

The Fine Art of Tactical Retreat

Dealing with and avoiding future moral failure

John 21:2-7 HCSB Simon Peter, Thomas (called "Twin"), Nathanael from Cana of Galilee, Zebedee's sons, and two others of His disciples were together. (3) "I'm going fishing," Simon Peter said to them. "We're coming with you," they told him. They went out and got into the boat, but that night they caught nothing. (4) When daybreak came, Jesus stood on the shore. However, the disciples did not know it was Jesus. (5) "Men," Jesus called to them, "you don't have any fish, do you?" "No," they answered. (6) "Cast the net on the right side of the boat," He told them, "and you'll find some." So they did, and they were unable to haul it in because of the large number of fish. (7) Therefore the disciple, the one Jesus loved, said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he tied his outer garment around him (for he was stripped) and plunged into the sea.

A tactical retreat is not a bad response to a surprise assault, you know. First, you survive. Then, you choose your own ground. Then, you counterattack. A tactical retreat is not a bad response to a spiritual assault that ends in moral failure either. Allow me to give you two different Biblical examples of what I mean.

Peter's restoration



¹Peter had vowed that he would be the most loyal of all men to the Lord². But when Jesus wouldn't let Peter show his loyalty in the way he wanted³, I think Peter got mad. He was not a fearful man; he demonstrated a willingness to face thugs in the middle of the night with only one sword. However, Jesus rejected his gift, in much the same way that God rejected Cain's offering⁴. And I believe that just like Cain, Peter pouted and then became angry.

⁵Soon after, Peter denied the Master three times before people who, compared to the bloodthirsty mob that had come to arrest the Lord hours earlier, were positively non-threatening⁶.



His sin was short-term, spanning a few hours at most. His sin was verbal and attitudinal, without the long-term consequences inherent in sins against the body or against the trust of others. As soon as Jesus looked at him, Peter reacted with repentance. He didn't try to deny it any further and even made a public spectacle of his contrition.

After seeing the empty tomb⁷ and perhaps seeing Jesus privately⁸ as well as publicly⁹, Peter was willing to leave his ministry¹⁰ because of this one late-night, emotionally driven, stress-ridden reaction.

¹ *The Kiss of Judas*; by Jean Bourdichon c.1500; from http://freechristimages.org/images_crucifixion/Judas_Betraying_Jesus_painting.jpg

² Matthew 26:33

³ Matthew 26:51; Mark 14:47; Luke 22:50; John 18:10

⁴ Genesis 4:3-8

⁵ *Second Denial of Peter*; by James Jacques Tissot (1836-1902); from <http://www.joyfulheart.com/easter/images-tissot/tissot-second-denial-of-st-peter-738x452.jpg>

⁶ first Matthew 26:69-70; Mark 14:66-68; Luke 22:55-57; John 18:15-18 – second Matthew 26:71-72; Mark 14:69; Luke 22:58-59; John 18:25 – third Matthew 26:73-75; Mark 14:70-72; Luke 22:60-62; John 18:26-27

⁷ Luke 24:12; John 20:3-10

⁸ 1 Corinthians 15:5a

However it is important to notice that it was only when he recognized that he was probably unfit for ministry and actually returned to his old vocation that Jesus came to restore him. As He usually does, Jesus came looking for His straying lamb by the lake's shore. When Peter recognized his Master, he did not speak a word. He simply threw himself into the sea and by the time everyone else got to shore, he had a fire going with fish and bread cooking. Then Peter personally drew a net full of 153 fish to shore alone. He no longer spoke. He served.

That lake-side meal was a silent one. The Bible says that it was when they were done eating that Jesus challenged Peter's love.



¹¹ Turn please to:

- **John 21:15-17 HCSB** When they had eaten breakfast, Jesus asked Simon Peter, "**Simon, son of John, do you love (agapao) Me more than these?**" "Yes, Lord," he said to Him, "You know that I love (phileo) You." "**Feed My lambs,**" He told him. (16) A second time He asked him, "**Simon, son of John, do you love (agapao) Me?**" "Yes, Lord," he said to Him, "You know that I love (phileo) You." "**Shepherd My sheep,**" He told him. (17) He asked him the third time, "**Simon, son of John, do you love (phileo) Me?**" Peter was grieved that He asked him the third time, "**Do you love (phileo) Me?**" He said, "Lord, You know everything! You know that I love (phileo) You." "**Feed My sheep,**" Jesus said.

Peter humbly qualified his passion and placed his trust in Jesus. Immediate remorse, contrition, public repentance, a tactical retreat (leaving the ministry), quietness, service, and humility all had to precede his restoration.

Furthermore, his restoration was limited. Besides that first great sermon, you don't really hear much about Peter, except when Paul had to rebuke him for hypocrisy¹². James took the leadership of the Jerusalem church,¹³ and Paul became the great founder of the early churches.

We need to understand that sin always has a consequence. We can be forgiven and we can even be restored. However, we will never be quite as good as we could have been. It's best to simply not sin in the first place. We need the shield of righteousness¹⁴.

The Corinthian's restoration

Turn if you would to:

- **1 Corinthians 5:12-13 HCSB** For what is it to me to judge outsiders? Do you not judge those who are inside? (13) But God judges outsiders. **Put away the evil person from among yourselves.**

A man in the Corinthian church was sleeping with his father's wife and the whole community knew about it. The church, instead of sorrowfully dealing with the incestuous relationship with the strict vigor required by a holy and righteous God, had arrogantly prided themselves on their "grace" and "understanding".

Paul warned them that if they excused and made room for sin, it would grow and infect the whole church. What amazes me is that Paul, the "apostle of grace", in directing their

⁹ Mark 16:14; Luke 24: 36-48; John 20:19-25; 1 Corinthians 15:5b; John 20:26-29 and then 20:30-21:14

¹⁰ John 21:3

¹¹ *Feed my lambs* by James Jacques Tissot (1836-1902); from http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/images/objects/size3/00.159.347_PS2.jpg

¹² Galatians 2:10

¹³ Acts 15:13-20

¹⁴ Ephesians 6:11-17

behavior, quoted a principle of Biblical law that in every instance was accompanied by capital punishment!¹⁵

People often feel that they are extending love by “forgiving” and “restoring” sinners. I put those words in quotes because there seems to be a fundamental lack of understanding of the scriptural meaning of these terms.

What some well-meaning people fail to realize is that by not confronting the sin and administering the proper healing regimen, they end up exacerbating the sinner’s plight and infecting others to boot! Imagine determining that someone was infected with a terrible contagious disease that threatened not only their lives, but the lives of their loved ones, and deciding to simply smile and pat their hands!

Didn’t Paul compare the church to a body¹⁶? If a member of my body becomes infected and threatens my life, I must do something. Wouldn’t it be better to amputate a limb than lose the entire body?

We don’t know how long the situation described in 1 Corinthians had gone on, but it must have been for quite a while. The news of their shame had reached Paul in Ephesus in a day when news had to travel on foot. Apparently, the church’s initial approach was not working!

Once the steps were taken to publicly rebuke the man’s sin and shun him, the social ostracizing did its work and he repented¹⁷. However, in normal human fashion, the church went too far the other way and was too slow to restore him. Paul again had to warn them to forgive and comfort the man, lest his sorrow overwhelm him.

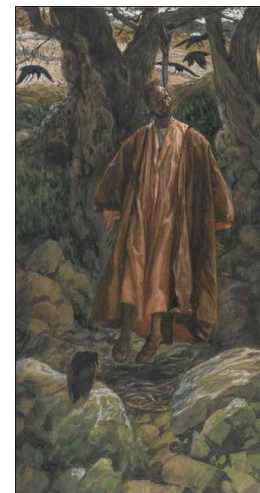
So, we must confront sin boldly. We must remove it from our midst and have no tolerance for it. However, we must maintain the good of the sinner in our minds and seek to do what is best, not only for the congregation but also for the sinner. Though church discipline may seem harsh, in the long run it is only when we obey ALL of the Scriptures that we can truly help the sinner. The goal of church discipline must be health – not comfort.

Interpersonal restoration

So, we’ve seen two different examples where someone sinned, one short-term, and one long-term, and in both cases the person had to at least temporarily retreat before they could be restored. First, you survive. Then, you choose your own ground. Then, you counterattack. Peter survived when ¹⁸Judas did not. Judas took the coward’s way out rather than facing his sin, allowing the Lord’s natural disciplinary process to take place, and chose instead to hang himself. Peter lived to fight another day. (Take picture down and replace with blank)

You may ask, “Why is tactical retreat from ministry or relationships necessary?” You may ask, “If they say they’re sorry, shouldn’t we forgive them and immediately restore them?” Yes and no. We should immediately forgive them, but that does not necessarily mean we should immediately restore them.

Some of the consequences of sin are: guilt, distance from God, conflict with one’s spouse, feelings of rejection, inability to show sympathy, lack of respect for one’s spouse, lying, distrust, inability to



¹⁵ Deuteronomy 13:5; 17:7, 12; 21:21; 22:21

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 12:12-27

¹⁷ 2 Corinthians 2:5-7

¹⁸ Judas hangs himself by James Jacques Tissot (1836-1902); from <http://www.joyfulheart.com/easter/images-tissot/tissot-second-denial-of-st-peter-738x452.jpg>

communicate, financial loss,¹⁹ even grief over the physical and emotional consequences ravaging our marriage due to sin.

- [2 Samuel 12:14 HCSB](#) However, because you treated the LORD with such contempt in this matter, the son born to you will die."

Imagine trying to recover from that one! All of these things take time to process. Some of those will leave permanent scars. The person may eventually be restored – even to ministry – but things will not be the same. There will be a new “normal”; a different “normal” that has to be taken into account.

So, how does one guard against moral failure? How does one recover from moral failure? Actually, the steps are the same for both. The essential difference is that if you have already failed you need to realize that it’s going to take time to recover, for you and for those whose trust you’ve broken.

Eight steps to take:

1. Commit to the Scriptural guidelines of moral purity (Psalm 119:9-11)
2. Be prepared for temptations (1 Peter 5:8)
3. Be accountable to someone (James 5:16)
4. Immediate remorse or contrition
5. public repentance or confession (if warranted)
6. separation or leaving the ministry (allowing room to heal) (1 Corinthians 7:5)
7. quiet patience
8. humble service or restitution

Eight guidelines to follow:

1. Guard each moral thought and desire (Proverbs 7:25)
2. Obey God’s Word and seek His wisdom (Proverbs 7:1-5; 2:12-17)
3. Don’t spend time with immoral people (Proverbs 5:8)
4. Don’t listen to enticement (Proverbs 2:16; 5:3-5; 7:15-21)
5. Flee moral temptations (1 Corinthians 6:18)
6. Rejoice in your spouse (Proverbs 5:15-18)
7. Be intoxicated by your spouse’s love (Proverbs 5:19)
8. Covenant to avoid pornography (Job 31:1; Matthew 5:27-28)

Study Questions

1. Why is it important to keep one’s heart, thoughts and desires pure? (1 Thessalonians 4:1-7)
2. How does moral failure spiritually affect a person? (1 Corinthians 5:1-2)
3. How does moral failure destroy:
 - a. One’s marriage
 - b. Our spouse’s ability to respond
 - c. Security
 - d. Intimacy
 - e. Trust
4. Describe specific temptations and some possible steps we could take to remain morally free.

¹⁹ Proverbs 5:10; 6:26