

Stewardship Forum

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Stewardship Tools for Leaders : Features

Title: Success - what prosperity teachers miss

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Prosperity teachers claim God wants his children to have the best of everything. Simon Coupland explains how success, growth, victory and greatness are part of the Christian's life, providing you understand them as Jesus did.

As Christians we tread a fine line between accepting failure and wanting success. When we see attendances declining and the Church losing influence in our society, we may comfort ourselves with the thought that Jesus' ministry ended not in popularity but on a cross, and that we are called not to success, only to faithfulness. I remember being told at the start of a university mission that the important thing was not how many were converted, but that the gospel was preached: we shouldn't play the numbers game. Yet does this show too great a willingness to embrace failure? The cross was, after all, not the last word — it was followed by resurrection, ascension, and glorious reign. Tom Wright has written that 'it is impossible to justify churches that really are failing on the grounds that failure is what Christianity is all about.' So should we rather be seeking success and celebrating success? Certainly that is what strategies such as March for Jesus and Alpha have done, though they have their critics.

The prosperity movement has gone much further, however, teaching that 'God wants His children to have the best of everything' (Kenneth Hagin). But is this a success too far? For those who are called to take up their cross daily, is it right to look for success, and if so, what kind of success? That is the question we will tackle.

Jesus redefines prosperity

Jesus did not explicitly talk about 'success' in his teaching, though he did speak in various ways about accomplishment or fulfilment, and we can discern four main strands. The first relates to prosperity. If one obvious criterion for success is wealth, Jesus told his disciples, 'Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth... but treasures in heaven' (Matthew 6:19-20). He also frequently promised his followers a reward, but what kind of reward?

Teachers in the prosperity movement have seized upon his words in Mark 10.30, when Peter burst out, 'We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?' Jesus pledged in response that 'No-one ... will fail to receive a hundred times as much'. Gloria Copeland explains, 'You give \$1 for the Gospel's sake and \$100 belongs to you ... Give one house and receive one hundred houses or one house worth one hundred times as much... Give one car and the return would furnish you a lifetime of cars. In short, Mark 10:30 is a very good deal.' What is noticeable is that Copeland has added money and cars to the equation, but omitted the other items Jesus promised, namely 'brothers, sisters, mothers and children'. They indicate that he was referring to a spiritual rather than physical return, a point underlined by his final words, 'and with them, persecutions'. This is part of the 'good deal'

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which Gloria Copeland doesn't mention! Success for the Christian cannot therefore be measured in terms of worldly prosperity; indeed, the promised 'hundredfold return' comes just a few verses after his warning, 'How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!' All this means having a mindset at odds with the materialistic consumerism of our age, believing that 'a person's life does not consist in the abundance of their possessions', in defiance of the claims of the advertising agencies. In a society where 6-year-olds are teased for not wearing the right brand of trainers, this is profoundly counter-cultural. It also means rediscovering the freedom that being a 'cheerful giver' brings. Perhaps surprisingly, this does not necessarily exclude worldly success. For example, the construction giant Sir John Laing reached the top of his profession but gave away huge sums, so that at his death he left just £371. In Jesus' redefined terms, success is measured not by our bank balance or our lifestyle, but by what we do with what we've got.

Jesus redefines greatness

A second theme in Jesus' teaching is that of greatness. He told his disciples surprisingly often how to achieve greatness in the kingdom, partly because it evidently preoccupied them: they wanted celebrity status. Garrison Keillor wonderfully expresses our rarely acknowledged hunger for approval: 'Under this thin veneer of modesty lies a monster of greed. I drive away faint praise, beating my little chest, waiting to be named Sun-God, King of America, Idol of Millions, Bringer of Fire, The Great Haji, Thun-Dar The Boy Giant. I don't want to say, "Thanks, glad you liked it." I want to say, "Rise my people. Remove your faces from the carpet, stand, look me in the face."'

But as in the case of prosperity, Jesus turned the desire for greatness on its head. He told the disciples that the way to greatness in the kingdom is by being the least. To exemplify greatness he stood a child in their midst, in the first century a symbol of weakness and powerlessness. And to demonstrate in the most graphic form what he means, Jesus knelt before his followers and washed their feet. He thus redefined the whole concept of greatness, like that of wealth, from an eternal perspective. Greatness in the kingdom derives from humility and service, not status or superiority. And as with the promise of treasure in heaven, it will only be at the consummation of the kingdom that such true and lasting success will be revealed.

We therefore need to learn to measure success not by our achievements or reputation, but by the growth of our relationship with God. We need to wean ourselves off the approval of others and conquer our addiction to status, and this will produce some very beneficial side-effects. For a start, it means that we will live as those who are called rather than driven. It can also do wonders for our self-esteem. If we gauge success not by our appearance, our job, our bank balance or, indeed, by how big our church is, but by God's approval, we can be free indeed. Furthermore, it cuts out the cancer of competitiveness. We can recognise that everyone is called to different tasks: one to sow, another to reap; one to preach to great crowds and see them turn to God in repentance (Jonah 3), another to preach his heart out but see the people walk away, grumbling (John 6:60-6). One apparent 'success', one apparent 'failure', but both fulfilling God's will and so both enjoying his approval (even if, ironically, the 'successful' one still wasn't happy!) As someone once said to the Scripture

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Union schools' worker who brought me to Christ: 'If God has called you to be a children's worker, don't stoop to becoming Archbishop of Canterbury!'

Jesus redefines growth

A further form of success Jesus referred to is the interrelated themes of fruitfulness and growth. The image of the vine in John 15 incorporates both, implicitly speaking of growth, explicitly expecting 'that you bear much fruit'. At the same time there is a warning that fruitlessness is not acceptable to God, coupled with the reassurance that fruitfulness comes from him, not from our effort. There is a lot about fruitfulness and growth in Acts, where Luke reports with obvious delight the conversion of about 3,000 people on the day of Pentecost and the continuing growth of the church thereafter. He was evidently not afraid to 'play the numbers game', because he saw the growth of the church as the success of the gospel, not of the apostles. At the same time, however, the growth of the church often came through persecution, as the scattered believers took the gospel to more and more places.

The growth Jesus describes is not only the extension of the kingdom, but also the individual growth of the disciple. Jesus expected his followers to grow in holiness, a fruitfulness which cannot be measured in numerical terms. Unlike the previous two forms of kingdom 'success', this one is apparent in this life as well as in the age to come. We need to stop measuring ourselves against the achievements of others, and instead focus on nurturing our relationship with God. This will put our successes and failures in a different perspective. For example, at Meribah Moses brought water gushing from the rock, yet in God's eyes it was Moses' disobedience which was ultimately of greater significance (Numbers 20.1-13). Kent and Barbara Hughes comment, 'This teaches us that one can be regarded as hugely successful in the ministry and yet be a failure.' On the other hand, real or apparent failures can be growth points in our relationship with God and our fruitfulness for him. For instance, Peter's experience of failure made him not weaker but stronger as a leader. And although missionaries like Henry Martyn or Jim Elliott were apparent failures, the fruitfulness of their lives and deaths for Christ has been incalculable.

Nonetheless, accepting the place of failure in our lives does not mean lapsing into a typically British 'Dunkirk mentality', which makes heroes out of disastrous ski jumpers or hopeless swimmers. Rather, it means judging by kingdom criteria. John the Baptist had to watch as the crowds deserted him and flocked to Jesus, yet he could see that this was God's plan, and that ultimately greater fruitfulness would ensue. And so, however difficult it must have been, he embraced his calling.

Part of the key here is to see things, as John did, from a long-term perspective, in a world, which thinks overwhelmingly in the short term. Jesus' parables of growth and harvest remind us that growth takes time. If we need further convincing, think of Jesus' own life: how 'successful' was his ministry in all those years as a carpenter? Those missing years were presumably preparation for his ministry.

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Jesus redefines victory

The final strand of success in Jesus' teaching is that of victory in the spiritual realm, which takes two quite distinct forms. On the one hand there is the message of the cross, where success is redefined as victory coming through apparent defeat, and vindication through death. Suffering can be God's chosen path to glory. On the other hand, Jesus also referred to victory in terms of preaching the gospel, healing the sick and casting out demons. He described his own ministry as 'binding the strong man', and when his disciples returned from a mission exclaimed: 'I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven'. Not that all our victories will be easy, for Jesus warned that his followers would, like him, at times face rejection. But if success offers no grounds for boasting; failure gives no cause for despair. We can be 'more than conquerors' even in the midst of 'trouble, hardship, persecution, famine, nakedness, danger and the sword' (Romans 8:36-8).

Having said that, success, too, has its own pitfalls. For it brings with it temptations to pride, sloth and ingratitude, to name but three. Like power, success can tend to corrupt. So when the 72 came back flushed with victory, Jesus warned them: 'Do not rejoice that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven' (Luke 10:20). In other words, don't get so carried away with your spiritual success that you forget the most important thing, your relationship with the Father. When Corrie ten Boom was asked how she handled people's acclamation, she said, 'Well, I take the flowers, and I thank the people, and I enjoy the flowers a little bit. Then each evening, I put them in a bunch and give them back to the Lord where they belong.'

Giving it all back to the Lord, where it belongs is, it seems to me, the only way to cope with failure and to handle success. As we keep our eyes on him we learn to store up treasure in heaven rather than focus on material prosperity, to be servants rather than worry about status. As we keep our eyes on him we want to grow and to see the kingdom grow. And so we look forward in hope to that day when we, too, hear those wonderful words, 'Well done, good and faithful servant'.

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