

How to get back on track
Psalm 37:23-24

It was a lazy warm afternoon in South Georgia, and as a young and dumb pastor, I was trying to my best to do everything in the church.

I thought that the way you got more people in a church was that you just did more and more work; instead of getting more and more people in the church to get to work.

In any case, someone had told me about a friend's sister's cousin's butcher's gardener or something like that, who needed someone to visit them because they were sick.

So, I got the directions on how to get to the house and headed off in my 1984 brown bronco. I turned off the highway and went for a couple of miles on this country road.

Then I turned off the country road that turned off the highway onto another road, and then I turned off the road that turned off the country road that turned off the highway – Can you say, Boonies? And I kept driving - looking for this house.

Dogging pot holes, pigs and pebbles the size of poodles, I hunted for what seemed like an eternity until I was sure that I had driven all the way to Alabama, of course, with my sense of directions I could have been in Nicaragua for all I knew. I was so lost, I wasn't even sure that God could find me. Has that ever happened to you? Have you ever gotten lost, not out in the country somewhere, but lost along the journey of life? It can be a difficult and frightening experience to say the least. Kind of like the passengers who heard the pilot of the plane announce over the intercom: "I have good news and bad news. The good news is we are ahead of schedule. The bad news is we're lost." Sometimes we get lost or wrecked or simply off the track on our journey through the Christian life, and it can be a terrible experience. So, what do you do when that happens? How do you get back on track?

- What do you do when you commit that sin that you promised God you would never commit again?
- What do you do when you allow other things to take the first priority in your life and God is pushed to the side lines?
- What do you do when you are filled with more worry and anxiety than faith and trust?
- What do you do when you realize you are just dabbling at the Christian life instead of living it to its fullest?
- What do you do when you have been anything but the Christian man, father, and husband you know God wants you to be?
- What do you do when you have been anything but the Christian woman, mother, and wife that you know God wants you to be?
- What do you do when you have stumbled and fallen as a believer?

Do you just give up, turn your back on God and say, "I guess I'll never be a real Christian?" Do you just sit on the sidelines, still going through the motions, but knowing you're not really in the game? Do you try to ignore it and act like nothing is really wrong? What do you do when you've gotten off track a believer? It happens to all of us, the only questions is what each of us will do. This morning, we are going to take a page from God's lesson book and see what it has to teach us about getting back on track in the Christian journey when you have failed. By the way there will be a pop quiz at the end of service today!

1) When you stumble and fall and get off track as a believer, the first thing you need to do is *look to God to **reorder** your life.*

Notice vs. 23, *"The steps of a man are established by the Lord; and He delights in his way."* When you stumble and fall along the Christian journey: When you have failed and sinned terribly; or when you have simply staggered and gotten off track as a Christian, [and we all know when we are not on the path the way God wants us to be] When you have stumbled and fallen or wandered or sinned, the first step is always to look to God to restore your life. And let me tell you why:

a) First of all, look to him because he is the only **one** who can restore you. *"The steps of a man are ordered by the Lord."* said the psalmist. You can't do it yourself. So, turn to the only one who can turn your disorder into order, and that someone is not you! It's God. Turn to him, because he's the only one who can do it!

b) And not only that, but he takes **delight** in doing it. *“And he delights in His way,”* said the psalmist. There is nothing God loves more than restoring and reordering your life. Scripture says that the angels rejoice over one lost soul who returns to God. God delights in getting you back on track. *In 1986 they discovered a boat from the first century in the mud along the shore of the Sea of Galilee during a drought. Immediately word spread of this fantastic discovery - the first 2000 year old boat ever found in the Sea of Galilee.*

Newspapers dubbed it “the Jesus boat,” but it is not known for sure whether or not Jesus may have used it. Still, it did sail the waters of the sea of Galilee during Jesus’ day.

The problem they had when they discovered the boat was how to get it out of the mud and into a museum without having it fall apart at the seams. The wood was terribly brittle and had to be kept in water to keep from cracking. To shore it up with beams on the outside would break the brittle hull. The wood of the sides of the boat just couldn’t handle the pressure.

How were they going to float it? Somebody got the idea of filling it with polyurethane foam which was sprayed into the boat and around the boat, so it looked like an overgrown, melted marshmallow. Thus filled, the boat rose and floated at lake level. For the first time in two thousand years, the boat “sailed” again to the cheers of an on looking crowd.

When you have stumbled, don’t try to brace yourself up. Don’t pull the old American folk religion trick of pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. That will not work. When it comes to your walk with Christ, it simply will not work. Rather, look to God and his grace which can permeate and surround your life, and enable you to sail again along this Christian journey. If you are off track today, then the first step you need to take is to look to God to reorder your life.

2) Not only must we look to God to reorder our lives, we need to **look to God to give us a perspective on failure**.

Notice vs. 24, *“When he falls, he shall not be hurled headlong.”* What is God saying? He is saying that he looks at failure a little differently than you do. You may look at it and think, “Well, everyone else does the same thing, it’s no big deal.” Trust me, it is a big deal to God. He looks at it a little differently than you do. You may look at it and think, “Well, everything’s over for me. That’s it. I’m through as a Christian. God doesn’t want me anymore.” Trust me, God looks at your failure very differently. And if you are going to get back on track as a believer, then you need to look to God for his perspective on failure. *I heard about a college girl who wrote home to her parents with some very disturbing news. The letter read like this:*

Dear Mom:

Since I have been away at college one full semester, I think it's time to bring you up to date as to what's going on. Shortly after I arrived at college, I got bored with dormitory life and stole ten dollars out of my roommate's purse. With the money I rented a Honda bike and crashed it into a telephone pole a few blocks away from college. I broke my leg, but was rescued by a young doctor who lives upstairs from the apartment at the corner. He took me in and nursed me back to good health, set my leg and thanks to him, I'm up and around again.

We wanted to let you know that we are going to be married as soon as possible, since we are having some trouble on the blood test because there is a disease that keeps showing up. We do hope however that we will be married before the baby arrives. We will be home shortly thereafter to live with you and dad. I know you will love the baby as much as you have me, even though it will be of a different religion.

But please try to understand. The reason we are having to come home and stay with you is because my doctor friend wants out of medical school because of all the tension he was giving me in my condition.

Really Mom, I didn't steal ten dollars from my roommates purse, or rent a Honda bike, or hit a telephone pole, or break my leg. I did not meet a young doctor of a different religion, nor are we going to get married. There is no disease or test or baby to worry about. I won't be home to live with you or dad either.

I am getting a "D" in geometry and an "F" in geology, however. And I wanted you to accept these grades in their proper perspective.

It is important for us to have the proper perspective on things, and that includes the proper perspective on failure. So, let me help you gain God’s perspective on failure by giving you 4keys to a proper perspective on failure.

a) The first is this: **Possess** it! The first step in gaining God's perspective on your failure is that you have to admit that it was a failure! Do you know what I find more and more among Christians? I find believers do the most unChristian things and then try to explain it away. They make excuses for it. Or they blame it on someone or something else. Or they try to call it something else besides a failure. Or they try to ignore it and act like nothing is wrong. If you are ever going to get back on track as a believer, the first thing you have to do is possess your own failures. Admit that what you did was wrong.

I am sure that many of you remember quite well Jim Bakker and the PTL scandal of a few years back. As you know Bakker ended up going to jail for his actions. And it was a sad time for the church.

Now, I don't know much about the man to be honest. And this is not an endorsement of any form; but do you know what I admire about Jim Bakker?

I admire the fact that even though he wrote a book about the experience in order to generate some income; do you know what he entitled the book?

He entitled it, "I Was Wrong!" And I admire that.

The first step towards gaining God's perspective on failure and getting back on track as a Christian is to possess it. Admit that you were wrong; admit that you are off track with God.

b) Here's the second: **Confess** it. Not only must you admit to yourself, to God and to others that you were wrong, you must go to God and confess that failure and seek his forgiveness. Now, I know that sounds so obvious. But listen to me carefully: there are people in churches across this country, and maybe even in this church today, **who think they are Christians and on their way to heaven, but they are not!** They think they are saved, when really they are not, because they are not taking this step of admitting and confessing their sins, their failures.

- ☞ They call them momentary lapses in judgment.
- ☞ They call them temporary setbacks.
- ☞ They call them unproductive decisions.
- ☞ When in fact, what they are, are spiritual failures - sins.

And un confessed sin is un forgiven sin; and un forgiven sin separates us from God.

- ☞ That sin of gossip, you keep ignoring.
- ☞ That sin of deceit that you hold on to.
- ☞ That sin of disobedience that you refuse to change.
- ☞ That sin of dishonesty that you aren't even honest with yourself over.
- ☞ That sin of bitterness towards somebody else.
- ☞ That sin of the flesh that you go back to over and over again.
- ☞ That sin of grumbling that you call just giving your opinion.
- ☞ That sin of selfishness that you ignore.

God's perspective is that you must possess it and then confess it, and until you do, it's still there. And you can sit in church and sing as loudly as you want, "When we all get to heaven," but that's as close as you will get! *One day, Lucy, that great theologian of the Peanuts comic strip was talking to Charlie Brown. And she said, "Sooner or later, Charlie Brown, there is one thing you are going to have to learn..."*

You reap what you sow! You get out of life exactly what you put into it. No more and not less."

Snoopy has been standing close by taking in the whole conversation. And you can tell he is thinking about himself and his own actions. As he turns to walk away, Snoopy says, "I'd kind of like to see a little more margin for error."

Well, the problem with us is that we are always looking for the margins, those ways to excuse our errors; rather than face them for what they are.

c) We must possess it, then we must confess it; and then third, we must **address** it. We must own our failures, or simply we must learn from them. **The only failure that is truly fatal in life is the failure to learn from our failures.** God wants us to learn from our failures, not repeat them or ignore them.

I read about a three watt bulb that has been burning in a northern California fire station continually for 85 years. General Electric would like to examine it -- to make sure they never make that mistake again. The only way to keep from repeating your mistakes is to learn from them. Ask God to forgive you of your sins and failures, but also ask him to teach you his lessons about your failures.

Do you know what I find? I find Christians who make the same mistakes over and over again, all because they have failed to learn from their failures. God has a lesson for you to learn, and until you learn it, you are going to keep making the same mistakes. There are Christians in this world or in this church for that matter who are making terrible mistakes and even maiming a few people along the way, but instead of learning from their failures, they just keep plowing on. God says, "You want to get back on track in the Christian life? Then address your failures. Learn from them so you won't commit them again." Gain God's perspective by learning from your mistakes.

d) Release it. Possess it, confess it, own it, and then **release** it. Let it go, because if you don't, it's going to eat at you forever. Our tendency is to never forget what others have done to us. We hold onto that stuff for an eternity. I have found that we hold on to our own failures, and we won't let them go, even if God has already forgiven them. We hold on to them and continue to beat ourselves down with them. **You are not beyond the reach of God's grace**, and what God forgives, he lets go. So, let it go yourself. If I could, I would come to some of you today and pry your fingers loose from around the sins and failures of your past that you keep holding on to, believing that you are damaged goods; that you are not good enough in God's sight. Please hear me:

- ☞What is forgiven is forgiven.
- ☞God has let it go.
- ☞So, you let it go too!

Sometimes we stumble on this Christian journey. It happens to all of us, but you can get back on track. You really can. You do it by looking to God to reorder your life, looking to God for a perspective on failure, and that perspective includes letting it go, because the father has loved you and forgiven you.

3) When you stumble and fall along the Christian journey, **look to God to lift you up!** Because that is what he loves to do!

Notice vs. 24, *"When he falls, he shall not be hurled headlong; Because the Lord is the one who holds his hand."* Do you remember when your kids were small and you were teaching them to walk? Boy I do. I remember with all 3 of my kids, taking them by the hand and helping them walk those first few steps. I always held tightly on to their hands; because if they stumbled, I didn't want them to smash their face in the ground. Well, God is saying, "I do the same thing with you." He says, "When you stumble, look to me to lift you up, because I'll be right there holding on to your hand." "And I love you so much, that I'll keep holding on to your hand." And the only thing that will keep me from holding on to your hand is if you pull your hand away from mine, but even then, I'll still be there to lift you up, and take care of you, if you reach back out to me.

Some of you are sitting here today with scrapped knees and scratched up elbows. You've stumbled and you know it. Some of you have fallen so far into sin you don't know if there is any way out. But I have learned that **as long as there is God, there is a way out!** So, look to him, today. Let him take your sins and make you whole.

Others of you here today are sitting there and you are bruised up from the falls you've taken this week or this month or this year. You are trying to live the Christian life. You really love the Lord, but you are stumbling. **Look to God today, learn the lessons, and let him lift you up!**

Others of you are sitting here today, and the fact is that you are way off track in the Christian life, but you won't admit it. You have so numbed yourself to your failures that you've convinced yourself that you are saved, sanctified and perfect. But the fact is that you are off track; way off track and God is trying to get your attention today in order to lift you up! Listen to him and let him do it, today!

We all get off track at times. We all get lost along the way. The key is to look to God and let him put you back on track. This morning, as we go to prayer, I want you to look into your heart. Ask yourself honestly: "Am I on track with God?" If not, what does God want you to do about it today?