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RESPONDING WELL TO CORRECTION, REPROVE AND REBUKE SECOND POSITIVE EXAMPLE: PETER (1) SOME OF PETER'S FAILURES

Introduction

We tend to like to hear pleasant words because we feel good and we may think they are good for us. But pleasant words, like flattery, can be detrimental to our lives. They may be spoken by people with selfish or bad motives, who are out to harm us.

Likewise, we tend to dislike hearing unpleasant words because they cause discomfort, embarrassment and pain. Yet, at times, unpleasant words can be very helpful and needful for our lives.

When we are corrected or rebuked, it is easy to respond negatively and the consequences can be serious. It is therefore important that we learn to respond well to correction, reprove and rebuke.

We have seen the negative examples of King Uzziah and Cain. We have also considered the positive example of King David. Let us now consider the second positive example: Peter.

Feasible to make good progress in the context of failures

An important point I wish to highlight in our consideration of the example of Peter is that it is feasible for a person to make good progress in the context of faltering and failures. It is possible to even attain to a high degree of spiritual stature and maturity and live a life that is fruitful and useful to God, contributing significantly to the fulfilment of God's purposes. This was true of Peter's life. Faltering and failures need not significantly damage our lives.

One major reason why the outcome was positive for Peter is that he responded well to correction and rebuke. But sadly, many believers do not respond well to correction and rebuke when they falter and fail, and therefore do not make good progress in their lives. At times the detrimental effects on their lives can be significant and the outcome of their lives disastrous.

Some preliminary observations about Peter

To learn from Peter's example, it is helpful to have some understanding of him as a person. It is also helpful for us to seek to understand the meaning and nature of his failures and the issues involved.

One of the inner circle of three

Peter is an outstanding character in the New Testament. He was one of the 12 apostles specifically chosen by the Lord Jesus. He was also one of those in the inner circle of three (Peter, James and John), to whom the Lord paid special attention and treated differently.

For example, when the Lord Jesus raised the daughter of the synagogue official from the dead (Mark 5:35-43), He allowed none of His disciples to be with Him except Peter, James and John, granting only these three the special privilege of sharing this experience with Him.

Mark 5:37

And He allowed no one to accompany Him, except Peter and James and John the brother of James.

In the garden of Gethsemane, a very significant time just prior to the Lord Jesus going to the Cross, we see that Peter, James and John were again treated differently from the other disciples.

Matthew 26:36-39

36 Then Jesus came with them to a place called Gethsemane, and said to His disciples, "Sit here while I go over there and pray."

37 And He took with Him Peter and the two sons of Zebedee, and began to be grieved and distressed.

38 Then He said to them, "My soul is deeply grieved, to the point of death; remain here and keep watch with Me."

39 And He went a little beyond them, and fell on His face and prayed, saying, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will."

The Lord Jesus took Peter, James and John to a place a little further from the rest of the disciples and He shared with them that His soul was deeply grieved, to the point of death. So these three disciples were given the privilege to be closer to the Lord, and to identify more fully with what He was going through at that point in time.

Peter, James and John were also the only ones present when the Lord Jesus was transfigured. We will look more closely at this unique event later in the message.

Stood out among the 12 apostles

Peter also stood out among the 12 apostles. After the death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus, he emerged as the disciples' spokesman and leader.

Peter was the one who spoke on behalf of the disciples on the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit filled all who were present and they began to speak in other tongues. Peter explained that what had taken place was a fulfilment of the prophecy of Joel.

Acts 2:14-16

14 But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: "Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words.

15 "For these men are not drunk, as you suppose, for it is only the third hour of the day;

16 but this is what was spoken of through the prophet Joel:

Peter then quoted from the Book of Joel and preached a very effective gospel message in the power of the Holy Spirit. Many were pierced to the heart and about 3,000 souls were added to the church that day (vs. 37, 41).

After the Lord Jesus had ascended but prior to Pentecost, Peter also took the lead and spoke of the need to have a replacement for Judas who had betrayed the Lord and taken his own life.

Acts 1:15-22

15 At this time Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren (a gathering of about one hundred and twenty persons was there together), and said,

16 "Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus.

17 "For he was counted among us and received his share in this ministry."

18 (Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness, and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his intestines gushed out.

19 And it became known to all who were living in Jerusalem; so that in their own language that field was called Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.)

20 "For it is written in the book of Psalms,

'Let his homestead be made desolate,

And let no one dwell in it';

and, 'Let another man take his office.'

21 "Therefore it is necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us—

22 beginning with the baptism of John until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these must become a witness with us of His resurrection.”

Those gathered in the upper room put forward two men: Joseph and Matthias. They then prayed, drew lots, and the lot fell to Matthias. And he became the twelfth apostle (v. 26).

The most outspoken of the 12

As we read the Gospels, we see that Peter comes through as the most outspoken of the 12. He was usually the first to speak up, to respond to situations. He was not the passive sort, not one to remain still and quiet. His impulsiveness often resulted in inappropriate remarks and conduct and he was frequently corrected and reproved by the Lord. When we read the New Testament, we find Peter stands out as the one with the most recorded faltering and failures and the one who was corrected and reproved by the Lord more than any other apostle or believer.

Peter is indeed an interesting character. There are significant truths that we can learn from the record of his life that can be helpful for us.

Some of Peter's failures

Let us briefly look at some of Peter's failures.

1. Denying the Lord Jesus three times

This incident is recorded in Matthew 26:69-75. When the Lord Jesus was arrested, all the disciples left Him and fled. But Peter followed Him at a distance, probably because of his love for the Lord and his concern over what was going to happen to Him. However, when a servant-girl identified Peter as having been with Jesus, Peter denied it saying: "I do not know what you are talking about" (v. 70). Then another servant-girl also identified him. He again denied it, but this time with an oath: "I do not know the man" (v. 72). When Peter was confronted the third time as having been with Jesus, he began to curse and swear: "I do not know the man!" (v. 74)

Peter's response and conduct in this situation was a definite failure. Denying the Lord is a serious matter. Doing so with an oath and then with cursing and swearing aggravated the failure. And this took place despite Peter having strongly affirmed that even if he had to die with the Lord, he would not deny Him.

Matthew 26:35

Peter said to Him, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You."
All the disciples said the same thing too.

Peter made this affirmation in spite of the Lord Jesus telling him he would deny Him three times that very night.

Matthew 26:34

Jesus said to him, "Truly I say to you that this very night, before a rooster crows, you will deny Me three times."

The Lord made the above statement in the context of telling the disciples that they would all fall away because of Him that night.

Matthew 26:31-33

31 Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of Me this night, for it is written, 'I will strike down the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock shall be scattered.'

32 "But after I have been raised, I will go ahead of you to Galilee."

33 But Peter said to Him, "Even though all may fall away because of You, I will never fall away."

It was wrong of Peter to contradict the Lord by affirming strongly that he would never fall away even though all the other disciples may fall away. Let us take note that Peter already failed even before he actually denied the Lord. He failed to pay sufficient heed to the words of the Lord. Peter's response also indicated that he did not have adequate understanding of himself. Nor did he understand the circumstances and the spiritual pressures that would come upon the disciples.

Peter should have taken the Lord's words seriously and asked the Lord Jesus to help him understand the issues involved and how he could be strengthened to go through the situation well. If he had responded in this way, the outcome might have been different.

2. Rebuking the Lord Jesus

When the time for the Lord's death on the Cross drew near, Jesus told His disciples about it. Peter's immediate response was to take the Lord Jesus aside and rebuke Him. He was in turn corrected and rebuked by the Lord. The Lord rebuked him sternly because it is a grave error to contradict the Lord Jesus and to rebuke Him, and because of the significance of the issues involved and what was taking place in that instance. The Lord's death on the Cross was the primary purpose for His coming to earth and here Peter was trying to restrain Him!

Matthew 16:21-23

21 From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day.

22 Peter took Him aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This shall never happen to You."

23 But He turned and said to Peter, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God's interests, but man's."

In just a few words, the Lord Jesus exposed the reality and meaning of what was taking place.

"Get behind Me, Satan!"

These words of the Lord Jesus were directed at Satan because he was actively at work in the situation and he was the one who had influenced Peter to speak those words. At the same time, the text indicates the Lord was also addressing Peter – because he had allowed himself to be manipulated by Satan to say the words Satan wanted him to say. This kind of incident ought to be distinguished from the other kind where an evil spirit is actually speaking through a man, for example, the incident recorded for us in the Gospel of Mark.

Mark 1:23–26

23 Just then there was a man in their synagogue with an unclean spirit; and he cried out,

24 saying, "What business do we have with each other, Jesus of Nazareth? Have You come to destroy us? I know who You are—the Holy One of God!"

25 And Jesus rebuked him, saying, "Be quiet, and come out of him!"

26 Throwing him into convulsions, the unclean spirit cried out with a loud voice and came out of him.

The words spoken in verse 24 were the words of the unclean spirit and not those of the man – the unclean spirit was speaking through the physical body and voice of the man. Likewise, the words of rebuke of the Lord Jesus in verse 25 were directed at the unclean spirit and not the man.

In contrast, the words in Matthew 16:22 were spoken by Peter and not by Satan. Peter spoke under the influence of Satan and spoke what Satan wanted him to speak. Peter knew what he was saying but he might not have been aware what he said was what Satan wanted him to say.

Evil spirits cannot freely speak through the body and voice of a man as in the incident recorded in Mark. In that incident, the unclean spirit was dwelling in the man and had to be cast out by the Lord Jesus before the man could be free from that kind of spiritual bondage.

Evil spirits and Satan influencing the thoughts and speech of a man the way Satan worked in and through Peter in the passage in Mathew is not uncommon. Often the person is not even aware it is taking place. Believers need to be alert and careful so that they are not manipulated by the evil one to say and do things which hinder and oppose what God wants to accomplish.

"You are a stumbling block to Me"

Peter was seeking to restrain the Lord Jesus from something very crucial – His death on the Cross. In so doing, Peter was a stumbling block hindering the will of God!

"For you are not setting your mind on God's interests but man's"

Peter's thinking and reasoning was according to man's way of thinking rather than from God's perspective. This gave ground for Satan to manipulate and influence his thoughts and words.

Notice that this failure of Peter, which is significant, took place just after Peter was commended by the Lord for his confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Matthew 16:16-17

16 Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

17 And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.

This confession was in the context of the Lord asking His disciples as to who the people say He was (Matt. 16:13-15). The Lord Jesus was pleased with Peter's reply and said it was God the Father who had revealed it to him.

We see from these two passages that although Peter's attitudes were generally positive, he was rash and impulsive. He could speak words pleasing to the Lord at one moment, and then move on quickly to speak inappropriate or improper words that elicit a strong rebuke from the Lord.

3. Lacking quality faith

Peter was also rebuked by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 14:22-33. In this context, Jesus had just fed more than five thousand people with five loaves and two fish. He then made His disciples go ahead of Him in a boat to the other side, while He sent the people away. And in the fourth watch of the night (around three to six in the early morning), Jesus came to His disciples, walking on the sea. When they saw Him, they were terrified, thinking it was a ghost. Jesus allayed their fears by identifying Himself. Peter responded by saying:

Matthew 14:28-31

28 Peter said to Him, "Lord, if it is You, command me to come to You on the water."

29 And He said, "Come!" And Peter got out of the boat, and walked on the water and came toward Jesus.

30 But seeing the wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, "Lord, save me!"

31 Immediately Jesus stretched out His hand and took hold of him, and said to him, "You of little faith, why did you doubt?"

Peter was rebuked for his lack of faith and for doubting. However, he did manage to walk on the water. To get out of the boat and actually walk on the water, in the dark, amidst the waves and with the strong wind blowing, is not an easy thing to do. It was faith that enabled Peter to do it. Peter did have faith in the Lord. But his faith was lacking in depth and quality. He was distracted by the wind, he gave in to fear, and he doubted. That was why he failed to walk right up to the Lord and ended up being rebuked by Him.

4. Uttering inappropriate words

When the Lord Jesus was transfigured (Luke 9:28-36), Peter, James and John were the only ones present. They were given the special privilege to witness this event – which includes Moses and Elijah appearing in glory, speaking to the Lord of His impending death. But during this very special occasion, this unique event, Peter uttered some inappropriate words, not realising what he was saying.

Luke 9:33-35

33 And as these were leaving Him, Peter said to Jesus, "Master, it is good for us to be here; let us make three tabernacles: one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah"—not realizing what he was saying.

34 While he was saying this, a cloud formed and began to overshadow them; and they were afraid as they entered the cloud.

35 Then a voice came out of the cloud, saying, "This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!"

Why did Peter make the suggestion about the tabernacles? It could be that he saw Moses and Elijah leaving and he wanted them to stay. So he suggested making the tabernacles for them so that they could remain there and he could enjoy their company.

The phrase "not realising what he was saying" at the end of verse 33 clearly indicates that Peter's proposal was not appropriate. He did not realise that what he said blurred the important truth that the ministry of Moses and Elijah was meant to culminate in the coming and ministry of the Lord Jesus. Their ministry was under the Old Covenant and now superseded by the ministry of the Lord Jesus inaugurating the New Covenant.

Another aspect is that the distinction between the Lord Jesus Christ and other servants of the Lord must be maintained and not blurred. Although Moses and Elijah were prominent characters in the Old Testament and were important servants of the Lord, they cannot be compared to or considered on the same level as Jesus, the Son of God. Their ministry was preparatory and pointing to His coming and His work on

the Cross. Now that the Lord Jesus has come, the concentration should be on the Lord Jesus Christ, His life, His teaching and His work on the Cross.

The inappropriateness of the words of Peter seems to be the reason why, while he was still speaking, God the Father intervened and said: "This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!" God could be seeking to correct the meaning and implications of the inappropriate words of Peter. God wanted to direct their attention towards Jesus, His chosen One. He wanted them to listen to Him.

The opening words of the epistle to the Hebrews are relevant to what we are considering here.

Hebrews 1:1-2

1 God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways,
2 in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world.

Yes, the prophets have their part. God spoke through them in the past. But in these last days, God has spoken to us in His Son. Our primary concentration should now be on the Lord Jesus Christ. We should listen to Him and obey Him.

In Mark 9:2-7, which is a parallel passage on the same incident, we are told that Peter did not know what to answer.

Mark 9:6

For he did not know what to answer; for they became terrified.

If Peter did not know what to say in response to the situation, he should have kept quiet. He should not have spoken carelessly without realising the meaning and implications of his words. It was a failure on his part.

5. Restraining the Lord Jesus from washing his feet

Peter failed on another occasion – when the Lord Jesus tried to wash his feet in John 13:1-7.

When the Lord Jesus washed the feet of the other disciples, they allowed Him to do so, but not Peter. He objected. Peter again responded differently from the other disciples. Just like when they saw Jesus walking on the water, Peter was the only one who asked the Lord Jesus to command him to go to Him on the water. And during the transfiguration, Peter was the only one who spoke. There is no indication that James or John spoke. On this occasion, Peter tried to restrain the Lord from washing his feet.

John 13:5-8

5 Then He poured water into the basin, and began to wash the disciples' feet and to wipe them with the towel with which He was girded.

6 So He came to Simon Peter. He *said to Him, "Lord, do You wash my feet?"

7 Jesus answered and said to him, "What I do you do not realize now, but you will understand hereafter."

8 Peter said to Him, "Never shall You wash my feet!" Jesus answered him, "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me."

"Never shall You wash my feet!" (v. 8). These are strong words. And this was a failure on Peter's part because he did not submit to the Lord and to His perfect wisdom. His failure was aggravated by the fact that the Lord Jesus had already explained to him that he will understand the reason for His action in time to come (v. 7). Peter should have recognised that the Lord Jesus knew what He was doing. And if He wanted to wash their feet, then it must be something meaningful and appropriate.

Peter failed to understand his position as a disciple of the Lord. He failed to adopt the proper posture of submission to Him. He also failed to recognise his own limitations in knowledge and understanding. In verse 6 Peter had addressed the Lord Jesus as "Lord" yet he failed to submit to the lordship of Christ.

When Jesus said: "If I do not wash you, you have no part with Me" (v. 8), Peter went to the other extreme and asked the Lord to wash his hands and head also (v. 9).

Peter might have reasoned that if washing the feet was helpful and it had a bearing on having a part with Jesus, then why not wash his hands and head as well so that he could have more of that which is good!

Peter had no negative intention. He wanted more of what was good. But he did not enquire of the Lord whether that would be better. He just assumed it would be so according to his own reasoning, which did not correspond with the spiritual reality. So the Lord Jesus corrected his wrong assumption.

John 13:10

Jesus said to him, "He who has bathed needs only to wash his feet, but is completely clean; and you are clean, but not all of you."

6. Failing to submit to God's instructions

On another occasion, Peter also spoke contrary to the expressed will of the Lord. This incident is recorded in Acts 10:9-16. In this context, the Lord was preparing Peter for the coming of Cornelius' servants. The Lord wanted Peter to know that it was His will for him to go to Cornelius and preach the gospel to him and his household. And these people were Gentiles.

Peter was praying when he fell into a trance and saw an object like a great sheet coming down from the sky. In it were all kinds of four-footed animals, crawling creatures of the earth and birds of the air. A voice came to him saying: "Get up, Peter, kill and eat!" This was the expressed will of the Lord, addressed to Peter directly. But Peter's response was:

Acts 10:14

But Peter said, "By no means, Lord, for I have never eaten anything unholy and unclean."

Even though Peter recognised that it was the Lord speaking to him and that He wanted him to kill and eat the animals, his response was: "By no means, Lord". Peter spoke contrary to the expressed will of the Lord.

If Peter felt uneasy about eating the animals and did not understand why the Lord instructed him to do so, he should have sought the Lord for understanding rather than replying the way he did. This was a failure to submit to the Lord's instructions.

To get the message through to Peter, the Lord had to speak to him again.

Acts 10:15

Again a voice came to him a second time, "What God has cleansed, no longer consider unholy."

Not only that, verse 16 tells us: "This happened three times".

This incident took place after the death, resurrection and ascension of the Lord Jesus Christ and after the outpouring of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. By that time, Peter was ministering effectively to the Jews.

Overall picture

From the passages we have considered, we see that Peter failed not just during the time the Lord Jesus was on earth, but even after Pentecost and in the course of an effective ministry as an apostle.

Peter was not only corrected and reproved by the Lord Jesus on several occasions, he was also publicly corrected and reproved by the apostle Paul at Antioch. We can read about this incident in Galatians 2:11-14. It also took place after Pentecost and during the course of Peter's effective ministry. We will look more closely at this incident in the next message.

It is helpful to take note that in spite of various faltering and failures and being corrected and reproved by the Lord on so many occasions, Peter continued to grow and to mature. He went on to become an effective and outstanding apostle of the

Lord. He also fulfilled a significant role in the establishment and growth of the early church. This is something very striking.

There are various factors that contributed to this very positive outcome and it would be helpful for us to reflect over them for our own learning. At the beginning of this message, I mentioned that one major factor is that of Peter responding well to correction and rebuke. In the next message, we will elaborate on what contributed to the positive outcome in Peter's life.

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