

Stop Condemning Yourself



David Wilkerson June 1, 1978

I feel so ashamed of myself when I think back over my early ministry — because I condemned so many sincere people. I meant well, and often my zeal was honest and well-meaning. But how many people I brought under terrible condemnation because they didn't conform to my ideas of holiness!

Years ago I preached against make-up on ladies, I preached against short dresses. I condemned everything that was not on my "legitimate" list. I have preached some very powerful sermons in the past, condemning homosexuals, divorcees, drinkers and compromisers. I am still deeply committed to the idea that ministers must cry out against the inroads of sin and compromise in the lives of Christians. I still don't like to see Christian women painted up like streetwalkers. I still don't like mini-dresses. I believe, more than ever, that God hates divorce. I am still committed to the idea that God will not wink at any sin or compromise of any kind.

But lately — God has been urging me to quit condemning people who have failed, and instead preach to them a message of love and reconciliation. Why? Because the church today is filled with Christians who are burdened down with mountains of guilt and condemnation. They don't need more preaching about judgment and fear — they are already filled with enough fear and anxiety. They don't need to hear a preacher tell them how mad God is with them. They are already too much afraid of God's wrath. They need to hear the message John preached —

"For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved" (John 3:17).

Jesus said to an adulterous woman, "Neither do I condemn thee — Go and sin no more." Now why can't I, and all my fellow ministers, preach that same kind of loving message to the multiplied thousands who today live in fear of adultery? Why do we still condemn divorced Christians who remarry — when they have truly repented and have determined to sin no more in that manner?

Recently a ten-year-old lad stopped me after a crusade and begged me to hear his story. He was hysterical. "My Mom and Dad got divorced two years ago. Mom is a good Christian, and she married a nice Christian man. I live with Mom and my stepdad now, and I love them a whole lot. But my Mom is always sad, and she cries a lot — because a minister told her she was living in sin. Is my Mom going to hell because she got divorced and remarried another divorced man? I'm all confused, because they're both such good Christians."

I told that boy what I want to tell the whole world. "If she divorced because of her own adultery and remarried — she is living in adultery. God hates adultery. But, if she has repented, God forgives her, and she starts all over like a newborn Christian. She is not living in sin when it is under the blood of Christ and forgiven. She can begin a new life without guilt or condemnation. If Jesus forgives murder, thievery lying, stealing, etc. — He also forgives adultery."

It amazes me that we ministers are so willing to go to Africa to preach forgiveness to "the heathen" - but so unwilling to preach forgiveness and reconciliation to Christians at home. One minister complained to me about all the divorced, broken, troubled people in his new assignment. I thought, "My brother, you ought to be thankful God put you in such a fertile field. Those are the people who need your help the most. They need a man of God to show

them how to begin all over anew.

I am a happily married man, and God helping me, Gwen and I will always be together till death do us part. And I despise divorce with a passion. But it troubles me that the church is willing to "write off" all those who have made a mistake. The church offers comfort and solace to all those who are "the innocent victims." The wife who was cheated on. The husband whose wife walked out on him. All the children hurt in the separations.

But what about all the "perpetrators" — the sinners, the ones who wronged some innocent loved one. If one out of every three marriages now ends in divorce, that means that millions of husbands and wives are "The guilty party." I'm not willing to give up on even the guilty ones. The thief Christ forgave at Calvary was not an innocent victim. No! He was a perpetrator — he was the criminal. But in his sin he turned to Christ in faith. He was forgiven and taken with Christ to glory.

What about homosexuals and lesbians — and alcoholics? Will condemning them accomplish any good? No! A thousand times no! Christ did not come to condemn these sinners, but to rescue them in love. God hates homosexual acts, but he does not despise people who do not live up to masculine or feminine roles.

Last week, a lovely 19-year-old nurse stopped me after a crusade. Tearfully, she sobbed out a pitiful confession — "Mr. Wilkerson, I'm a lesbian. I feel so dirty and unclean. The church where I used to attend asked me to never return. The minister said he couldn't take a chance of my seducing others in his congregation. I feel like suicide is my only way out. I live in total fear and condemnation. Must I kill myself to find peace?"

She kept backing away from me as if she was too unclean to be in my presence. I asked her if she still loved Jesus. "Oh, yes," She replied. "Every waking hour, my heart cries out to Him. I love Christ with everything in me — but I'm bound by this terrible habit."

How beautiful it was to see her face light up when I told her how much God loved her - even in her struggles. I told her, "Don't ever give yourself over to your sin. God draws a line right where you are. Any momentum toward Him is accounted as righteousness. Any move back across that line, away from Him, is sin. If we draw near to Him, He draws near to us. Keep your spiritual momentum! Keep loving Jesus — even though you still do not have total victory. Accept His daily forgiveness. Live one day at a time! Be convinced Jesus loves sinners — so He must love you, too!"

She smiled a smile of relief and said, "Mr. Wilkerson, you are the first minister who ever offered me a ray of hope. Deep in my heart I know He still loves me — and I know He will give me a deliverance from this bondage. But I have been so condemned by everybody. Thanks for your message of hope and love."

Reader of this message — are you living now under condemnation? Have you sinned against the Lord — have you grieved the Holy Spirit in your life? Are you waging a losing battle with an overpowering temptation?

All you need do is search God's Word, and you will discover a God of mercy, love and endless compassion. David said:

"If thou, Lord, shouldest mark iniquities, O Lord, who shall stand? But there is forgiveness with thee, that thou mayest be feared" (Psalm 130:3-4).

A distraught woman who had come to my office sobbed, "Mr. Wilkerson, once God cured me of alcoholism. But recently I got discouraged and went back to drink. Now I can't stop. I've failed the Lord so badly that all I can do now is give up. After all He did for me, to think how I've failed Him. It's no use — I'll just never make it."

I'm convinced there are more spiritual failures than many of us realize. And there is a demonic strategy to build such failures into walls to keep the defeated ones far from God. But we don't need to let the devil turn our temporary defeats into a permanent hell.

I believe there are literally millions of people like the young sailor who came to see me. With tears in his eyes he said, "My Dad is a minister, but I've failed him so terribly. I'm so weak, I'm afraid I'll never serve the Lord like I should. I'm so easily led into sin."

Confessions like these are tragic, but I have great encouragement in the realization that some of the greatest men

and women of the Bible had times of failure and defeat.

Would you consider Moses a failure? Hardly! He was to Israel what Washington and Lincoln together were to America — and much more. But look closely at the great lawgiver's life. His career began with a murder, followed by forty years hiding from justice.

Moses was a man of fear and unbelief. When God called him to lead the Israelites out of slavery, he pleaded, "I am not eloquent...I am slow of speech...send...by the hand of him whom thou wilt send" (Exodus 4:10,13). This angered God (4:14). All his life, Moses longed to enter the Promised Land, but his failures kept him out. Even so, God compares Moses' faithfulness to Christ's in Hebrews 3:1,2. His failures did not keep Moses out of God's Hall of Champions.

We usually think of Jacob as the great prayer warrior who wrestled with the angel of the Lord and prevailed. Jacob was given a vision of heaven with angels ascending and descending. Yet this man's life was filled with glaring failures, and Scripture does not hide any of them.

As a youth Jacob deceived his blind father to steal his brother's inheritance. Married, he despised his wife Leah while he nursed a great secret love for her sister Rachel. He did not accept his responsibility as a husband. After the birth of each manchild, Leah kept saying, "Now this time my husband will be joined unto me" (Genesis 29:34). But the fact was — Jacob hated her.

Here was a man caught in a web of trickery, graft, theft, unfaithfulness and polygamy. Nevertheless, we still worship the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob.

King David, singer of psalms and mighty warrior, delighted in the law of the Lord and posed as the righteous man who would not stand among sinners. Yet, how shocking are the weaknesses of this great man. Taking Bathsheba from her husband Uriah, he sent that unsuspecting man to death at the front lines of his army. The prophet Nathan declared this double sin gave great occasion to the enemies of the Lord to blaspheme.

Picture the great king standing by the casket of his dead illegitimate child, a stolen wife at his side and a world filled with enemies who cursed God because of his notorious sins. David stands there a total failure. Yet, God called David a man after His own heart (1 Samuel 13:14). He blessed the murderer Moses and the schemer Jacob, too, because these men learned how to profit from their failures and go on to victory.

If you are discouraged by your failures, I have good news for you. No one is closer to the Kingdom of God than the man or woman or young person who can look defeat in the eye, learn to face it, and move on to a life of peace and victory. Here is the program to do this.

1. Don't be afraid of failure. This seems like an automatic reaction. When Adam sinned, he tried to hide from God. When Peter had denied Christ, he was afraid to face Him. When Jonah refused to preach to Nineveh, his fear drove him into the ocean to flee from the presence of the Lord.

But God has shown me a truth that has helped me many times: Something much worse than failure is the fear that goes with it. Adam, Jonah and Peter ran away from God not because they had lost their love for Him, but because they were afraid He was too angry with them to understand. Satan uses such fear to make people think there is no use trying.

That old "accuser of the brethren" waits like a vulture for you to fail in some way. Then he uses every lie in hell to make you give up, to convince you that God is too holy or you are too sinful to come back. Or he makes you afraid you are not perfect enough, or tells you that you will never rise above your failure.

It took forty years to get the fear out of Moses and to make him usable in God's program. Meanwhile, God's plan of deliverance had to be delayed for nearly half a century while one man learned to face his failure. If Moses or Jacob or David had resigned himself to failure, we might never have heard of these men again. Yet, Moses rose up again to become one of God's greatest heroes. Jacob faced his sins, was reunited with the brother he had cheated, and reached new heights of victory. David ran into the house of God, laid hold of the horns of the altar, found forgiveness and peace and returned to his finest hour. Jonah retraced his steps, did what he had refused at first to do and brought a whole city-state to repentance and deliverance. Peter rose out of the ashes of denial to lead a church to Pentecost.

2. Despite failure, keep moving on. It is always after a failure that a man does his greatest work for God.

Twenty years ago I sat in my little car, weeping - a terrible failure, I thought. I had been unceremoniously dumped from a courtroom after I thought I was led by God to witness to seven teen-age murderers. I had seen my picture in the tabloids over the caption, "BIBLE WAVING PREACHER INTERRUPTS MURDER TRIAL." My attempt to obey God and to help those young hoodlums looked as though it was ending in horrible failure.

I shudder to think of how much blessing I would have missed if I had given up in that dark hour. How glad I am today that God taught me to face my failure and go on to His next step for me.

I know of two outstanding men of God — both of whom had ministered to thousands of people — who fell into the sin that David committed with Bathsheba. One minister decided that he could not go on. Today he drinks and curses the Christ he once preached about. The other man repented and started all over. He now heads an international missions program that reaches thousands for Christ. His failure has been left behind. He keeps moving forward.

In my work with narcotic addicts and incorrigibles, I have observed that the majority of those who return to their old habits become stronger than all the others when they face their failures and return to the Lord. They have a special awareness of the power of Satan, a total rejection of confidence in the flesh.

3. Despite failure, continue to worship. There was only one way for Moses to stay in victory, because he had a disposition like so many of us today. He continually communed with the Lord, "...face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend" (Exodus 33:11). Moses maintained that close friendship with God. I believe the secret of holiness is very simple: Stay close to Jesus. Keep looking into His face until you become like the image you behold.

One evening a hysterical woman stopped me on the street and blurted out a terrible confession. Clutching my sleeve so hard I thought she would tear it, she said, "Mr. Wilkerson, I am facing the darkest hour of my life. I don't know which way to turn. My husband has left me, and it's all my fault. When I think of how I failed God and my family, it is almost impossible for me to sleep at night. What in the world am I going to do?"

I was moved to tell her, "My friend, lift up your hands, right now on this street corner, and begin to worship the Lord. Tell Him that you know you are a failure, but you still love Him so. Then go home and get on your knees. Don't ask God for a thing — just lift up your heart and your hands and worship Him."

I left that lady standing on the street corner with her hands raised to heaven, tears rolling down her cheeks, praising the Lord and already tasting the victory that was beginning to surge back into her life.

Now, let me talk about your failure. Is there trouble in your home? Has some despised habit gripped your life so hard you can't seem to break it? Are you tormented in mind or spirit? Has God told you to do something you have failed to do? Are you out of the will of God? Are you hounded by memories of what you were at one time? Or by visions of what you can be?

Then worship the Lord in the midst of your failure! Praise Him! Exalt Him!

All this may sound like an oversimplification, but the way past failure is simple enough for children, fools and Ph.D.s to follow successfully. Christ says,

"Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37).

"Come unto me, all ye (failures) that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 12:28).

Don't be afraid of failure. Keep going on in spite of it. Worship God until victory comes.

The hardest part of faith is the last half hour. Keep going, and you will yet face your finest hour.

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