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Title: *Asking for a Friend - "I Won't Stumble Badly, Will I?"*

Scripture: Matthew 26:31-35

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Good morning. It's great to be together. So, have you ever been in a place where you interviewed somebody for a role or a job or something like that? And if so, did you have a favorite question, a go-to question, or two that you would ask? And undoubtedly, probably, most of us, if we haven't been in that place, have been interviewed for something, whether it was to get into school, into a group, or for a job.

And here's what is generally true about an interview setting. And that is, until you knock the person who's being interviewed a little bit off of the expected path, you haven't actually found out much about them. So, in other words, if you just simply say, what's your greatest strength? Well, everybody has a rehearsed answer for that. They say, well, it's this. When you say what's your biggest weakness, everybody has a prepared answer. But when you can get somebody to stop and think in the middle of the interview, there's a moment where you get to see the real them.

Sometimes I have the chance to be part of the interview process here at the church when we're hiring ministry staff. And one of the things that I've learned to ask, I don't always ask it because sometimes it's been apparent before this, but one of the things I've learned to ask is this question, and it's not really a question. It's more of a statement. And that is somewhere in the process, I'll say, tell me about your biggest spiritual failure.

Now, my goal, admittedly at that moment, is to knock them a little bit off their expected answer, because what are you supposed to say when you're looking for a job at a church? You're not supposed to say, well, here's all my big failures. But at the same time, what I actually want is to see somebody who's willing to say, here is where I have failed, and own it and be okay with talking about it.

Because what I found is if your staff is not willing to talk about spiritual failure, what happens is they create a culture of pretending. And a culture of pretending in a church is very unhealthy, as opposed to a culture that says, we understand that we're failing human beings at points, and that is why the gospel is such good news. And so that's part of why I asked that question.

So let me ask you today, you don't need to answer this out loud. What is your biggest spiritual failure? What was the last failure that you can look back at and say, aha, that was not a great choice? Would you consider yourself spiritually successful or a spiritual failure as you think about your trajectory?

Regrets are fairly common. Whether they're moral, spiritual, vocational, or social. Many of us will look back and say I regret certain things. And a spiritual failure is when we have a regret that is either moral or spiritual in nature because we made some choices that were detrimental to us or detrimental to people in our lives. And we look back and we say, I knew better. I knew a path that I could have gone, that I should have gone, that God called me to. But I ended up going down this path. Sometimes it's kind of an innocuous journey, meaning we take some steps, and we don't even realize where we got to. And we just end up in a spiritual malaise where we're saying, in essence, I've taken this journey and this is where I am, but I don't know how I got here, and I'm just kind of indifferent.

So, a bit like the proverbial frog in the kettle, you know, the story where the frog can jump out of the kettle easily enough, and it would if it was thrown into boiling water. But when you turn the water up slowly, the frog swims around happily until it's incapacitated. Sometimes our spiritual trajectory is like that, and sometimes it's big. Make big decisions. Big steps.

I was talking to a man this week who told me about how he started drinking just to deaden the dullness of his day-to-day job and how the drinking led to some light drug use, led to harder drug use, and led him into rehab. And he was quick to talk about how God met him in rehab and God restored his life. But as he looked back, he said this as well, it was a season. I don't know how I even got here, how I made these choices that got me here.

And I know some of us who are probably here would say, well, part of why I don't like church or God is because I don't actually want there to be a spiritual success, spiritual failure in life. I just want to live. I just want to have life, be what I choose to do, and what I choose not to do. But, you know, whether you're a person who considers yourself spiritual or church-ed or Christian or not, there's more to your life than that. There are decisions you make that set you on a course that can change the way that you live.

And you may try to step back and say, I redefined the standard or live with guilt and shame. But either way, spiritual failure is something that all of us deal with on some level. And we're at the end of a series that we've called *Asking for a Friend*, and we've been looking at Matthew's account of Peter's interactions with Jesus seven different times.

Peter comes to Jesus and either asks a question or makes a statement that's bold and has an element to it. That is almost like saying, I want to know how this works. Today we're looking at really the second most well-known incident, maybe the first one of the top two, certainly of Peter's encounters with Jesus. One is where he walked on water from the boat and this one is where he denied Jesus three times in Jesus' final hours.

And as I was working on this, I struggled a little bit. And let me just tell you a little bit about my process. Normally, not that you care a ton about this, but this will make sense in a second. Usually what I do is decide on a series of messages through a series of text, and then I'll start

jotting notes as I study the text over time on yellow pads, I'll put them in a file folder that's for a coming message.

And then as I think of ideas, I'll pull out the file folder, I'll write down potential illustrations, things like that. And then about a week or two out, I'll start to craft it into how I want to talk about it and outline illustrations, sentences, and word choice. And then on Thursday, usually the week before, it's a day where I try to take it from all of that to what I'm going to actually say.

So, I go into writing it down well, and it ends up on a five by eight card and I reduce everything to just these little things. This is what I usually carry with me. And then that prompts me to remember what I'm about to say. And the reason I tell you this is because what I do is on Thursday, whenever that card gets done, I send some of that to the people who do the tech stuff here. Then I put it away. And I don't look at it Thursday afternoon, evening, and I don't look at it Friday. And then on Saturday morning, I'll pull it out. I'll usually spend some time praying and reading the scriptures unrelated to this. Then I'll pray over that. I'll make a few changes and I'll come over here on Saturday night and I'll do the message. That's usually my process.

Now, the reason I tell you this is this week I actually did that on Wednesday because I had something else going on Thursday. And I didn't like what I wrote. And I didn't know why. I've done this long enough that that's unnerving. So, I came back to it on Thursday. I couldn't figure out why I didn't like it. I came back to it on Friday. I couldn't figure out why I didn't like it. And then on Saturday morning, I'm sitting and working on it again. I'm saying I think I see why I don't like it now. That's really late for me to be making changes. And here's why I tell you this. I'll tell you what I didn't like about where I was going with this in just a moment.

Here's the story very simply. Peter is told by Jesus he's going to deny him three times. Peter denies Jesus three times. Jesus restores Peter. And what is easy about it is you can look at it and you can say, okay, here's Peter's journey. Where are we in this? And what my message had been as I had written it was basically a don't be like Peter message.

And if you've been around here for any length of time, you've heard me talk about this kind of teaching where we say either be like the person in the Bible or don't be like the person in the Bible, and why that isn't actually ultimately a good message. Not that there aren't lessons we can learn from some of that. But the reason that's not good teaching ultimately is what it does is it sets a standard and it says, here's the standard. You're either going to be like this person or not be like this person, whichever way we're taking the example in this particular moment. And if you meet the standard, you become prideful. So, if you're one of the people who go I didn't have a spiritual failure like Peter. I didn't have one of those big failures. I'm good, and boy, I hope other people are hearing this who really need to hear it. And if you're one of the people who say you know what, I just had a spiritual failure. I made some big

mistakes. You hear that and you say, why didn't I do better before? Why didn't I know this ahead of time? And there's shame and there's regret.

And ultimately, what the message should be about, and I think this text is ultimately about, is not, don't be like Peter who failed, but it's understand the beauty of what Jesus Christ has done in our lives. You often hear me pray when I start. Lord, would you help my words to reflect your word in content and in tone and in emphasis? And that's not just something I pray in this room. It's something that I pray for as I'm preparing because I want the message here not just to be something that we read and then talk about what interests me about it, but something that reflects what the passage is about. And so, this passage struck me for this reason.

I think there's a time to say there are big warnings, things that you can do that can be damaging to your life, that you need to be aware of the process and stay away from. While at the same time understanding that this passage is about Peter's failure in the sense of when Jesus was going through his moment, and Peter pledges his allegiance to Jesus, and he doesn't come through.

And here's again what I'm driving at. Sometimes people will say well, isn't sin, sin? Isn't any failure a failure? And the answer is kind of yes, kind of no. And here's what I mean. If sin is sin, then you're saying all sin is equal and has the same impact. But there's a difference in the consequences of some sins than other sins.

Let me give you an example from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus was teaching, and in the Sermon on the Mount, he says this about anger. He says if you get angry with your brother or your sister and you call them a fool or an empty head, the text says "raca," it's the same as if you've committed murder against that person in your heart.

So, what's Jesus take? His take is well, it's an offense to God, even if it seems pretty innocuous. And here's what this means. If you're driving around, somebody cuts you off, and you're like "raca." What Jesus is saying is it's like you have killed that person. But is it the same as killing that person? No, in this sense. Yes, it's sinful. It's something that isn't pleasing to God. But you're not going to go to jail for saying "raca." You get out a gun and you shoot somebody, you might go to jail, might not, but you might go to jail. And so, what that means is that there are big things that have consequences, and then there are things that don't seem like they have consequences.

And what my discomfort was as I was working on this is I was talking about the big things saying in a sense, here's a way you can avoid the big mistakes. And sometimes we need that word. Some of us right now need that word because we're headed toward something that will be disastrous in our lives. And yet at the same time, we need to see what is true in this passage. And that is Peter's simple denial of Jesus was a spiritual failure at the same time.

So, I want to just talk about what I'm going to call the anatomy of a spiritual failure, and then the restoration of a spiritual failure. So first, the anatomy of a spiritual failure. And we see this in this passage in three ways. First, we see self-confidence in Peter. This is verses 33 through 35. He says this after Jesus had said this very night, you will all fall away on account of me. Here's Peter's response. "Even if all fall away on account of you, I never will." In the original language, there's an extra emphasis here, never, ever, will I. And then Jesus responded, "Truly I tell you," Jesus answered, 'this very night, before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.' But Peter declared, 'Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you.' And all the other disciples said the same."

So, here's what happens. Jesus says you're going to deny me. There's this oh, no, never, never, not me, Jesus. Oh, yeah, you, three times before the rooster crows. I will die before I deny you. And all the other disciples standing around say me too. There's no way we're denying you. If you read through the text, you know what happened, and that is Peter denies Jesus three times.

So why do I say self-confidence? You see, self-confidence is when we start to say that my standards and my ability to keep the standards, my ability to discern consequences in the best path forward is so good that I don't absolutely have to defer to what Jesus says about life or about me.

When my wife and I lived in Michigan, the first house that we lived in had a road that we would take to walk or bike. And after about a half mile, mile, there was a fork, and one way went on a road that had a bridge out. So, in effect, it was a dead-end, and you could take it down and only the people who lived on the road would go, which made it ideal for walking and biking.

And so, you would come up to this bridge. And there was a big sign that said, danger, keep off. And for a few months we first lived there I would come up to the sign and be like, yeah, I probably shouldn't cross the bridge. But after a while, I would come to it when I was running or biking or something, and I'd say but there's a dead-end road on the other side, and I can go even farther if I cross the bridge.

So, I go up to the bridge, and I do the nothing bad is going to happen. So, I walked across the bridge for the first time, no big deal. And I say, you know what? It might be unsafe for cars, but it's safe for me. Then I tried riding my bike across the bridge again. Nothing happened. I ran and biked across that bridge for years. I never did try my car. But here's what happens spiritually. Some of us will come up to the warning signs and we'll say I'm wise enough, I'm smart enough, I can figure it out. Nothing bad happened. I can take that step. And what we do is we just keep going and it's our self-confidence that does that. So, there's self-confidence.

Secondly, there's what I'm going to say is a spiritual distance. And we see this in verse 39. This is when Jesus was in Gethsemane, all part of this story, Gethsemane is the garden that Jesus prayed in. It says this, "Going a little farther, he fell with his face to the ground and prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will." Then he returned to his disciples and found them sleeping." This is after he'd asked them to stay up and pray with him. "'Couldn't you men keep watch with me for one hour?' he asked Peter. 'Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation. The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.'"

And so, he speaks directly to Peter here. And Peter was sleeping when God had invited him to pray. And sometimes our indication that spiritually we are headed toward some kind of a failure is a lack of spiritual closeness. It's when our disciplines of being part of a church, being part of a group, being in the word joyfully praying, serving, all become different.

What happens and some of you know this is maybe you started down a path and that was a certain way for you. It was joyful. And now it's a burden. It's a little bit of a drudgery. That's an indication that there's a little bit of spiritual distance. And what's true about any relationship is closeness takes some effort. And when we lose proximity from Jesus, what happens is our values begin to shift. And when our values begin to shift because we don't have closeness, then we find ourselves in a place where we're susceptible to spiritual failure.

And then the third thing that's part of this is the poor influences that were around Peter. Verses 69 and following say that a servant girl came up to him. And I think the indication here with the servant girl saying we're one of the classes that were seen as the lowest in that society, came to him and said, weren't you with him? He's like, no, I never knew him. What he was doing at that moment was he was choosing the acclaim of somebody who had no social standing over faithfulness to Jesus.

Certainly, you could say this was Peter being engaged in wanting to impress secular people, but throughout Scripture, one of the groups that Jesus warns against the most are Pharisees, which were the religious conservatives of the day because they had a form of godliness by saying we kind of play the rules game, and they didn't actually have spiritual vulnerability.

I've heard it said that if you take a look at the five closest people to you in your life, you'll see your future. And so sometimes we need to understand that our choices of acquaintances will impact our spiritual trajectory. Now, here's why I struggle a little bit. What I've talked about, most of that I had written. The reason I partly struggled is because if I stop here, what you hear a little bit is oh, don't be like Peter down this path. Do you see that?

But over the years I've heard some different teaching. And here's what some people have said. Not about this specifically, but just in general. Maybe you've heard this kind of thing. If Jesus isn't Lord of all, He isn't Lord at all. Has anybody ever heard of that? Or another one is

the idea that if you are a radical, sold-out, uncompromised follower of Jesus, you aren't a follower at all.

There was a whole book about this a few years ago. But is that Jesus' message here? Who was Peter? Peter was somebody who was present with Jesus through his miracles, through his earthly ministry, and here was Peter in his moment of truth. When his life was coming apart, everything was going to pot. And he says, will I still follow Jesus? Will I still proclaim Jesus? Or will I walk away? And He walks away.

You see when we make it all about us, it's all about our pride or our guilt. And when we feel guilty, we feel bad and feel bad for feeling good, and it makes us feel alive. And so we kind of like the pride guilt thing, but what we need to understand ultimately is when we make the Christian life the ultimate experience of faith, what we're doing is we're playing right into this rather than saying that ultimately Christianity is not about my performance for God, but it's about the performance of Jesus Christ on my behalf.

Christianity is not about climbing a ladder to a higher spiritual peak, but it's about Jesus descending, and the cross making it possible for me who can't climb the ladder to be in a relationship with the God of the universe. And as long as we make Christianity about our performance, about climbing the ladder, what we end up doing is we end up having this be like, don't be like, how am I doing evaluation rather than saying there's an anatomy of failure that says even though I don't want the consequences of a huge failure, I want to live with the awareness that every time I fail, there's grace.

I remember when I was first pastoring. I was working as a youth student pastor at a small church in Chicago, and there was a man who was on the church board who was well thought of in the church, and he seemed like he was 80-something to me. He may have been 60-something. That's just the age thing at the time. But he seemed really old. And I remember he had health issues in the hospital, and he said I need the elders, the church leaders to come and pray. So, I guess by virtue of working on the staff, I was invited to be in this room with him while he prayed with a few of the church leaders and the pastor.

And I'm in there, he starts to pray, and he starts to confess his sins. And this is interesting, you know. I guess this is good. Confess your sins before you presumably die or something. And so, he's confessing it. And then all of a sudden, he starts to confess his lust in detail. And I'm standing here thinking all this is a little bizarre. And after I got over my initial this is a little bizarre, I had this moment where I thought, wait for a second, this dude's like 80, and he's still dealing with lust. Doesn't it go away as you get older?

And what I recognized is that all of us need to constantly be reminded of the grace of God. And when we start to pretend, when we start to say, I've only had spiritual successes, that we don't understand the anatomy of spiritual failure. Yes, there are big failures and things to

avoid, but there are also things that you will do, I will do, that separate us from God's plan and will for our life. But there's grace that's available. So that's the anatomy of a spiritual failure.

Let's just look at the restoration of a spiritual failure again from this text. Here's what we see. First, we need to realize that our failures don't surprise God. Therefore, they don't need to surprise us. What if your worst spiritual failure was still in front of you? Would you be confident of God's love for you? Or would you feel like somehow that failure puts you in peril? You see, our failures remind us of our need, and when we pretend, what happens is that we don't have any failures, as we put ourselves in a place where we're more susceptible to bigger failures because instead of acknowledging our need, what we do is we start to rely on ourselves. There's a reason that one of the great hymns of the faith is great is thy faithfulness not great is my faithfulness. Because what we want to often do is make it about us. But we need to remind ourselves that our failures don't surprise God.

Secondly, we need to see failure as an invitation to start again. Verse 69 and following here. And this is where we see this. "Now Peter was sitting out in the courtyard, and a servant girl came to him. 'You also were with Jesus of Galilee,' she said. But he denied it before them all. 'I don't know what you're talking about,' he said. Then he went out to the gateway, where another servant girl saw him and said to the people there, 'This fellow was with Jesus of Nazareth.' He denied it again, with an oath." This is, I swear on my mother's grave. I wasn't with him kind of a thing. He denied it again with an oath. I don't know the man.

"After a little while, those standing there went up to Peter and said, 'Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away.' Then he began to call down curses, and he swore to them, 'I don't know the man!' Immediately a rooster crowed. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken: 'Before the rooster crows, you will disown me three times.' And he went outside and wept bitterly."

And it was a chance for him to start again. You see, what some of us will do is we'll have something happen and we'll say well, since I did this, I might as well go ahead and do it. But when we fail, it's a chance to start again. And what I would say is it's ultimately a chance to repent, to turn, to go another direction. And what happens when we don't understand that is we use grace as an excuse. But what we need to do every time we get close to the sign, like the metaphorical bridge that's out, is say I went past a sign that said, bridge out, I need to turn around before I get too far down this path and turn back toward God because it's a chance to start again in my life.

So, we need to realize our failures don't surprise God because he's the one who said here to Peter, you'll deny me three times. We need to see failure as an invitation to start again. And then finally I would just say this, and that is we need to remember that our failure is never greater than God's love for us.

After Jesus had come back to life, He went to where the disciples were, and He helped John, Peter, and the others catch a big catch of fish. And then in John 21, he has this interaction with Peter, Jesus does. Verse 15, "When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, 'Simon son of John, do you love me more than these?' 'Yes, Lord,' he said, 'you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my lambs.' Again Jesus said, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' He answered, 'Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Take care of my sheep.' The third time he said to him, 'Simon son of John, do you love me?' Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, 'Do you love me?' He said, 'Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.' Jesus said, 'Feed my sheep.'"

There are a couple of things that are happening here. One is Jesus is restoring Peter, giving him a mission, saying, feed my sheep. And if you know about the New Testament, what you know is Peter was one of the apostles that helped build the early church. So, after his moment of failure, Jesus reinstates him and gives him a calling. Some of us will go through a season of spiritual failure and we'll say there's nothing that I ever can do or say about what God wants for me. Some of us are maybe in a place where we say, well, God doesn't want to use me because of what happened. I want you to know that God is often in the business of restoring.

Now I do believe that there are some things that can disqualify us from certain ministries. For example, if you've been inappropriate with kids, you shouldn't work with kids. If you've done something like stealing money from an organization or something like that, maybe you shouldn't be in charge of the money. I'm not saying there's no consequence but notice what's true here.

And this is the part that's important, and that is that the love that God had for Peter, the love that God has for you, the love that God has for me, is not contingent on our performance. And that is good news. And so, when you read what comes next, Jesus goes to the cross and in the Synoptics, which is Matthew, Mark, and Luke, we're told that while he was on the cross John, he uttered this phrase, "It is finished." In the original language, it's the word "tetelestai" and it has an accounting kind of reference. It's paid in full. You owe nothing. There's nothing that you need to do to settle this debt.

Sometimes people think that when Jesus said it is finished, he was referring to his work as if now it's done. But probably because of this word, what he was really doing was he was saying, it's finished, there's nothing else for you to pay. I have paid it all. And what happens when we revert to making our religious experience central rather than the gospel central is we move our message from it is finished to just do it. And we take kind of a modern mantra and we say yes, theologically it's finished. Jesus paid it all. But now I need to do everything so that. And what we actually need to do is we need to understand that when we feel most unlovable, we're more likely to experience the love of God than at any other time. And when we can run to it is finished, it frees us from a sense of failure to a sense of saying, I am loved. Why wouldn't I want to do what God wants?

Sometimes people hear this kind of teaching and they'll be critical. They'll say well, if we do what you know you're talking about here, then anybody can do anything and it's okay. Sin is okay. You know, Paul addressed this in Romans six. He was making the argument. He says so if grace increases every time I sin, then why don't I sin more so that I get more grace? Wouldn't that be a good thing? So, sin is actually good because I get grace. Do you know what his response was? There's a little phrase he said, "May it never be." Some translations say, "God forbid." See, what Paul was saying was, once you understand it is finished, why would you want to run away from the goodness and the grace and the love that God offers and pursue your own ends?

Now, I don't know what kind of spiritual failure is represented here today. I would guess that there are some of us who have big stories, big moments, big things that we say, I wish I could turn the clock back. But some of us maybe have things that are more private, things that are so private that even people closest to us don't know about. But their repeated hardness and the invitation, I believe, of Jesus is to say understand that your failures don't surprise me. They don't need to surprise you but turn back toward me in my ways. And as you do that, know that there's nothing that can outpace the cross because it is finished. Do you see how that will change the way that we interact with spiritual failure?

Some of us may be here today and you may be saying, well, I've always thought that spiritual life was about climbing this moral ladder, that the church was about a moral person telling other moral people how to be more moral. That's not this church. This is about a sinner talking with other sinners about the savior. And what that means is that the way you enter into a relationship with God is not by climbing this ladder or performing better, but by acknowledging that your performance, your climbing of a ladder, can't get high enough, and it's Jesus' work on your behalf that gives you standing. And when you call out to Jesus in your sin, He saves.

And for those of us who say, I've done that, revisiting the work of Jesus keeps us from becoming prideful and saying, I haven't had a big failure in 20 years, but other people need that. And it keeps us from living in guilt and shame because on the cross Jesus took away our ability for pride, and he took away our need to live in guilt and shame. And so, your invitation, my invitation, is to say, will you come and revel in the "it is finished" rather than the "just do it." God, I pray today that you would help each one of us who's here to not be so consumed with our own trajectory that we don't savor what Jesus has done. Father, I ask that you would bring relief from those of us who feel under a cloud of guilt and shame and that we would encounter again those sweet words, "It is finished." And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.