

Failure, Fear and Success

By Jim Seghers

The Parable of the Talents, found in the *Gospel of Matthew* (Mt 25:14-30), is so imbedded in English literature that the word "talent" has lost its original meaning of a unit of weight or money. Today its primary meaning is that of a person's ability. This is the metaphorical sense that the word is used in the gospel story.

Developing one's ability, becoming successful and avoiding a life of failure has become a major preoccupation of modern Americans. A visit to the bookstores that proliferate in shopping malls would demonstrate an amazing multiplicity of books and magazines devoted to helping people develop their talents. In addition there exists an army of paid professional speakers and entire organizations devoted to teaching and inspiring the ambitious with the latest techniques to expand their potential.

One grasps the understanding that millions of Americans feel a sense of discontent and even failure in their lives. They eagerly explore methods of escaping the trap in which they feel they find themselves. There is no denying that the sense of failure, that one is achieving far below one's potential is a very painful experience. Failure is hard to accept.

Curiously, the study of those deemed successful reveals several surprising observations. First, successful people fail more in the very area of their success than do those ranked less successful in the very same area. Secondly, the successful are remembered and honored for how often they succeeded not for how few times they failed. The example of athletes readily comes to mind.

Ty Cobb is a name familiar to most baseball fans. He was renowned for being one of the greatest base stealers of all time. In one year he stole 96 bases, a record that lasted for many years. He achieved this in 134 attempts. He failed 38 times. There was another player who was a contemporary of Cobb's by the name of Max Carey. Few of even the most avid baseball fans have heard of Max Carey; yet he was also a great base stealer. In 1922 he stole 51 bases out of 53 attempts. He hardly ever failed. At that rate it would have taken Carey 19 years to fail as often as Cobb did in just one year. Still few people remember Max Carey. Successful people fail more, but they are honored for how often they succeeded not for how many times they failed.

Babe Ruth affords another example. Few people remember that for many decades the great Ruth held the all-time record for the most strikeouts. In reality he struck out almost twice as many times as he hit the home runs for which he is most famous. It's noteworthy that the man who broke Ruth's strikeout record, Reggie Jackson, joined him in the Baseball Hall of Fame.

Examples like these abound in all walks of life. Many consider Abraham Lincoln to be one of this country's two greatest presidents, yet his life was replete with election failures. Yet it was in the political arena that he achieved his greatest fame. Countless failures and disappointments marred his presidency ending with his assassination. Edison provides another example but from the field of science. In his effort to invent the light bulb he had great difficulty in finding a filament that would work. He tried a thousand times and failed a thousand times. On one occasion he was asked if these failures made him feel discouraged. His reply is very instructive: "No, I'm not discouraged because I have not failed a thousand times. I just discovered a thousand different ways it doesn't work!"

The Parable of the Talents disclose that "the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money" (Mt 25:18). When later confronted by his master, the servant gave this excuse, "I was afraid" (Mt 25:25). Like this servant the response to fear freezes many in a paralyzing vice that prevents them from utilizing their talent. They bury their ability because they do nothing with it. Fear propels others to overcompensate in one area, for example, in athletic, academic or

business success while hiding from their insecurities. If those fears were faced they would develop other abilities that would make them both more well rounded and happier people.

It's an axiom that successful people succeed the most because they fail the most. Failures are failures not so much in their abilities, but in their cowardliness that makes them shun those failures that are the process through which winners must pass to become successful. It is only through many failures that success is possible. However, like the cartoon character, Andy Capp, many can also cry out: "You can't call me a failure. I'm not a failure. I never tried!"

What is true in the natural order is even more valid in the supernatural order. Fear prevents many people from becoming the saints God destined them to be. One fear that cripples many is the *fear of the cost*. Francis Thompson describes this fear in his autobiographical poem, *The Hound Of Heaven*. The author depicts God as a bloodhound hot on the trail of a fugitive, Thompson, himself. In describing his inner fears he writes: "Though I know the love of him [the heavenly hound] that followed, yet I feared, lest having him [God] I might not have naught besides [all those other things to which he was attached and know were in his best interest to abandon]."

Matthew depicts this same fear in the moving story of the rich young man (Mt 19:16-22). When he asked Jesus what he must do to enter heaven, he was told to keep the commandments. However, when he asked what he must do to be perfect, truly successful, he was told: "go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." The passage concludes with the poignant statement: "He went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions." How many fail to respond to the talents God have given because they are afraid of the price?

A second fear is that of *death and suffering*. This may seem surprising because few Christians face the prospect of physically dying for their faith. More common, however, is the feeling of death, of being psychologically trapped and alone in a place so painful that it feels like a living death. This is the pain that people feel in loveless marriages, or when they face the prospect of giving up a sinful relationship and living alone. It is the pain felt by priests and religious after they have lost the spiritual foundation that once gave their calling so much meaning and vitality. It was this fear that moved Jesus to pray: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want."

Suffering is akin to death. Sometimes death seems a welcome relief to suffering. A commitment to Christ always demands a confrontation. Jesus said: "I have not come to bring peace, but the sword" (Mt 10:34). A serious commitment to Christ stands out like a beacon in a storm proclaiming that the values of this world are wrong. This creates the fundamental confrontation with this world and those who live according to its values. Confrontations bring rejection.

Rejection is always painful and the pain is frightening. Peter was a strong man. Yet Peter's fear led him to deny his Lord when confronted by a simple servant girl. Rejection is a very painful experience. The fear of rejection cripples many people from living their faith. This fear of rejection and ridicule is not an experience exclusive to the peer pressure associated with young people. In our modern, pagan society the majority of well educated, sophisticated Americans shun those committed to Christ like a plague ready to happen. Those Americans committed to children, to family values, to life and to obedience to the Church quickly feel the persecution of rejection and being marginalized. Being discounted and made to feel foolish and out of step with the times can be excruciating. Many are afraid to face this cruel rejection. Like Peter they deny their Lord. Often they mask this betrayal behind a pseudo intellectual facade that questions the existence of God and his relevancy to the everyday life. Anything to avoid facing one's cowardliness!

There is another fear that the spiritually maturing experience, namely, the *painful withdrawal of the sense of God's presence*. In John's Gospel, Jesus portrays the Father as a zealous vinegrower: "Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit" (Jn 15:2). This pruning is always a painful process

because it entails a dying to oneself. When it reached the intensity of the complete sense of abandonment, the soul feels utterly alone and devastated. It is this sense of abandonment that led Jesus to cry out on the cross: "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" (Mt 27:46)?

The last fear that hinders many is the *fear of never being able to succeed*. This is a realization that can hit with the force of a pile driver once a person has fully faced ones' limitations. An incident that illustrates this occurred many years ago when I was a college freshman. I had two friends who were excellent ping pong players. Let's call them Jerry and Larry. Jerry was a fine all-around athlete and the school's best ping pong player. Larry was also a fine player. He considered himself to be Jerry's equal. One day Jerry let his game out and did not hold back. He won the game with a score of 21 to 0. Larry was so shocked by the ability difference that separated them that he never again played ping pong. He would not face the defeats necessary to elevate his game to Jerry's level. He simply quit.

Something similar sometimes happens in the spiritual life. A person will begin to ardently live the faith. Then he faces the startling discovery of the vast difference between where he is and where he needs to be. What once may have seemed as a climb up a steep hill now appears like a solo attempt to scale Mount Everest. At this point the temptation is to quit. Many people start out on the path to holiness with great fervor. However, they become discouraged and give up when they are confronted with two truths. First, they have a very, very long way to go. Secondly, they are incapable of bridging the gap no matter how hard they try.

The fatal flaw is their refusal to accept their human limitations and their utter supernatural helplessness. Thus they see quitting as their only alternative. They forget that God is always making saints out of sinful, broken souls. Mary Magdalene was a prostitute out of whom Jesus cast seven devils. Peter denied Jesus and all of the other apostles except John abandoned him. Paul approved the murder of Steven. The tragedy of these faint-hearted souls is their self-reliance and the shattering consequences it brings. Of these proud and cowardly souls the following saying aptly applies: "Of all the words of tongue and pen, the saddest are these: it might have been!"

Developing ones natural ability is a good thing. Yet it is not an end in itself. Jesus confronts each person with a more fundamental challenge: "What does it profit a man to gain the whole world and to suffer the loss of his soul" (Mk 8:36)? Jesus describes the gate that leads to heaven as being hard and narrow, whereas the gate that leads to eternal destruction is easy and wide (Mt 7:13-14). These are life and death issues: eternal life and eternal death.

Sailors have a saying: "There are no atheists in storms at sea." The fear of capsizing and drowning can be overpowering. Life itself sometimes feels as if it were a series of storms at sea as a person feels buffeted by the wind and the waves of defeat, hurt, sadness, loneliness and disappointment. Similar storms beat against one's heart on the spiritual journey of life. It is natural to be fearful. Once when the disciples were in a storm and feeling afraid, Jesus asked them: "Why are you afraid, you of little faith" (Mt 8:26)? They felt themselves in danger and they called out for help. Jesus immediately came to their rescue.

The source of courage and the secret of all spiritual success is to rely on God, not on oneself. This is the great secret common to all the saints. They allowed God to do it all, to virtually carry them as a father does his child. Paul teaches this wisdom when he writes, "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (Phil 4:13). It is because he allowed God to work in him that Paul can also write: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil 1:21). The key to overcoming fear and becoming successful beyond ones wildest dream is simple and hard. Simple because we only need to rely on God. Then his hand will guide us through all the frightening storms of life. Hard because sacrifice, chiefly the sacrifice of one's self will and giving up the fantasy of control, is always difficult, painful and frightening. Our most urgent need when we are afraid is to cry out like the disciples: "Lord, save us! We are perishing" (Mt 8:25)!

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