

## **Success and the Good Life**

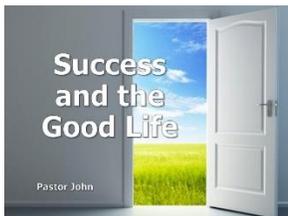
May 7, 2017

Scriptures: Matthew 22: 34-40

*<sup>34</sup> After Jesus had made the Sadducees look foolish, the Pharisees heard about it and got together. <sup>35</sup> One of them was an expert in the Jewish Law. So he tried to test Jesus by asking, <sup>36</sup> "Teacher, what is the most important commandment in the Law?" <sup>37</sup> Jesus answered: Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. <sup>38</sup> This is the first and most important commandment. <sup>39</sup> The second most important commandment is like this one. And it is, "Love others as much as you love yourself." <sup>40</sup> All the Law of Moses and the Books of the Prophets are based on these two commandments.*

Galatians 6: 7-10

*<sup>7</sup> You cannot fool God, so don't make a fool of yourself! You will harvest what you plant. <sup>8</sup> If you follow your selfish desires, you will harvest destruction, but if you follow the Spirit, you will harvest eternal life. <sup>9</sup> Don't get tired of helping others. You will be rewarded when the time is right, if you don't give up. <sup>10</sup> We should help people whenever we can, especially if they are followers of the Lord.*



*"It was a bitterly cold evening in Northern Virginia many years ago. The old man's beard was glazed by winter's frost as he waited for a ride across the river. He heard a brigade of men on horses coming around the bend. He let the first one pass him without any effort to get his attention. Then another passed by, and another. Finally, the last*

*rider neared and the old man caught the rider's eye and said, "Sir, would you mind giving an old man a ride to the other side?" The rider said, "Sure, thing. Hop aboard." Seeing the old man unable to lift his half frozen body onto the horse, the horseman dismounted and helped the old man onto the horse.*

*The horseman not only took the old man across the river but to his destination which was just a few miles away. As they neared the man's home the horseman was curious and he asked, "Sir, I noticed that you let several other riders pass by without making an effort to get a ride. Then I came up and you immediately asked me for a ride. I'm curious why on such a bitterly cold night that you would wait and ask the last rider. What if I had refused and left you there?"*

*The old man replied, "I've been around these parts for some time. I reckon I know people pretty good. I looked into the eyes of the other riders and immediately saw there was no concern for my situation. It would have been useless even to ask them for a ride. But when I looked into your eyes, kindness and compassion were there. I knew that your gentle spirit would welcome the opportunity to help me in my time of need."*

*Those heart-warming comments touched the horseman. "I'm most grateful for what you have said," he told the old man. "May I never get too busy in my own affairs that I fail to respond to the needs of others with kindness and compassion." With that, Thomas Jefferson turned his horse around and made his way back to the White House."*

Let me repeat Jefferson's words: "*May I never get too busy in my own affairs that I fail to respond to the needs of others with kindness and compassion.*" May I never get too busy.



There is much truth in these words. For many of us, it is a harsh truth. We allow our life to become so filled with so much that we often feel as if we were constantly running from one thing to another, barely able to catch our breath. We lie down at night and our mind begins to churn with thoughts of how will we do it all again tomorrow. And that is how we drift off to sleep. Have you ever felt like this? Will you feel like this tomorrow night? And the night after that? Let us pray...

Today we look at the idea of success and the good life. For many, these two thoughts naturally go together. Success leads to the good life. We invest much time in trying to find or earn success in life. We study hard, we practice hard, we work hard. All in hopes of finding success. But before we go any further, we better define the term. Dictionary.com defines 'success' as:

*the attainment of wealth, position, honors, or the like.* This is how most people in the world would describe success. And in worldly terms, success can come in many forms. Success can



come in athletics, in schooling, in the work place, in marriage, in children, in homes and cars and stuff, and so on and so on. Success comes in many shapes and sizes. It always has and it always will. Even in Jesus' day one could easily identify who had found success. Then it was in land and animals, in wives and children, in titles and positions. As long as man has breathed, success has been something we have chased after. Success in the world.



The essence of our first passage for today, from Matthew 22, is well known. It is the central theme of our journey of faith. Jesus himself said these were the most important of all the commandments. In fact, He even said that all the Law and that all the prophets ever said are based upon these two commandments.

Simply put, we are called to love God and to love neighbor. If we could truly live out these two commandments each day in our lives, then life would be great. If only we could master these two commandments, then we would not strive for success like it was all that mattered. If it were only so easy.



But so much can get in the way of loving God and loving neighbor, can't it? In Matthew 7, verse 13 and 14, Jesus had this to say about why faith is hard:

*"Go in through the narrow gate. The gate to destruction is wide, and the road that leads there is easy to follow. A lot of people go through that gate. But the gate to life is very narrow. The road that leads there is so hard to follow that only a few people find it."*

In our day and age, the road is indeed wide. We live in a time and society where almost everything is acceptable, where so much is tolerated. We live in a culture where easy credit allows people to live far beyond their means and to enter financial agreements that they simply cannot meet. We live in a world

where access to anything and everything is almost unlimited. Indeed, the road is wide. Indeed, it is easy to follow. Indeed, many people go through the wide gate. But the wide gate leads to destruction. It leads to death.

There is a better path to follow. But it is narrow. It is hard to follow. And few people find it. Even though loving God and loving neighbor are the two great commandments, it is a hard path to walk. God is demanding. And our God is a jealous God. God said things like, "*you shall have no other god before me*" and "*do not worship any god but me*". From the very beginning, God established that He must be number one in our lives. Just as it was in Jesus' day, there is much in the world that competes for the throne of our heart. And it is a struggle to live in the world, to hear the voices of the world, and to keep God number one. It is a daily struggle. Sometimes it is more often than daily.

There is so much we must battle to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind and to love neighbor as self. We have talked about success in worldly terms, but much of it also starts within us. We are hard wired to want to excel, to climb the ladder of success, to be better than the next person. The emotions of pride and ego and jealousy and envy and greed so easily bubble up to the surface. The tendencies to judge and gossip and ridicule require constant fending off. Satan is diligent in working all of these angles. The great deceiver is skilled at pulling us off the narrow path. Satan has many accomplices working for evil, for our destruction. But we are not alone. We have the Holy Spirit the Spirit works diligently as well. The Spirit is always leading and guiding and reminding us of

the things of God, of the narrow path that we are called to walk. The Spirit is always correcting us and rebuking us and prodding us to walk the narrow path. It is a constant battle.

The battle will ultimately be won in our hearts and minds and souls. We will either love God or we will love the world. We will either listen to the Spirit or we will listen to Satan. It is a person by person, soul by soul battle that is being constantly waged. It is a battle we are each well aware of. Loving self and seeking success in the world is always luring us in. It is bright and shiny and attractive. It draws our attention. We so easily wander and find ourselves on the wrong path. We can suddenly realize where we are at and think, "How did I get here"? But we know how. We cannot pretend we did not make the choice. We can blame this or that. But God knows. Paul writes about this in Galatians 6:



*<sup>7</sup> You cannot fool God, so don't make a fool of yourself! You will harvest what you plant. <sup>8</sup> If you follow your selfish desires, you will harvest destruction..."*

Never one to mince words, Paul connects back to Jesus' words. Wide is the path that leads to destruction. And God knows when we are on that path. God knew we would be drawn to the wide path. That is why God sent the Holy Spirit. Paul continues, in the second half of verse eight, saying: "*but if you follow the Spirit,*



*you will harvest eternal life*". If we hear the voice of the Holy Spirit. If we heed the words it whispers. If we allow its instruction to guide us. If we respond to the conviction when we feel it and repent and return to the narrow way. Then we will harvest eternal life. Friends, there is no greater measure of success. Paul continues on in this passage and connects back to the second great commandment that Jesus gave: love neighbor as self. Paul understood this command to be an extension of the first command to love God. For Paul, it was what flowed out of loving God. He goes on in verses nine and ten to encourage us: *"Don't get tired of helping others. You will be rewarded when the time is right, if you don't give up. <sup>10</sup> We should help people whenever we can, especially if they are followers of the Lord."* Paul would have liked the story about Thomas Jefferson that we opened with today. It was about living life with kindness and compassion and making time for others. Jesus would have liked it too.



Each day we have opportunities to do as Jefferson did, to show kindness and compassion to those we meet. Each day we wrestle with living to please God and living for self. Each day God is at work, through the Holy Spirit and through our fellow believers, working to shape and mold us more and more into the image of Christ. Each day we play our role – some days well and some days not so well. But, the good news for each of us is that God never gives up. God sees in each of us the child of God we were created to be. God continues to work in us and through us, drawing us ever closer to the purpose He created us for: to love God and to love neighbor. To close, another story:

*"Once upon a time a daughter complained to her father that her life was miserable and that she didn't know how she was going to make it. She was tired of fighting and struggling all the time. It seemed just as one problem was solved, another one soon followed.*

*Her father, a chef, took her to the kitchen. He filled three pots with water and placed each on a high fire. Once the three pots began to boil, he placed potatoes in one pot, eggs in the second pot, and ground coffee beans in the third pot. He then let them sit and boil, without saying a word to his daughter. The daughter, moaned and impatiently waited, wondering what he was doing.*

*After twenty minutes he turned off the burners. He took the potatoes out of the pot and placed them in a bowl. He pulled the eggs out and placed them a bowl. He then ladled the coffee out and placed it in a cup. Turning to her he asked. "Daughter, what do you see?"*

*"Potatoes, eggs, and coffee," she hastily replied.*

*"Look closer", he said, "and touch the potatoes." She did and noted that they were soft. He then asked her to take an egg and break it. After pulling off the shell, she observed the hard-boiled egg. Finally, he asked her to sip the coffee. Its rich aroma brought a smile to her face.*

*"Father, what does this mean?" she asked.*

*He then explained that the potatoes, the eggs and coffee beans had each faced the same adversity - the boiling water. However, each one reacted differently. The potato went in strong, hard, and unrelenting, but in boiling water, it became soft and weak. The egg was fragile, with the thin outer shell protecting its liquid interior until it was put in the boiling water. Then the inside of the egg became hard. However, the ground coffee beans were unique. After they were exposed to the boiling water, they changed the water and created something new.*

*"Which are you?" he asked his daughter. "When adversity knocks on your door, how do you respond? Are you a potato, an egg, or a coffee bean?"*

*In life, things happen around us, things happen to us, but the only thing that truly matters is what happens within us."*

Let us pray.

### **GPS – Grow, Pray, Serve**

- 1) What are your greatest obstacles to being able to extend kindness and compassion to others? How can you overcome these obstacles?
- 2) How has your definition of success changed as you have matured in life and as you progressed on your journey of faith?
- 3) In what ways is God at work in you, molding and shaping you to be the child of God He created you to be? Pray for discernment and courage.