

# Why You Need To Fail

“Peter, I’d like you to stay for a minute after class.” Calvin teaches my favorite body conditioning class at the gym.

“What’d I do?” I asked him. “It’s what you didn’t do.” “What didn’t I do?”  
“Fail.” “You kept me after class for not failing?”

“This,” he began to mimic my casual weight lifting style, using weights that were obviously too light, “is not going to get you anywhere. A muscle only grows if you work it until it fails. You need to use more challenging weights. You need to fail.” As it turns out, Calvin’s onto something.

Every time I ask a room of executives to list the top five moments their career took a leap forward — not just a step, but a leap — failure is always on the list. For some it was the loss of a job. For others it was a project gone bad. And for others still it was the failure of a larger system, like an economic downturn, that required them to step up.

Yet most of us spend a tremendous effort trying to avoid even the possibility of failure.

According to Dr. Carol Dweck, professor at Stanford University, we have a mindset problem. Dweck has done a tremendous amount of research to understand what makes someone give up in the face of adversity versus strive to overcome it. It turns out the answer is deceptively simple. It’s all in your head.

If you believe that your talents are inborn or fixed, then you will try to avoid failure at all costs because failure is proof of your limitation. People with a fixed mindset like to solve the same problems over and over again. It reinforces their sense of competence.

Children with fixed mindsets would rather redo an easy jigsaw puzzle than try a harder one. Students with fixed mindsets would rather not learn new languages. CEOs with fixed mindsets will surround themselves with people who agree with them. They feel smart when they get it right.

But if you believe your talent grows with persistence and effort, then you seek failure as an opportunity to improve. People with a growth mindset feel smart when they’re learning, not when they’re flawless.

Michael Jordan, arguably the world’s best basketball player, has a growth mindset. Most successful people do. In high school he was cut from the basketball team but that obviously didn’t discourage him: “I’ve missed more than 9,000 shots in my career, I’ve lost almost 300 games. Twenty-six times I’ve been trusted to take the game winning shot and missed. I’ve failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.”

If you have a growth mindset, then you use your failures to improve. If you have a fixed mindset, you may never fail, but neither do you learn or grow.

Here's the good news: you can change your success by changing your mindset. When Dweck trained children to view themselves as capable of growing their intelligence, they worked harder, more persistently, and with greater success on math problems they had previously abandoned as unsolvable. A growth mindset is the secret to maximizing potential.

How can all this help us? We can learn the growth mindset from the Scriptures. Every person who obeys Christ becomes His disciple. Disciples are characterized by putting Jesus first in everything (Matthew 10:32-39; Mark 8:34-38; Luke 14:26-27, 33; John 21:15-19), by following the teaching of Jesus (John 8:31-32), by fruitfulness (John 15:5-8), and by loving other disciples (John 13:34-35). Pushing the envelope of being a disciple, and sometimes failing, is how you learn, grow, and succeed. It's your opportunity.

We want smooth, linear growth. That makes us comfortable. However, life is rarely that simple and neat. In life, we fail. We fail through sin; we fail through persecution; we fail through infirmities. But failure can make us better. Hebrews 12:5-7 says, "And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not?" Chastening can bring strength. And failure can not only help us, but it can help others too. The Lord exhorted Peter that after he fell away and came back to Christ, he could strengthen his brethren (Luke 22:32).

Can you the imagine the power at David's disposal once he was punished by the Lord for his sin with Bathsheba (Psalm 51:7-13)? He could teach other transgressors about God! Can you imagine the power at Peter and John's disposal when they came through the persecution in the beginning stages of the early church (Acts 4:19-31)? They could all glorify God! Can you imagine the power at Paul's disposal after he had prayed for his infirmity to be removed and it wasn't? Christ responded, "My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness" and then Paul said, "Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Corinthians 12:9). He had to "fail" in his prayer before he could have the experience of incredible power to face every obstacle and continue preaching the gospel of Christ (Galatians 4:13).

The next class I did with Calvin, I doubled the weight I was using. Yeah, that's right. Unfortunately, that gave me tendonitis in my elbow, which I'm nursing with rest and ice. Sometimes you can even fail when you're trying to fail. But I'm learning.

Adapted from Peter Bregman