

### ***All Glory, Laud, and Honor***

In the name of him before whom every knee shall bow and every tongue confess to be Lord, to the glory of God the Father, dear friends in Christ: Let's begin with a question I'd like you to think about: How do you measure the relative success of a person's life? What criteria do you use when making such a judgment about your own life or somebody else's? And please don't tell me that you don't make such judgments. Of course you do. There isn't anybody here who can't name several people whom they consider to be hugely successful. You all know folks who have done very well in life or who have accomplished great things. And you respect and admire them. And you also know of other folks whom you think of as failures: people who haven't done so well, who set their goals too low or squandered the opportunities they had or just couldn't make things work out like they hoped. They managed to make a mess of their lives and they have only themselves to blame for it. You consider them to be (and in your less charitable moments you may actually call them) *losers*. We all make such judgments. To be sure, most people we peg as being somewhere in between these two extremes; but there's no question about it: in this world some do much better than others.

So I'll ask again: what are the things you measure when making such an evaluation? And sure, I understand that to a certain degree it depends on what a person does. If someone's an author, for example, we could measure success in terms of the number of best-sellers or critically acclaimed novels they write. But let's not be so specific. What would you say are the *general* measures of success?

Let me throw out a few and see if you agree. The first one's fairly obvious. We live in a capitalist society in which everyone's out to make money. There's no denying that we all want it; and the more of it the better. Certainly we'd be hard pressed to call someone successful who wasn't a success financially. No, wealth and with it the luxuries and pleasures that wealth can buy are part of what's necessary to be considered successful in this world. Fair enough?

But money alone won't do it. Some people inherit or manage to save vast amounts of wealth, and still live and die having achieved nothing worthwhile. So it's also necessary for success to be known for having attained a certain level of accomplishment. People have to know that you're good at what you do or that you've done something especially noteworthy. It helps if they tell you so – and even more if they treat you that way. Call it fame or celebrity or popular acclaim, a successful person will be given that deferential treatment we call VIP status.

But even that's not enough. There are people who are both rich and famous that we would still call losers. Take for example those child actors who had a good run in their cherubic-faced youth but then spend their adulthood pathetically trying to resurrect a career in television or film that should have been given up as soon as they hit puberty. They've got money (if they didn't spend it all), and they've got fame; but other than appearing every decade or so on one of those "where are they now?" programs and making us feel sad and disgusted because now the little darling we once loved so much has become a fat, balding, substance abusing bum, they've got nothing going on. So let me suggest that truly successful people *continue* to meet or exceed high expectations as they go through life – both their own expectations and those of the people who admire them. They aren't one-time, one-note, flash-in-the-pan wonders. They keep on being accomplished. And along with that, it depends also who it is that comprises one's adoring public. I mean it's one thing to be popular among teeny-boppers or some other less

discerning segment of society, and quite another to hold the respect and admiration of one's peers. A musician in a garage band might be popular at local dances and fundraisers, but a really good player is going to be held in esteem by other musicians because they are better qualified to fully appreciate what the artist is doing. Same holds for any other discipline or career field. A successful person is going to be well-regarded by the people best equipped to evaluate what it is he or she does.

So far so good? Okay, let me suggest a couple more criteria we might use for measuring success. One is the question of potential. Where did the person start and what did they have to work with? I think we'd agree that someone who overcame enormous obstacles and disadvantages to achieve greatness was *more* successful than someone who was naturally gifted and simply oozed talent and genius from every pore and then reached a similar level of achievement. The farther one goes, the greater the height one climbs from start to finish, the more successful he or she is. And finally there's the criterion that's most often overlooked. It has to do with personal relationships. I'm not sure how you quantify it exactly, but we've all heard about people who put their family and friends on the back burner while they pursued their goals with single-minded ambition and who then, having achieved what they set out to do, were miserable because they'd totally alienated themselves from those they loved and with whom they hoped to enjoy their success. So with this in mind, I put it to you that to be truly successful means that you are also properly prioritizing and investing in your personal relationships.

All right, there may be more factors; but I think I've hit the big ones. If someone did everything I've mentioned so far: they became rich and famous through their accomplishments, *and* kept impressing folks with their performance, *and* earned the respect and admiration of their peers, *and* lived up to their full potential, *and* were surrounded by loving family and faithful friends – if they managed to do all that, you'd judge them to be pretty successful, wouldn't you? Sure. It only makes sense. But maybe you're wondering why I'm asking.

The reason is this: it's Palm Sunday; and today we're given a snapshot of Jesus at the very end of his public ministry. He's been at it for three years. And now he rides into Jerusalem to the praise and accolades of his adoring public. All glory, laud, and honor are given to him. Wonderful. But let me ask, has his ministry been a success? Well, let's see: he's not rich. He doesn't even own the donkey he's riding; had to borrow it. He lives day to day on the meager donations of a few women of modest means who have followed him from Galilee. He *is* relatively famous – at least for the moment. This crowd has turned out to fete him largely because of the news that he raised Lazarus from the dead. That's impressive; but it falls far short of his potential. He is the Son of God, after all. He could have just as easily raised the whole cemetery. That would have been much more impressive; but he didn't do that. The truth is that he's made a career of deliberately *not* living up to his potential. He's purposely been holding back. Furthermore, though he is a religious teacher popular with the unsophisticated public, he doesn't command the respect of his peers. No, the religious experts hold him in utter contempt. They think he's a hack, completely unqualified to teach. And they fear that with his back-woods, crowd-pleasing ways he may be inadvertently stirring up a rebellion that will bring the nation to ruin – and they think that he's too simple and naïve to see the danger. Now, there are a handful of scholars who do appreciate his teachings; but they're too cowardly to admit it. They don't want to be associated with Jesus publicly for fear of what their fellow scholars will say. And on the personal relationship side, let's see: when last we heard from his immediate family, his mother and siblings, they thought Jesus had lost his mind. And of his twelve closest companions, one is about to betray him and the others are just a few short days from abandoning him. Even the crowd that now hails him as a hero will soon be calling for his death. There's no lasting loyalty or faithfulness in any of them. So, has Jesus' ministry been a

success? If we judge it according to the standards we set forth, we have to say emphatically “no”. It’s been a colossal failure.

And that makes it all the more ironic that Jesus says in the midst of all this: “The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified.” Here he is receiving the glory, laud, and honor of men; but it means nothing to him. He knows that it’s short-lived and fickle – that it has no real value. That, by the way, is the reason that the ashes used to mark the foreheads of the penitents on Ash Wednesday are traditionally made from the palm fronds used in the preceding year’s Palm Sunday celebrations. It’s to show that all the glory, laud, honor, and wealth of this world are destined for destruction. They all fade away and turn to dust and ashes. And that’s why Jesus has not been pursuing any of these things we consider so essential for attaining success. And yet, *he is* looking forward to being glorified – to achieving the greatest success of all. It’s just that he’s got an entirely different agenda and an entirely different set of criteria for measuring what success is.

Jesus is not after the glory that comes from men. He loves instead the glory that comes from God. And this glory comes not from reaching up and trying to achieve great things. It doesn’t come from the pursuit of wealth, fame, and influence. It comes instead by stooping downward, by bending low, by setting aside honor, privilege, and power and becoming the lowest of all servants performing the most wretched and dishonorable of tasks. This glory comes of serving God by serving fallen man. It comes of bearing the shame and punishment of sin that others deserve. It comes of being falsely accused and mocked and despised and spat upon and beaten. It comes of humbling himself and becoming obedient to death, even the most miserable and disgraceful death imaginable: death on a cross.

It looked in the eyes of the world like a terrible defeat. It was, in fact, the greatest of all triumphs. That’s how Jesus achieved success in his ministry because that’s how he saved you and me from the eternal suffering we deserve on account of our sins. Therefore, the Apostle Paul tells us, God has highly exalted him and bestowed upon him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. In this way he has rightly earned for himself all glory, laud, and honor in time and eternity. And it’s fitting that we who are even now being saved through faith in his name should render it to him along with our heartfelt thanks.

It’s also fitting, however, that we follow him in the path he has taken to achieve success. We don’t want to be like the crowd who hailed him as king but then called for his death when they didn’t get what they wanted from him, or the disciples who betrayed and abandoned him when the going got tough, or the religious leaders who were fearful to identify with him and confess their faith because they preferred the glory of men.

Jesus said, “If anyone serves me, he must follow me.” He means that we must adopt the same criteria he used for evaluating success. He means that we must take up the cross that’s been assigned to us – the cross of humble service for others. We haven’t been called to die for others. Jesus did that. It is finished. The price of redemption has already been paid. What we’ve been called to do is to live for others by dying to self. This is what Jesus meant when he said, “Unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Whoever loves his life in this world loses it, and whoever hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.”

I started with a question about how you measure success. I’m going to finish with a challenge. We’ve been called to see success in an entirely different way – the way Jesus looks

at it. We've been called to serve others even as he served us. So, who is it in your life that needs your help and isn't getting it? Who is it that needs your forgiveness and hasn't received it? Who is it in that needs to be served and you haven't yet helped because you refuse to swallow your pride, or because you're afraid of what others might think, or because you're concerned that they'll take advantage of you?

It's time to die to self. It's time to humble yourself. It's time to repent. And receiving again Christ's sure word of blood-bought forgiveness, it's time to become genuinely successful, rendering all glory, laud, and honor to the Lord Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***