

When Failure Is an Option *Genesis 2:15-17;3:1-7* | 3/5/2017

Who likes to get a ZERO on a quiz or a test? How does a middle-schooler or high school student how they feel when their test paper comes back with a big fat ZERO on it in red ink? Perhaps it isn't a ZERO. It might be a 25 percent, or 40 percent –or maybe just an F.

There's a movement afoot in some educational systems that is designed to keep students from feeling the pain of a ZERO. These school districts are creating a grading scale *in which failure is not an option*. In Maryland, Prince George's County will limit failing grades to a 50 percent minimum score. All the students have to do is show a "good-faith effort." Failure is not an option.

So what is this pain-free scoring all about? Some educators evidently believe that these new grading systems are more conducive to learning. Getting a score of 50 percent instead of ZERO can encourage students to catch up when they fall behind instead of completely giving up. And no one wants failures to put students on a path to dropping out.

But other people argue that teachers need to be able to give a ZERO or an F. Failing grades are important tools for teaching diligence, and they prepare students for college and the working world. If a 50 percent is a minimum score, then grades can mask real failures in the classroom. "No-zero" policies can advance students who haven't mastered the material they need to know to succeed in life. In school and in the work world, *failure needs to be an option*. Otherwise, we fail to see the truth.

Look at what happened to Adam and Eve. God put Adam in the garden of Eden and then gave him a quick tour. Great place. Interesting foliage. Beautiful flowers and shrubs. Exotic trees including an impressive tree in the middle of the garden. Here, God said, "You may freely eat of every tree of the garden" -- except for one! "Of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die" (2:15-17). In other words, eat the forbidden fruit, and you get a big, fat ZERO!

Soon after, the crafty serpent said to Adam's companion Eve, "Did God say, 'You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?'" Eve answered, quite correctly, "God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.'"

But the serpent said to Eve, "You will not die; for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil" (3:1-5).

The serpent established a "no-zero" policy for Adam and Eve, saying: "You are not going to get a ZERO if you eat that fruit. You'll get a 50 at least, maybe even better. You will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Failure was certainly an option for Adam and Eve. God said that the penalty for eating the forbidden fruit was going to be death. But once the serpent instituted a "no-zero" policy, the fruit of that tree became very attractive -- good for food, a delight to the eyes, and the key to wisdom as well (v. 6).

Studies have shown that people become more careful when they sense greater risk, and less careful when they feel more protected. This behavior is called "risk compensation." For example, motorists drive faster when wearing seatbelts. They drive closer to the vehicle in front of them when they have anti-lock brakes. In the sport of skydiving, equipment has become steadily more reliable but the fatality rate has remained constant, since skydivers are now engaging in riskier behavior. In short, people make better choices *when failure is an option*.

Genesis tells us that Eve took fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and she ate it. She also gave some to Adam, and he ate. "Then the eyes of both were opened," says the Bible, "and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loin cloths for themselves" (vv. 6-7). They fell from

obedience to disobedience, and from innocence to shame. Suddenly, Adam and Eve's report card is not looking so good.

We need to look at our failing marks, but not be ashamed of them -- but, instead, learn from them. These marks may be ugly, but they can help us understand our limits and gain valuable knowledge about ourselves. We would never grow in faith and understanding if we lived in a "no-zero" world.

Sometimes, the path to success involves a face-plant into a pile of failure.

Peter Gomes served for decades as the minister of Memorial Church, Harvard University. But when he was a teenager, he set his heart on going to Bowdoin College and put every effort into achieving that goal. When he went to the campus for the required on-campus interview, the admissions officer said to him, "Mr. Gomes, I don't think you are Bowdoin material."

He was stunned and scarred by this rejection, and ended up attending Bates College, his second choice. Bates turned out to be the best place for him, and he received an excellent education. After many years in the ministry, he was awarded an honorary degree from Bowdoin, and he thanked the college for not offering him admission. "What had looked like a disaster and a dead end," concludes Gomes, "turned out to be a means for an improved situation."

So what were the failing marks that Adam and Eve received, and how did they improve their situation? The first of their ZEROS came from *failing to trust God's word*. God said to avoid the forbidden fruit, but Eve ate it along with Adam. "Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked" (v. 7). Eventually they were sent out of the garden of Eden.

The eyes of both Adam and Eve were opened -- not only to their nakedness, but to the importance of trusting God's word. The Bible is filled with guidance designed to help us, not hurt us. In fact, we end up doing violence to ourselves when we ignore it. Think of the Ten Commandments: "Remember the sabbath day. Honor your father and your mother. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal" (Exodus 20:8-15). Each of these commandments is designed to enhance our quality of life, not diminish it. We learn from Adam and Eve that our situation actually improves when we open our eyes to God's word and trust it.

A second ZERO came from *wanting to be like God*. The serpent told Eve, "You will be like God, knowing good and evil," and this increased Eve's desire to eat the forbidden fruit (v. 5). We can hardly blame Eve for having this desire, since wouldn't life be easier with God-like knowledge and God-like power? When we are experiencing weakness, illness, failure and frustration, it's hard to resist the temptation to "be like God."

But only God is God, and we're put on earth to live as God's children. Like Adam and Eve, we're finite human beings, vulnerable to failing and falling in a variety of ways. Although this might seem like a disaster and a dead end, it actually helps us by opening our eyes to the truth of who we are. As finite human beings, we can put our faith in a powerful and loving God, trusting God to forgive us and renew us. We *can* choose to avoid evil and do good. We *can* turn to other people for help and support, instead of feeling as though we have to solve all of our problems by ourselves. And we *can* trust in a loving God to take care of the things that are beyond our ability to control.

In the garden of Eden, unlike some of our schools today, failure was an option. And we can be thankful for that. Adam and Eve flunked their test, but their failure taught them and teaches us today to trust God's word and live as children of God.

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