

“JESUS ON SUCCESS”
by Rom A. Pegram (7/21/19)

Today, we’re talking about SUCCESS. Success is something everyone wants, but it’s so hard to define/so hard to get a hold of. Yet, many work 80, 90, 100 hours a week to get it! Here’s what some said about success:

- To a businessman in his 30s, success was gaining promotions on a regular basis—*climbing the corporate ladder* was his definition of success...
- To a college student who was 19 years old, when he graduates, he’d make enough money to pay off student loans, then retire before the age of 65—that would be success...
- Finally, to an actress in her mid-20s, to become known and respected by her peers and to be able to get roles other people coveted. That was success for her...

According to Webster’s dictionary, success is: “the attainment of wealth, fame and power.” These are the three most important components of success to the world. That’s exactly how we measure success—with those 3 elements, whether we mean to or not. In fact, if I were to ask you who the most successful person in your life was, I can almost guarantee you’d choose someone who would either be wealthy, famous or powerful...

This morning, though, I want to look at what Jesus says about success. And remember, what we’re talking about throughout this 40 Days with Jesus is ... *how to live a life God will bless!* So how do we do that? How do we live a life God will bless, with success in mind? Let’s go back to the Sermon on the Mount (the Beatitudes) and look at our scripture for today (Matthew 5:5, NLT):

“God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth.”

Now, that’s success, isn’t it? ‘To own the whole earth? That’d be something... ‘Not even the Koch brothers (Charles & David) are at that point, are they? Honestly, folks, out of all the verses in the Bible, this is one that makes little sense to me. If you’re humble, gentle, lowly ... the earth will belong to you? Do the insignificant and powerless usually end up running the world? I thought it was wealthy, famous and powerful!

Well, Jesus here didn’t say the ‘lowly and gentle’ will *take* the earth; he said they will *inherit* the earth—something quite different. You see, in God’s economy, *true success isn’t something that can be attained*. It’s something given to us as we follow Jesus. It’s not earned; it’s a gift. And Jesus says *success will go to the humble*. The whole earth will (eventually) belong to them. What a radical idea!

I don’t know if you know this or not, but a bit of ‘the gift’ runs in my family; sometimes we get a sense of what’s coming in the future. And I believe I can tell you 3 things about yourself, right now, that are absolutely true. Well, at least 2 of them are. Do you want me to try? Here goes...

- ***You’re not exactly where you want to be in your life.*** Next...

- Because of that emptiness, ***you feel like you're failing on some level in your life***—your career, your relationships, your finances; in at least one of these areas, you feel like you're a failure (and the emotions that go with that). Then...
- ***You want something more, something better, something else.*** There has to be something more in your life than what you're going through right now, but you feel inept and powerless to get there on your own—to be who you want to be...

Honestly, how many of us can relate? I know *I* can. And let me just say, *you'll probably never get rid of all these feelings*; they're a part of the 'human condition.' If nothing else, they remind us ... *this isn't heaven!* Heaven's coming, but this isn't heaven ... and we need to learn to rely on God (the first beatitude).

When we strive for success—the world's way, fame, wealth and power can be so elusive. BUT in the Sermon on the Mount, *Jesus gives us four rules that are possible to follow if we want to discover what real success is.* Let's look, again, to today's scripture (Matt. 5:5, NLT): **"God blesses those who are humble, for they will inherit the whole earth."** Based on this statement, here are Jesus' four rules for success:

RULE #1: PURSUE HUMILITY. It seems many people have the wrong idea of humility. According to many, it means you're a little wimpy, low on self-esteem, always telling people how you fall short and how much better they are. But, folks, *being humble has nothing to do with speaking poorly about yourself!* It has nothing to do with being a 'doormat.' *Humility, at its simplest, is merely being comfortable with who you are—who God created you to be...* It also has to do with *your view of yourself...*

A friend told me recently the key to being humble is realizing there is a God ... and you're not him! That's true. Humility has to do with the way you view yourself, which has a lot to do with whether or not you find happiness/success in life...

And the #1 enemies to humility are: *envy, jealousy and comparing ourselves to others*—worrying about what others think of you. Look at this scripture with me (Eccl. 4:4, NLT): "Then I observed that most people are motivated to success because they envy their neighbors. But this, too, is meaningless—like chasing the wind." Isn't that true for many of us? We look at our peers and we envy them. Then, often, we begin to dislike them, which leads to more hours at work trying to 'one up' them. Folks, ultimately this kind of living makes us miserable, because it's meaningless! HUMILITY, remember, is *being happy with who God's made you to be...*

I'm not saying it's sinful to be competitive. You should always do your best, in whatever you do. That's O.K. *If you don't try your best to succeed, you're dishonoring God who gave you your gifts—your talents.* But you can't make comparing yourself to others the #1 way of measuring whether you are a success or not. That'll kill you! And I'm so thankful God doesn't rank me in comparison with others. In fact, James 4:10 (NLT) says: "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor." That's how God works...

Jesus tells of the devout religious leader, and a tax collector, praying in the Temple together. The devout religious leader is someone who's experienced tremendous (worldly) success in life. He keeps 300 commandments a day. And when he goes in to

pray, his prayers are like: “God, I thank you that I’m such a good person. I thank you that I’m better than that tax collector over there.” And the tax collector comes into the Temple, falls on his knees, in shame, and won’t even look up. He beats his chest and cries out, “God, forgive me. I’m a sinner. Have mercy on me.”

And Jesus says, ‘Which one do you think God honors? Which one do you think is justified in God’s eyes?’ The answer is ... the TAX COLLECTOR! Why? Because, surprisingly, *God’s not interested in how you compare to others.* God’s not interested in how well you’ve been able to impress others. Frankly, God’s more interested in someone who is simply ... humble. *Pursue humility!* God’s word tells us (Matt. 19:30, NLT), “But many who are the greatest now will be least important then, and those who seem least important now will be the greatest then.” If you want to be the greatest in God’s eyes, *pursue humility... Be like the tax collector!* Next:

RULE #2: PRACTICE SELFLESS LIVING. Jesus’ second rule to success is ... *selflessness!* If you want to be successful to God, you must practice selfless living...

Here are some questions to ask yourself:

- Do I assume the best about other people, or do I assume the worst?
- When I look at others, do I first recognize their strengths, their gifts and the good things about them, or do I immediately judge by looking for their faults?

Jesus said to look for the good in others first (Matt. 7:1a, 5, NLT): “Do not judge others, and you will not be judged.... Hypocrite! First get rid of the log in your own eye; then you will see well enough to deal with the speck in your friend’s eye.” Jesus lays out an important truth in this verse: *Look in the mirror before you even think about finding fault with another person!* This is SO IMPORTANT IN MARRIAGES & other relationships... Ask yourself these two questions to find out if you live a life of *selflessness—in your marriage, in your home, in your workplace, etc.*

And folks, here’s a secret: *Others will begin to see the best in us ... when we begin to see the best in them!* It’s true. The way we judge others will be the way we’re judged. That’s what Jesus is saying here in Matthew 7. If you’re critical of other people, that’ll be the same way they look at you. But the opposite is also true; if you’re always seeing the best in others, they’re always going to notice the best in you. So, do you assume the best in others? Paul’s words to the church at Philippi (Phil. 2:3-4, NLT) rings true: “Don’t be selfish; don’t try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves. ⁴ Don’t look out only for your own interests, but take an interest in others, too.” That’s Jesus’ second rule to success ... and it’s radical. Next...

RULE #3: GIVE GOD CONTROL. There are really only two ways you can live your life: With you in control... or with God in control... Which is it going to be?

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus is very clear about his expectations—very straightforward, even a little strict. Jesus says we should be obeying his teachings/laws better than the religious leaders do—the professionals. And you’re thinking, ‘How am I supposed to do that?’ Jesus tells us how.

Jesus teaches ... 1) it’s not enough *not* to murder; from now on, don’t even get angry without a justifiable reason, as that’s murder in the heart. 2) It’s not enough to *not*

commit adultery; you have to no longer lust inappropriately/think impure thoughts. What? (Yeah, I know...) Then he says 3) it's not enough to *not* break an oath; you have to be sure every word that comes from your mouth is truth. Let your yeses be 'yes' and your nos be 'no.' No more white lies. And 4) don't seek revenge on those who've mistreated you; forgive. What is Jesus saying here? What're his expectations?

Look at Matthew 5:48 (NLT) with me, would you? "But you are to be perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect." Seriously, Jesus? (Isn't that what you feel like saying?) But you know in your hearts, if we could do what Jesus asked, we'd be better people ... and the world would be a better world. The truth is ... *we can't do it on our own, especially if we're in control.* What Jesus is asking only happens if GOD's in control! Paul (Rom. 7:19, 24-25a, NLT) sums it up: "I want to do what is good, but I don't. I don't want to do what is wrong, but I do it anyway....²⁴ Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?²⁵ Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord...." If we're honest, we know we can't be perfect (Webster's definition); *that's why Jesus suggests something different. Instead of trying to control your life, give God control!* Let God begin to work in you. How?

Let me suggest a change in thinking: Instead of getting up in the morning and thinking 'I'm not going to be angry,' think about God. Instead of getting up in the morning and thinking 'I'm not going to lust,' spend 5 minutes reading God's word or doing a devotion. Instead of getting up in the morning and saying, 'I'm not going to lie,' spend 5 minutes in prayer (or 10!). *Don't focus on what you don't want to do; FOCUS ON GOD!* Replace thoughts of self-improvement with thoughts of God...

Then, we can expect what Paul says (Phil. 1:6, NLT): "...I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns." Give God control, folks, and God can do a good work in us too—*success...* Finally:

RULE #4: INVEST FOR ETERNITY. This is Jesus' fourth rule for success; invest for eternity! Jesus says if you want to be successful, be humble, be selfless, give God control, and—above all else—be sure to invest your life in something that's going to last forever—for eternity...

In Matthew 6:19-21 (NLT), Jesus teaches this: "Don't store up treasures here on earth, where moths eat them and rust destroys them, and where thieves break in and steal.²⁰ Store your treasures in heaven, where moths and rust cannot destroy, and thieves do not break in and steal.²¹ Wherever your treasure is, there the desires of your heart will also be." In other words, *don't make the most important thing in life ... something that's temporary!* Don't look for happiness, meaning & fulfillment, or worldly success first—all things that can easily be taken away from you at a moment's notice... That means, ultimately, the final measure of success can't be measured by how famous you are, or how powerful, or how rich. Solomon—the richest, most famous, most powerful king of his time—said (Eccl. 2:10-11, NLT): "Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure. I even found great pleasure in hard work, a reward for all my labors.¹¹ But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless—like chasing the wind. There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere."

And that's the question: WHAT'S WORTHWHILE? What's worth investing your life in? After we die and we come face-to-face with Jesus, we're only going to be asked 2 questions—*nothing to do with worldly success*: 1) *What did you do with Jesus?* Did you accept him into your life—allowing *him* to be LORD? And 2) *What did you do with your life?* This second question has to do with how successful you were in Jesus' eyes ... and what your rewards will be in heaven...

Let me close today by telling you about Jim Elliott. Jim Elliott was a missionary to South America. God laid on his heart, while in his 20s, a cannibalistic tribe in Ecuador he needed to share the Gospel with. The tribe had never heard of Jesus Christ. God laid on his heart that that should be his life's mission. So, he pursued it. He went to this tribe—known for killing people, by the way, made contact with them, then began sharing the Gospel. But things went bad. The tribe turned on he and his partner, eventually killing both of them. Jim Elliott died when he was 28 years old, sharing the Gospel as a missionary in South America...

Now, that seems like a very tragic thing—a sad thing that someone so talented would lose their life at such a young age. But what Jim did, for generations to come, was to open the door. Later his wife—Elizabeth Elliott—went back and shared the Gospel with this same tribe and a tremendous transformation took place in that tribe In South America; they turned to Jesus and lives were transformed...

Jim Elliott wrote these words before he went on his final mission—before his death: “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” You know, many of us live our lives exactly the opposite. We trade things that will last forever to gain temporary happiness or success. Think about it; you know we do. We trade things of God ... for things so worthless in comparison. Later in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 7:13-14, NLT), Jesus says: “You can enter God's Kingdom only through the narrow gate. The highway to hell is broad, and its gate is wide for the many who choose that way. ¹⁴ But the gateway to life is very narrow and the road is difficult, and only a few ever find it.” There's still two ways you can live your life: 1) With you in charge, and self-centered as all get out ... or 2) with God in charge; it's the radical way, if you think about Jesus' teachings, but it's the way that leads to eternal life...

Today, we have a choice: You can keep trying to fill that life of yours—the emptiness of your life—with temporary solutions, or you can see that Jesus offers a different way—one whose destination will be eternity with God. Each of us must decide what road we want to walk down; I want to invite you to take Jesus' way today, success based on humility, selfless living, putting God in charge and investing in the eternal...