to understand Gal. 2:20. We are not alone, we are united to Christ and Christ is united to us, he is alive in us. We live moment by moment by faith in Christ. This isn't a life of striving, this is a life of resting. All the striving, all the restlessness, all the hurried behavior in our lives dishonors God.

Where are you striving? Leave your striving behind. Repent of your striving. Accept this invitation to live moment by moment by faith in Christ, resting in Christ.

Conclusion

Galatians 2:11-21 is an incredible passage. It's life transforming. It transforms our whole approach to failure, identity, and behavior. Keep this text close to you as you move through life. We need to Galatians 2:14 our failures—to let Jesus lead us back in step with the truth of the gospel. We need to not base our justification on our sanctification—to see that no matter how we're performing or feeling, when we wake up each morning we have a big "J" painted on us, fully forgiven and fully justified/righteous in the sight of God. And we need to leave our striving behind and start resting in Christ—we can do this moment by moment, rolling all our burdens onto his back.

Can you say what Paul says in verse 20? ***"And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."*** Who loved me! Who gave himself for me! Christ's love for you is personal. Can you say "me?"

You might think you're a failure. You feel forever marked by that big "F." If you're in Christ, that's not how God sees you. ***"The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."***

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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