

Grit 'n' Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules
Episode #10: Overcoming Error Terror

Cheri:

We'll just dive in to the whole topic of failure. We're not going to try to label you or anything like that. We'll let you make your own confessions.

Michele:

Hold on. You're saying "topic of failure" and "label me". I need to understand where you're coming from with that.

Cheri:

Amy and I are self-confessed recovering perfectionists and people-pleasers, And we suspect you may be part of the club.

Michele:

Hi, my name is Michelle Cushatt ... I'm a recovering perfectionist and people-pleaser...

<music>

Cheri:

Hey, you're listening to Grit 'n' Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules. This week, my de-LIGHT-full cohost Amy Carroll and I are talking with Michele Cushatt, author of *Undone: A Story of Making Peace with an Unexpected Life*.

Cheri:

So, talk to us about the role of failure — how you've tended to experience it and relate to it.

Michele:

Wow, what a question. First of all, how I tend to experience it? I avoid it at all cost. Just the word *failure* makes me a little nauseous as we sit here and talk about it. So, to begin with, I avoid it all costs, which makes me become workaholic, overachieving, near desperate — like will lose sleep in order to get work done, and then you lay in bed worrying about the work that you've got done. When that doesn't work, when avoiding it doesn't work, when failure still comes, I rename it.

<laughter>

Cheri:

Do tell.

Amy:

That is genius!

Michele:

I don't like that word. Failure seems so fatal, so I do everything I can to ... I don't know if it's part of my avoidance skill or whatever, but let's not quite call it failure. Unless — let's pause — unless I'm in my complete drama mode where I then just dive off the deep end into a corner, "I'm such a failure!!" and usually Ben and Jerry's is involved, and my husband's running as fast as possible in the other direction. How's that? Is that helpful?

Amy:

We might recognize that.

Cheri:

What was it I was watching? It was Gilmore Girls (thank you Kathi Lipp) and she had this tub of Ben and Jerry's. They don't sell those in California. It's wrong.

Michele:

Yes. One tiny little pint is really only good for about 10 minutes of sobbing. Then you need to go on to another one.

Cheri:

Exactly.

Amy:

I'm pretty sure here in the South they probably still sell it by the gallon. I feel really sorry for you California girls.

Cheri:

Where's my invitation to come visit?

Michele:

Poor you Cheri, you have to have a kale shake, and I'm so sorry.

Cheri:

I love it.

Michele:

That's the humorous approach to failure, and there's some real truth behind the humor. I have spent a whole lifetime trying to escape failure, avoid failure, make up for failure, outrun failure. To me, it's like the disease I can't bear the thought of catching. It's been something that's been such a driving force in my life to try to avoid it. To the point that I have then mislabeled other things as failure. For example, *somebody disagreeing with me, or somebody being disappointed in me, or somebody being disconnected for whatever reason*. I look at all of those as personal failures. It's a massive, massive subject that has a huge role in my life.

Amy:

Wow.

Cheri:

It sounds like you're taking responsibility for the entire world, but that's not...

Michele:

Why would I do that?

Cheri:

...that's not okay. I'm responsible for the entire world.

Michele:

Yes. You see that the funny thing behind this whole ... The power of failure is we end up really truly believing that the weights of everything rests on our shoulders. Heaven forbid we should put that burden down for a second, because it's all on us. Of course, you and I, we kind of understand how we end up in that place, but yet when you talk about it from a little bit of a removed distance it seems so ridiculous. Except in real life it feels very real.

Amy:

When we talked to Kathi Lipp, Michelle, she talked about this concept of "good enough," which is such a foreign concept ...

Michele:

What? What? Of what are you speaking?

Amy:

...to the context we're talking about, right? Cheri uses this term that I love that for perfectionist it's "error terror," so how do you move from error terror to being okay with good enough and without compromise in all of that?

Michele:

Oh my goodness. That's a tough one for me, because I have many times justified my perfectionism under a label of "delivering excellence." I'm a business woman. I'm a professional. I see no problem with bringing your best self to every project, or environment, or relationship, or whatever. The problem is I take it too far where there is no grace. There is no buffer for anything less than 150%. To get to a place where you're okay with good enough always sounded like a compromise to me, like I'm being lazy, or compromising my values, or that I'm not valuing the people I'm with enough to give them my best.

Honestly, I think it takes a deconstruction of our definition of failure. Then a reconstruction of real truth, because I think behind failure is countless mistruths that we have basically bought in to and believed for so long we don't even realize that we're believing a lie.

Amy:

Wow. That's really insightful. What do you think some of those mistruths are about failure?

Michele:

Things like "I won't be loved if I'm not perfect." "I won't be accepted or loved, or I won't have relationships if I don't do it right all the time." That's a pretty high standard for anybody to live up to. Other mistruths? "Anything other than an A is an F." All or nothing. It's that all or nothing mentality that if it isn't perfect than it's bad. "Failure is unredeemable. It's a complete loss."

Whereas I'm learning to say even failure is an opportunity for growth, right? Anytime you fail at something you learn how to do it better next time, but for a long time I believed failure is absolutely unredeemable. It's a total loss. It's like a car that gets creamed. There's nothing you can do with the wreckage. It has to be thrown in the trash heap. I treated my own failure like that. It's either win or it's trash. There's really no redeeming value of any kind of failure.

Amy:

I know you have a really interesting life story. What are some of the ways that you started realizing that those were mistruths that you moved in that direction?

Michele:

Oh goodness. I wish I could point to a particular day or one particular story that was revolutionary and completely transformed me from the inside out.

Cheri:

Perfectly, of course.

Amy:

It didn't happen overnight? That is such a bummer!

Michele:

No. I'm still so much in progress. There's things even this week that I've had to wrestle through. A couple of factors. I think the best cure for failure is failure. I guess the best cure for being afraid of failure is failure. That's a better way to say it.

Probably the experiences or the pieces of my story that were the most helpful for me to learn to have grace with myself and others is, first of all, marriage. Hello. Marriage is such a complicated mix of personalities and people in one house trying to figure out how to cohabitate, for crying out loud, live in the same space, and do things like raising children, and working jobs, and all of that. I had the fairy tale mentality, which Hollywood does a really great job of setting us up for failure within our marriages, so that was one way. The nitty gritty of the friction of living with another person is a great way for you to slowly, painfully, over time work on your fear of failure.

Parenting? Hello. Parenting actually deserves 2 places on my checklist, because I think parenting might be one of the biggest tools for me learning to accept my own fallibility, but when you have children you can do everything right, and they can still make bad decisions. For way too long I owned all of my children's bad decisions, because it was a personal failure for me as a mother. At some point and time, especially since I have 6 kids (by the way, side note: I'm thinking that God knew that I needed extra practice with failure, thus he gave me 6 kids) but with 6 kids you can only carry so much responsibility for your children's choices before you're literally drowning underneath the weight of it. It's too much. That would be another piece, parenting.

Then, perhaps, one of the ones that has helped me the most is enduring a life-threatening illness three different times. Having cancer three times and recognizing my own mortality really helped me to frame the fact that I am human. I know we know this, but I operated as if I was not human. I approached my life as if I was Superwoman who could make anything happen if I worked hard enough. Cancer taught me that there is so much over which I don't have control. That really the only one who's truly

omnipotent and sovereign is God himself. I've been trying to crawl on to that throne for way too long. The pressure of that throne is more than a human can bear. It's best beared by God himself.

Amy:

Can you see the tears when you said, "I'm just human." There's so much grace even in that phrase, Michele, that I had this visceral response to that. I'm literally teared up to hear you say it.

Michele:

It's a powerful ... Trust me, I've cried many, many tears over this whole entire concept. It has been and will continue to be very hard learned for me, because I truly believe some of the struggle with my fear of disappointing people, my fear of failing God and failing others, and all of that. In some ways it's the way I'm wired up. I tell people in *Undone* that I basically came into the world and wanted everybody to know, what a fine job that I did on my own delivery. Look at me. Didn't I do a fine job? I came in on time. I didn't cause anybody any trouble. Some of that is my nature, but the Bible is so clear about the fact that we don't have to be held captive to our human nature by the grace of God.

Slowly over time as I get closer and closer to eternity, my goal — my hope, your hope — is that God can teach us how to be transformed by the Spirit's presence. Some of that is acknowledging and accepting our mortality, our limitations, the fact that we're human, and that we were never, from the beginning, meant to be God.

Cheri:

I want to backtrack a little bit to you talking about some of those misbeliefs we have about failure, like if we aren't perfect we aren't lovable. That sort of thing. In *Undone* you say, "Perfectionism isn't rational. It's poison." What you made me think of here is how self-fulfilling those misbeliefs about failure actually are, because I can think of times when I was so desperate to do things perfectly or else I wasn't going to be worthy of love. Then I failed. Then I was so overcome that I hid or I was unbearable. It was my reaction to my failure that made me "unlovable". I sabotaged any possibility. People had to leave me alone. They had to flee from me. I wasn't safe at that point. Yet, perfectionism told me ... the poison of perfectionism is the belief that, "See? I told you so. I knew it. If I failed, they would abandon me."

Michele:

I've said those exact words before; I have said those words before to my husband. "See? See? This is proof in the pudding right here. I knew it would happen. I fail and people walk away." The irony is that in that moment of failure the emotion is so powerful that we really believe it. Then, of course, as we know that the more that we repeat that phrase, whether out loud or even in our mind, the more power it has. The more true it becomes. All of those things. At some point we have to stop the process.

The world would like to offer us a lot of 4 step plans to curing this, 3 strategies to doing this, and all of this, but the only thing that I have found for me personally that upsets the fruit basket of perfectionism is for me to become very, very clear and convinced of the supremacy of God himself.

Amy:

Profound and true.

Cheri:

On a daily, or hourly, or for someone like me, minute by minute, what might that look like? Say I go downstairs and the man I've adored/been driven crazy by for 28 years does or says that thing that brings that out, when that kind of thing happens to you, what is your go-to?

Michele:

Oh, goodness. I don't really want to say what my go-to is, because my automatic response is often the bad response. Right? It's the trained response, the learned response, over time that isn't always good. When I'm acting like a mature adult and able to think through a good response I have to remind myself of things. That my marriage isn't the supreme purpose of my life. I know that some people will heartily have a hard time with hearing that, but my mothering and my marriage are not the supreme purposes of my life. They're valuable pieces of my life, but as far as my faith is concerned the Bible is very clear that we are created for the glory of God. Period. If that becomes a framework for my operation than when my husband is, let's say, misbehaving, when he's being less than the prince that I know he is, if all of my eggs are in that basket, than I unravel very fast.

If all of my eggs are in the basket of my marriage, then one disappointment, one misstep, one failure on his part, becomes a tangled mess of emotion, and reactions, and responses, and all of that stuff that it will quite possibly take me days to process through. However, if that is not the sum total of my value, and my worth, and everything, if I can mentally remind myself of the supremacy of God, the love of God, the fact that I am his, and he is in charge, and he can be trusted, then some of those things can be let go a little easier.

Here's an interesting truth about this whole perfectionism thing, which I'm sure you've discussed before, but those of us that are perfectionist like to believe that we only hold these high standards on ourselves. Right? That we like to believe we only hold ourselves to this standard of excellence, but we would never expect that of somebody else. We're nothing but grace with everybody else. Which is a bunch of baloney. We'll say that, because the truth is if we don't understand grace for ourselves, we will never be able to offer it to anybody else. Period. Not really. Part of that process of letting my husband have a moment of poor behavior or poor responses in a conflict is, the only way that I can respond to that with grace, is for me to receive the grace of God first for myself.

Practically speaking, yes, I read the Bible. Yes, I read the books. Yes, I go through processes, but the biggest work is frankly done is taking captive of how I let myself think about who I am and who God is. Really starting to slowly retrain how I approach God's role in my life and my role in my life, because I've really had those switched.

Amy:

I love what you said about mistruths versus truths. So many times our emotions are giving us those mistruths. They're giving us the "bad rules" as we like to say. When we think about the sovereignty of God, which is what you say we have to go back to as the ultimate truth, he is the Redeemer. Instead of that mistruth that failure's a total loss, when we remember the sovereignty of God and that one of my favorite names for him is the redeemer, that we know that failure is redeemable.

Michele:

Absolutely. The many cases, what is right now one of the subjects that I'm pondering or wrestling with is the whole connection between suffering and the sovereignty of God. How many times in the Bible did

failure not become something that God goes, "Oops. Now I'm going to have to come up with a plan B." That failure ended up being the very means that God would use to accomplish His plan A purpose. He's not bound by time and all that.

In his supreme wisdom to see all things from all points of view for all of time the very things that we think were fatal flaws end up becoming the very thing that God uses to create a great leader. For example Peter, or a vocal spokesperson Paul, or Rahab, the harlot, who was a refuge for God's people, or Ruth, who was a pagan, who ended up coming to bat. There's so many examples of what the world would label as failure, what perfectionists would label as failure, that become this tremendous platform for God's greatest glory.

Amy:

That is so helpful and not despairing over our own seemingly fatal flaws, like perfectionism and people pleasing, that even in that God is sovereign and the redeemer.

Michele:

Yes, so true. So true. I would say it's a tough process and certainly a life long one. It's not resolved quickly or easily, but the irony of all this, when it comes to us perfectionists, the very thing that will set us free from the perfection that we carry around is the very thing we're afraid of. It's our own fallibility. Our own flaws. The more that we come face to face with that, and start to realize that we don't have to be afraid, the more we start to be free from that.

Cheri:

The only place to have that freedom is when we take our failures straight to Christ. I look back at all the people I've tried to take them to and get the people to either redeem them, or tell me that it was okay, or tell me it was awful. It really was as bad as I thought it was, so I can wallow some more. I don't know if aging is important in this process. I would have loved to have found this in my 20s. It's a waste of time. It's a waste of time. People are wonderful. The relationships we have are valuable, but trying to take all of that to person, after person, after person? I'm a social person, so I've taken my stuff to a lot of people with a complete zero success rate. You would think that I would have learned from all of that failure that it always fails.

Michele:

Yes, me too. It's so true. The more that we try to beat our heads against the same wall, getting the affirmation that we want, we're going to get a headache. It doesn't accomplish what we think it's going to accomplish which, again, it sounds so cliché or trite from a spiritual standpoint, but if our identity is wrapped up in other imperfect people we are always, always at risk for an identity crisis. Always. The only way that you and I can have this certain sense of security and safety is shoring up our belief in the love of God. For me personally I would have preached a great sermon about the love of God, but that didn't mean that I was fully bought into the truth of it. I've had to learn do I believe this or not? Am I willing to bank on it? And deepen that belief to become something that's real, and tangible, and that I live out.

I have a quote on my desk that says faith is what faith does. All that means is that if I really, for me, if I really believe that God loves me, then I'm going to act like God loves me. I need to start demonstrating the reality of that truth.

Cheri:

The "bad rule" that hit me the hardest during this episode is the misbelief: "Failure is unredeemable. It's a complete loss."

And the truth that sets us free is the FACT that no matter how badly we've failed or how lost we've become, "God is ALWAYS our **redeemer** and **savior**."

Be sure to stop by the webpage for today's episode of Grit 'n' Grace. You'll find it at CheriGregory.com: c-h-e-r-i-g-r-e-g-o-r-y.com. We're giving away a copy of Michele's book *Undone*, and we've also got a great download for you from Michele called *60 Creative Ways to Love a Friend in Crisis*.

We hope you've enjoyed Episode 10 of Grit 'n' Grace: Good Girls Breaking Bad Rules. Next week, Amy Carroll and I will be back, sharing all the "ah-HA!" moments we had while learning from Michele.

For today, grow your grit. Embrace God's grace. And when you run across a bad rule, by all means, **BREAK IT!**