

CHRIST'S LAW OF SUCCESS

"And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant." Matthew 20:27.

Too many Christians take their cue for success far more from Wall Street and Hollywood than from the New Testament. Far more than we think, we have ideas of success that have to do with this world just as bankers and actresses do. We have dreams of easy rewards and securities just as they do.

Christ recognized this tendency in His own disciples long ago. He was disturbed by it. He spoke out in such a way as to leave in us no doubt as to His own feelings about it. It is time that we hear Him again as He says, "Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant" (Matthew 20:25-27).

Christ left the happiness of heaven and came to live in the midst of the world's misery. While here, He ministered to the needs of the bodies and souls of people. His example and teaching prove that true success is entirely different from what most people think it is.

I. The Pronouncement About Success.

Like so many gems in the teachings of Christ, this one appears in the form of an answer to a request. When our Lord made the announcement to His disciples of His sufferings soon to be endured, Salome, the doting mother of James and John, asked Him to give her sons the first places in His kingdom. She did not ask for anything of a personal nature, but with a typical mother's love for her sons she requested that they might sit the one at the Lord's right hand and the other on His left in His kingdom of power and glory about which He had talked and which He had come to establish.

Mothers should be very cautious about seeking places of honor for their children. When they do so, quite frequently they are like Salome in that they do not know what they ask. In seeking places of honor for them, they may be striving for that which will ruin their children. It is not posts of honor that secure eternal salvation or earthly happiness. Quite often we do not know for what we ask when we seek in our folly great things for ourselves. When we long for this or that honor, this or that post of pre-eminence for ourselves, for our children or for those who are nearest and dearest to us, we know not what we ask. We do not think of the temptations and dangers which lie before us or the envies and jealousies which we provoke. In the case before us, just as soon as the other ten apostles heard of the request presented to the Lord for the promotion of James and John, indignation filled their hearts for the simple reason that they desired the same place themselves. It was directly against such a selfish spirit that the revolutionary words of our text were uttered by our Lord.

Christ did not condemn ambition or the desire for success. He did not say that it is wrong to wish to succeed or to be great. He defined what true success is and bade all of His followers to strive for that. To those who were eager for greatness, He preached the might of service, and at the same time He held Himself up as the brightest exemplification of His words. He informed Salome that success or greatness is more than a matter of assigning places of eminence and handing out titles of nobility. Success and greatness come not through concern for self but rather through regard for others. "Whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant."

If I understand Christ, the basic idea in genuine service is the shifting of your interest from self to others. Unless somehow this transfer be made, there is no real success for any man. Such is the pronouncement of the One Who is the Master-Servant of all ages. Nearly twenty centuries after His pronouncement, Harvard University places on its official seal a Latin inscription which, translated, reads: "Not to be served, but to serve." The rule stands regardless of how far short men may come of it.

II. The Perversions Of Success.

James and John and their proud and anxious mother were not alone in their warped notion of success and the way to attain it. Even today the prevalent idea of success or greatness is far from that which the Saviour's words define.

Whereas the law of true success is "Give all you can," the law of false success is "Get all you can." One man, under the touch of Christ, says, "The world is my field. I'll put into it everything I can." Another man says, "The world is my oyster. I'll get out of it all I can." One is success by contribution; and the other is success by exploitation.

When Christ says, "But it shall not be so among you," He is saying, in effect, "Watch your thinking. Watch your step. There are false notions of what constitutes success and distinction and greatness. These perverted ideas will invade your minds if you are not on guard!"

How is success perverted?

1. By shallowly defining it.

Ask the men of the world what they mean by success. They will tell you that it is getting power and prestige in your hands. It is making other people step around at your bidding and to your advantage. Some think of success in terms of power to control others and use them as pawns in the game of politics, industry or war. They forget such bitter lamentation as that which fell from the lips of Cardinal Wolsey when, stripped of his power, double-crossed by his cronies, he cried, "Had I served my God as I have served my king he would not have left me naked in my gray hairs."

On another occasion our Lord took another sounding in this shallow water of bad thinking about success. That time it was not so much the achievement of power over others as it was the amassing of wealth beyond others. Christ described a man who hung a dollar sign on success and said, "There, that's how you can identify it when you come to it!" The man He portrayed was so rich he couldn't figure out how he was going to preserve his whole hoard. In spite of all his wealth the night he died God said, "Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee."

What is the world's way of defining success? It is having your eye on the main chance. It is taking some short-term gain --- some palace of pleasure in which to be entertained, some bank account on which to draw, some gilded reputation on which to dote and going after it "hammer and tongs." It is the direct assault on some castle of dreams that is bounded entirely by this life. When you seize it, you see that it is made of nothing but stuff that crumbles.

2. By selfishly defiling it.

We are told that when news reached the other apostles concerning the request for preferred seats in the kingdom for James and John, they were "moved with indignation against the two brethren." Were they indignant because they were about to be beaten out of those seats, or was it for a higher reason? At any rate it was clear to them, as it was to Christ, that it was a case of selfishness. Ask yourself these questions, "Who is at the center of the vision of success which I have before me -- self or Christ? Am I ready to be last, if thereby I can honor Christ?"

This, I suppose, is what Margaret Anderson was driving at when she wrote the folksy lines:

"It's a funny thing how proud
we always were of Mister Frank,
We'd steal admiring looks at him
conferring at his bank,
Or walking through his factories
in that frowning, bitter way,
Or calling new tenants
when the old ones didn't pay;
His house looked lonely, somehow,
but it was new and grand,
And we pointed him out proudly
as our city's self-made man.

"We never took much notice
of his shabby brother, Joe;
He was so easy-going,
so jolly-like and slow;
He didn't make much money,
but was liberal with that,
And never spoke unkindly
when he stopped to have a chat;
I think it took his death
to make us really understand
That Joe deserved the better title:
God-made man."

III. The Pattern Of Success.

1. As words may describe it.

"Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant." The motto of all of Christ's followers should be: "Not to be served, but to serve."

The world cries, "If you want to see success, look at the princes and captains and emperors: Rameses, Nebuchadnezzar, Alexander, Caesar, Napoleon, etc." But, the true Christian says, "If you want to see real success, look at the heart-menders, the truth-tellers and the burden-sharers: Paul, Florence Nightingale, Robert Morrison, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, etc." They were the bondslaves of Christ and servants of men.

2. As deeds may demonstrate it.

Such deeds are to be found supremely in the life of our Lord and superlatively in the deed of his death. "Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many." Wherever Christ was found He was always ministering but never demanding that anybody minister unto Him. On one occasion He girded Himself with a towel, poured water into a basin and began washing the soiled feet of those travel-weary, temper-torn men. If you want a picture of success as God measures it and greatness as He views it, observe the Son of God sponging the grime from the feet of His undeserving disciples.

How much longer is it going to take for some of us to see it --- Judas Iscariot with his thirty pieces of silver was a failure; Jesus Christ on the cross was a success?

IV. The Price of Success.

In substance Christ said to James and John, You want to sit on My right and on My left. You think that such honors are conferred upon those who thrust in their request first. You are mistaken. When these high honors are finally awarded, it will not be on the principle of favoritism. It will be on the basis of fitness, and that fitness comes only along the costly way that I Myself am taking --- losing one's self and life in order to find it. If you want to be near Me in splendor in the next world, be near Me in service in this world. If you would share My throne then, you must bear My cross now. There is no other way.

Let us look at the price of success from two angles.

1. Self-confidence must be shattered.

Here are James and John and their mother asking that two seats of honor be reserved for them. Christ said, "Ye know not what ye ask. Are ye able to drink of the cup that I shall drink of, and to be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" The "cup" and the "baptism" were His passion and death. It was so tremendous that even He was staggered by it. Yet, in the full flowering of their self-assurance, they said, "We are able." But, they were not able. They slept in Gethsemane and shrank away at Calvary. They were not able.

That same self-confidence in us must be brought to the dust and to the death. Are we able to keep Satan out of our thought-life? We are not, and the sooner we confess it the sooner we shall be on our way to a Christian ordering of the mind. Paul found that he was not able, so he cried, "O wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me?"

2. Christ-control must be established.

You must abdicate. Your hand on the helm of your tossed and threatened life must give way to the hand of that heavenly Steersman, Christ.

A few weeks after the crucifixion, a few weeks after these men had failed ingloriously to stand by their Lord, they were in a prayer meeting. There God met them in the fulness of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit did, in that experience, what He always does for Christians who are self-surrendered; He made the reigning, mastering Lordship of Christ a living and a bright reality. No longer did they say, "We are able," but they said, "We are enabled." They were strong in the Lord. James died a martyr's death according to Acts 12. It is said that John came to a similar end. In God's estimation that is not failure, but it is success.