

# FAILURE

— friend or foe?



## CHAPTER 10

*Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again,  
this time more intelligently.<sup>1</sup>*

— Henry Ford

**F**or the first time in history, the 2007 Super Bowl between the Chicago Bears and the Indianapolis Colts was coached by two black men who were friends, and who are committed Christians. Louie Smith of the Chicago Bears and Tony Dungy of the Indianapolis Colts knew each other well, and the media seemed to enjoy highlighting the “color” issue. Most newscasters downplayed the Christian piece.

The game was a great one. Soggy weather, high intensity, great plays, and amazing athletic ability were all part of the day. Both teams gave their all. And when the clock ran out, Indianapolis was the winner, 29-17. The coaches shook hands and embraced. They looked at each other with a sense of “we both gave it our best shot.”

One team won . . . one team lost. It could be said that one team succeeded and one failed.

The life of Tony and Lauren Dungy, though, goes deeper than winning this football game. About two years before his phenomenal win, Tony and Lauren suffered perhaps the greatest loss and nightmare that any parent could experience. Their 18-year-old son James committed suicide.

We cannot understand that kind of pain, unless we have walked a similar path. Tony and Lauren were devastated. They went through terrible emotional turmoil and a tremendous loss of energy.

The Tampa Bay Buccaneers' defensive coordinator, Monte Kiffen, had previously worked with Dungy at Tampa Bay. When he heard the tragic news, he said, "It shakes you, there's no doubt about it. Tony and I first came together in 1992 and I got to see the boy grow up. . . . Tony's got tremendous faith, and that's what will carry Tony through. . . . He's unbelievable. I know what Tony's thinking. I know how he'll handle it. It'll be his faith that will let him stand strong, but that doesn't mean it's easy."<sup>2</sup>

Kiffen was right in his assessment. Eventually, this genial, brilliant coach and his wife began to stand back up, to look for something inside called "trust," and to rebuild their lives.

One of the most common reactions of parents who have lost a child in this way is separation or divorce. Depression, overwhelming discouragement, and blame are frequent emotional obsessions. Feelings of failure become daily thoughts. Though this couple had a wonderful marriage and were exemplary parents, many of these emotions hit Tony and Lauren. A day came when this couple decided to talk to each other and to trust their God.

*Give ear to my words, O LORD, consider my sighing. Listen to my cry for help, my King and my God. . . . But let all who take refuge in you be glad (Ps. 5:1–11).*

Hardship, disappointment, loss, and the wrong choices of those in our family can be interpreted as personal failure. But many times in life, challenging — and even devastating — pain come, because it is normal and common.

### ***Excuses or Scapegoating***

Many people will not permit themselves to accept failure. One of their common reactions is to blame those around them or to make excuses.

Part of the reason for this is that their egos or their neurotic guilt will not permit them to be wrong. This subtle part of their thinking drives them to perfectionism and to standards within their work environments that cause pressures that few can live up to. This is not normal, but it is common.

I'm not saying that we do not need a diligent, strong work ethic. We must all work hard at what we do and be administratively strong. However, there are many who struggle with finding a balance and "scapegoat" their employees or peers in the process.

Popular author and pastor Rick Warren often tells his staff, "We must give ourselves permission to fail." He reminds them of the principle of "it's good enough."<sup>3</sup> Although we try our best, we reach a point in our work and efforts where it is healthy to say, "I've given this my best shot; now let's go with it." Really, the only thing that is perfect is God and His truth.

### *The “Limps” of Life*

I am in my fifth decade of life. When I was halfway through the sixth grade, I was placed back into the fifth grade. My teacher, my parents, and the school counselor felt that this was best. My problem? It was difficult for me to concentrate on all the different subjects at once.

During that decision time, and really since that time, I’ve said very little to my mother and father, sister, or brother about it. I didn’t understand it. I didn’t argue but did what my parents and teacher had decided.

Although my athletic ability, emotional maturity, and body were a year ahead of my new classmates, I felt “failure” in a way that I did not understand. It was different than not winning a game or not being chosen for a team.

That new feeling was supported by small comments from my new teacher, the new desk that I sat in, the way the teacher and new kids perceived me, my old friends in the sixth grade that I had just left, and the fifth graders saying things like, “You’re better at running because you’re older.” I experienced personal, emotional pain and misinformed comments at a new level in my life. There was no instruction about how to use this challenge as an opportunity, or how soon I could be bumped back up with my peers. The only instruction was, “You’re doing this.”

It’s interesting to me that after over 40 years that memory can still be somewhat fresh. Perhaps this is one of the reasons I have loved college, graduate schools, reading, and writing. That “setback” may have been an incentive to work harder.

I was the first in my family to receive graduate degrees and doctorates. My early English teachers would never have expected me to write books or to speak to audiences. I feel that probably the greatest reason I’ve gone on with education, writing, and speaking is that God restored my faith in the gifts He had given me and helped me learn from that terrible experience.

*My great concern is not whether you have failed,  
but whether you are content with your failure.<sup>4</sup>*

— Abraham Lincoln

There was another boy who failed sixth grade. He also had a battle with depression in his early life. He was made fun of for his “large head” and his lack of coordination. When he was 16, he was sent home from a prestigious boarding school with a report card that said, “This young man shows a conspicuous lack of success.”

Many years later, that boy became the prime minister of England. His job? To defend the British Empire against the evil dictator Adolph Hitler.

Sir Winston Churchill became perhaps the most effective national leader that England had ever had.

He once said, “Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never — in nothing, great or small, large or petty — never give in except to conviction of honor and good sense. Never, never, never, never give up.”<sup>5</sup>

Another boy was sent home from school. His teacher explained to his parents that he really had no great mental ability and would not be able to benefit from his intelligence. The teacher suggested that he work on the farm.

Later in his life, he said, “When everybody else is quitting on a problem, that is the time to begin.”<sup>6</sup> Today, Thomas A. Edison is known for his brilliance in the sciences.

When Albert Einstein’s doctoral dissertation was submitted to the University of Bern it came back with the shocking words, “This thesis is irrelevant and fanciful.”<sup>7</sup> The tidal wave of rejection emotions hit him; however, after thinking it through, he submitted his dissertation to the University of Zurich. Not only did the University of Zurich recognize his abilities and unique thinking gifts, they gave him a university position as a junior professor. He became one of the greatest physicists ever.

### ***Why Do “the Successful” Often Reject Failure?***

Psychologist Archibald D. Hart feels, “Even in our Christian subculture, we see people all around us who are driven to seek success but have no idea what role failure can play in building success. They don’t know how to receive it with grace. They are unable to incorporate it into their Christian experience. The Church has, by and large, uncritically fostered a theology of success. In contrast, it has no theology of failure. If anything, failure is viewed as something no Christian should have to deal with. This has left many of the faithful believing that if they fail, it is simply because God has turned His back on them.”<sup>8</sup>

*If there was just one thing that every enduringly successful person we met had in common, is that they were all really great at failure.<sup>9</sup>*

As leaders, we should recognize the fact that we are not perfect, and all of our decisions are not perfect either. If we are not careful, we displace our failures onto our employer, employees, family, and friends.

Our ego and our arrogance will not permit us to admit that we were wrong, or, for whatever reason, that “this didn’t work.”

People who egotistically blame others for their bad decisions or failures have a level of arrogance that will not permit them to say, “I was wrong; I made a bad call. I will take the responsibility for this one.”

Employees who work for people who blame are constantly having to play by their boss's rules in order to keep their jobs and to be loyal. Most will do what they are told, even though they might feel that the direction that the boss wants to go will injure the company, or the church, or their own lives. The kind of pride that many leaders have will encourage them to blame the staff, a stockholder, a parishioner, or a board member. Instead of sincerely admitting that they made the wrong decision, they find a creative way to keep their self-perceived reputation intact, while they unjustly put the blame on another.

I once knew an employer who lived states away from the home office. He came to the office only a few days a month and basically communicated by phone or e-mail. He loved his life and activities at home, and enjoyed his part-time job where a friend of mine served as an executive. The problem started when he wanted to make all the major decisions in the portion of the company that my friend led. Other divisions experienced the same challenge. He would say, "Let's do this project" or, "I'd like for you to consider hiring this person," and then force his agenda through. Typically, the project or person was not something or someone that my friend thought was best.

The feeling was that he was running the company out of his hip pocket and that his CEO job wasn't something he was serious about, but rather a fun game (for him) — a diversion. He made decisions that were not well thought out and he operated on shaky, inexperienced "hunches."

He had the personal weaknesses of shifting blame and of not releasing his managers and other experts to lead in their departments. As a result, numerous people, projects, and results were negatively affected. For a while, others were blamed for his bad calls. Eventually, the company realized that many of their problems came from this person's off-the-cuff inexperience and ineptitude.

Failure. Inaccurate decisions and poor judgment calls are part of everyone's lives. What can we do when we discover that we have been caught in wrong thinking or behavior? We can recognize it, admit it, and change.

What can we do to accept our failures?

*It may not be your fault for getting down,  
but it has got to be your fault for not getting up.*

— Steve Davis<sup>10</sup>

## **1. Accept the fact that you will make mistakes; and when you do, admit it.**

Many successful people think that when they fail, they are a "failure." I might fall down a lot in life, but this occasional (or frequent) experience

does not make me a failure. Everyone makes choices that are not perfect, or might be wrong. We can accept this fact and learn from it, or not accept it and blame others when we mess up.

Don't fear your past failures — trust that you have a Creator God who will give you other chances to get it right. The Psalmist David wrote:

*If the LORD delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm; though he stumble, he will not fall, for the LORD upholds him with his hand (Ps. 37:23–24).*

*He will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall (Ps. 55:22).*

## **2. Accept the fact that you are not perfect.**

When we make a bad decision that results in failure, we are often shocked because it points out our imperfections.

I have met very few people who enjoy their imperfections. All of us have blind spots, and we occasionally realize new tendencies or personal issues that point out additional flaws. This is humbling and at times embarrassing. It can remind us that everyone has feet of clay.

Since we all “limp” a little in life, we can identify with others who are also trying, but are not perfect.

## **3. What we call failure might not be failure in God's eyes.**

In the classic devotional book *My Utmost for His Highest*, Oswald Chambers writes, “God called Jesus Christ to what seemed unmitigated disaster.”<sup>11</sup>

His point is that, with our human understanding, the life of Jesus was full of rejection. People wanted to kill Him, and His life ended with the death penalty — what we might describe as failure.

But from God's viewpoint it was an *exact success*. His obedient life fulfilled His Father's perfect plan for the world. He did the absolute right thing in everything He said and did.

There are many times in life when we know the “right” thing to do, but we also know that a certain decision could cause personal pain. What do we do in those intense times? Do we make the right call, knowing that is the direction we (the company or church) need to go, even though we will go through a time of “paying” for our decision?

Frequently, success or failure is just a matter of perspective.

We often analyze our results in the company we serve, the church we pastor, or the family we are a part of with standards that do not consider the whole picture. There are many factors involved in whether a project (or a person) is going to be what we call “a success.”

#### 4. Make the commitment not to blame others for your wrong decisions.

Norman Vincent Peale said, “Never say anything to hurt anyone. Moreover . . . refrain from double talk, from shrewd and canny remarks that are designed to advance our interests at someone’s disadvantage. We are to turn our back upon evil and in every way possible, do good, help people and bring blessings into their lives.”<sup>12</sup>

Do all you can to ensure that others understand that you own the problem, not that you pretend to own it while blaming another. A multitude of employees, parishioners, spouses, and children have been wounded by people who have “scapegoated” their guilt and wrong decisions.

This behavior is as old as Adam and Eve. Adam blamed Eve for his decision to disobey God. Eve said, “The serpent deceived me and I ate.” She blamed the devil for her bad choice. They didn’t accept the fact that they did the wrong thing. I wonder what would have happened if they had said, “God, we are deeply sorry for our decision to disobey You. We understand our wrong choice and need Your help to ensure that we never do this again.”

Failure has been a personal struggle for mankind since the beginning. We must understand that we are not perfect. We must own our wrong decisions and behavior, and not blame others for our choices, and we must learn to go frequently to our Creator and receive forgiveness for our sinful acts as we strive to live a balanced life.

Think about this:

*Out of the depths I cry to you, O LORD;  
O Lord, hear my voice.  
Let your ears be attentive to my cry for mercy.  
If you, O LORD, kept a record of sins,  
O Lord, who could stand?  
But with you there is forgiveness;  
therefore you are feared (Ps 130:1–4).*

#### Endnotes

1. <http://quotes4all.net/authors/henry%20ford/quotes.html>.
2. <http://sports.espn.go.com/nfl/news/story?id=2268593>.
3. This is a success trait that Rick Warren often shares at pastors’ conferences and speaking engagements.
4. Herter Studio, *Fall Better* (Philadelphia, PA: Running Press, 2006), p. 47.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 24.
6. Archibald D. Hart, *Habits of the Mind* (Dallas, TX: Word Publishing, 1996), p. 58.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

8. Ibid., p. 56.
9. Jerry Porras, Stewart Emery, and Mark Thompson, *Success Built to Last* (New York: Plume Books, 2007), p. 128
10. Source unknown.
11. Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost For His Highest*, August 5th, "The Baffling Call of God," <http://myutmost.org/08/0805.html>.
12. [http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/n/norman\\_vincent\\_peale.html](http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/authors/n/norman_vincent_peale.html).