

“Weathering the Storms of Life—Success and Failure”

Today we’re talking again about weathering the storms of life—a health crisis, a relational break down, financial problems. Last week we looked at how we are all either in the middle of a storm or will be at some point in the future. Last week it was all about how we can prepare for the hard circumstance in life by looking beyond them at the other side. By enduring through storms we’re prepared for other storms. And we can even face them with a kind of joy knowing that they help us to become people of compassion, people who are sensitive, who are more faithful.

Today I want to look at the storms of success and failure. Both have the potential to tear us up and wreak havoc in our lives. Being prepared can help us be ready so we survive and come out the other side stronger.

Success and failure. To get at this Bill Hybles talks about two circles. There’s the winner’s circle. It’s awesome to spend time in the winner’s circle. NASCAR drivers always drive into winner’s circles, Indy car drivers, people who win horse races. They come into a winner’s circle and people line up to take their pictures. Cameras flashing and video cameras everywhere. The press is there, trophies are handed out, garlands of flowers are draped. You’re big stuff when you’re in the winner’s circle!

I sent an email asking you tell me about times you felt like winners and losers. You gave me a ton of responses! Here’s what some of you said about the times of being winners. I feel like a winner... “the days I ‘get it right’ by fulfilling someone’s friendship needs.” One man wrote, “As odd as it seems, I felt like a real winner caring for my Dad during his final illness. It was a heart wrenching time but I knew I was doing the right thing and helping Dad achieve his goal of remaining in his own home. We drew closer together and to God.” One young mom wrote about feeling like a winner after 6 years of infertility and then taking her son to his first day of kindergarten last week. One man wrote about feeling like a winner when he was the first in his family to ever get a college degree.

One man wrote, “I felt like a real winner when I helped start up the Salvage Yard. It felt great to be a part of something a lot bigger than I was.”

Another man wrote, “When my wife and I are clicking, winner. When I get complimented on being a good father, I definitely feel like a winner.” It feels good and is good to be in the winner’s circle

Now, there really isn’t a loser’s circle. But if there was one, it would probably be a bland empty place. No trophies, no press, nobody taking pictures. There’s nobody who wants your time if you’re standing in the loser’s circle. If there was such a thing as a loser’s circle nobody would want to stand in it! We’d all try to avoid it as much as possible.

I asked you to tell me about time when you felt like you had failed, a time when you felt like a loser. One woman wrote, “When I had to accept the fact I was an alcoholic and drug addict I felt like a total failure...” Another woman wrote, I “Feel like a real loser every time I fail at not finding a husband, marriage, finding a relationship that can lead to marriage. It makes me feel like there is something wrong with me....not worthy, can’t measure up, unattractive, bad communication skills, poor personality, nothing to offer. Makes me feel like I don’t ‘fit in’”

One man was accused of stealing money and publicly humiliated in the press. He was later proved innocent of any wrongdoing but the damage was done. He wrote, “In the a period of 2 1/2 years I lost my job, my career, my reputation, my business, my house, my dad past away. I lost the ability to obtain suitable employment. I lost people who I thought were my friends, all the little fun toys, my marriage, and for the most part my kids.”

This mom wrote, “There are days that I feel like a loser and it always revolves around ‘mom guilt’. I might yell at the kids or lose my temper with them and that makes me feel like a loser. Sometimes, I admire someone that I think is an amazing mom and wife and start thinking about all the ways I could be doing better and that makes me feel like a loser.”

This man said, “I felt like a total loser after each of my failed marriages.”

This wife wrote, “When my marriage was in serious trouble and I had been subjected to my husband having an affair. I felt that it was all my fault. Everything that was happening was my fault.”

This man wrote, "I felt like a real failure as my wife and I suffered several miscarriages, and she slipped into a deep depression as a result. The failure I felt came from realizing that no matter how much I wanted to try and 'fix' it and help her feel better, I couldn't."

That's real world stuff right there. I want to be in the winner's circle as often as I can be and I'll work hard to be there and stay there. But the way life works, the way our world works, the way sin works, all of us are going to spend some time, and some of us are going to spend a lot of time, in the loser's circle and it's not going to be fun. And it's going to test our faith. And we'd better know some things in order to be ready.

A good starting point is the apostle Paul and some insights he had. You see, Paul had his struggles, his storms. He didn't try to hide it. In fact, he wrote a letter to a church telling them about his struggles. He wrote this: **"Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:8-10).**

There's a lot in there, but let's focus in on that part where God says, "My power is made perfect," where? In the winner's circle? No! "My power is made perfect in weakness." Now that's an interesting concept.

Yes, there are some experiences you can gain and some lessons you can learn from the winner's circle, but there's a whole spiritual curriculum that will only get developed when you lose. When you get defeated, beaten down or you feel weak. That's why Paul says in verse 10, "...for Christ's sake I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Let's talk about this, about what we do when we're standing in the winner's circle and when we're standing in the losers circle and what we can learn in both places.

The first part of this is about what happens when we win. Or what can happen when we win if we're not careful. First, winning is a good thing. Don't give up striving to win at what you do, to do it well, to do it with excellence—whether that's raising your family, or your job, or your health, or your faith, or your hobbies. Do your best, to win, but be careful! Because some people who win a little bit here and there start to cultivate a desire to win every time no matter the cost. They begin to be obsessed with winning in business, winning in relationships, winning at having and raising kids, winning at having the perfect job, the perfect life, the perfect home and so on. One of you wrote about how your pursuit of all that ultimately cost you everything.

For some people, when they taste the champagne of the winners circle, winning becomes the greatest drive in their lives no matter who gets hurt. No matter what gets lost along the way. No matter what has to be compromised. No matter what God or anyone else says about it. Sometimes when we put a few victories together it can create an addiction to winning. It can create the illusion that we have to win to be OK internally. And we'll pay any price to keep our string of victories alive.

To make matters worse, in a very high percentage of those addicted to winning, they become puffed up with pride. They become arrogant people who start to look down on those of us who lose a battle now and then.

People who get to a place of being addicted to winning at any cost can think they don't need God. They can think that people who are down and out are somehow lesser people, loser people. And that can affect their level of compassion for the poor. If you're addicted to winning it's very, very hard to be on a mission of connecting people to Jesus. I've got to say it again: It's fine to win and to seek to win, but to become obsessed with winning can destroy you.

And listen, being obsessed with winning can take a few different forms. I figured out that for me, an addiction to winning took the shape of a gigantic fear of failure. Kind of interesting isn't it? An addiction to winning, can keep a person from taking risks, from doing things that have the potential for great good, but also great failure. For me as a leader I've had to overcome some serious junk about this. Never wanting to fail can

be paralyzing—and if I cave in to that, it would mean me as a leader being paralyzed and getting in the way of us doing new things like new worship services for new people, not trying new ways to live out our mission. Because anything new has the potential for failure and if you fail, you don't get to stand in the winner's circle. What I'm getting at is that being addicted to winning can look like a fear of failure that has the potential to be paralyzing. So be careful in the winner's circle.

Because things happen in life, don't they? A divorce in your family, ongoing illness, a death, infertility, depression, friends moving away, changes in your job, aging. Things like this can make you feel like you're standing in the loser's circle. These are the kinds of things that drive you to a moment of utter vulnerability and openness to the activity of God and sensitivity to the work of the Holy Spirit. It is in times of weakness like that, that we are truly open and receptive to the Holy Spirit.

The spiritual truth is that there are some benefits associated with losing once in a while, with being in a "weakened state" as Paul said. When you're weak, there are some hidden strengths that can be developed.

Let's talk about this. First is when you experience a loss, God will often use that loss to clarify what's of ultimate importance in your life. **Loss often can have a clarifying effect.**

Some of you may remember a young woman named Leslie Johnston. A number of years ago she had a nearly fatal brain aneurysm. As a young wife and mother it struck hard leaving her in a coma for weeks. She came out of that coma and has been on a long road of recovery with a very long rehabilitation. She has had to relearn how to swallow and talk, and move. I visited Leslie and her husband Charlie when Leslie was in rehab in Columbia. I'll never forget the conversation I had with them. Charlie said, "Aaron, everything is different now. I know what's really important. Stuff is not important, money is not important. Life is too short to worry about that stuff. Life is too short to do a job you hate. Everything is different since this happened to Leslie. I can see what's really important now." Loss can clarify the values in our lives.

Losses can do that. They can serve you well. Some of you have had a lot of victories and gotten hazy about what is really important in this life. And maybe now you're standing smack dab in the loser's circle. It's painful to be there, I know. But one of the strengths to be gained out of a heartbreaking loss is clarity from God as to what's really important in your life when you're standing here. At least allow God to maybe clean your lenses a little bit and to see if you really are where you need to be in your relationship with God, in your relationship with family and friends. If you allow a loss to clarify some stuff in your life, your loss might serve you well.

Another thing I've learned about losses over the course of my life is that not only do they clarify, but **they can purify**. They really can. They can purify parts of you that might need it more than you think. Take a look at a person who was probably one of the most celebrated winners in all the Old Testament.

It was King David who stood in the victory circle militarily, economically and politically. This guy put together more victories back to back to back than almost anyone recorded in the Old Testament. He led Israel into what's known as the Golden Era. All the surrounding countries stood in awe at the achievements of this one man.

Then, of course, was his downfall with Bathsheba a married woman. He had an affair with her, she became pregnant, and then David had her husband killed. But it all came out. In just a few days, he lost face in front of the entire nation. He lost a confrontation with the Prophet Nathan. And because of the judgment of God, he lost his firstborn son. Three staggering losses to a guy who had only known victories.

From the middle of the loser's circle, David writes some words that are recorded in the Bible. Here's what the celebrated winner standing in the loser's circle writes. **"Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me....Cleanse me...and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow... Create in me a pure heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Ps 51:2-4, 7, 10. NIV)**

Sometimes when we're stringing up victories, when every chart is going up and to the right and life is really sailing along, well, we don't poke around our hearts for dark stuff. Winning can do that. Then every once in a while, through whatever set of circumstances--sometimes I create my own rotten circumstances--but

when I stand smack dab in the loser's circle for whatever set of reasons, I often look deep within myself and question how did I wind up here? Is there any part of this I need to own?

Often when I look inside myself, when I'm in a loser's circle, I see things I hadn't seen before, and they're not good. There's compromise. There's slippage. There's pride or there's envy or just junk—sinful junk. I'll find myself in the loser's circle saying, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, renew a right spirit, wash me. Make me whiter than snow."

One of you wrote about a struggle you're in right now in feeling like you are not being a good husband, not supporting your wife when she need you to be there for her. You wrote, "*I have been struggling with this for 14 years today. I am very close to losing my wife and family. Two of the most important things in my life and I am very close to losing them. I have seen what I have done and taking slow and careful steps to change this direction. I am finding strength through God and other good resources to finally make some change I need to grow and save what is important to me. It is a long slow process. Sometimes you have to lose to win.*"

The fact of the matter is some of you are in a loser's circle right now, and it's spiritual inventory time. Some of you have been so busy shaking your fist at God, and yelling about the economy, and blaming somebody else for your problems. If you're in a loser's circle, it's not a bad time to say, "What can I learn about this? Did greed get its way with me? Did something else? Please show me."

Now, I'm not suggesting that everyone who stands in a loser's circle is standing there as a result of a specific sin, because I don't think the Bible teaches that at all. But I think when you stand there, some good can come out of it and maybe some purification can occur that needs to occur in your life.

Just one final idea. I find that when I'm in the loser's circle it can, if I allow it, it **can have a unifying effect** with me and other people. Because of the power of the loser's circle to bring people together. But here's the thing, when we fail, our tendency might be to hide from people—especially the people closest to us. But, listen, there is power in being vulnerable about our losses, our failures.

I got a call earlier this year from a woman asking me to help her friend. She told me she was worried that her friend was going to go off the deep end. She had recently gone through a divorce and was trying to raise her daughter and run a business. She was barely making ends meet and had gotten behind on her loan, and in the midst of it all had her purse stolen on her way to the bank. It was the last straw and she didn't want anybody to know, her friend cared enough to know she needed help. We surrounded her as a church, got her through the crisis, gave her some breathing room so she could get back on her feet. She found a good job, sold her business, and started brand new. But it was when she allowed herself to be vulnerable and ask for help and let people be there for her that things began to turn around. Our losses can unify us and make us stronger.

Well, I want to remind you that it's OK to win when you can win, just be careful to keep your focus. Don't wreck your soul. Don't get arrogant. Don't drift away from God. Don't walk around thinking everybody else is stupid. Just be careful and remember that to those whom much is given much is expected.

And if you're in the loser's circle, remember that it's not forever. The power of God can be made perfect in your weakness and it can clarify, and it can purify, and it can unify if you'll let it. So please, let it. Please invite God to complete the spiritual growth that he has started in you in the winner's circle and in the loser's circle.

You know, everybody thought that Jesus was weak and big loser when he was crucified. But God's strength was made perfect in his weakness, and God's strength will be made perfect in yours. And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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