

LETTING GO OF LITTLE FAILURES
By Jay Emory

Recently I ran across a very interesting quote from noted leadership consultant John Maxwell. It served as a good reminder for me. Maybe it will be a good reminder for you, too. He wrote:

“Little progress is better than no progress at all. Success comes in taking many small steps. If you stumble in a small step, it rarely matters. Don't gift wrap the garbage. Let little failures go.”

If there's one lesson my wife has learned (with me) in our marriage, it is this: “Let the little failures go.” Recently we celebrated our wedding anniversary, and people close to me know how I have had to seek forgiveness from my bride many times over the years. She has had to let many of my little failures go!

Please do not misunderstand me – our lives have not been filled with failure. (I think that I am a great husband.) We have been blessed beyond measure, our 33 years together serving as good evidence of this. But, like everyone else, whether married or single, we must deal with the people we encounter every day – coworkers, customers, friends, and spouses who occasionally do or say things that fall short of expectations. Sometimes their words and actions – as well as our own - are downright disappointing.

The key, as Maxwell said, is to keep making forward progress, to persevere in moving ahead even when we experience little failures. Then before you know it, as has been the case in our marriage, 33 wonderful years have passed! The same can be true in forging a successful work career.

Letting go of little failures involves more than the mind. It also involves the tongue. How many times over the years have you heard sermons at church or engaged in conversations about the power and danger of the words we speak? The importance of “taming the tongue” is addressed directly in James 3. After stating that, “We all stumble in many ways” (James 3:2), the passage explains that just as a horse is controlled by small bit in its mouth, and a small rudder guides a ship, the tongue can be a powerful influence for good – or for bad:

“Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell” (James 3:5-6).

This is a harsh reality we all face. As the passage goes on to say, “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God's likeness.... My brothers, this should not be” (James 3:9-10). So, as we interact with coworkers, friends, and even our spouse, we should remember to “let the little failures go.” One way of doing this is restraining our tongues, resisting the urge to say things we will later regret – turning little failures into big problems.

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If there is something we all should have learned over the years, it is that tomorrow can look very different from today. For this reason, we should strive not to let the small stuff damage the great relationships we have at work or at home. Life, health and relationships are precious and should not be taken for granted.

As Proverbs 19:11 wisely observes, “A person’s wisdom yields patience; it is to one’s glory to overlook an offense.” This is not only wise; it is also the honorable thing to do.

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. How good are you at dealing with the “little failures”? Do you tend to dwell on them – whether they are failures of your own or those of others? Or are you able to let them go, putting them aside and moving forward unburdened by regret or animosity?
2. Why do you think concentration on little failures can have such a detrimental effect on our relationships and work performance?
3. In what ways can the things we say result in magnifying little failures that otherwise might quickly be forgotten? Can you think of any examples from your own experience?
4. The proverb cited declares, “A person’s wisdom yields patience; it is to one’s glory to overlook an offense.” How does our reaction to minor offenses reflect wisdom and patience? Does this mean we should never acknowledge or even confront failures? Why or why not?

Challenge for This Week

Have you found yourself being critical of people (or a specific person) around you for minor things you consider failures? Maybe it is time to ask God to help you determine if these are “little failures” you need to let go.

Similarly, what “little failures” from your past might be continuing to haunt your present, prohibiting you from moving forward without unnecessary regrets? This week might be a good time to meet with a trusted friend (or perhaps a few friends) and admit your struggles, seeking their counsel on how to release the unchangeable past and move toward a promising future.

NOTE:

For more about what the Bible says, consider the following passages:
Proverbs 10:19, 10:20-21, 12:18; Matthew 5:22; Ephesians 4:26,29-32; James 1:19-20

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