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BECOMING BUTTERFLIES

John 13:36-38

In the year 2000 Reed Hastings, cofounder of Netflix, initially a DVD by mail company, offered to sell the company to Blockbuster. He asked for $50 million. The visionary Blockbuster CEO thought this was an absurd sum for a company they thought was pretty much a joke, so he laughed at Hastings and turned him down flat. He and his company were convinced that their business model was the best. We all know what happened. Today Netflix is worth over $30 billion dollars. Blockbuster declared bankruptcy 10 years later and is now down to one store, which exists mostly as a novelty.

Turns out that actually wasn’t the only big failure in history. In 1976 there were 3 guys who worked for Atari, the video game company. These guys had an idea to start a new computer company. Their names were Ronald Wayne, Steve Wozniak and Steve Jobs. You probably recognize the 2 Steves and know the company they founded was Apple Computers. What about Ronald Wayne? He had a much smaller role in the company, so while the 2 Steves were given 45% of the company each, Wayne only got 10%. But he lost faith. Very quickly he decided how ownership stake in the company put him at too much financial risk. He let the other guys buy out his 10% after only 12 days with the company. He sold to them for $800, and went away patting himself on the back for at least coming away from the venture with something. Today Apple is worth $2 trillion. Had Wayne held onto his share of the company it would have been worth hundreds of billions of dollars, making him one of the richest men in the world. I’m guessing whatever he did with his $800 didn’t get him anywhere close to what he would have had. That was an epic fail.

Each of us can point to our own personal failures if we are honest. I can think of a couple of things that at points in my life I determined I was going to do. At one point, regretting my decision to take German in high school and college, I determined to learn a more useful language. I would teach myself Spanish. Today I can tell you that I have mastered parts of espanol. Unfortunately the parts amount to “come esta usted,”and “donde es el Banyo por favor.” The project was a complete bust. Oh, wait, there’s also “me llamo Rick.” Well that changes everything. I declare you fluent. Yeah, big fail.

There have been others, but there is one I have in common with everyone who calls themselves a believer in Jesus. And that is I determined to try to make myself holy and godly. That was another epic fail. I should have known better. If I or anyone could have done that, Jesus wouldn’t have needed to enter this world and die on our behalf. Today we’re going to look at someone headed toward an epic fail, and we will find out that he had the same problem we all have. I’m talking about failure because in the past 2 weeks we have been challenged to live radical lives of unconditional love and humble service. It is common to see how far short we fall and feel guilty. How are we to deal with that failure? Let’s look at John 13:36-38.

PETER HAD THE BEST OF INTENTIONS

In 1 Samuel 13:14 after Samuel told Saul that his kingdom would not last because he didn’t do what God commanded him, Samuel went on to say, “The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him ruler of his people.” That man after God’s own heart was David. Acts 13:22 quotes Paul saying, “After removing Saul, he (God) made David their king. God testified concerning him, ‘I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do.”

Wait, David was a man after God’s heart? He had some spectacular failures. Let’s see, he coveted his neighbor’s wife, he committed adultery with her, he had her husband murdered and he lied about it. That’s 4 of the big 10 shattered right there. That puts him at 60%, a D minus right off the bat. I don’t have any failures that can hold a candle to what David did. But that didn’t change the fact that he was a man “after God’s own heart.” He loved God and he had a passion for God’s glory. We see that in his writings. In Psalm 27:4 he wrote, “One thing I ask from the Lord, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life.” What he wanted above all else was to live in the presence of God.

David was a passionate man who had great love for God, but who had some historic failures. I remind you of this because Simon Peter was pretty much cut from that same piece of cloth. He had enormous passion and love for Jesus, but like David, he was not perfect. He didn’t have it all figured out, but his heart was in the right place. In Matthew 16:21 Jesus told the disciples that he was going to be rejected and killed, then rise on the third day. Peter’s reaction is found in verse 22. “Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ‘Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!’” Uh, Peter, he’s the Lord of all and you’re telling him he’s got it all wrong? Peter’s heart was in the right place, but in his enthusiasm, he made a mistake. He was thinking and doing things his way, not trusting Jesus and his way.

In John 13:33 Jesus had said, “Where I am going, you cannot come.” Jesus followed that statement by giving them a profound command to love as he loved them. He said this would be the mark, the identifying badge, of a true follower of Jesus. This was a crucial teaching, but for Peter, it kind of went in one ear and right out the other like an express train roaring through a whistle stop without even pausing. All Peter heard was, “Where I am going you cannot come, blah, blah, blah.” He was upset by the comment that they couldn’t go with Jesus. He’d made the focus of his life following Jesus. Jesus meant everything him. Now Jesus said he was leaving and Peter couldn’t go with him. It was over?

So in verse 36 Peter, completely skipping over that command to love as Jesus loves, said, “Lord, where are you going?” All he wanted to know was what is this place Jesus was going, and why couldn’t Peter go with him? Jesus repeated that he couldn’t come now, but they would all be able to follow later. I’ve noticed with our grandchildren that later is a concept they do not endorse. This past week Michael and Carissa’s two boys, Wesley and Hunter, were staying with us. Yeah, I thought you guys look like zombies today. True, but we are happy zombies. I’m just glad I managed to get matching socks on today. I did, didn’t I? One day Laurie made some chocolate chip cookies. Wesley was a big fan. He devoured a couple of them and wanted more. Laurie said, “Not right now. You can have another one later.” Wesley was not down with later. To him, later just meant no, and he found this to be a highly unacceptable answer. We all are kind of like that. Peter certainly was. He didn’t like later. To him that was just “no.”

I suspect if Jesus had laid it all for Peter, that where he was going was to a torture chamber, an excruciating death on a cross and then a tomb, and said, “So, do you really want to come with me, Peter?” Simon the rock might not have been quite as eager. But Peter didn’t know that part of it. When Jesus said he was going away Peter was thinking he was going to spend some time maybe in Asia Minor or maybe even go all the way to Rome or some other distant place. Sure, maybe it would be an arduous trip, and maybe he’d have to live in a very foreign place, but it was worth it to be with Jesus. Maybe it would be hard, even dangerous. Peter was willing to accept that. So he said, “Lord, why can’t I follow you now? I will lay down my life for you.” Even if it was dangerous and cost him his life, Peter was sure he would follow Jesus, no matter what it might mean.

At this point all we have is a little note from history. But this passage actually intersects with our lives at a crucial point. We, too, often have the best intentions. Maybe we are out of that same piece of cloth as David and Peter. We have good ideas about how we will be faithful to God. Our tendency is to be sure we can live out that passion for God if we will only give it enough time and effort.

The past couple of weeks in John have certainly presented some challenges to us that we find difficult if not almost impossible to meet consistently. We saw Jesus clean his followers’ grimy feet and command us to follow his example. Then he commanded us to love like he loved. So we are to humbly served like he did and love unconditionally and sacrificially as he did. It is quite common for us to think we need to do better in those two areas. We often end up feeling guilty because we can’t seem to love and serve well enough and long enough. So we determine that we need to try harder and somehow do better. Our reaction to our inability to live to the standard Jesus set is to beat ourselves up, feel bad, but then to grit our teeth and try harder. We just determine that we have to do better. This eventually wears us down and it is common for us to just settle for creating the appearance that we’re doing well, but inside knowing we’re not and feeling the guilt of that.

This dynamic shows up in a lot of ways in life. We might set out as a goal to read the Bible every day for a year, or to pray at least 10 minutes every single day. We might be determined to call someone at least once a week to encourage them. We might exercise at least a half hour every day. Peter was certain, due to his determination, that he would follow Jesus without fail, and we are certain with determination we will do what we have set out to do and be what God wants us to be. This kind of thinking is not confined to Christians. We see this every year around New Years Day when people make resolutions that in the next year they’re going to do better and be better.

We are often like Peter in that we have good intentions, wanting and trying to do what God tells us to do, and thinking it is up to us. That is the key, thinking it is up to us. It is all about us just trying harder.

PETER HAD CONFIDENCE IN THE FLESH

Peter was certain he would stay faithful to Jesus no matter what happened. He had total confidence. Unfortunately, as Jesus pointed out, he had confidence in the wrong thing. Contrary to what he believed, he did not have the ability to stay faithful to Jesus no matter what might happen. He thought he did, but as Jesus told him, he was going to find out that he was wrong. His vow to never abandon Jesus would prove untrue that very night. There is a reason why.

In Philippians 3:3-4 Paul wrote, “For it is we who are the true circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh, though I myself have reasons for such confidence.” Paul was confident in his ability to be “blameless” in his efforts to keep the rules of the Law of Moses, in his unflagging passion and zeal. When Paul wrote about the flesh he meant fallen human nature, the way we are when we operate on our own apart from God’s Spirit and his work. The flesh always works apart from God. It wants to live life on its own terms.

In his massive 8 volume systematic theology Lewis Sherry Chafer wrote that the flesh is “an integral part of a human being” that “cannot and will not be dismissed until the body itself is redeemed” or until death. He makes the crucial point that it is not possible to control it “by the power of human determination and will…It is not within the range of human will power…to control” it. He calls it the dominating factor in our lives.

When we operate purely from our human resources, using our own natural desires, inclinations and abilities, we are operating out of the flesh. In short, we are confident in the flesh. Peter was working out of the flesh. He relied on what he was sure he was able to do. The results were dismal.

CONFIDENCE IN THE FLESH ALWAYS LEADS TO FAILURE

Peter must have been offended, maybe even devastated by Jesus’ response to him. He was asserting he would never abandon Jesus. He couldn’t even imagine such a thing happening. But he was counting on the flesh. He was certain he would even die for Jesus. He believed that right up to the point where he ran into the situation where dying for Jesus became a real possibility. When it appeared that declaring his loyalty to Jesus could put him in serious peril, he crumbled like the Padres in an extra inning game. That is something of a microcosm for the flesh. Operating in the flesh will always end in failure.

This does not mean the flesh can never do anything. The people of the world work continually out of the flesh and succeed at many things. So do Christians much of the time. The fact is, people can discipline themselves to read the Bible, pray consistently, develop habits in line with the teaching of Scripture. All of us have had times when we have been very consistent in carrying out some discipline. Maybe we’ve read from the Bible every day for a year and read it all the way through, which is fairly impressive when you take into account the laws in Leviticus and genealogies in Chronicles.

So trying to set goals and discipline ourselves to make ourselves better can and often does succeed. We can meet goals and improve. We are not doomed to crash and burn in everything we try. But the critical point is that ***it is possible to achieve our goal, to seem to do better, and still fail.***

Romans 8:6 says, “The mind governed by the flesh is death, but the mind governed by the Spirit is life.” According to that verse living by the flesh is death. Death is about as much of a failure as is possible. Paul didn’t mean literal physical death. If that were the case there would be nobody around. We all live by the flesh at times, and if we immediately died, well, no one would be left.

What does he mean, then by the flesh causing death? It is death as opposed to true life. We have seen in John that Jesus came to give us life to the fullest. That is life full of hope, joy, peace, love, meaning, fulfillment. It is having the life of God in us, a life of goodness and patience and kindness and forgiveness. The death Paul referred to is the absence of that life. It is a life of emptiness, hopelessness, anxiety, stress, selfishness instead of love, anger, impatience, resentment and bitterness. Paul’s point is when we live by the flesh we get that instead of true life. That is a big failure.

One of the tests they ran on me in diagnosing the cancer I have was a PET scan. I didn’t get why they cared if I was a pet owner. Do pets cause cancer or something? I figured I’d pass that one easily. If they’re scanning me for pets they’re not going to find one because I don’t have one. No dog, no cat, no hamster, nothing. Not even a gold fish. It turns out they weren’t looking for fur friends. PET means positron emission tomography. That’s a big scary name for something I found more than a little unsettling. They inject a radioactive tracer into your blood. Good idea, right? Radioactivity can cause cancer, so we’re going to inject something that causes cancer into you to find cancer. Of course. If cancer wasn’t there before we’ll start it. Great plan. They assure you it’s a “safe radioactive tracer.” Of course it is. I often put the words safe and radioactive together. Here, have this weight trimming jelly doughnut. Those things just don’t go together. Anyway, they tie this radioactive tracer to glucose. Cancer cells give themselves away because they are super efficient at consuming fuel in the form of glucose. So when they see an accumulation of the tracer in a spot in your body it tells them there are probably cancer cells there. It’s a tell tale. The flesh also has tell tales. It is things like pride, arrogance, anxiety, fear, anger, hypocrisy, dishonesty, self focus, sacrificing others to get what you want, lack of grace, lack of forgiveness, defensiveness, being easily offended, and more. This is the opposite of the life of God. So we can do what I think of as a FAT scan. Watch it, Rick, don’t be talking about my weight. Calm down, I don’t mean that kind of fat. It’s another acronym like PET. FAT stands for Flesh Attributes Test. Whenever we see these traits in ourselves we can know we are in some way living by the flesh. Remember that fateful night of John 13 the disciples were arguing about which of them was the greatest. Hello flesh attribute.

In Romans 12:2 Paul urged “be transformed by the renewing of your mind.” The word “transformed” is crucial. The Greek word is metamorphoo. It means to go through a metamorphosis. Much of what passes for “discipleship” or “spiritual formation” these days is an effort to make ourselves “better.” Trying to improve. The problem is, being transformed is not being improved. Right now we are seeing lots of monarch butterflies in our yard. They are beautiful and I love watching them. But those creatures did not start out life as a lovely thing with colorful wings and the ability to fly. They started as caterpillars, which look nothing like a butterfly. They are, to me, particularly ugly worm like things that crawl in the dirt. But one day they go into a cocoon, and in that cocoon a metamorphosis takes place. What comes out looks nothing like what went in. That caterpillar is transformed into a beautiful thing with abilities that the former caterpillar could not have imagined. When Paul says we are to be transformed, that’s what he means. Not a new improved caterpillar, but an entirely different thing.

I’m not sure what a new, improved caterpillar would be. Maybe it wouldn’t be quite as ugly. Maybe it could crawl through the dirt at significantly improved speeds. Would that matter at all? No, it would still be a wormy thing crawling through the dirt. The point is clear. God wants us to fly, not crawl. He wants us to be beautiful, not ugly. He wants us to become an entirely new thing, not just make some minor improvements. In Ezekiel 36:26 God promised, “I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.” He would give us a new heart. In 2 Corinthians 5:17 Paul wrote, “If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come. The old has gone, the new is here.” God’s plan is to make us new creation, something different from the old. The old is gone, replaced by an entirely new thing.

I fear advertising has caused me to be a little cynical and jaded. A laundry detergent company advertises that its product is new and improved. A cereal company urges you to buy their new, improved breakfast food. But the difference in the new detergent and the new cereal is so small as to be undetectable. They are still the same things with slight variations you may not even notice. I pay no attention to new and improved. When God says his people are going to be a new creation, he means they will not be incrementally improved, just a little better maybe. They will be transformed into something different altogether. Unfortunately, much of the time the church seems to be aiming at new and improved. Here are some steps you need to take to improve yourself. Taking them is fine, I suppose, but those steps will never transform us. We will never be butterflies, we’ll just be improved caterpillars.

At this point you’re probably thinking, “That’s great, Rick. All you’ve done is tell me what doesn’t work. You haven’t said what does.” Well, I’ll be coming out with a new book shortly called *The Butterfly Effect: The Secret To Being Transformed*. You’ll have to buy my book and read it to find out the secret. I’m just kidding. There is no book, and there is no secret. In this little incident we get a little pointer to how the transformation happens. You just have to think a little about what happened in that conversation between Peter and Jesus.

JESUS’ WORK WASN’T RUINED BY PETER’S FAILURE

This conversation seems to end with Jesus telling Peter he is going to do the unthinkable and bail out on Jesus that very night. Unfortunately, when the book of John was divided into chapters and verses, which happened many centuries after John wrote it, they put a chapter division after verse 38. We think, “Ah, end of that chapter. Now on to a new story.” But chapter 14 isn’t a new story. When John wrote the book verse 38 flowed right into 14:1. The next thing Jesus said was, “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Jesus had just told Peter was going to totally fail. Then he said, “Don’t worry about it.” Be at peace. He went on to say there was a place in his Father’s house for all of them. In other words, yes, there are going to be some failures here, but you’re going to be okay.

Think about what is missing in Jesus’ comment to Peter. What he didn’t say was, “You’re going to deny you even know me, thus proving that you don’t really love me and I can’t rely on you. So you’re fired.” What Jesus said was the exact opposite of that. Jesus said Peter was going to have an epic fail, then said, “Don’t let your heart be troubled.” Be at peace. It’s all going to be fine. Peter’s failure wasn’t going to change his standing with Jesus even one millimeter.

In Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost the Spirit of Christ was given to believers for the first time, and it was dramatic. The believers began speaking in languages they had not previously known. Onlookers wondered how that could possibly be happening. Acts 2:14 says, “Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd.” He preached to them about Jesus. Some in that crowd had been responsible for Jesus’ death, the people who scared him into his failure! In Acts 4 Peter and John were arrested after Peter preached Jesus again. They were tried and warned they had better not talk about Jesus again or else. Verses 19-20 say, “But Peter and John replied, ‘Which is right in God’s eyes, to listen to you or to him? You be the judges! As for us, we cannot help speaking about what we have seen and heard.” This is the guy who swore he would die if necessary to follow Jesus, then when he feared he just might have that chance he crashed and burned in spectacular fashion. Now he’s standing in front of the same people he was terrified by earlier and they are threatening him. But now he said, “I leave it to you to decide whether I should obey you or God, but I’m obeying God. So there.” What happened? The caterpillar had become a butterfly. He was transformed. He became a different person. Not slightly improved. Totally different.

What brought that about? Jesus let him know in this incident that he knew all about Peter’s failure before it happened. Jesus knew Peter’s bluster was just that, and that it was as solid as the soap bubbles our grandkids love to chase and touch, and when they do the bubbles vanish instantly. Jesus knew it, and loved him anyway. Not only loved him, but was going to use him as a crucial leader in his new movement. Then Jesus died on a cross for Peter’s sins, and rose from the dead to give him new life, and put his Spirit in him. Peter now understood. Jesus had done for him what he could never do for himself. He could never live up to God’s standards for him, because the flesh was always there. But Jesus obtained forgiveness for him and he now understood his place in God’s kingdom was a gift given by Jesus. He relied on that gift and nothing else. He began to understand God’s unimaginable, profound and powerful grace. It was that grace that changed him, that transformed him into a butterfly.

Early in Jesus’ ministry he preached one of the most profound sermons ever delivered. We know it as the Sermon on the Mount. It was a dissertation on the new way to relate to God that he was bringing and contrasted it with the old way, the way of the flesh. Matthew 5:3 tells us that Jesus’ opening volley that set the tone for the whole speech was, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.” Wait, that can’t be right, can it? Surely God wants us to be rich in spirit, to have spiritual lives that are the envy of everyone, right? How can it be that the poor in spirit are blessed?

The person who lives by the flesh does exactly what Peter did in this incident we are thinking about today. He thinks he has the resources within himself to do what God wants him to do. He knows he can do it. Just determine to do it, apply some discipline and hard work and you’ll get her done. You’ve got what it takes. The person who is poor in spirit knows that absolutely is not true. He knows if he thinks he can grit his teeth and be what God says we should be, he has set himself up for a tragic and epic failure. He knows that his hope is 100% in the grace of God given to him through Jesus Christ, and in nothing else.

Not long ago Laurie and I took care of Toby and Anna’s two youngest children, ages 2 and 1. That day proved to be a poop fest. Laurie was astounded at how many poopy diapers she had to change in one day. She began to think it was a miracle a bit like the feeding of the 5000 because the poop just kept coming. That day was a bit unusual, but it also was not a total surprise. We were not surprised that our grandchildren produce poop filled diapers, though that day did seem a bit extreme. We knew that’s part of having kids in diapers, but it reminded us of something critically important. *It changed nothing in our love for those kids.*

Jesus knew that despite his boast, Peter would shortly produce the spiritual equivalent of a poopy diaper. It was no surprise to Jesus. It changed nothing in his view of Peter and his love for him. Think of the dumbest, most unspiritual thing, the most ugly thing you’ve ever done. Think of your frustrating failures spiritually. Jesus knew all about all of it long ago. Psalm 139:3-4 say to the Lord, “You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue, you, Lord, know it completely.” God is familiar with all your ways. All of them. Every bit of it, including the worst parts. He knew you before you were even born. And he chose you and called you to be his child. This is what we rely on, not on our ability to do everything right.

When we live by the flesh, all we can ever do is be caterpillars pretending to be butterflies. Maybe we can paste fake wings on our bodies and flap them, trying to make it look like we’re flying. But we can’t fly, and we’re still ugly caterpillars. It certainly doesn’t fool God, and it pretty much won’t fool anyone else either. But when we trust in God’s grace, we count on his love as the sole reason we are welcomed by him and approved by him, when we are poor in Spirit, it changes our hearts. It is then that we begin to live in freedom, in joy, in humility, in peace and in love, for we have nothing to prove. We live in gratitude to God, rejoicing in his presence and his love for us, and we begin to be transformed into something entirely new. We have new, free, joyful, peaceful, grateful, loving hearts.

Will we seek to love others as Jesus did, aim to humbly serve like Jesus, read God’s word, pray and all the rest of it? Yes, of course. But we will do it for a totally different reason and with a completely different spirit and freedom.