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The Well-Played Life: Chutes & Ladders

Many years ago, a man was preparing for a business meeting in a restaurant in Dearborn, Michigan, and he happened to bump into the famous American businessman and auto industry executive, Lee Iacocca, and he immediately went over to meet Iacocca and said, "It's an incredible honor to meet you. I'm a huge fan, I've read your book, I've heard you speak." And as they were shaking hands, this great idea occurred to him and he said, "Mr. Iacocca, in just a few minutes, many of my colleagues will be meeting at this corner table for a business meeting. Would you mind doing me a favor and at some point during that meeting, would you just walk over, and look down and say, 'Hi Jack.' It would mean a lot. It would really impress my friends if you could act like you know me." Apparently, this sounded like a fun idea, because once the meeting had started, Iacocca got up from his table, went over and said, "Hi Jack. How are you doing?" And Jack, looked up and said, "Not now Lee, I'm busy."

Inherent in all of us is this desire to at least appear to be more powerful and impressive than we really are. This is not *necessarily* bad, for in the business world and in many of the social structures that we operate, it's reasonable to sell or promote ourselves as somebody who's got the chops – somebody who's worthy of the confidence and admiration of others. It's how we climb the ladder... how we play the game of life in many ways. But what happens when we start to believe that we really are that person we're projecting ourselves to be... that we really do have it all together, all the time. What happens when we begin to conceal, through our outward appearance and our social position on the ladder, conceal those inner cracks, our imperfections, our inner fears. What happens when we wake up starving for admiration and praise, when we're consumed by the desire to be something that we're not, when we're no longer content with who we really are under the facade?

When you play the measuring up game, you lose eventually, every time. This game plays off our greatest fear – the fear of NOT measuring up, of not being good enough, smart enough, pretty enough... our fear of failure. It's one of the most debilitating fears, and it affects all of us in this room at different times in our lives, even though we all know that we won't always have a 100% success rate. Eventually, we will fall and fail, we won't be perfect, we will make mistakes. And no matter how hard we try, how competent we are, how perfectly we live, there will be times when our greatest plans fall apart because of forces beyond our control. We will fall and fail... the question is, how will you respond in the face of failure?

Let me tell you about a character from scripture who starts out playing this measuring up game, but in the end, has the grace and courage to embrace failure in a beautiful, constructive way. His name is Paul, and after the death of Jesus, he converted to Christianity. He was so passionate that he preached to anyone who would listen. He planted several churches throughout Asia Minor. He was so convicted in his faith and his calling to spread the news of Jesus that he wrote to the Corinthian church in a letter, and said, "If you want to learn how to walk the walk, to be faithful followers of Jesus, be imitators of me." That's confidence... I might even say over-confidence... But, by the time he writes his second letter to the Corinthians, everything's changed. He's lost his confident tone... Listen again to how he describes himself to the very people he once told to imitate him. He says, "We're not much to look at. We've been surrounded and battered by troubles. We're not sure what to do. We've been spiritually terrorized. We've been thrown down."

What happened to Paul? Things were going so well for Paul in Corinth... he planted the church and taught them all about Jesus, and then he left to start some other faith communities. In his absence, a group of teachers came into the church and started to spread rumors about Paul, trying to discredit and correct his teaching. They said that he wasn't really a legitimate apostle, because he wasn't one of the original 12 disciples. They were trying to compromise Paul's authority, intent on "correcting" what he was teaching about Gentiles not needing to be circumcised to be followers of Jesus and that they didn't need to obey the restrictive food laws of the OT. Paul catches wind of this and he writes the church a letter. He calls these teachers "super apostles", and says, "You know, you're right. I don't have any official credentials from Jerusalem. In fact the last time I was there, they ran me out of town. Most places I go, I get beat up, thrown in prison, struck by stones, left for dead. I'm not much to look at; I'm persecuted, perplexed, knocked down. I'm not like those flashy super apostles. But here's the thing; I'm afflicted, but I'm not crushed. I'm full of doubts, but I'm not driven to despair. I'm persecuted, but I'm not forsaken. I'm knocked down, but I'm not knocked out!"

Paul says that the key to being a follower of Christ, is to know that we have a power that is contained in clay jars, a treasure that's contained in our fragile bodies, so the world would know that we do not live by our own strength and skills, but it's the power of God working through us that motivates and drives us. Notice that Paul's not saying, "look, my life is perfect, I've got it all together, and because I'm bright and shiny you should listen to me." What he says is, "I'm afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, knocked down. My relationship with God has not spared me from the pain and suffering of life. What it has done is give me the strength to not let these things define or defeat me." God's power within is a that of resilience, a spirit of resurrection and love, that sees us through the good and the bad that comes our way, and inspires us to keep running the race.

Have you ever played the game Chutes and Ladders? It's actually one of my least favorite board games, because it's essentially a game of chance. I like games where you have a plan and strategy and you're rewarded for it. But when you play Chutes and Ladders, whether you rise up or slide back is completely up to the roll of the die. The goal is to move your token up the board as many boxes as your die allows, and the first to 100 wins, but there's a lot of chance between 0 and 100. You land on a chute and you could be sent back for no good reason. You land on a ladder and you can be rewarded for no good reason. In many ways, Chutes and Ladders is a metaphor for life, for no matter how well we play the game, there will inevitably be unforeseen ladders that propel some high above the

rest, while the chutes lie in wait for some to slide back down, by no fault of their own. This incredibly frustrating game challenges us to look at how we handle and overcome the setbacks of life that seem so random. How do we bounce back from those falls and failures that get in the way of our hard won and well-deserved progress? How do we get back up again when life seems to knock us down, and push us back?

Paul has every right to be frustrated. All the passion and hard work he poured into this Corinthian church, helping the Gentiles know that they are loved and accepted, invited into the Kingdom of God as they are, without a full conversion to Judaism... all that work torn down by these "super apostles." But even in the face of this challenge, Paul doesn't give up, he relies on a message of hope and resilience. Paul says, "Look, our bodies are breaking down, but the person we are within is being renewed every day." And it's being renewed by these minor setbacks and adversities... all of which are producing an inner strength and that will serve you for all time.

This message of resilience is as important for us to hear today as it was in Paul's day. This reminder that our fear of failure should not hold us back from living as fully and faithfully as we can; that failure and mistakes are inevitable in life; and that "winning" is not always the goal. Winning is sometimes not up to us. There's times that enduring is the true victory. Life is not about "measuring up," but about doing, and being our best, and knowing that sometimes even that won't be enough to keep us from failing, from hitting one of the chutes and sliding back down the game board. Instead of running from adversity, lean into it, rely on God and others to help you through it, and as we do that, we learn how to bounce back from failure. We remember that our story is not over yet... that there is more yet to unfold before us, if we just get through this time of challenge. As Isaiah wrote, long before Paul, we can trust that those who wait in the Lord will renew their strength, and as we rely on that inner strength, that power within that comes from God, we will mount up with wings like eagles, and rise up again. Failure is always a possibility, but it does not define us. We, like Jesus have a spirit of resurrection, a treasure from God within, and we too will rise like a phoenix from the ashes.

Paul put it this way, I'm afflicted but not crushed, full of doubts, but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken. I'm knocked down, but I'm not knocked out. Be not afraid of failure, of those chutes we find along the path... for our story is not over... it's still unfolding before us, and God will see us through. Thanks be to God.