

When Christians Fail: Don't Give Up & Don't Give In
a sermon

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Introduction

A friend of mine took a class on the Bible at a secular college. Before that, his Bible knowledge consisted of your standard collection of Sunday School stories: Moses crossing the Red Sea, Daniel in the lion's den, and Jesus feeding the five thousand. Imagine his surprise when the professor started reading stories from the Bible about the people of God lying, cheating, stealing, raping and murdering. My friend's reaction was predictable: he decided that he could come up with better morals on his own and chucked the Bible.

I have another friend who thought maybe Christianity had something to say, but when he poked his head in a church he was overwhelmed by the nauseating hypocrisy. After reading that Christians have the same divorce rate as the national average, hearing his neighbor rage in anger about his church's building program, and reading cheesy bumper stickers about how righteous Christians are, I'm not surprised that he decided that he didn't really need this brand of self-delusion.

Aren't the people of God supposed to behave better than this?

Coming closer to home, I looked into my own heart recently. It's been 16 years now since I realized that my life was a mess, since I realized that God loved me, since I trusted that if I gave myself to Jesus that he might put me back together. But after all these years, when I look into my heart, I begin to wonder if I have missed something. I think, "I'm nowhere near where I want to be...or *who* I want to be."

There's no question that there's sin in the camp, right here in our church, right here in every person, and right here in your preacher's heart, too. So the question is: what do we think about this? What does *God* think of this? We're going to look at the biblical story of God's people. My friend's professor was partially right: the picture isn't nearly as pretty as we learned

in Sunday School. But that's a *good* thing, because the Bible is down-to-earth and realistic. The scriptures are full of stories of God's people falling down, and it's full of stories of God seeing that and refusing to either give up or give in. He refuses to give up on his people because his goal is still the same as it was from the beginning: he wants to be with us and to share his creation with us. And he refuses to give in and just let us make a mess of things with our bull-headed ways. God loves us and loves the plan he has for us, and he is determined to overcome every obstacle.

The Biblical Story

Let's begin with what we mean by "the people of God." The key concept here is "holy." To be the people of God is to be holy. Now this word brings up all sorts of images in our minds: old, stone cathedrals; big, black, gold-edged Bibles; robed saints in prayer; and wild, religious enthusiasts. But for the most part we associate "holy people" with moral perfection. We use the word "saint" (which means "holy person") to mean a highly virtuous person. But to think this way is to get the cart before the horse. "Holy" really means to be separated for God's purposes. Holy things are those things that God has special use of. Holy things have been dedicated to him. As a simple illustration, it's like me and my favorite fountain pen: I have a desk drawer full of pens for scribbling down a phone number or something. But then there's my special pen that I get out when I'm going to write a meaningful note to a friend. The way it feels, the way it writes, and the beautiful strokes all separate it from the pile of ordinary pens. I love writing with my special pen. That's what it means to be holy: to be specially chosen by God for a special purpose.

Throughout the Bible, God is in the business of making things holy. He takes them from being ordinary and makes them holy, setting them apart for his special purposes. When he created the heavens and the earth, he made humans for a special purpose. He made us holy by

making us in his image. He made us holy by giving us a special responsibility: to care for all of creation underneath his authority. Human beings were made to share creation with God and to be in relationship with him, a dance of sorts, throughout our lives.

But the first humans, like all people ever since, were not content with being in this relationship with God. We all naturally rebel against the thought of being holy, of being dedicated to God's purposes. We much prefer to dedicate ourselves to our own purposes. For some reason, we see God's plan for us to be oppressive and limiting. We think that by getting out from under God's authority we can really *be* something and really start living. Oddly enough, the result is the opposite: instead of transcending this "burdensome" holiness, we end up descending to the realm of the ordinary. Adam and Eve disobeyed God by eating from the forbidden tree, thinking they would become like God, but instead they became mortal. As this pattern plays itself out in the Bible, we find people running further and further from God's plan, and at each step they become more and more animal-like: fighting, taking, seducing, raging. When we give up holiness, we end up becoming worthless. It's as if my favorite fountain pen decided that it didn't want to slide across the paper effortlessly in my hand any more. It thinks, "Why should I do what *he* wants? I think I'll just stop here!" *Ert! Aah! Argh!* As I try to write and it tries to do its own thing, you can see that I'm just going to throw it away. "Well, it *used* to be a good pen!" Now, of course, we are much more than a fountain pen, and God wants much more than simply to "use" us. But I think you get the idea. Because we're much more than fountain pens, when we reject God, he responds. He doesn't give up on us. He doesn't give in to us.

When people in the Bible assert themselves against God, how does he respond? First, God is emotional. When he looked out at people living like beasts in the time of Noah, it says that "He was grieved in His heart" (Gen 6:6). The prophets often speak of God's sorrow when

his people reject him. Sometimes God moves beyond grief. When he calls Moses to the special, holy purpose of leading his people out of Egypt, Moses makes excuses to get out of the assignment. This time the Bible says that “the anger of the Lord burned against Moses” (Exod 4:14). We find many other times when God is angry like this when people reject his dreams. But behind both his grief and his anger are his love. God’s love for his people exceeds even that of a mother for her infant: “Can a woman forget her nursing child, And have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, but I will not forget you” (Isa 49:15). God grieves, is angry, and loves. Emotionally, God doesn’t give up and he doesn’t give in.

God’s love drives his other responses to people rejecting their holiness. God responds with words to call us back to our senses. When Adam hides from him, he asks, “Where are you?” (Gen 3:9). He doesn’t ask this to get information but to give Adam a chance to think about it. When Cain is enraged, God asks him, “Why are you angry?” (Gen 4:6) for the same reason. Later, Isaiah speaks God’s challenge to his wayward people, “Come now, and let us reason together” (Isa 1:18). But God speaks in more ways than this. He also responds to our rebellion by making promises. For example, he promises to stick with Abraham. Have you ever paused to be amazed by God making a promise to a mere human being? Why should God commit himself to a particular course of action by making a promise to us? It’s part of his way of drawing us back to him, to being holy and being part of his plan. One of God’s most amazing promises is in the mysterious ceremony with Abraham where he tells Abraham to sacrifice some animals and to leave a walkway through their carcasses on the ground. God then puts Abraham to sleep and walks through the midst of those bloody bodies, saying in essence, “May this be done to me if I ever give up on you” (cf. Gen 15). God *really* doesn’t give up on us, or give in to our rebellion.

Finally, God responds to our rejection of holiness by adjusting how he works with us.

This doesn't mean that he gives in and says, "Ok, I'll relax the standard." It means that he's so dedicated to having us be with him on this whole project that he's willing to adjust it to accommodate our weaknesses. For instance, after the world gets completely out of kilter with the Tower of Babel incident, he chooses Abraham as the start of a new, holy nation—dedicated to God—who will be the model for the rest of the world. He changes from working equally with everyone, to establishing a beachhead with Abraham and then working outward. When Abraham's descendents become a large nation and need guidance, he provides them with teaching and laws so that they will know how to live in a way that fits their holiness. As we find ways to go off track, God works in new ways to bring us back. God accommodates his plan to our failure, not to compromise but to make it work. No matter how bad it gets, God always finds a way to save the day: he doesn't give up; he doesn't give in.

So God responds to our rejection of holiness emotionally, with words, and with accommodation. But he remains dedicated to achieving his goal of having people who embrace him, who embrace being holy.

Despite all of this, God's plan for having a holy people just never seems to get traction. The new, holy nation of Israel grumbles in the wilderness and wants to get out of their holy calling (Num 11:4-6). David, the man after God's own heart, descends to lust and murder with Bathsheba (1 Sam 11). The nation of Israel spirals downward, is sent off into exile, and returns to be an insignificant province within a great world empire. It just doesn't seem to be working.

The turning point comes when God himself becomes a holy man. Jesus, "the Holy One of God" (John 6:69), accepted his holy calling with his whole heart and lived the one life that was fully dedicated to God. In his ministry, Jesus reflected every aspect of God's reaction to unholiness when he encountered it. He did this emotionally. When people cared more for killing

him than caring for others, Mark says that he looked “at them with anger, grieved at their hardness of heart” (Mark 3:5). But more than anything, Jesus felt love and compassion for all. And just as God had responded by teaching and questioning people to call them back to their holy vocation, Jesus did the same with many lessons and parables. But most importantly, Jesus affirmed God’s promise that he would die before he would give up on his people, and Jesus indeed chose to die for us, the wayward holy. And Jesus re-shapes how the world works by sending the Holy Spirit to live within any who will have him, to any who truly desire to live a life dedicated to God’s purposes.

And what has been the result? Somehow we all intuitively expect things to go well from here. Jesus has lived the perfect life. He has given his Holy Spirit to us. We are his saints, the holy people. But sadly, we as the church still fall far short of living the holy life that God calls us to. Instead, we still think that God’s ways are oppressive and undermine our becoming ‘all we can be.’ And so we assert ourselves as knowing better than God, and the result is dissension, division, sexual misconduct, broken families, addictions, workaholism, and all the old familiar sins. We’re a clogged up, sticky, leaking fountain pen.... It seems like God’s master plan has failed. So what do we do? Do we give up on the Bible like my friend who saw how un-holy God’s people can be? Do we give up on church because of all the un-holy people there? Do we give up on ourselves because we fall so far short? Do we give in and quit caring about it?

Our Response

The Bible teaches that a day is coming when God will set everything right. In that day, we will be wholeheartedly dedicated to God. But what do we do until then? I’d like to suggest five ways that we can respond in a godly way to Christians (ourselves included!) behaving badly. As you might guess, the summary is that we don’t give up and we don’t give in.

First, we need to avoid the error of thinking that Christianity just doesn't 'work.' I remember times when I've looked at my church and thought that I should just go somewhere else where people are 'more Christian.' I've even seen the darkness in my own heart and thought that I needed some new salvation because the first one didn't 'take.' I know I've looked at other Christians' lives and thought that *they* needed to be saved again! But this is completely the wrong way to look at the problem. Don't go looking for another church, another "successful Christian living" book, another set of friends. God hasn't given up and neither should we.

Second, we need to each individually decide whether we want to accept the holiness that God has given us. Whether for the first time or for the zillionth time, we need to listen to God's voice that says, "You are holy and I created you to be dedicated to me." When we hear that call, we are both drawn to it and repulsed by it. God's holiness is like a fire: it's light attracts us and it's heat scares us. We wonder what we'll have to give up in order to be set apart for God. We *like* trusting our stock portfolio; we *like* putting other people down so we feel more important; we *like* flirting with that co-worker. But in the end, there's nothing more wonderful than being in relationship with God. We can choose to set ourselves up against him, but that road is self-destruction. Make the decision: are you dedicated to God or against him? Don't give in and settle for something less.

Third, after we've accepted our holy calling, we need to move toward acting that way. Paul charged the Christians in Ephesus: "I...entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called" (Eph 4:1). This takes discipline, prayer, study, reflection, and Christian community. As we embark on that together, we may find that what it means to live a holy life is different than we thought. It's not tithing 10% and avoiding drinking and smoking. It's discovering what it means to bear the image of God on earth. It's a lifelong

adventure. We may discover that God's ways are more wonderful (and more difficult) than we imagined. Don't just listen to some dumbed-down version of what it means to be a Christian – that's giving in.

Fourth, we need to face our own failings realistically. God tells his people, "You shall be holy for I am holy" (Lev 11:45). The bar is high, and history says we're going to fail a lot. Some say that we will continually grow better at living a holy life. That may be. But, if I'm honest, I'll admit that there have been long periods where I seem to be moving backward. In the face of that, let's remember how God responds: he neither tosses his holy people aside, nor gives in and says, "Ok, just be partly holy." Don't fall prey to looking upon yourself with anger and disappointment when you fail, because God doesn't do so. When Paul wrote to wayward Christians, even when their lives were ugly with sin, he didn't toss them aside as worthless. Instead he constantly reminded them of who they are: the holy people of God. Remember: that's who you are. No matter how badly you're failing at it, don't give up. God chose you "before the foundation of the world [to be] holy and blameless before Him" (Eph 1:4).

Finally, how should we respond to others when they fall short of their holy vocation? Sometimes, like God, we grieve and are even angry at what others do. But when someone has cast aside their holiness, our driving response should be love. God also speaks, and so we are likewise called to speak words that encourage and build one another up (1 Thess 5:11), but with the humility that comes from remembering our own failings (Phil 2:3). Christians will let you down, but don't give up on them because God doesn't.

Praise God who made us. Praise God who dedicates us to his service. Praise God who gives us new hearts that yearn to please him. Praise God who loves us when we fail. Praise God for appointing a day when all sin will be destroyed, and we will dwell with him at peace forever. Father, thank you for not giving up on us and not giving in to our failures. May we do the same. Through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.