



Redemptive Recovery from an Ethical Failure

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“If”^{*1}

*If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too;
If you can wait and not be tired by waiting,
Or being lied about, don't deal in lies,
Or being hated, don't give way to hating,
And yet don't look too good, nor talk too wise:*

*If you can dream—and not make dreams your master;
If you can think—and not make thoughts your aim;
If you can meet with Triumph and Disaster
And treat those two impostors just the same;
If you can bear to hear the truth you've spoken
Twisted by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Or watch the things you gave your life to, broken,
And stoop and build 'em up with worn-out tools:*

*If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;
If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew
To serve your turn long after they are gone,
And so hold on when there is nothing in you
Except the Will which says to them: 'Hold on!'*

*If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue,
Or walk with Kings—nor lose the common touch,
If neither foes nor loving friends can hurt you,
If all men count with you, but none too much;
If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And—which is more—you'll be a Man, my son!*

¹ T.S. Eliot. *A Choice of Kipling's Verse* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1941), 273. This poem by Rudyard Kipling, written in 1909 for his teenage son, is about the importance of maintaining one's personal ethics.

Several years ago, a young West Point officer (Class of 2000) and Rhodes scholar referred to this poem in his book, “The Unforgiving Minute: A Soldier’s Education.”² He stated that he often wondered how he would answer if he was in command in the battlefield and a soldier asked him, “What do we do now, sir?” He hoped his military education and ethical standards would be sufficient for critical moments on a battlefield – those “unforgiving minutes” – where a sudden decision had to be made quickly and wisely. In 2003 he came face-to-face with one of those unforgiving minutes when his platoon was caught in an ambush in Afghanistan. One soldier died and many troops were injured. He knew going into that fight there would probably be casualties, yet he tried his best to prepare his soldiers for war as much as possible.

Those unforgiving minutes are minutes we all experience as human beings. Are we good stewards of the time given to us? We can’t replace time, redo it, or reboot it. We have to ask God to help us when we get to that particular point in time when we face an ethical or moral decision.

In the last several weeks I have seen headlines in military newspapers of military leaders of all ranks -- junior officers, flag officers, and even a three-star general – who were under investigation, relieved of command, or court-martialed because of sexual misconduct, inappropriate comments, toxic leadership towards their staff and subordinates, or ethical behavior that caused a loss of trust or confidence in their leadership by their superiors or subordinates.

There are four chapters in the Bible about Samson, and most of the information about him is negative. Despite that, he made it to the Hall of Faith in Hebrews chapter 11, verse 32. In Judges chapters 13-16 we learn the story of Samson’s ethical failures. Chapter 13 tells us that Samson had a divine calling. An angel appeared to his mother and told her Samson would be dedicated to God, would lead Israel free from the Philistines, and be one of the twelve judges whom God would raise up to maintain His covenant with Israel. In Hebrew, Samson’s name means “sun” – he was going to be a bright light. Yet his relationships with Delilah led to his complete downfall. He was a man who seemed to have ruined his life because of his ethical decisions and personal choices.

What happened to Samson? Why did he make so many bad and painful choices that took his life so off the course God had for him? Samson’s parents consecrated him at birth through something called “the Nazarite vow” which is explained in Numbers 6:1-8. The Nazarite vow involved three restrictions: abstinence from strong drink or anything from grapes, no contact with dead bodies, and no haircuts. Samson eventually broke all three of those vows. In chapter 14 he wanted to find a Philistine wife. Although his parents advised him not to, he went anyway. On his journey he found a honeycomb in a dead lion’s carcass, so he scraped the honey out of the body of the lion, ate it, and gave some of it to his parents. (It’s interesting when we break ethical boundaries, we bring other people into that as well.)

In Judges 14:10 we read about Samson in the Philistine city of Timnah preparing for his wedding feast (or, bachelor party) just like other young men did in that pagan culture. The Bible implies that he joined his thirty guests in a nothing more than three days of drunken revelry. In Judges 16, Samson goes to the Philistine city of and engages in sexual misconduct with a prostitute. He then meets Delilah, whose name means “darkness”, “woman of the night”, or “consumed with desire.” She eventually seduced him and tricked him into telling her the secret of his strength. Samson told her, “I have been a Nazirite to God since my mother’s womb. If my head is shaved, then my strength will leave me, and I shall become weak and be like any other man.” (Judges

² Craig Mullaney. *The Unforgiving Minute: A Soldier’s Education*. (New York: The Penguin Press, 2009).

16:17). Delilah used that knowledge and gave it to the Philistines who cut his hair, took away his strength, and gouged out his eyes, and threw him into prison for the rest of his life.

The bottom line to his failures is found in Judges 14:3,7: “Samson did what was right in his own eyes.” Doesn’t that sound so familiar? In the book of Judges, it also says Israel had no king and everyone did what was right in their own eyes. In multiple other places in the Bible, we also see that same phrase.

Samson succumbed to the culture that surrounded him. Is it possible that as Christian leaders we can also find ourselves acting, thinking, talking, and doing things just like our secular culture? In *The Maxwell Leadership Bible*, Christian author and pastor John Maxwell writes, “By all accounts, Samson could have become one of Israel’s greatest leaders, yet he turned out to be one of the worst. How could someone with such a strong start finish so poorly?”³ Maxwell then lists five signs when a Christian leader is in trouble:

1. When they fail to address glaring character flaws in their own lives.
2. When they count on deception to safeguard themselves.
3. When they act impulsively.
4. When they are overcome by an area of weakness.
5. When they misuse their God-given gifts.⁴

Samson was a showman, and the biblical text never shows him giving glory to God for his strength. He took all the credit for his supernatural abilities. He worked alone, without a spiritual accountability partner. And he never prayed until he was in prison, blind, and performing slave labor. Sometimes it takes us to get to the bottom of our life before we really cry out to God for help.

Judges 13-16 is somewhat depressing, yet it shows God’s mercy continuing to prevail even over Samson’s ethical failures. Samson broke his vows and didn’t even realize that the Lord had left him, but God wasn’t finished with Samson. God had called him as one of his judges, and God’s call on his life was irrevocable. Notice how the Bible describes God’s mercy to Samson, “However, the hair of (Samson’s) head began to grow again after it had been shaved.” (Judges 16: 22). God in His great mercy was continuing to woo Samson into a personal relationship with Him in spite of his sinful failures, just as he does with each one of us.

There are other biblical examples of leaders failing, yet God continued using them. The prophet Balaam was on a treacherous path to curse Israel when God put a talking donkey in front of him to get his attention. David’s life was disastrous after he committed adultery and murder, yet God sent Nathan to David to help him return to the Lord. In Luke 22, Simon Peter failed to honor Jesus and betrayed the Lord three times, but Jesus told him that he would recover and go on to be a leader. 1 Corinthians 10 is a powerful chapter listing the various things that happened in the life of Israel.

What a beautiful picture of how God redeems us when we have failed. And God asks us to look for someone else who is struggling and help them instead of having a pity party about our own failings. James 2:13 says, “...judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment.”

³ John C. Maxwell. *The Maxwell Leadership Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Bibles, 2002), 296.

⁴ Ibid.

What was Samson's unforgiving minute? He was in a prison and all the Philistine leadership had gathered in a pagan temple to worship their false god. They used the opportunity to have the blind, broken, and defeated Samson to perform for them and to mock the God of Israel. When things looked so dark, Samson chose to pray – the only time the Bible records a prayer from him to the Lord. It was a desperate prayer: "Oh Lord, Sovereign God...remember me. Strengthen me. Avenge me." God heard that prayer, and gave Samson the strength to grasp two pillars and bring a house down on all his enemies.

All these ethical failures are warnings from God's Word that we should not fall into that same trap. God's word is a reminder, a light, to keep us on the path of righteousness.

"I wonder if we're defensive about everyday 'white lies' because we are too lazy to find creative ways to speak the truth in love. My sense is that most of us are defensive about our lying because we are defensive about ourselves. We are slow to face the truth of the contrast between our character and God's. According to the Scriptures, God himself 'does not lie' (Titus 1:2). In his holiness, he is incapable of lying. As the Apostle John puts it, 'God is light. In him there is no darkness at all.' (1 John 1:5) Lying can't be other than sinful because God can't do it. If lying were ever righteous, then there would be something righteous that God can't do. It is clearly not God's plan for people to harbor darkness or deception in their hearts. Even though God might use us when we lie, it doesn't mean we are not sinning when we do." -- Sarah Sumner, Seven Levels of Lying *

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Discussion Questions:

1. Think about one of your biggest moral lapses or ethical failures. What warning signs did God provide beforehand to avoid the failure?
2. How do ethical failures affect our relationship with Jesus Christ? With others?
3. Why is it so important to show repentance instead of remorse when you have an ethical failure?
4. How have your past ethical failures affected your future ministry opportunities?
5. How have you seen God accomplish His redemptive purposes in your life despite your ethical failures?

Conversational Prayer: *Spend time in conversational prayer, using your own words and speaking to Christ as not only as your Redeemer, but your friend. Ask Him which lessons from this devotional you most need to learn and apply in your own life.*

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