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Success and Faithfulness

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Text: Isaiah 49:1-7

One of the problems with trying to live a Christian life in our Western world is that so much of what our society values, conflicts with what our faith teaches. Success, how it is defined, how it is obtained, and how it is valued, is one of these areas of conflict.

Last century, Horatio Alger wrote over one hundred books for boys. They were extremely popular in their day, and survived well into this century. I read some of them as a teenager in the 1950s; some of you may well have read them in your childhood.

Alger was a formula writer; almost all his books have the same plot. The hero is a poor boy, from the slums or the country, who is determined to make his fortune. He scrapes together enough money, for example, to begin shining shoes. He leaves home before dawn, shines shoes in the business district all day, and comes home well after dark. Then he studies by reading books and newspapers he has found, using the light of a street lamp because he can't afford candles.

One day he shines the shoes of a businessman, who is impressed with the effort the young man puts into his work, and with his personality and charm, and offers him a job in his factory as a sweeper. Our hero works hard at sweeping, and at self-study, and attracts the attention of a manager who promotes him to mailboy. As the story goes on he does so well that he is promoted again, and then again, and then again. Soon he is earning an adequate income. However, rather than

spending this on recreation, better clothes, food, or housing, he puts himself through high school by correspondence.

Finally, the hero is invited to the company picnic or Christmas party, where quite by chance he meets the owner's daughter. They fall in love and have a romance, over opposition from the father who wants the daughter to marry the son of a business colleague. During all this our hero continues to work hard, studies even harder, and finishes college in night school. In time the father comes around, sees that our hero is a prince among men, gives his permission for the marriage, appoints him manager of the business, and makes him the heir of all he owns. Effort, perseverance, and hard work have won the day, and the hero lives happily ever after.

These books promote an understanding of the world which was very much a part of the 19th century thinking, and is still the way we see the world today. It is so common an understanding, that most of the time we are probably not aware of it, and even less often do we question it. But these Horatio Alger stories are cartoons of a principle that underlies our North American view of the world.

Firstly, these stories and our society define success in a very particular way. To be successful means climbing the corporate ladder and eventually coming to own the business. To be successful means to be wealthy and powerful. Secondly, success can be achieved without fail by persistence and hard work. If one simply hangs in and works hard, success will surely follow.

If you don't think these ideas are still common, just read any of the popular magazines or books dealing with how to be successful. Or watch late-night television, with its parade of programmes dedicated to selling systems for getting rich. A few years ago one of these was even called "The Success Formula"—it may still be on. They all claim that if one follows their method one cannot help but succeed. They differ from Horatio Alger only in that hard work is no longer required; success can be obtained through real estate or investment. Perseverance, taking time, are still required, but success, defined as the accumulation of money, is guaranteed.

There are several problems with success being measured by power and money, and with thinking success is the certain result of hard work and persistence. There is of course the immediate logical problem that not everyone can be the head

of a company, no matter how hard or how long they work! It is not possible for everyone to accumulate more money than everyone else, no matter how diligently they practice some system! Finally, the number of bosses' daughters—or sons for that matter—available to be married is very limited!

For Christians, those are not the serious problems. For followers of Jesus Christ, who take our Lord's life as a model for living, there are far more serious problems with this success-oriented way of thinking. If we believe that God is fully revealed in the person and life of Jesus of Nazareth, then our preoccupation with success and wealth is the opposite of what is revealed in Jesus.

Jesus was not a success story! The poor boy from Nazareth did not find wealth and power in the city. He lived the life of a travelling preacher, living on the charity of his few friends, and making enough enemies that at times he could only travel by roundabout routes. Instead of working hard all day and studying all night, Jesus preferred to be with people, talking, eating, drinking; enough so that he was accused of being a glutton and a drunkard! Rather than hanging around in the business district where he might have met influential people, he preferred the company of those on the fringes of society: simple working people, and some dubious characters, some of whom were known to be criminal or immoral—in other words, Jesus made friends of undesirables! Whenever he met wealthy or powerful persons, rather than seizing the opportunity to make an influential friend, Jesus did his best to offend them. On his last visit to the city, he might have had a chance, and his supporters even organised a parade for him. Instead of capitalizing on his popularity, he visited the temple financial district, and rather than learning some pointers from the entrepreneurs who were successful at working the money exchange, he disrupted business. He had irritated the wealthy and powerful people of the city beyond their toleration. They had him arrested and executed. Not a success story, is it? Not in the sense that Horatio Alger and our society would define success!

If Jesus reveals God, then God does not care about success stories, not as our world defines them. If Jesus' choice of friends reveals God's choice, then God does not choose the successful. If we follow Jesus, then we ought not to expect that hard work and persistence in being a follower will always lead to rewards.

And, if we follow the God who is revealed in Jesus, then we ought not and cannot measure our progress the way our society measures success.

Consider our Old Testament reading. The speaker is a mysterious figure, the Servant of Yahweh, often called the Suffering Servant, who appears four times in the later chapters of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. These passages are called the "Servant Songs" and the one read this morning is the second of these. Christians have from the very beginning identified Jesus Christ with the Servant.

The Servant speaks to the world, the coastlands, and the peoples from afar. The Servant relates how he was called from his mother's womb and equipped for a mission of preaching and proclamation, with the purpose that in him God would be glorified. Through him Israel, the house of Jacob, would be brought back to God.

Yet it appears that despite all effort, in which he has completely spent his strength, the Servant has failed. "I have laboured in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity," he says. He goes on to relate how God, rather than chastising him for the failure, will use that very failure to bring about an even greater effect than planned for the Servant's original mission. Rather than bringing only Israel back to God, the Servant will bring salvation to the ends of the earth, to the very nations of the world to whom the Servant is speaking in this passage. God will take the Servant's failure, and use it for God's own purposes.

If hard work and persistence do not automatically lead to success in the life of following God, what then does God expect of us? The same thing that God expected from his Servant, and the same thing that we find underlying the entire life of Jesus as we read it in the Gospels. Faithfulness!!! When we are baptized, we are called to the ministry of Christ, and we are given a mission by God. We are not given the means of judging our progress in this mission. The Christian life contains no built-in rewards, no raises, no promotions, to tell us how well we are doing as Christians. The Christian life is always a life of ambiguity, in which we can never be sure we are doing the right thing, or working hard enough. No matter how much we do for Christ, there will always be more to be done; the mission given to us at baptism will never be finished in this

life. There are no indicators of Christian "success"! We don't need them, because, bluntly, God calls us, not to be successful, God calls us to be faithful!!! As with the Servant, God will use our faithfulness for God's purposes.

Listen!

Bishop Whipple was a Bishop of Minnesota, last century. He was a tireless worker for the Lord, and both as a frontier priest and later as a bishop he brought many thousands of settlers and native peoples into the church. Once, when he was on holiday in England he received a cable from an elderly priest in New York, asking him to come and see him on his way home. As soon as his ship docked, he took a cab and drove to this man's home. He was received hospitably, and after they had settled in front of the fire, the old man said:

"I've been working in this poor parish for forty years, seeking to be used by God for his purposes. I've tried, and I've toiled, and I've prayed... and I seem to have achieved nothing. Thousands have been won to God through you. Tell me, why have I been such a failure?"

"Do you remember Mary so-and-so?" asked the bishop.

The priest thought for a bit. "Yes," he said. "I think so. Very early in my time here she came to a few confirmation classes... but then she gave it up and dropped out."

"She left to go and live on her family farm after her father died," said the bishop. "She kept a home going, even after her mother died, despite a drunken and abusive half-brother, who made her life a misery." The bishop paused, then continued. "One day in an infrequent sober moment he asked her why she stuck it out there, when it was so awful for her. 'I suppose it's my religion,' she replied. 'What do you mean?' the brother asked with a sneer. 'Well, I always find it hard to put into words,' she replied, 'but I've got some notes I once took in confirmation class... I'll lend them to you. They explain it better than I can.'" The bishop paused again, then went on. "The brother took the notes, not meaning to read them, but somehow he did... and something in those notes opened the way for the Holy Spirit. He sobered up, and gave up his dissipated life, and went to college... He now stands before you as Bishop of Minnesota."¹

There is something we need to remember when we look for signs of success in our life as Christians, and don't find

any. Success does not matter; faithfulness does. When we are faithful, God can take our failure and make it into the work of the kingdom.

Note

- ¹ This story is adapted from "Bishop Whipple of Minnesota" in Richard Tatlock (ed.), *Stories and Prayers at Five to Ten* (London: A.R. Mowbray & Co., Ltd., 1959).