

Motivation Through Failure

Lee Richards, Principal, Cariboo Adventist Academy, Williams Lake, BC



Doctor: You ignored the advice I gave you for the past 20 years, and now you are on death's doorstep. If you had followed my instructions you would not be here. Deal with it, I won't waste my time on you any longer.

Lawyer: You went ahead and broke several laws. You now face a massive legal problem that may lead to your incarceration. It's your problem, you fix it. I can't be bothered to assist you.

If we were in either of the above situations, we would probably find the professional's response to our situation rather disconcerting. After all, aren't these people there to help us? Granted, we would have to take the responsibility for getting ourselves into the predicament, but when we seek the help of a doctor or lawyer, no matter how bad our case may be, we don't expect them to turn us away without offering any assistance they can.

These individuals would have every right to say "You got yourself into this mess, why should I help you to get out of it?" It would be true. If I had ignored the doctor's instructions there would be natural consequences regarding my health that would compound the problem. If I have broken the law then there are consequences I would have to face for doing so, and it would not be anyone else's fault but mine. But when we go to our doctor or lawyer for assistance because of foolish mistakes we have made, they are there to do what they can to help alleviate our problems.

That being the case, why then would students get this response?

Teacher: I gave you the assignments, and you chose not to do them. You are going to fail, and I am not prepared to help you out of your predicament.

In education, we use many techniques to help students learn valuable lessons, and one of the techniques we employ is failure. How many times have I heard teachers say "Well, they don't seem too concerned about their mark in my class, so I'm not going to be concerned either," or "I'm not going to hunt them down to turn in their work," or "They will get what they deserve," or my personal favourite "If I had a mark like that I would buckle down and get cracking!"

Failure as a motivational technique can be effective. I still remember my Grade 4 teacher employing that technique on me. Even now I can feel the seething rage that built in me as she told me, in front of the whole class, I obviously didn't have what it would take to be a successful Grade 4 student, and my resolve to "show her" what I was capable of. At the end of the year when she presented me with my passing report card, smiling sweetly and saying she knew I could do it, and she had only said those things to "get me going", did very little to temper my negative feelings towards this teacher.

You can only “go to the well” so many times before students get wise to this. Admittedly, I had slacked off in Grade 9 Geography, and deserved to fail. I repeatedly did not complete assignments, and when my first quarter report came out and I weathered the storm at home, my teacher told me this was his way of teaching me a lesson regarding school work. Unfortunately the lesson I really learned was that as long as my parents thought I was doing my best, and the teacher didn’t have that much interest in making sure I was handing assignments in, I might fail the class, but my workload could be drastically reduced. An “F” on my report card didn’t bother me that much.

Then I met a teacher in high school who had a different attitude. For her, students taking her class did not have the option of failure – that word was not in her vocabulary. She was a Physics teacher, so her class was not one of the easiest, and I was struggling, partly because I had been slacking off, and partly because I found it difficult. Before first quarter reports came out she sat me down to share my predicament with me. My initial reaction was “Here we go again!” I was waiting for the pep talk about how I could do better, work harder, and achieve, but it didn’t come. Instead, she had an outline prepared outlining what I would need to achieve to receive a passing grade, and shared options I could initiate to help should I find myself needing to improve my grade.

In teaching, the easiest approach is that of “sink or swim.” It takes time, effort and commitment on the part of a teacher to do something other than let students fail as a motivational technique. For some students, failure will bring the desired result of renewed effort and improvement, but we need to realize that it will not work for all students. We also need to recognize when it is not working, and change our method of dealing with those students. Trying to hammer square pegs into the round holes of our personal expectations will not help either of us.

To look at this from the Biblical perspective, the Bible tells us that through Christ we will not receive that which we deserve so justly. Because “. . . all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, . . .” (Romans 3:23) we know that “. . . the wages of sin is death, . . .” (Romans 6:23) so therefore there is not much hope for us. But, fortunately for us, there is hope because “. . . the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” (Romans 6:23) If God took the view that we were undeserving and chose not to extend salvation to us, then we would get what we deserve. However God is not like that, and are we not called to reflect His love in all ways, including the instruction of his children?

As Jesus worked with people, it would have been easy for Him to turn a blind eye to the needs He saw and simply say “They are getting what they deserve.” But He did not. When Mary was thrown before Him He could have allowed her to be stoned. But He did not. When the bedridden man was lowered through the roof He could have let him be. But He did not. When Peter was drowning He could have let him go. But He did not. Christ did not come into this world to let sin take it’s natural course, neither has He put us in our classrooms to allow students to slip through the cracks. He called us to touch the lives of these young people in a positive way, and assist them to be successful learners with the strengths they have, while encouraging them to strengthen themselves in areas of weakness.

If our Christ will not turn His back on one lost and lonely lamb, can we as teachers, turn away one of His beloved ones whom He has placed under our care? Do you really believe failure is an option?

Resources:

- New American Standard Bible, Nashville, TN, Holman Bible Publishers, 1977.