

Are You a Successful Person?

Matthew 5.38-48

FUPC
Aug. 14, 2016

How do you measure success? If you're running for political office, you either win or you lose. If you're an Olympian, you pole-vault higher, throw farther, swim faster or perform more perfectly than any of your competitors. If you play baseball, you look at your batting average, RBI's, ERA and a lot of other statistics. If you own a business, you look at the bottom line: did you make any profit after taxes, expenses, and depreciation? If you're an investor in the stock market, you calculate how much your investments appreciated over time.

But what about you as an individual? How can you tell if you're a successful person? We might begin by thinking about how much money we have in the bank or how deeply in debt we are. We might think about our job and conclude that we've achieved what we dreamed we'd accomplish or we've fallen far short of our vocational dreams. We might think of our education and feel proud of our degrees or wish we'd stayed in school or worked harder for an advanced degree. We could look at our relationships and if we've lived with integrity and compassion, generosity and forgiveness, common courtesy and kindness... or if we've been abrasive and self-centered, bullying to get our way and throwing tantrums when we don't.

How does our church measure success? Most churches have two metrics that they use to measure success: Money and Membership. The first is Money: Are we paying our bills? Do we have enough to maintain our property? Can we pay staff salaries? Does our income allow us to have a balanced budget? The second metric is Members: Do we have enough regular members and attendees who give enough to support our budget? Are there enough people willing to serve on the various boards and committees defined in our by-laws? Nearly all churches measure success by these two standards: Cash flow and Members and I suspect that our church is pretty typical in that regard.

I'm asking these questions because it seems that our western culture is based on measurements of success that are defined by corporations and people who have a stake in our values and choices. If you spend any time at all watching television or reading popular magazines, you will see the standards of success defined by corporations and their advertising departments that are built around materialism, beauty, and self-interest. These people define success for us and we buy into it... our weight, our body shape, our standard of living, that shampoo we use, the bank we put our money in, the schools we attend, the car we drive, the job we hold, the house we live in, the soft drink we prefer, the places we go on vacation and much more.

Jesus addressed this same issue in the Sermon on the Mount, part of which we read in today's Scripture reading. In this exchange with the religious and political elite of his day, he redefined what it meant to be successful. If anyone knew about being successful, the Pharisees did. They were at the top of the ladder in education, They were the recognized religious authorities and leaders... the "professionals" who interpreted God to the people. They were not poor. They made themselves financially comfortable from the offerings and various currencies that were exchanged in the Temple.

If you asked a Pharisee about success, he'd have been able to go for hours about how he had kept all the laws of God so well, and even exceeded what was required. He could tell you about all the hours he spent standing in the Temple praying (in a way calculated to draw attention to himself). He'd talk about his charitable donations to the poor, right down to the exact penny. He could talk a long time on nearly any subject you brought up because he was well-educated and

felt that he was entitled to a greater respect and regard than the ordinary man or woman. By any standard of the day, the Pharisees were successful men. Note that there were no women Pharisees.

I get the feeling that Jesus was not as impressed with these men as they were with themselves. They knew all the rules, but they didn't know God. In fact, the entire Sermon is Jesus' way of changing the unit of measurement. The Pharisees measured themselves with one yardstick. And Jesus said, "No, there's a different measurement." The sermon follows a pattern something like this, "It has been written..." or "You have heard it said..." and then: "But I say to you."

"Do not murder... but I say to you, anyone who is angry with his brother (or sister) has already murdered."

"Do not commit adultery... but I say to you, anyone who looks at another with selfish desire has already committed adultery."

"Do not break your oath to God...but I say to you, don't even dare to swear by heaven or hell."

"An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth... but I say to you, turn the other cheek. If someone take your coat, give him all your clothes. If someone wants you to go one mile, go two miles."

"Love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I say to you, love your enemy and pray for them."

"When you pray, do not make a big show of it in public. Offer your prayers in private."

"When you give alms, do not let anyone know what you are giving."

"When you are fasting, don't look sad and hungry, but bright and cheerful."

"Don't be anxious about material things. Look at the lilies of the field and the birds of the air... how God cares for them, feeding them and clothing them."

Jesus took the commonly accepted unit of measurement for success and turned it upside down. He moved the yardstick from one of external performance and tangible measurement to an internal yardstick of the motives and authenticity of the heart. He called the Pharisees "whited tombs" – nice looking on the outside but inside full of darkness, death, and dirt.

Jesus lived by different values than these men, and it got him killed. One day he was watching people coming to the Temple to pray and give their offerings. The rich brought their gold and silver coins and with great fanfare and pride, dropped them into the receptacle. And then an impoverished widow came, feeling small and ashamed and as she approached the place of offerings, Jesus watched her take out two copper coins and drop them into the tray. Listen to what he said about her, "I tell you the truth. This poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on." If you want to feel truly rich, think of all the things you have that money can't buy.

Jesus' whole life redefined success in terms of compassion, grace, forgiveness, integrity, generosity, kindness, vulnerability, patience and unconditional love. It was the way he lived. It was who he was... not about a performance to be praised and applauded but an authentic connection to the person in front of him who was broken, sick, guilty, rejected and outcast from polite society.

The Pharisees hated Jesus for that. If you'd asked them if Jesus was a success, they'd have shouted a resounding "NO!" To them, he was a dangerous revolutionary. He broke all the rules, thumbed his nose at the religious authorities. He turned all the usual measurements inside out and upside down. He was moral revolutionary and it got him killed.

It's not about how many prayers you pray, but about their depth and sincerity and honesty and openness to God's sovereign answers. It's not about how good you look in the mirror, but how much beauty you see all around you in the lilies of the field clothed in colors and shapes that put the riches of Solomon to shame. It's not about how much money you have in the bank, but how willing you are to trust that God will care for you just as completely as God cares for and feeds the birds.

So let's bring this home. Are you a successful person? How do you know? Who defines success for you?

Are you a successful student if you ace an exam because you crammed and jammed the night before, but you failed to actually learn and understand the subject matter you were supposed to know through serious study, reading and reflection?

Are you a successful person if you make a large income but always feel incomplete and hungry for something more on the inside and more money doesn't seem to quiet that hunger?

Are you a successful person if your life appears complete and happy on the outside but inside you are miserable and depressed? What is it that would make you feel complete and whole? What is it that would put you in tune with yourself and let you experience harmony within yourself, with other people and with God?

I'm not going to give you the answers to what makes a person truly successful other than to point you back to Jesus' life and words in the gospels. I have a feeling that the more we can bring our lives into conformity and harmony with what Jesus lived and taught, the more likely it is that we will experience a fulfillment and satisfaction that has nothing to do with the common measurements of success used by our culture.

Our church is successful to the degree that we fulfill our mission in this community and in our world. What is that mission? We are the body of Christ. In our life together, we embody that same spirit of compassion, grace, forgiveness, integrity, generosity, kindness, vulnerability, patience and unconditional love. When we are tuned in to the hurting, the lonely, the forgotten and forsaken, the fearful, the impoverished, we can call ourselves a successful church. Money only helps us accomplish that mission. And to the degree that money gets in the way of our fulfilling that mission, then it becomes a curse and not a blessing. Money in the bank can never be a measure of success for a church. I've known too many churches that closed their doors with thousands of dollars in the bank – because they'd lost their way and forgotten their mission. Money is merely a means to an end, a tool that can be used to the glory of God. Or not.

Here are two questions to take home with you today:

What are the values and standards of measurement that define success for you personally?

What does our church need to do to become more successful in fulfilling our mission in Hilo and around the world?