

Introduction:

When I was young, I developed a character flaw with which I continue to struggle. I am afraid to fail. I am afraid to mess up, afraid to strike out, afraid to fall on my face. On the surface, that may not sound like a bad thing, but it is. The fact is the only way any of us ever develop any real skills is by first failing at those skills repeatedly and learning from our failures. Because of my fear, I have rarely attempted things I wasn't absolutely certain I could succeed at. As far back as elementary school, I bailed from honors classes because I was afraid the work would be too hard, I wouldn't pass, and people would learn I wasn't as smart as they thought I was. I decided not to try out for the high school football team because I feared I couldn't make the cut, and would solidify my social status as a nerd. I quit trying to learn Greek when I started out preaching because I was afraid I would never get it and would look stupid. Every time, the problem was I was afraid to fail. I was afraid I would invest my time in something, it wouldn't work out, and I would look like a failure. I know what you are thinking. "Edwin, that's silly; since you didn't try, you never did learn Greek, you didn't make the football team, you didn't learn from the honors class. You actually failed in every single case." Looking back, I grasp that in a purely intellectual kind of way, but this character defect plays a mind game with me. Since I didn't even try, I have a justifying excuse: "Oh yeah, if I had worked at it, I probably could have done it, but I didn't try that hard." I know that sounds absolutely insane, but that is exactly how my mind works. I can trick myself into believing I didn't fail because I didn't try.

My mind is working like that right now. Over the next few weeks, our shepherds are going to share the plans they have developed and the direction they are going to guide us. I've prayed a lot about this path and these plans. On the one hand, I'm super excited about all God can do through us as we follow our shepherds up this path. However, my old friend, the fear of failure, is starting to attack, rehearsing the obstacles to our plans and all the reasons why our efforts won't work. I hear the voices of those who have said, "It's just too hard to get people to volunteer and commit to voluntary work." I hear the voices of those who have said, "You just can't ask too much of people." I think about how little I can actually do. I think about how much needs to be done. I think about Satan's attacks in the past. I could go on and on. This is about the point when my character defect starts to say, "Edwin, quit trying so hard. It will be one thing for this to go nowhere if you didn't put any work in it. It will be completely different if you work really hard and it goes nowhere." My fear of failure is telling me to give up and quit working. However, God has been good to me. Some time ago, He had a good friend of mine remind me of **Mark 4:26-29**. Whenever Satan starts to use my fear of failure against me, I read and reread that passage. It reminds me of three things that rally my courage. I want to share them with you because, if you're like me, you need to see these lessons too. If you're not like me, I hope you'll be encouraged anyway.

Discussion:

I. We don't know how it works.

- A. The farmer is an interesting man according to **Mark 4:27**. He sows his seed, tends his ground, and eventually brings in the harvest. However, he doesn't know how the whole thing works. How exactly does that seed germinate? I know botanists have made huge strides since the time of Jesus, yet, who really knows what causes that little seed when it enters the ground to grow? The farmer goes out and scatters the seed but doesn't even know how it works.
- B. Here is the kicker about that. If he doesn't know how it works, then in reality he doesn't know if it will work. Dropping that seed in the ground is a tremendous leap of faith for the farmer. But he does it anyway because he has seen in the past that even though he doesn't know how it works, the only way it will work is if he works.
- C. This principle has helped me tremendously. It actually attacks one of my other character defects—pride. In my pride about evangelism and sowing the Word of God, I am constantly looking for that one exact right way that will work. I'm looking for that in general. That is, I keep stirring about trying to find some method that will produce amazing results with a bunch of different people. I'm also looking for it in specific. That is, with each person with whom I am in contact, I often get paralyzed. I want to wait for the perfectly right moment or the perfectly right approach. I'm sure that I can at some point divine exactly how to sow the seed with someone to make sure they'll listen. The problem is, until I figure it out, I just keep silent. That is my pride. That is me thinking I know how it all works. Therefore, I end up making these lofty and grand statements about what will and won't work.
- D. I have no problem with us trying to find approaches and methods that seem to have more success. At the same time, I think we need a healthy humility that says we just don't know what makes the seed grow. Once that seed gets in the soil of someone's heart, we don't know what will cause it to grow. We hear door-knocking doesn't work. But I know of people who have baptized folks through door-knocking even recently. We hear getting folks mad doesn't work, but I know folks who came to Jesus because they were first made angry and wanted to prove the person who

made them angry wrong. We hear gospel meetings don't save people anymore. When I was in Texas we had a gospel meeting in which we baptized 17 people in 4 days. Do I know many times when these things have not worked? Sure. Why did it work sometimes and not others? I don't know. But that is the key. If I don't know how it works, how can I make lofty statements about what will work and what won't ever work?

- E. If I don't know what will work, what won't work, or how it all works, what is the final conclusion for me? I just need to get to work. Instead of offering excuses, instead of assuming things won't work, instead of waiting for something I'm positive will work, I just need to get to work. That's what the farmer does; that's what I should do.

II. God does the hard work.

- A. **Mark 4:28** says something interesting. "The earth produces by itself..." Strictly speaking is that true? No. Jesus' point is that is how it seems to the farmer who doesn't know how it works. The true fact is the earth does that work because God is doing His work. Think about this. The farmer is actually doing the easy part of the job. All he has to do is drop in the seed and tend the ground. God is the one who gets the seed to germinate and grow. The farmer could bend the might of all his will in the direction of that seed, but he would never make the seed grow. However, he drops it in the ground, tends to the land, and God makes it grow.
- B. Have you ever read **I Corinthians 3:5-7**. Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God caused the growth. Who did the hard work here? I recognize that the planting and watering can often seem like hard work to us. After all, the farmer who plows, plants, and tends is working hard. But what is the really hard part of that? Plowing, planting, and tending may take a great deal of manual labor, but they are not the hard part of the work. The hard part is getting the seed to grow. God hasn't asked us to do that. He does that.
- C. Isn't that great? Someone else does the really hard part. We don't have to save people. We don't have to make the seed germinate. Our job is simply to plant and water the seed. God will tend to the seed once it is in the soil.
- D. This also brings up that character defect of pride. Sadly, in a moment of rigorous honesty, I want us to have a great year so we can say, "Wow, look at all we did. We're awesome." The fact is, however, we can't do the really hard work that needs to be done. That's why all of this work is really about having faith in the working of God. Consider **Matthew 19:24-26**. Jesus said it was hard for rich people to enter the kingdom. The disciples simply couldn't understand this. If rich people had a hard time entering, then who could possibly enter? Jesus' response was, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." Think about that for a minute. It is impossible for us to do any amount of work and save even one single person. We just can't do it. We can work and work and work and work but not one single person will make it into Christ's kingdom. However, we are not working alone. God is working with us and all things are possible with Him. **Ephesians 3:20** brings it home for us. Our God can do far more abundantly beyond all we ask or think. When it comes to this evangelistic effort, what is the biggest thing you can think of? God can do more than that.
- E. We need to keep working because God is doing the hardest part. He can do more than we can imagine.

III. God works when we work.

- A. Having said the above, however, I can't help but notice that God did His work through the earth and seed only when the farmer actually sowed the seed. God can make seeds grow however He wants. God doesn't actually need farmers to provide food for us. However, that is the way God has chosen to work. If we want to eat, someone has to plant the seed. Then God does His work on the seed. Do you see how it works in the agricultural world? God won't just work on His own. God works when we work.
- B. The same is true in evangelism. God does the hard work. He does what we cannot. He could do it any way He wanted. However, He has chosen to work through us. God can do far more abundantly beyond all we ask or think according to **Ephesians 3:20**, but notice it is by His power working in us. He will only work when we work.
- C. Think of all the Bible accounts you've ever learned. What did they stress? They stressed that God works when we work. God delivered Noah when Noah built the ark (**Genesis 6-8**). God delivered Israel from Egypt when Moses finally went to Pharaoh (**Exodus**). Goliath had taunted Israel for 40 days (**I Samuel 17:16**) and God didn't kill him. But when David stepped on to the battlefield with his sling, God slew Goliath (**I Samuel 17:46**). God delivered Israel from Haman when Esther went into the king (**Esther 5-7**). Do you see it? God works when we work!

Conclusion:

The reality is I have a bunch of character defects. God continues to work on them as I continue to work with Him, relying on His working. My natural tendency because of those defects is to clam up, be paralyzed, quit working. I'm afraid to fail. However, God is conquering that fear as He teaches me that when we work, He works. I hope if you have that fear, you can overcome as well by the grace of God. We have a lot of work to do this year and some of it may seem a bit overwhelming. However, if we work, so will God. Let's get to work.