

Success and Failure, Part 1

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

10 March, 2024

Children's Talk: Planning Ahead

- It is easy to jump into something without thinking ahead
- That can get us into trouble though:

And whoever does not bear his cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple. For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he has enough to finish it— lest, after he has laid the foundation, and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, "This man began to build and was not able to finish." Or what king, going to make war against another king, does not sit down first and consider whether he is able with ten thousand to meet him who comes against him with twenty thousand? Or else, while the other is still a great way off, he sends a delegation and asks conditions of peace. So likewise, whoever of you does not forsake all that he has cannot be My disciple. (Luke 14:27-33)

- If I wanted to build a tower very tall, could I do it with just these pieces?
- I'll try, but halfway through I'll have to give up
- When we don't prepare, we aren't able to finish what we start
- The Lord wants us to follow Him: not just when it's easy, and not just right now, but also when it gets hard and over a long time
- It is easy to say, "of course I will follow the Lord!" But we should really think about what that means, so that when we say it we are fully committed
- Then we will be able to prepare for the challenges along the way, so we can finish the task, to follow the Lord even when it is hard.

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What does success mean? What are some of the things that you have been successful at? And how did you know you were successful? Now I'm going to ask the adults the same thing. It's interesting that what we mean by "success" differs from person to person and changes from age to age. No two people will have the exact same idea and even one person might change their own personal definition many times over the years. But we are going to try to get to a spiritual definition of success this morning, and then from that your own definition might become more clear.

First we are going to hear a story about greatness, and what it means to be great. I think this says a lot about success as well.

Then the mother of Zebedee's sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him.
And He said to her, "What do you wish?"
She said to Him, "Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom."
But Jesus answered and said, "You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?"
They said to Him, "We are able."
So He said to them, "You will indeed drink My cup, and be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with; but to sit on My right hand and on My left is not Mine to give, but it is for those for whom it is prepared by My Father."
And when the ten heard it, they were greatly displeased with the two brothers. But Jesus called them to Himself and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave— just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:20-28)

I'd like three volunteers to come up here. Two of you sit in these thrones. The third can sit down here on the steps. The mom of two of Jesus' disciples wanted her sons to be great; or in other words, to be "successful." So she asked if they would be able

to sit on either side of Jesus when His kingdom was established. Now if you saw this situation, you would think these two were super important, perhaps even successful; whereas this one down here looks much less so. And understandably, the other disciples were upset with this picture: why would those two get to be so important? But Jesus pushed them to see things differently: if you want to be great, you don't have to be powerful and order other people around. That's not what makes someone great! What makes someone great is their willingness to serve others. The one down here, working hard to make the world better for other people is greater than these two who just want power and riches and to have authority over other people. Even the Lord Himself, the God of the universe, the greatest and most successful being in existence, came to serve and not to be served.

Now this might be a bit disappointing. It might seem like sacrificing a definition of success that would make you really happy for one that would make you less happy. But the opposite is actually the case. The Teachings of the New Church describe how angels, people who have died and gone to heaven, view the idea that the least will become the greatest:

I have talked with spirits who believed heaven and heavenly joy to consist in their being great; but such were told that in heaven he that is least is greatest, since he is called least who has, and wishes to have, no power or wisdom from himself, but only from the Lord, he that is least in that sense having the greatest happiness, and as he has the greatest happiness, it follows that he is greatest; for he has thereby from the Lord all power and excels all in wisdom. What is it to be the greatest unless to be the most happy? For to be the most happy is what the powerful seek through power and the rich through riches. It was further said that heaven does not consist in a desire to be least for the purpose of being greatest, for that would be aspiring and longing to be the greatest; but it consists in desiring from the heart the good of others more than one's own, and in serving others with a view to their happiness, not with recompense as an end, but from love. (*Heaven and Hell* §408)

There are plenty of people who achieved great with, only to find that they were still unsatisfied with life; there are plenty of people who had great power over others,

over companies and countries and armies, who still did not have the power find true happiness. What would the point of wealth and power be if it does not make you happy? And if serving others makes you truly happy and content and joyful, what does it matter if it means giving up wealth and power? The sacrifice is more than worth it! Strive after that which will make you happy; and the Lord is clear that true happiness will come only when we are loving others more than self, when we live lives of service. If you can manage that, your life will be successful no matter how things go for you.

That does not mean that we all should give up on our individual hopes and dreams; far from it! There is endless variety in the Lord's Kingdom; each individual has been blessed with a unique combination of talents and skills, of ideas and ways of thinking, of goals and passions. For some of you, success means getting a 95 on a test; for others, success means getting a 70. For some of you, success means scoring a goal; for others, success means going out on the field at all and giving it your best. This is a good reminder for parents and teachers as well. If your child or student learns to love other people, gives thought to the best ways of doing that, and then puts it into action, they are a success. That's true even if their choices at school or in life are completely and totally different from your own; even if they define success totally differently from the way that you did or still do. The Lord says, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" (Mark 8:36). What's the point of meeting someone else's definition of success if you don't end up as a good person?

Again, that doesn't mean we shouldn't have goals we should strive for. It is true that for some people their goals will lead them to want to be something explicitly service-based like a healthcare worker, and in that they have their own definition of

success; others might see success in serving their family or community. But then again, someone else might have success mean being the CEO of a major company, a company that employs thousands of people and makes millions in profit. True success is to serve others; but that does not mean playing small or rejecting any and all ambitions. As long as the goal of serving others is at the heart, a CEO of a major corporation can do amazing things for the world!

We've talked a lot about how to define success, but I want to end with just a little on how to achieve it. The teachings of the New Church say that you need three things, and that if any one is missing, the whole thing falls apart.

There are three things that hang together and cannot be separated: love, wisdom and useful life endeavour. If one is taken away, the other two collapse. (*Apocalypse Revealed* §352)

Any time you are setting out on a new path, check these three things: first love, in other words, your motivation, your purpose, your intentions, the thing at the heart of what you want to accomplish, the why behind it all. And check to see if that personal love fits in with love to the Lord and love to the neighbour. The second is wisdom, in other words, the ideas that will enable you to achieve your goal, the means, the plan. Check to see, do your personal plans and means to achieve your goal fit with what is right and wrong, does it fall in line with the Lord's teachings? Lastly is usefulness in life, in others words, doing the thing itself, putting it into practice, taking action, actually doing, not just thinking and planning. This is the stage where it all comes together. The most loving motives and the wisest ideas won't mean anything if you don't choose to move forward with them.

This process does not guarantee success in the world; we will sometimes have the best motives, a great plan, and go at it with full effort, and still not have things work out the way we wanted. As for failure, come back next week. It will be all

about failure. Now that might sound depressing, but it will actually be a very uplifting service; many of what we think of as failures may not be true failures after all; and the Lord uses even real failure to lead us to something better. But for now, with the focus on success, we can guarantee spiritual success. The Lord asks that we work on purifying our motives, making plans that fit in with what is right and true, and put in real effort. No matter the outcome, we will be spiritually successful if we do those three things. The Lord does not require that we control the outcome; it is enough that we do what we can with what we have control over, and trust that the Lord will handle the rest.