

God's vision of success

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne May 10, 2009



Taken from Ephesians 2

Once upon a time you were living apart from Christ and you did not know the promises God had made to you. You lived in this world without God and without hope. But now you belong to Christ Jesus. Just remember God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done ... you who were once far away from God have been brought near to him because of Jesus. (NLT)

Intro to the service: So how successful are you? I suppose it depends ... success may seem to depend on what you have or what you have accomplished. Often success may be defined by what others think of you, or maybe you choose to define it for yourself. No matter what, we tend to think of success as something you have to work for, and should deserve. Face it, when someone seems to get ahead without putting in the time or effort, you may feel cheated ... like when the boss's nephew with only a long resume of fast food positions is given the job right above yours though you've been working overtime to impress him. That doesn't seem right does it?

Like most things in life, having a successful spiritual life takes some work too. Makes sense. Nothing comes easy. However, your spiritual life does not require the kind of work you may be thinking about ... Did you know that among the world's religions Christianity alone believes you can not earn your way into Heaven by being good enough? Surprised? I know some preachers and some churches seem to say those sorts of things. But right here in the Bible, Paul tells you that you can't take credit for anything with God. That includes salvation. No he says: "*Salvation is not a reward for the good things you have done,*" always supposing, of course, you've done some in your life. To be close to God is a gift God himself gives you, and it all comes from learning to trust him.

Sounds easy I suppose, but as we all know, it's not. A spiritual life takes work in terms of patience and perseverance. It helps to practice good spiritual hygiene by confessing your sins. Spiritual good habits help too like praying often, serving others, being thankful and listening for God's words in the Bible. If you don't bother with your spiritual life much then you may end up feeling a bit, well bothered and bewildered. Sometimes that happens anyway. There are times in every life when you may feel far from God. Those may be moments when you thought you were better off doing life on your own terms, your own way ... even though that's what leads to more emptiness. Sometimes the emptiness may not be your fault, but simply a passing test to see if you only love God when he seems close,

and not when he seems far off. For whatever their cause I've found these moments of emptiness are a good reminder of why I want God in my life. For me, life is about being filled and fulfilled, and that's something I only really find in God. The Bible says when you try to live without God you end up living without hope. That leads me to ask, "*What would my life be without you Lord ... ?*"

Solo: What is life?

words and music by George Harrison

*What I feel, I can't say.
But my love is there for you anytime of day
But if it's not love that you need
Then I'll try my best to make everything succeed
Tell me, what is my life without your love
Tell me, who am I without you, by my side
What I know, I can do
If I give my love now to everyone like you
But if it's not love that you need
Then I'll try my best to make ev'rything succeed
Tell me, what is my life without your love
Tell me, who am I without you, by my side
Tell me, what is my life without your love
Tell me, who am I without you, by my side*

How do you benefit if you gain the whole world but lose your soul in the process? Is anything worth more than your soul? [Mark 8:36-37 NLT]

Song: Without you

*Without you I would have no hope,
I'd be all alone, without you.
Without you I could not be strong
I could not go on, without you, without you . . .
Who would I be if you didn't love me?
Who would I be without you?
Who would I be if you didn't save me?
Who would I be without you?
Without you, life would make no sense
Dreams would always end, without you
Without you spring would not appear,
storms would never clear,
Without you, without you, without you ...*

Intro to the message: In this message series we're comparing what it means to live it up according to the world's standards, and what living it up means to God. Christians believe on that first Easter Jesus was raised up to a new life ... not just revived but renewed. Christians are challenged to join Jesus now by living in new ways, in what the Bible calls a resurrection life. I've read this line to you over and over with the hope it will sink in more and more, like stain that seeps into wood and not just another layer of paint that sits on the surface of your life. The line goes like this:

If you're serious about living this new resurrection life with Christ, act like it. Pursue the things over which Christ presides. Don't shuffle along, eyes to the ground, absorbed with the things right in front of you. Look up, and be alert to what is going on around Christ—that's where the action is. See things from his perspective.

[Colosians

3:1-3 The Message]

So the first step to living up is to look up. Life is not about shuffling along it's about going boldly where God has gone before. Life's not about being absorbed with what's right in front of you, but soaking up more and more of the Spirit of God. That's what your life can be about. That's what makes living such an adventure.

This resurrection life you received from God is not a timid, grave-tending life. It's adventurously expectant, greeting God with a childlike "What's next?"

[Romans 8:15 The Message]

What's so odd about Christianity is how often churches have stomped all the life out of this vision of living. But it doesn't have to be that way. God is challenging you to join him on this adventure, to live it up now and to live for eternity later. Not a bad deal. But the question is whether you see this as something worth working towards. Or is your life about other priorities? Do you see things from another perspective? I mean how do you spell success?

That's a big deal. How you define success and failure will determine whether you feel you are important or unnecessary, whether you are valuable and life has meaning or whether you feel like a loser and nothing matters. How you choose to live depends so much on how you view success. So how do you?

Many people let others define success, so success means making someone else happy or living up to someone else's expectations. If you're trying to do that I have one question for you. How's that going for you? Probably not well. Face it, no matter how hard you try you may never live up to all the expectations other people have for you. And it can hurt to have to try all the time. Some of you may remember not living up to a parent's expectations. Dad wanted you to work harder or get better grades. Maybe you didn't pick the person your mother wanted you to marry. Or you chose the wrong career, or made

other lifestyle choices your parents did not like. If they showed any disappointment in you, well you could keep that with you the rest of your life. Or maybe for you it's not a parent's expectations ... it's a spouse, or a teenage daughter, a boss. No matter how hard you try you just can't seem to do enough or the right thing. It can leave you feeling not just unappreciated but unaccepted, and those feelings spill over into your other relationships.

Well enough with that folks. Why are you letting someone else define whether you are successful or important or valuable? You can choose instead to feel empowered. You can choose for yourself whether or not you are successful. You can try some affirmations to tell yourself you're successful. You can even get the help of others to reinforce those feelings. Let me show you how. OK, so it's Mother's Day today, so let's start with the women in the congregation (whether you are a mother or not). Turn to the person next to you and say the affirmation that pops up on the screen. Like this one: "*I am beautiful.*" And then the person next to you will respond with what comes up on the screen, in this case, "*Yes you are.*" Yeah, it sounds corny and half of you are thinking about hitting the restrooms until this is over, but I'm sure you've got enough courage to give it a try. OK so here goes "*I'm a star.*" Answer: "*Yes you are.*" Fine. Now for the men, follow the screens ... "*I'm a success.*" Answer: "*If you say so dear.*"

Well that's the problem with self-affirmation. Whatever you tell yourself may not, in fact, be true. For years at college I cooked my own meals. It cost less than buying a meal ticket, and money was tight. People used to say, "*Wow, you must be a good cook.*" My answer was always, "*How would I know?*" I liked what I cooked, but I was the only one who ate it. There was no way to judge whether or not I was any good. The same thing happens if we put you in charge of defining your own success. You could be kidding yourself ...

There's another way to define success, and this is more difficult to track down, and more difficult to live up to. Here's where success is seen as some standard society

has chosen. To be a success our culture says you have to have a certain level of fame, fortune and dashing good looks. You need to be able to show others the symbols of your success by what you drive or wear or where you live. Successful marriages are defined one way by society, successful business folk are defined another, being a successful parent means something else, and so on. It's hard not to get caught up in chasing status.

Well each of those ways of defining success are really ways of defining a life filled with failure. In each case, you'll never have enough to be sure you're a success, you'll need more stuff, or status. When success is based on what you can do or earn or accomplish, you'll never know if you've done enough,

Easter defies explanation. I think that's so it's harder to try to explain it away. Something big happened. Something powerful. Something mysterious. I would expect no less from God.

earned all you needed, or accomplished big enough things. According to these standards, success is all about doing the big things. Yet life is filled with so many smaller things that are also important. It would be easy to get confused, to get sidetracked. It's easy in this chase for success to miss out on other important parts of life. I mean whoever gets to the end of their life and on their hospital bed asks a loved one to lean in and whispers, *"I should have put in more overtime at the office."* Defining success in this way would be a hard way to live. Not much of an adventure here. And not much Spirit either.

The problem with all of these measures of success is that they are based on what you do. They're based on external things, on how successful you seem, not how successful you really are. Nothing new about that, people have been acting that way since things began. That's why Jesus became frustrated at one point and reminded his follower:

"Do not judge by appearances but judge with right judgment."

[John 7:24 NRSV]

So if success is not about outward appearances, it must have something to do with what's inside. I want to suggest that if anyone is going to define what success looks like, it should be God. I hope that doesn't automatically make you uncomfortable. I hope it will give you a greater sense of joy in life. I expect it will give you a greater sense of your value too. The Bible tells us:

We are confident of all this because of our great trust in God through Christ. It is not that we think we can do anything of lasting value by ourselves. Our only power and success come from God.

[2

Corinthians 3:4-5 NLT]

That's pretty cool. Success and power come from God. I can not do anything of lasting value by myself. I'm sure that's true. As we get ready to celebrate our Tenth Anniversary as a church (by the way you're all invited to the party but we need you to RSVP so we can have enough food and chairs set) anyway as I prepare for the Anniversary, I have heard the stories again of how we got started. Looking back I can see where God has been involved. I know it's only with his help could we be here today. I've made so many errors, I've tried things that didn't go over too well, like the day we tried both reggae and rap in the service. There have been so many other glitches when things have fallen apart, and a few times when I simply wanted to walk out here turn to you all and say, *"OK, the Spirit's not here. Go home and we'll try again next week."* Like the time I tried to celebrate communion, looked down and saw the pita bread we were using was green. Someone rushed out to get us some more, God bless 'em, but bought the wrong thing and we ended using Onion Pita for communion. Folks, the only reason I can explain why this place has not shut down and I'm not off somewhere asking, *"You want fries with that?"* is because God has tried to work through us here. I believe he has not brought us this far to leave us now either. We have work to

do for God yet!

The point is, that if I'm going to do anything of lasting value it's gonna take God's help. And you know what? I'm OK with that. I know I need help. And I know God is willing to help you and me when we are not trying to do it all on ourselves. In one of the more moving and one of the least proud moments of his life, Paul writes these words:

Jesus told me, "My grace is enough; it's all you need. My strength comes into its own in your weakness." Once I heard that, I was glad. I quit focusing on my handicaps and began appreciating his gifts. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride ... and I just let Christ take over!

[2 Corinthians 12:9-10

The Message]

I can take my limitations in stride because they can't hold me back from succeeding, not if God strengthens me. And how lost can I get if I let God guide me? How can I feel like a loser if God is with me? I mean this: when God tells you *"You are my beloved, my child, with whom I am well pleased"* why would you ever feel useless or worthless? You are worth everything to God ... so much he was willing to give up everything to find you and show you his love and draw you back to him. I realize for those who are still thinking about having to earn God's love, that is hard to accept. Let me explain it as simply as I can. When my daughter goes to sleep each night I go in and tell her how much I love her. I say, *"You're my biggest treasure."* She says, *"You're my bestest Daddy."* Some nights I add, *"I am so proud of you."* At first Sami would say, *"But why? What did I do to make you proud?"* I probably could answer any number of things, but none of them really matter. My answer is always, *"I'm not proud because of what you have done. I'm proud because of who you are."* That's what God is saying to you too. He's not proud of everything you've done. He's not just proud of the times you got it right, and too nearsighted to see all the times you didn't. God is proud of you because you are his. As soon as you realize that, you have found the antidote to worrying about failure and success my friends. You may lose your shirt in the market. You may lose your job. Or maybe like me you've lost your hair and a bit of your mind. but none of that can make you a loser so long as God loves you and strengthens you.

But remember at the start I said a spiritual life is a lot of work? While you can't earn God's love there are ways you can repay him for it. A successful spiritual life simply gets measured against a different standard though than the rest of life. It's life from a different perspective. And there are some basic ways you can be more successful as a Christ Follower. Like this:

(1) Start small. Jesus tells us:

"Unless you are faithful in small matters, you won't be faithful in large ones. If you cheat even a little, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities."

[Luke 16:10-11 NLT]

If you are not trustworthy in little things, there's no reason for anyone to trust you with bigger things. So start down the road to success one step at a time, one small step at a time. The world will tell you that to be successful you need to do something big. Jesus wants you to start at the other end, and begin doing all the little things in life in a big way. And an important corollary to that is be careful about people who are not faithful in small things. If they can't be trusted in small things, they aren't going to be any more faithful in the big things.

(2) Think big. This resurrection life is a way of living it up. The Bible explains:

Christ will live in you as you open the door and invite him in. And ... you'll be able to take in with all Christians the extravagant dimensions of Christ's love. Reach out and experience the breadth! Test its length! Plumb the depths! Rise to the heights! Live full lives, full in the fullness of God. [Ephesians 3:16-19 The Message]

We are to live full lives, full in the fullness of God. Not hard lives or solemn lives, not lives filled with rules and fears and all the rest. But here's the deal: to live fully you need to open your life up fully to God. Otherwise how will he be able to fill you with his Spirit? And while you may need to start small, you can't possibly think small and follow God. Let me repeat that ... God's got so much bigger plans for you than you can imagine. I think too often we don't trust God enough to live bigger and bolder lives. But he's got the power to overcome your limitations. God wants you to be his partner in changing the world. With God's help there's no reason you can't. Unless you think small.

(3) Persist. Don't stop or quit. God won't.

Jesus told them: "Staying with it—that's what God requires. Stay with it to the end. You won't be sorry, and you'll be saved. [Matthew 24:13 The Message]

Not everything works the first few times you try it. So what? So what? It's faithfulness that matters with God, not results. God can make all the results happen he wants, but he can't make you be faithful. Instead he asks for you to trust him and follow him, and then keep on following him. That's your role. That's why to God success is defined by your heart and not your achievements. And yet, you never know what you can achieve when you stick with it.

Multimedia: Famous Failures