

## **“Three Strikes, You’re In”**

John 21:15-25

*Series: Follow Week 10. Explosion*

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I am so grateful to God that many of you have found Follow – our journey of following Jesus through the Holy Land – to be meaning and moving. And I am very grateful to Martha Stringer who worked countless hours to put these ten videos together and to her husband Paul who assisted in filming the videos at the places where Jesus taught, lived, died and rose. During Advent we will share with you additional videos connected with the birth of Jesus in Nazareth and Bethlehem.

Now that we are near the end, I can share with you that putting this project together was more difficult than we imagined. The same strong winds which threatened to sink the disciples ruined our audio tracks, the lighting was very dim in the churches and caves, and other tourists sometimes interrupted my talks – the nerve of them. We struck out so many times, we even talked about filming some of the scenes back home in front of a green screen to make you think I was in the Holy Land. Yet we persevered.

We wanted to make a series as good as the one Francis Chan made in Israel on the Gospel of Mark for Right Now Media. In that series, Francis Chan is frequently pictured walking very slowly through the Holy Land with his Bible. I call it, “Walk slowly and carry a big Bible.” Some on our trip even pretended to be Francis. On our last day I asked Paul to film me walking slowly like Francis Chan. He did, but he accidentally set the camera to fast motion. It looked like I was racing for the bathroom.

Everyone makes mistakes – some more costly than others. Mathieu Boya was practicing his golf swing in a pasture adjacent to the Air Base in Benin, Africa. With one swing of the golf club, Boya’s ball sailed high and hit a bird. The wounded bird slammed into the windshield of a jet taxiing into position for takeoff. The pilot lost control of his plane and plowed into four shiny Mirage jets, totally demolishing the entire air force of Benin, Africa. Boya was jailed and required to pay \$40 million to replace the jets. Since Boya made only \$275 per year, it will take him 145,000 years to pay his debt to society.<sup>1</sup>

Taking a cue from baseball, people often give you three chances to succeed. If you don’t complete the task, finish the job or fix your behavior by the third try—if you make three strikes—you’re out. Failure is not only found on the playing field. You get a big red “F” on your paper. You drop out of college. Your marriage falls apart. You make a blunder at your business. The deals fall through.

What do we do when things fall apart, fall out, fall short or fall down? Fame, wealth, wisdom and power are no guarantee against failure. At one time, Mike Tyson was the most feared heavyweight boxer in the ring. The only opponent he could not defeat

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<sup>1</sup> Rick Cato, *Parables, Etc.*, (May 1991).

was himself. The minimum he earned in nine years was \$300,000,000. Yet later he filed for bankruptcy. A USA Today interview revealed Tyson

...is anything but at peace. Confused and humiliated after a decadent lifestyle left him with broken relationships, shattered finances, and a reputation in ruin, the fighter cannot hide his insecurities, stacked as high as his legendary knockouts.... "I'll never be happy," he says. "I believe I'll die alone. I would want it that way. I've been a loner all my life with my secrets and my pain. I'm really lost, but I'm trying to find myself. I'm really a sad, pathetic case." The divorced father of six is blunt about the opportunities he squandered over the last decades. He discusses his drug use, lack of self-esteem, and sexual addiction. He says, "My whole life has been a waste—I've been a failure."<sup>2</sup>

The Bible is filled with failures – Moses, Gideon, Saul, David. Chief among them is Simon Peter. Most of our failures are forgotten. Peter's mistakes are recorded for all time in the Scriptures. Many episodes in this Follow series feature Peter's failures. In the beginning, Jesus fills Peter's boat with fish. He replies, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8). Instead, Jesus invites him to fish for people. Impulsive Peter almost drowns when he tries to walk on the water with Jesus. At Caesarea Philippi, Peter is so wrong Jesus rebukes him and calls him Satan. Peter probably won't let Jesus wash his feet at the Last Supper because his foot is in his mouth. Worst of all, Peter publicly vows to follow Jesus to the death. Yet at in the moment of crisis, when his Master needs him most, Peter denies His Lord three times. With this Peter the Rock crumbles to rubble.

What do you do when you feel defeated and dejected? Sometimes you just want to go off and hide in a corner. After three miraculous years of ministry topped off by the Jesus' resurrection what does Peter do? He goes back to fishing. Peter simply returns home, picks up his nets and picks up where he left off. He witnesses the most amazing, life-changing event in history and then acts like nothing happened. It takes a lot to get through to some people. For Peter, it will take one more miracle. You want to get a fisherman's attention? Drop 153 flapping fish in his lap. Suddenly, this miracle sparks a memory. Peter remembers how Jesus flooded their boats with fish the first time the Lord said, "Follow me." Peter realizes the man standing on the shore must be Jesus. He dives headfirst into the water and swims straight for the Lord. He doesn't know he is stepping up to the plate to face his failure. Here comes the wind up and the pitch.

"Simon, son of John," Jesus begins, "do you truly love me more than these?" The two of them are alone now. Jesus asks him to decide. But what are the choices? Does Peter love Jesus more than his fishing nets and boats, more than his house and family in the village, more than his quiet life in Galilee, more than the other disciples? Jesus means them all. Every part of Peter's life demands his devotion. He is trying to please them all. As a result, the Lord falls out of first place in his heart. Someone once said, "I don't know the key to success, but the key to failure is trying to please everybody." Jesus knows this. He once said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness and all these things will be added as well" (Matthew 6:33). The Lord asks, 'Do you truly love me first?'

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<sup>2</sup> Jon Saraceno, "Tyson: My Whole Life Has Been a Waste," USA Today (6-3-05)

Peter is quick to reassure Jesus of his devotion. But the fisherman's reply is revealing. When Jesus asks, "Do you *truly* love me?" He uses the verb form of agape. This is an unconditional, selfless love. It is a true commitment. It is love in spite of the circumstances and no matter what the cost. It is sacrificial love. The Bible uses agape when speaking of God's love for us. Yet when Peter replies, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you," he uses the verb form of philos. This is the word used to describe friendship and brotherhood such as in "Philadelphia" the city of "Brotherly love." In other words, Jesus asks for a total commitment, "Do you *truly* love me?" and Peter replies, 'Oh Lord, you know we're buddies.' Not the response Jesus requests. But still the Lord gives him a new job: "Feed my lambs."

Here comes the second pitch. "Simon, son of John, do you truly love me?" This time, there is no comparison. No mention of career, family, home or friends. Let's get right to the point. "Do you truly love Jesus?" Again, Peter replies with a half-hearted promise, "Yes, Lord you know we're pals." "Take care of my sheep," Jesus repeats.

Finally, with the third pitch, Jesus lowers his request. "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" This time, the Lord uses Peter's word – philos and it stings. 'Why did the Lord ask for less?' Peter looks down distressed. He sees a charcoal fire smoldering between the two of them. And he remembers another fire. It's nighttime. He's in a courtyard. In the background ugly, loud voices scream, "Blasphemy!" "Away with Him!" "He deserves death! Crucify Him!" On that night, Peter promised to love Jesus, to follow him even unto death. Yet within the glow of that charcoal fire, Peter denied he knew Jesus three times. Now Jesus asks three times, "Do you love me?" The question exposes him and breaks him. 'Lord you know all things,' Peter cries out, 'You know what's in my heart. You know I can never give you complete, unconditional love. I failed then. I'll fail again. But I love you. I can't promise you perfection but I will give you all I've got.' Grief-stricken, he dares not look into his Master's eyes. Three strikes! Peter's out. Right?

But then Peter feels a hand on his shoulder. He looks up into the eyes of Jesus and sees love. 'Peter I want you to feed my sheep.' In the Kingdom of God, failure is not fatal. Failure is never final. Even with his three strikes, Peter is not 'out' but 'in'! Why? Vance Havner says,

God uses broken things. Broken soil to produce a crop, broken clouds to give rain, broken grain to give bread, broken bread to give strength. It is the broken alabaster box that gives forth perfume. It is Peter, weeping bitterly, who returns to greater power than ever.<sup>3</sup>

The very heart of Christianity is a failure – the broken body and shed blood of Jesus on the Cross. Yet God is able to take the greatest of all failures and turn it into the greatest of all victories. When failure breaks us we can despair or turn to the Lord. Jesus will not let the shame of failure stand between us and Him. He will remove it from us just as He did from Peter. In His hands we are made whole and then sent to feed His sheep.

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<sup>3</sup> Vance Havner, Leadership, Vol. 4, no. 1.

Once more Jesus says to Peter, “Follow me.” (John 21:19) And Peter does. He returns to Jerusalem and witnesses Jesus ascend to heaven from the Mount of Olives. When the fire of the Holy Spirit descends on Pentecost, it ignites an explosion. Peter preaches the first sermon to the assembled crowd and Jesus’ flock of lambs grows to three thousand in one day. Peter, the one who denied Jesus to a serving girl in the courtyard of the High Priest, goes on to boldly proclaim the Lord to the same High Priest and ruling council which condemned Jesus to death. And Peter is given a great privilege, on the shore of another Sea – the Mediterranean Sea. In the pagan city of Caesarea, Peter welcomes the first Gentile – a Roman military officer named Cornelius - into Jesus’ fold of sheep. If Peter had not made that breakthrough, none of us who are not Jewish would be included in God’s flock. The Good News spreads like wildfire throughout the empire and people of all nations follow Jesus.

Yet the Lord is still not done with Peter. The fisherman follows Jesus over the horizon of the Mediterranean Sea to the very heart of the empire, to Rome itself. There Peter cares for God’s growing flock until he lays down his life for Jesus Christ. Before he does, he writes a letter to followers of Jesus scattered around the empire.

Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, watching over them—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be...And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away. I Peter 5:2,4

As we conclude the Follow series, I have a question for you: Are you a follower of Jesus? If you are, then He has a flock for you. Jesus has lambs He wants you to feed. He has sheep He wants you to tend. Who are they? They are the people in your life who do not know Jesus, who know Jesus but do not follow Him, who once followed Him but have gotten off the path, even those who doubt and despise Jesus but keep asking questions about Him. That is your flock. Those are your lambs. Write the names of three of them on the back of your bulletin. Jesus says, “Do you love me?” If the answer is “Yes” then here’s how you show Him you love Him: feed His sheep. Share God’s love with them. Care for their needs. Invite them to worship and your Growth Group. Give them this card and invite them to Christmas Eve worship. And don’t stop with bringing them here to worship. Go out to them, share with them, care for them in school, at work, on the soccer field, in your home. Every follower is a feeder. Go out and feed His sheep.

When you live to please the Lord first, when you let Him mend your brokenness, when you feed His sheep, you begin to lose your fear of failure. Remember from Week 1 of Follow: You are God’s Beloved. You have God’s unconditional love in you. It does not matter what you’ve done or how you’ve failed. Jesus is standing before you today and asking you one simple question: “Do you *truly* love me?” Are you willing to put me first in your home, work, school, among friends and in the community? I can redeem your failure. I can mend your brokenness. With all my love and encouragement, I entrust my sheep to you. Go feed them.

There is a place on the shore of the Sea of Galilee that commemorates the breakfast where Jesus said to Peter, “Do you love me? Then feed my sheep.” It is a

beautiful church made from the black volcanic rock of the region. Nearby is a powerful statue of Jesus sending Peter out to feed his sheep. In the shadow of that sculpture there is an outdoor table of stone. When we visit this site, I ask our guide to arrange for us to celebrate communion there. When the Holy Land Tour visited there in 2014, there was a little commotion. Another tour group was in our way. The guide from that group said something to our group. Johnny, our guide, shook his head. Then he turned to me and said, “They are a group from France. They want to know if they can join you for the communion service.” I replied, “Well, I don’t speak French but we would be truly honored if they would join us.”

We all gathered around the table and I shared about what happened on this sacred spot – how Peter learned his failure was not fatal or final, that Jesus wanted to use this man with three strikes against him to feed his sheep. Then all of us who are broken by sin, like Peter, received the broken body and shed blood of Jesus. At the end I turned to one of the members of the French group and asked him to pray for us in his native tongue. But before he did, he said in English, “Today is June 6<sup>th</sup> – the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the D-Day invasion of Normandy. We wish to thank your nation for the great sacrifice you made to liberate us.” Then we all prayed the Lord’s Prayer in English, French, and Hebrew. On the beach of Normandy allied forces made a vital breakthrough to free the people of Europe. On this beach, Jesus made a vital breakthrough in the heart of Peter to free the people of the world. As a result, people from every nation, tribe and tongue now follow Jesus.

It took a great sacrifice to free the people of France.

It took a great sacrifice for Peter to feed Christ’s sheep.

It took a great sacrifice for Jesus to love us.

It doesn’t matter how many strikes are against you and me, let’s step up to the plate and make a great sacrifice for him.