

## Baseball and the Bible - The Strikeout

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Mark 6:1-6

*He left that place and came to his hometown, and his disciples followed him. On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, "Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" And they took offense at him. Then Jesus said to them, "Prophets are not without honor, except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house." And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief. Then he went about among the villages teaching. Mark 6:1-6 (NRSV)*

Let's pray together. *Gracious God open us up today for whatever you have for us. Open our eyes that we might see, and our ears that we might hear. Open our hearts that we might feel, and then, O God, open our hands that we might serve. Amen.*

Youth sports. I have five daughters, and all of them participated in youth sports in some way, shape, or form. Baseball, softball, soccer, swimming, all of those sports they were a part of. And I believe they learned a great deal. Youth sports teach so many things like teamwork. Like the coach says, "There's no *I* in team!" They teach good social skills as you learn to get along with other people. Sometimes they learn bad social skills if they watch overenthusiastic parents who don't behave well and don't model the right kind of behavior. But they learn discipline, and they learn perseverance. But one of the things they learn about is failure. Unless they're the team that goes all the way to the end and wins the championship, they're going to lose at some point, and they're going to learn about failure.

Today, I want to talk about “The Strikeout” as we’re looking at baseball and the Bible. You know, since I’ve gone to so many of those youth sports games, I’ve learned that you watch the kid walk back to the dugout after striking out - he’s dragging his steps, with his head kind of drooped, as he’s trying not to cry because he or she has struck out. Your heart breaks for them, and I have to tell you that I’ve been there a lot. I was a terrible Little League player. My brother and I played in the yard a lot, we played catch, and if we could get a buddy to play with us, we’d play hotbox. But when it came to being on a team, I was just not good. I played on a team called the Gnats. Now, if you play on the Nats team, you’re playing for the Washington Nationals, but at that time when I played on the Gnats, it was spelled with a *G* - the Gnats - those little tiny bugs that bother you all the time.

I was terrible! I would get up, and at practice, I’d know Tommy Doakes was the pitcher, and he’d be pitching the ball. But whoever the pitcher was I was just terrified I was going to get hit by the ball, so I just prayed that I would walk. But my coach told me I had to swing and couldn’t just stand there. So, I struck out - a lot. I’d make that walk back to the dugout.

But here’s the thing I’ve come to understand, and it’s that if I struck out, I was in good company. Strikeouts are on their way up. They are becoming a really important part of the game. Take a look at this chart. It shows that in 1901, and at that time in the Major League Baseball season, there were 140 games in a season. And in 1901, there were 6,876 strikeouts in 140 games total. Then in 1962, there were 162 games played, and in those games, there were 17,567 total strikeouts. But by 2019, without the addition of too many more teams, the number of strikeouts had gone to 42,823.

Now what that says is that people aren’t as worried about striking out anymore. Now it may be that the pitchers are just getting better. So, my favorite thing Nolan Ryan said was that if you’re a pitcher, it helps if the batter thinks you’re just a little bit crazy. So, I think that might be part of it - we have some crazy pitchers these days. But I think part of it is that the mentality has changed. And that we understand how important it is to be able to fail and to fail well.

This will surprise you. Do you know who has the most career strikeouts? I'm going to start the list from number five and move up to number one. The number five person who has the most career strikeouts is Alex Rodriguez. Number four is Sammy Sosa, who hit hundreds of home runs - over 600 home runs. Number three is Adam Dunn, two time All-Star, and number two is Jim Tomei, who is a Hall of Famer. And the number one most career strikeouts is Reggie Jackson, a Hall of Famer.

The very best of our players strike out a lot.

But why? Because they go up to the plate, and their managers have told them that they need to swing for the fences. They need to go for it. And if you're going to go for it, if you're going to try, if you're going to take a risk, if you're going to really put yourself out there, there will be times when you fail.

What we want to talk about today is what the Bible teaches us what we can learn about how to fail well. And there are four things I want to share with you - first, we all fail. It's just that simple. It's a part of life.

Even Jesus failed. Our Scripture today has these peculiar words. "And he could do no deed of power there..." He's gone back to Nazareth, to his home synagogue, and he's been preaching. It says, "And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them." (Mark 6:5)

Now for me, that would be a wild success. But in this context, Jesus sees that as failure. And why is it a failure? Because he'd been sharing the gospel with them, sharing with them who he was, and who he'd come to be and why God had sent him. And the Scripture says that they didn't believe him. You could tell that he was one who spoke with power, but he was threatening they didn't believe him, and that was a failure. Even Jesus failed.

We all do it. It might be an epoch failure. When I was in high school, I set my mom's car on fire, trying to impress my girlfriend. Apparently, it worked because she became my wife, but the attempt was just to make her think that the car was on fire. But unfortunately, I had accidentally set it on fire. I can't help but think of this wonderful scene when Tom Cruz in the movie "Risky Business" when he takes his dad's fancy car out at night, and it accidentally rolls into the lake. It felt a little bit like that - it was an epoch fail.

Maybe you lost your job because of poor performance. Or maybe a relationship, a marriage or a friendship failed, because you just didn't pay attention to it. Maybe you filed for bankruptcy. Epoch fails. I think most of us will have at least one or two of those along the way in our lives.

But we all have smaller failures on a regular basis. The Thanksgiving dinner doesn't go well, or you didn't get the part or the job you wanted. You forgot to show up for the appointment. There are just so many opportunities.

When I was in college, my roommate and I decided we would make some money by selling Dallas Cowboy playoff tickets. We bought all these tickets in the end zone, but we didn't realize that those don't sell out early, and the semester ended before we could manage to go scalp them, and we had to go back home again. So, we ended up with a bunch of unused Dallas Cowboy tickets.

There are daily fails in my life, of things that fall short. So, the first important component to remember is that we all fail—even Jesus.

Now the question then becomes, how do we fail? What's the right way to do that, and my proposal today is that we must learn to fail mindfully. We must realize that there are ways to fail and learn from those failures.

I certainly don't agree with everything Jeff Bezos says or what he stands for. But one of the things he does teach well is how to fail, and he talks about failing fast. Here's what he writes: "Amazon has made billions of dollars at failures. Failure inevitably comes along with invention and risk-taking, which is why we try to make Amazon the best place in the world to fail."

Yes, you have to be willing to strike out; you have to be willing to go for it. But the question is - how can we do that in the right way? Leticia Gasca is the head of an organization called The Failure Institute - she's the executive director. And one of her businesses failed and so as she was processing it and she realized just how many other business leaders had failed. She gathered them together, and they began to create this "Failure Institute." I heard her speak not long ago, and she said this: "Of course, failing fast is a great way to accelerate learning and avoid wasting time. But we must put aside the idea that failing fast is always the best. I want to propose a new mantra: fail mindfully. This means to be aware of the impact of the consequences of the failure on

that business and it's people. Being aware of the lessons learned. Being aware of the responsibility to share those lessons with the world.”

When we fail, it's not just us; it hurts other people and failing mindfully means to recognize that kind of failure, to grapple with it, and to learn the lessons along the way. Andy Stanley is a great preacher. His father, Charles Stanley, heard Andy Stanley preach about failure, and he said that there are three myths that we often want to take hold of. He said the first myth is that experience makes us wiser. He said, “Experience does not necessarily make us wiser. Evaluated experience makes us wiser.” You can't just think that because you made the mistake, you're not going to make it again. He goes on to say that the second myth is that “Since I know better, I will do better. That's a myth. You can know that it's wrong and know that it's a mistake, but you keep doing it anyway.” So, the question is, how do you move from just knowing something to actually changing behavior.

The third myth, he says, is that that time is against you. He says, “No, time is your friend. What you need to do is take the time.” See, we need to take the time to grieve the mistakes we've made, especially those epoch ones. To recognize people that we've hurt in the mistakes we've made. To look carefully and evaluate why we made those mistakes and what led to that, how we can come to terms with the decisions we made along the way. And then figure out how to put structures in place that will lead us to doing better and not just knowing what's better.

In failing fast, we've been taught to get back on the horse. Well, you might get back on the horse, but you want to first figure out why you fell off in the first place before you get back on. We're called to fail mindfully. I think it is such an important realization that even the best batters in the world go to the hitting coach. And if they're striking out a lot, they go to the hitting coach and say, “Help me. What am I doing wrong? What can I do this to fix this?”

For us to take some time and find a therapist or a friend, someone with whom we can process, doing the grief work from the mistakes we've made. To process the consequences for ourselves or others. To identify the steps we can take. That's why we have the Nick Finnegan Counseling Center. It's because we want to provide those kinds of opportunities for people to wrestle with the challenges that come in their lives.

And when we do that part of that is to look into the midst of it to see how God is at work even in our failures. So, it's great for God to be at work in our successes, and we can say, "Look what God did!" But in our failures, we've got to look into the midst of it and see how God is present there as well.

Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 12: "But he said to me, 'my grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong." (2 Corinthians 12:9-10)

When I realize my failures, they drive me to my knees. And I begin to realize I have to count on Christ to get through. God is at work in the midst of even those darkest moments, those failures.

Mary Oliver, the great poet, has a very brief little poem titled "The Uses of Sorrow." She writes, "In my sleep, I dreamed this poem. Someone I love once gave me a boxful of darkness. It took me years to understand that this, too, was a gift." That over time, we begin to see what God has done in the midst of our failures to transform us.

So, we all fail. Second, we want to fail mindfully, learn from it, and find God in the midst of it. And third, we want to realize that our failures are not final - they do not define us.

Dee and I watched Tom Hanks' movie "Greyhound" this last week. It's an interesting movie. It's kind of hard to understand sometimes because it's full of lots of naval jargon that you have to really lean into to try to pay attention to. It's about this journey that Tom Hanks as the captain of a destroyer in World War II makes. He commands an escort ship for a convoy of ships that are crossing the Atlantic. There's this stretch of a couple of days in the middle of the Atlantic where they have no air cover, and that's where the German submarines like to attack. In the midst of this, Tom Hanks - as Captain Krause - makes a mistake, and that leads to some bad things that happen.

There's this interchange in the midst of it where he's talking to his first mate. He sort of realizes the mistake he's made. He says, "I wouldn't need to take this risk if I'd been smarter yesterday." And Charlie, the first mate, is trying to appease him, and says,

“What you did yesterday got us to today.” Then Captain Crouse says, “It’s not enough Charlie, it’s not nearly enough.”

He realizes that he made this mistake and he comes to terms with it, but that’s not the end of the movie. At that moment he can’t just dwell in that, he can’t just stay there, he has to keep going. He begins to lead and make good decisions and move forward from that. He recognizes it, he doesn’t brush it off or blow it off, but he realizes that that’s not the end. Our failures don’t define us; they are not the last thing. We like to say, “That’s the whole Gospel message.” That the worst thing is not the last thing.

I know you all have heard about Abraham Lincoln and how many times he failed in running for office before he was finally elected President. I hadn’t heard about this one but both Albert Einstein and Wernher von Braun, who was sort of the father of modern rocketry, who helped us get into space - both of them failed math. Enrico Caruso, the great tenor, was told by his voice teacher that because he couldn’t hit those high notes, he should give up the opportunity to have a career in voice. But none of those people allowed those failures to be final. They weren’t defined by those failures.

At some point, you have to realize that this is not who I am. I’m not the person who lost that marriage. That’s not my identity in Christ. My identity is not the one who went bankrupt. I’m not the one who made that bad business decision. Yes, I’m the one who did it, but that’s not my identity. What we have to do is recognize that our identity is established in Christ.

Now here’s what kind of leads to my final point. While those people - Lincoln and Einstein and von Braun and Caruso - all were not defined by their failures, they were defined by their successes. And for us, that can be awfully tempting. Yes, we get stuck and our failures kind of grab hold of us, and we keep going back to them and focusing and dwelling on our failures. But what’s even more seductive is to begin to believe that we are our successes. That that’s our identity.

Friends, the Scripture seems not all that interested in our success or failure. What the Scripture is interested in is faithfulness, not success. The fourth point is we are called to be faithful, not successful. Faithful not successful.

See, the world is obsessed with success. As a leader of an organization, I read books on leadership and listen to leadership podcasts and what helps an organization to be successful. Just this week I got this email. Here's what the subject line is: "Everything you need to succeed, Tom." Then it continues in the body of the email: "Chart your path to success with HBR's [Harvard Business Review] curated collections. HBR collections bring together the best in books, tools, and research all in one place, to help you dive deep into management topics - and put ideas into practice." The "premium collection" is only \$665! The world is obsessed with that success!

God's not all that interested in our success. God is in charge of success; our job is to be faithful to God's calling.

Let me put it a different way. There is a difference between failing and falling. Failing is when you honestly try and accomplish something, you're not successful, and you don't reach the goal. Falling is when you turn away from faithfulness. Failing is when you have a goal that you're going for, and you try and reach it with everything you have but falling is that spiritual or moral failure. Everybody applauds someone who fails. They say, "What a great try! Yes, a good job - you're trying!" But the moral or spiritual failure we respond differently to.

Failure is not reaching the playoffs, failure is striking out, but there's a difference in that than cheating to steal signs with the camera and television monitor and banging on trash cans. We feel differently about that. So, what do we do with that?

Well, before we become too self-righteous and judgmental, let's recognize that the same points apply to falling as to failing. First, we all do it. We all fall. "All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." So, before we throw stones at others or look down our noses, we have to stop and think about our own falls.

Falling is the time you reveal the confidence that a friend shared with you. Falling is the emotional affair you had with a colleague, even if it didn't become physical in any way. Falling is the time you didn't have the courage to stand up for what was right. Falling is that fudge you do on your taxes. Falling is the sleazy stuff you look at on your computer. Falling is that attitude of racism or prejudice or discrimination that you can't even seem to see in your own life, but it's there. Falling is the hypocrisy you practice. Falling is every time you turn away from someone who is hurting or hungry or in prison.

“As you’ve done it to the least of these, you’ve done it to me,” Jesus says. Falling is the time we fail to love as Jesus loved.

No, we all fall. Sometimes it’s an epoch fall, and sometimes it’s a small one, but they’re all falls just the same.

So first, we all do it. Second, when we fall, we must learn to fall mindfully. We don’t dwell or wallow in our sin, but we do take the time to recognize the people that we’ve hurt and try and make amends. To look inside us to see what it is that’s driving that sin. Saying, “The devil made me do it!” just doesn’t cut it. Where’s that coming from? What’s led me to fall from faithfulness?

We talk about three steps along the way. One is conviction - actually seeing the sin in our own lives. The second is confession - admitting it to God and others. And the third is repentance - actually changing, moving from knowing to doing. To actually changing our direction and turning. That’s falling mindfully. And finally, we refuse to let our sin define us.

King David, in Scripture has an epoch fall with Bathsheba as he exploits her and takes advantage of her. He sends her husband off to the front line to be murdered in battle. Simon Peter denies Jesus three times in the courtyard of Caiaphas’ house. But God said about King David, “He’s a man after my own heart.” He didn’t let that define him. There were consequences, but it didn’t define him. For Simon Peter, after the resurrection, Jesus reinstates him and says, “I’m going to put you in charge of caring for my sheep.” Our failures, our falling, doesn’t define us either.

So, here’s the truth - you and I are a little like Major League Baseball players. Every time I see a Major League Baseball player really struggling, really having a hard time when I begin to feel sorry for them, I realize that the average salary of a Major League Baseball player is \$4.4 million. And that minimum salary is just almost \$600,000 a year. That’s like if you’re the worst brand new one onboard, that’s the payment. Regardless whether you’re failing or succeeding, you’ve been given a great gift.

I think we’re like that too. Whether we’re succeeding or failing, we have the grace of God, the very presence of God, the gift given to us. It’s not dependent on our success or failure but upon God’s love for us. That’s grace. What that means is that every time it’s

my turn to bat, I'm going to step up to the plate, strikeout probably more times than not, but I'm going to swing for the fences.

Let's pray together. *Gracious and loving God, we thank you for your presence in our lives. For your presence in the midst of success, but even more so for your presence in the midst of our failures. We pray, God, that we would learn to fail mindfully and that in the midst of those failures and falling we would be transformed and see your presence right there in the midst of it. And that we would learn and repent and begin to move in a new direction, knowing that those failures will not define us. In the name of Christ, we pray. Amen.*