

# **OBSESSED WITH SUCCESS**

**Continuing to Achieve Being The Person  
God Wants Me to Be**

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## OBSESSED WITH SUCCESS

*“The standard of success is not to be a numerical or financial standard.” George Muller*

*“A man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth.” (Luke 12:15)*

*The Lord Jesus Christ*

While attending a church management seminar conducted by a pastor from Great Britain, I asked him to distinguish the difference in British pastors and American pastors. I will never forget his reply. Without hesitating, he said, “British pastors are overly concerned about tact and diplomacy. American pastors are obsessed with success.” **“Obsessed with success”** . . . In one brief statement this man has exposed a major failure of the church, and he is not alone in his views. A newly released book refers to the “American Success Cult” and claims that “the success cult has . . . crept into much of organized religion without many . . . being aware of what’s happening.”<sup>1</sup>

It is an undeniable part of American Christianity. Performance and production are indicators of God’s blessing. We measure the church by its bodies, bucks, and buildings; and when one of these indicators is down, we question our worth, God’s presence, and even His power. We are surrounded on every side by this godless philosophy which equates church statistics of every kind with what the world calls “success.” The pressure to succeed is overwhelming! This pressure comes from every side, from the pastor’s alma mater, his revered mentors, his peers in the ministry, his congregation, and even from his wife who fears the stigma of failure. Success means production, performance, and growth – always bettering the previous year’s attendance, enlarging the auditorium, increasing the offerings, adding new missionaries, adding new members, etc. To do so is known as “success!”

The pastor’s failure to resist this siren’s song is altogether too common and not without its price. Cecil Paul, author of *The Passages of a Pastor*, says, “It is true that the quest for fame and recognition is not without its impact on the . . . clergy. In fact, one problem the pastor often reveals is a difficulty accepting the reality that he does, at times, function out of that motivation.”<sup>2</sup>

One author reflects on the impact of such beliefs upon the ministry. “In our society, success and self-worth go together. If a church ‘fails,’ the . . . pastor . . . tells himself, ‘The church is no good, and I’m tied to it; therefore, I’m no good.’ This makes us struggle for success in order to boost our own self-worth. The Scriptures say we are all accepted in the eyes of God because He loved us even while we were yet sinners, but that’s not the way our society operates. Society says if you fail, this reflects your worth. So you take it personally.”<sup>3</sup>

It is the unmentionable sin of the ministry, this belief that “... *gain is godliness,*” (*1 Timothy 6:5*), and that the gainer therefore must be godly. Look at the national conferences of every sort. Why are there no speakers from churches of 100 to 200 in attendance? Why are such men not invited to speak? Is it because they

are not spiritual, because they are not faithful, because they have nothing to offer, or even because they are not effective speakers? With rare exception, it seems that speakers are chosen from the “successful” pastors who lead the “super churches.”

In observing the glut of honorary doctorates being heaped upon pastors today, it is noteworthy that performance, production, and achievement are usually the basis of this honor. All too often the honor reflects a comparison of performances more than the faithful utilization of one’s spiritual gifts. Please don’t misunderstand me. I do not wish to detract from the honor due to deserving men, but I believe we err when we honor the servant with “ten talents” while overlooking the servant with “four talents.” Man focuses on the end product of the one servant in comparison to the end product of the other. Had the servants in the parable of the talents been under today’s system of success, the one with ten talents would have received an honorary doctorate with loud accolades, while the one with four talents would have been unnoticed. How unlike the Master, whose judgment is based on a comparison of the talents we begin with in relation to what we end with. His praise was absolutely identical for both: “...*Well done, thou good and faithful servant...*” (*Matthew 25:21*).

Some pastors who fail to scale the esteemed heights of achievement succumb to the suicidally-hypnotic suggestion to retreat and resign. Because they cannot be a “success,” they choose the other extreme of resignation with honor, and enter into another profession. Without a doubt, this insidious cancer of success is doing more damage to the body of Christ than any one has imagined and is a leading cause of mortality within our ranks! It even plays a major role in the moral failure of our leaders.

The church has built a platform of egocentricity which glamorizes the “quick fix,” fast growth, and the meteoric rise to fame and acclaim. We elect our own celebrities who adorn the covers of our magazines and the platforms of the national conferences. We have, in effect, told the carnal Diotrophes of our churches, “You CAN seek the preeminence!” All that is required is production and growth.

The stage is now set for self-seekers to assume positions of leadership within the church. Success-crazed churches seek out the dynamic pulpiteer who can draw a crowd with little thought to his spiritual character. They thrust him before the adoring crowds, basking in the shared glory of their “growing church.” They are blissfully unaware that the same blindness which affects their judgment also affects the dynamic, young preacher before them. They are unaware that the same need which hungers for the applause of the crowd, hungers for the approval of the individual . . . even . . . that woman in the counseling chamber. In failing to see the parallel between the two, we gasp in horror as our leaders tumble in waves off the platforms upon which we have thrust them. Through “... *philosophy and vain deceit...the tradition of men...the rudiments of the world...*” (*Colossians 2:8*), our leaders are “spoiled” before our disbelieving eyes!

Is it possible that the leader is conditioned for moral failure by the church’s philosophy of success and failure? I am personally acquainted with many pastors who have fallen through adultery. In every case, they were driven men, obsessed with making it “big” through their church achievements, all to “the glory of God,” of course. Is it possible that success was their god, that their carnal egos were, in fact, channeled through

“spiritual” goals? As Seamands says, “The drive to be the top jazz trumpeter or the top lawyer or the top surgeon is the same as the person who says, ‘I’ve got to be pastor of First Church, Jerusalem – not Fourth Church, Bethany.’ It’s basically the same sin.”<sup>4</sup>

The greatest enemy of the church is not persecution from without. History abundantly records that persecution has purified and toughened the church. The greatest enemy is seduction from within, and the drive for success is the most seductive femme fatale to Satan’s harem.

Rather than disciplined and spiritual soldiers of the cross dedicated to a noble cause, it seems the church is more akin to rowdy soldiers on furlough, salivating over every establishment with glittering lights and promises of forbidden pleasure. Desperate in our drive to appease our need of recognition, we cave in to the fleshly temptation to “...compare ourselves with some that commend themselves...” (2 Corinthians 10:12). How has this happened? What has brought the church to such a state?

First and foremost, we have conformed to the world’s standards of success. Paul warns us to “*Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.*” (Colossians 2:8). This truth was brought home vividly to my heart in a 1987 trip to Heritage USA. (Confession is good for the soul.) While touring the 2200 acres, learning of the world-wide ministry of PTL, and being bombarded with the praises of Jim Bakker and claims of “God’s blessings” from numerous tour guides, I began to think seriously about current standards of success. I concluded three things. First, most Christians view success-achievement as an outward sign of inward worth. Second, our primary focus is on the EVIDENCE of success, rather than the ESSENCE of success. Because of our insecurities, we need the tangible rewards of success to prop up our low view of ourselves, therefore, we concentrate on the product of achievement rather than the process of disciplined faithfulness. Third, I realized with a start that if I applied contemporary standards of success to our Lord, He would never have been thought a “success.” With a poor heritage, a suspicious birth, and limited education, He was unpopular with His own people, had few followers, left nothing behind, died in disgrace, and was so poor He was buried in a borrowed tomb. Were He upon the earth today, He would receive no honors nor be invited to speak in many churches due to His abysmal record of achievement.

We have listened for too long to the “tradition of men,” men like Napoleon Hill whose book, *Think and Grow Rich*, is called by Earl Nightingale, “one of the most amazing books ever written...” which has “...had a greater influence on the lives, accomplishments, and fortunes of more individuals than any other work of its kind.”<sup>5</sup> Even Christian authors naively state without apology that Hill “...probably did the most useful research in history.”<sup>6</sup> One Bible college course assigned Hill’s book as required reading. This is a prime example of the Christian being spoiled by “man.”

Second, we have come to worship the goddess of success because we are committed to immediate gratification. Unwilling to serve 40 years without a convert, as Jeremiah, or preach 120 years with no results,

like Noah, we prostitute spiritual ideals and principles requiring patience for the “I want it now” enjoyment of tangible, measurable, immediate progress.

Paul warns us to “...not be weary in well doing...” Why? “...For in due season ye shall reap, if ye faint not.” (*Galatians 6:9*). Being “weary” is a state of mind, while to “faint” is an action of life. Fainting is always preceded by weariness, and weariness in the Christian life often comes from a misperception that we are to “reap” in our time rather than in God’s “due season.” Certainly Paul’s “due season” has yet to reach fulfillment while thousands of sinners are coming to Christ yearly as a result of his writings. Your “due season” is also in God’s hands, not your own deadlines or growth charts. John Piper writes that our “...true usefulness will not be known to us until each fruit on all the branches on all the trees that have sprung up from all the seeds we’ve sown has fully ripened in the sunshine of eternity.”<sup>7</sup>

Another reason for our present dilemma is that we are confused by unscriptural applications. Many sermons are preached from Psalm 1 and Joshua 1:8, promising “good success” with the analogy of the tree by the rivers of water which guarantees that “... whatsoever he doeth shall prosper.” (*Psalm 1:3*). However, success in the Old Testament is one of material and physical prosperity, while the New Testament promises relate to spiritual prosperity. A casual reading of the New Testament reveals that our Lord “*had not where to lay his head.*” The Apostle Paul’s biography in 2 Corinthians 11 reads like a horror story out of a Nazi concentration camp – hardly a testimony to the promises of good things we extract from favored success texts from the Old Testament.

In fact, there is reason to believe that God’s standard for material prosperity is our spiritual maturity. John wrote to Gaius, “*Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, EVEN AS THY SOUL PROSPERETH.*” (3 John 2). [Emphasis added]. Gaius obviously was a man whose spiritual health far outstripped his material wealth and his physical well-being. He had his priorities right, and now John wishes health and wealth in proportion to his spirituality. (It is important to note that he did not PROMISE him wealth; he only WISHED it upon him.)

When we aspire for success beyond our spirituality, we do ourselves a disfavor. We need to learn the prayer of the writer of Proverbs who said, “*Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the Lord?*” (*Proverbs 30:9*). As Dr. B. H. Carroll observed, “It was good for such men that God kept them poor; if he allowed to them an increase of wealth at the expense of the soul, it was in anger and as a judgment. Prosperity makes fools of many ... Many may echo the Bible statement, ‘Before I was afflicted I went astray.’”<sup>8</sup>

A final reason for our current preoccupation with success is that we are corrupted by demonic influence. I am increasingly burdened by a gripping realization of the role of the demonic in the lives of Christian leaders. Yet, one is hard-pressed to recall a sermon or lesson on this subject. Satan is not concerned that we believe in his existence and influence if we but ignore it. I see little difference in the end result of the world’s logic and the church’s thinking; the world denies Him and we ignore Him.

It is noteworthy that Napoleon Hill, whose book *Think and Grow Rich* is a virtual bible of the success philosophy and a precursor of the prosperity theology, attributes his thinking to some sinister sources. In his

own words, he describes where his thinking originated. He attributes them to disembodied spirits! “Now and again I have had evidence that unseen friends hover about me, unknowable to the ordinary senses. In my studies I discovered there is a group of strange beings who maintain a school of wisdom . . . The School has Masters who can disembody themselves and travel instantly to any place they choose . . . to give knowledge directly, by voice . . . Now I knew that one of these Masters had come across thousands of miles, through the night, into my study . . . I shall not set down every word he said . . . much of what he said already has been presented to you in the chapters of this book and will follow in other chapters. ‘You have earned the right to reveal a Supreme Secret to others,’ said the vibrant voice, ‘you have been under the guidance of the Great School . . . Now you must give to the world a blueprint . . .’”<sup>9</sup>

Any reader with a modicum of discernment will pale in horror to realize that the contemporary genesis of the Positive Mental Attitude movement, the Prosperity Theology, and the church’s inordinate preoccupation with success can be traced to Hill, and through Hill to demons! If the church is not careful, we too can “*...depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils.*” (1 Timothy 4:1).

It would be infinitely unfair to bring you this far without proposing a solution to the problem before us. First, recognize the place of problems and suffering in the Christian life. The Apostle Paul makes some startling observations regarding today’s trendy view of spiritual success, and they are all the more gripping when seen in close proximity to one another.

*“Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all thing I AM INSTRUCTED BOTH TO BE FULL AND TO BE HUNGRY, BOTH TO ABOUND AND TO SUFFER NEED.”* (Philippians 4:11-12). [Emphasis added].

*“That no man should be moved by these afflictions: for yourselves know that WE ARE APPOINTED THEREUNTO.”* (1 Thessalonians 3:3). [Emphasis added].

*“Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus SHALL SUFFER PERSECUTION.”* (2 Timothy 3:12). [Emphasis added].

Paul is instructed to suffer. He recognized there would be seasons of abundance, but he had a divine directive to suffer at other times. In such times of deprivation, he was able to be content because he realized he was under his marching orders. Paul was appointed to affliction. He did not shrink from it as a brand of God’s disfavor. Rather he saw it as an “appointment” for which to “*...give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you,*” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). He exhorts us to “*... watch thou in all things, endure afflictions...*” (2 Timothy 4:5).

Paul was prepared for persecution. He accepted the fact that godly living produces persecution. Someone has well said, “The problem with Christians is that nobody wants to kill them anymore.” It seems that people measure our record by looking us over for medals instead of scars. Truly the lack of persecution (called

a “blessing” in the success parlance) may more accurately reflect our lack of godly living rather than our “most favored” status with God.

Recognizing the place of problems is more than a grudging resignation to our fate; it is to “... *rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings...*” (1 Peter 4:13). Away with the hangdog expressions, and the “poor me” mentality. Scripture teaches us that we should expect sufferings, welcome them, and rejoice in them when they arrive.

Second, formulate a working definition of success. It is absolutely impossible for one person to judge another person as a success or failure. No one knows what you began with, nor what your God-given goals are. No one knows, that is, but God. So borrowing from others, I offer you, in closing, a working definition of success which focuses on the essence of success rather than its evidence.

**“SUCCESS IS THE CONTINUING ACHIEVEMENT OF BEING THE PERSON GOD WANTS ME TO BE, AND THE CONTINUING ACHIEVEMENT OF ESTABLISHED GOALS GOD HELPS ME SET.”<sup>10</sup>**

Success is the process (not a product) of “...*always abounding in the work of the Lord.*” It is an open-ended process of faithfulness to God’s divine orders for you and you alone. It is not a driving obsession to draw attention to self, to ascend a “throne,” wearing a crown of man’s making. Rather it is the obsession of which Paul speaks. “*Whether therefore ye eat, or drink, or whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God.*” (1 Corinthians 10:31). **THE “GLORY OF GOD” – NOW THERE IS A GOAL WORTHY OF OBSESSION!**

The British preacher I met may have been right about many American preachers, but he was wrong about those who are motivated by the glory of God. May their numbers increase.

## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Pike, Thomas, and Proctor, William, *Is It Success or Is It Addiction*, (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1988), p. 16.
- <sup>2</sup> Paul, Cecil R., *Passages of a Pastor*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1981), p. 70.
- <sup>3</sup> Merrill, Dean, *Clergy Couples in Crises*, (Waco: Word Books, 1985), p. 34.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Hunt, David, *The Seduction of Christianity*, (Eugene: Harvest House Publishers, 1985), p. 17.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 18.
- <sup>7</sup> Piper, John, *The Supremacy of God in Preaching*, (Baker: 1990), p. 18.
- <sup>8</sup> Cook, William H., *Success Motivation and the Scriptures*, (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1974), p. 30.
- <sup>9</sup> Hunt, p. 18.
- <sup>10</sup> Cook, p. 45.