

MATTHEW 26:26-56

THE DISCIPLES' FAILURE

“. . . Then Jesus said to them, ‘You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, “I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered.” But after I have been raised, I will go before you to Galilee.’ But Peter answered and said to Him, ‘Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away.’ . . .” (26:26-56).

In the closing hours of Jesus’ life, Judas was not the only one who failed Jesus. *All* of His disciples failed Him, in spite of His warnings and attempts to prepare them for what was about to happen.

THE FAILURES OF THE DISCIPLES

They made boasts they could not back up. When Jesus announced, “You will all fall away because of Me this night” (26:31), Peter declared, “Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away” (26:33). When Jesus informed Peter that he would deny his Master three times, Peter replied, “Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You.” The problem of boasting was not Peter’s alone, for the very next sentence says, “*All* the disciples said the same thing too” (26:34, 35; emphasis mine).

When Jesus was praying in the Garden of Gethsemane, the disciples were unable to keep awake and pray with him even though He requested that they do so (26:36-46). Jesus had cautioned them to “keep watching and praying, that you may not enter into temptation” (26:41).

The “temptation” about which He spoke was the temptation to deny Him when the situation became difficult and dangerous. They later denied Him because they were unprepared.¹

The disciples misunderstood the necessity of what was about to happen to their Lord. When the soldiers came to arrest Jesus in the Garden, Peter tried to defend Him with a sword in spite of the predictions that He *must* die and then be raised. After Jesus rebuked Peter and shamed His captors, He proclaimed, “But all this has taken place that the Scriptures of the prophets may be fulfilled” (26:56).

Finally, they all deserted Him: “Then all the disciples left Him and fled” (26:56). What a humiliating failure! The very men who had vowed their loyalty ran and hid in their Master’s hour of deepest need for friends!

The flesh is indeed so “weak.” Jesus said, “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak” (26:41). The disciples were good men, but they were weak. They were subject to the same types of weaknesses that all humans are subject to, including fear and confusion. The sinfulness of man is horrible when we see it at its worst.

¹Ironically, Peter, James, and John were the ones who were unable to stay awake with Jesus, since they were the very ones who had explicitly told their readiness to share His fate (20:22; 26:35). “They are now called to share with him in preparing for it, and even at this level they will fail” (R. T. France, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, ed., Leon Morris [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1985], 372).

THE ENCOURAGEMENT TO US

Notice what is *encouraging* about all of these failures by the followers and friends of Jesus.

We do not have to be perfect to be followers of Jesus. The Gospels show that the Twelve were very *human!* They were capable of jealousy, ambition, and fear. They probably failed to “keep watching and praying” with Jesus because they did not realize how much they *needed* to watch and pray. Like most of us, they overestimated their own strengths and underestimated the power of the flesh. Yet Jesus loved them. He stayed with them to the end.

Jesus loves and forgives *us* as well—not because of our perfection, but in spite of our imperfections. Paul called that “grace.” In Romans 5:6, he said that “Christ died *for the ungodly*”—that includes the Twelve *and us*.

God does some of His best work through imperfect people. At the time of Jesus’ arrest and trials, the disciples did not make a good impression, but they would be *magnificent* later. The eleven and Matthias stood up on Pentecost and proclaimed Jesus as Lord in the very city in which He had been put to death (Acts 2). Peter and John were arrested for preaching Jesus and proclaimed to the same Jewish leaders who had condemned Him that “there is no other name under heaven . . . by which you must be saved” (Acts 4:19, 20). The apostles skillfully settled a dispute among the Christians that threatened to disrupt their unity (Acts 6). James, the brother of John, was put to death with the sword by Herod (Acts 12:2). John was exiled on the Isle of Patmos for his testimony to Jesus (Revelation 1).

They did their work so well that Paul later wrote that the church is “built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets” (Ephesians 2:20). This is not bad for a group who looked so hopeless in Matthew 26!

Never give up on yourself! Regardless of your present failures, God can *use* you. Imagine how terrible the apostles must have felt that Friday night after they had failed so miserably to stand by their Lord. They must have imagined that their part in the mission of Christ had ended in failure. Yet they were only a few days from the glorious experiences of Pentecost and after.

God can use you, as weak and sinful as you may be. That fact is not to your glory but to His. If you deny that He can work through you, you are detracting from His power. If you put your life in His hands, seek His forgiveness, and ask Him to use you as His instrument, He can and will.

True disciples do not quit following Jesus just because they fail. Judas failed and *quit*, for “he went away and hanged himself.” The eleven failed, too, but they still loved Jesus and did not abandon their ministry. They returned to their Source of life and power.

Have you failed the Lord miserably at some point in your life? Do not give up! Come back to Jesus as the apostles did, and let Him forgive and strengthen you. The only spiritually fatal mistake that you can make is to *give up* as Judas did (Galatians 6:9, 10).

Disciples should know better than anyone else how to be forgiven and how to forgive. As the apostles went out to preach the good news of new life and forgiveness in Christ, they were living examples of their message. They themselves had experienced forgiveness and redemption, a second chance to live in relationship with God.

We should be the same kind of examples—living proof of God’s love and forgiveness. And there is no better way to demonstrate that love and forgiveness than by putting it into practice in our relationships with others, by never being prisoners of grudges, jealousy, bitterness, and hatred.

CONCLUSION

The twelve apostles were human, and they forsook their Lord. But eleven returned and let Christ show His great power in them and use them for His glory.

Believe today that no matter what your failures are, you are not a failure until you give up on the Lord, for He will *never* give up on you. Come back to Him, and let Him cleanse you and refit you for His service. The possibilities are *limitless* as to what He may yet do in and through you.

—Tommy South