

"Success, as God Sees It"

Text: Luke 15:1-10

"Now to Him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, to Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (Ephesians 3:20-21)

Dear Fellow Christians:

In our culture, when you hear someone described as "very successful," what does that almost always mean? That that person is making, or has already made, a pile of money – right? Doesn't that ever bother you? It does me. How did we ever get to the point in our society that we now define "success" or "successful" in terms of money?

As with all aspects of our lives, also here we need to take a good, hard, honest look and try to figure out just what the devil is up to. Because this has to be of Satan, doesn't it? It certainly wasn't God who taught us to evaluate and quantify our lives, and the lives of others, on the basis of money and possessions. In this case it really isn't a difficult process, is it? The plan is actually pretty straightforward. Since Satan is well aware of our natural desire to be admired by others, he knows we will tend to do whatever it takes to gain that admiration. That means that if wealth = success, we will quite naturally pour ourselves into that goal.

That's the basic plan, but there's more to it. The plan actually has both a push and a pull. The pull is our natural desire both for admiration and stuff. But the devil knows that we not only crave admiration, we fear ridicule. No one wants to be a loser. The push therefore that works together with the pull comes when our society shakes its head in condescension and pity when you focus your attention on anything other than the attaining of their idea of success. Moms who choose to focus on church and family are common targets here. *"You don't have a career?? You're wasting your life and your talents! You could be so much more... successful!"* Men are targets whenever they regard their job as simply a means to a more noble end (serving their God and providing for their family) rather than an end in itself. The attacks are as relentless as they are effective.

So we need help. We need reinforcement. Our text for this morning provides just that. Here our God talks about success as he sees it. That text is found in the Gospel of Luke, the 15th Chapter:

^{ESV} **Luke 15:1-10** *Now the tax collectors and sinners were all drawing near to hear him. ² And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled, saying, "This man receives sinners and eats with them." ³ ¶ So he told them this parable: ⁴ "What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? ⁵ And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. ⁶ And when he comes home, he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that was lost.' ⁷ Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance. ⁸ "Or what woman, having ten silver coins, if she loses one coin, does not light a lamp and sweep the house and seek diligently until she finds it? ⁹ And when she has found it, she calls together her friends and neighbors, saying, 'Rejoice with me, for I have found the coin that I had lost.' ¹⁰ Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents."*

So far the verbally inspired words of the Creator of all that exists. Pause for a moment and try to grasp the profound importance of such words, praying that the God who provided them for your study and mediation this morning would also grant to *you* the wisdom, strength, comfort and guidance that he intends such truths to provide. To this end we pray: **"Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."** Amen.

The problem with being successful, of course, is never that we are incapable of succeeding. The problem is threefold:

- 1) Our focus is wrong, since man's idea of success and God's idea of success differ greatly
- 2) Our natural assumption is that the power to succeed must come from within, from self, and,
- 3) We adopt the wrong sort of scale

Do you have grand dreams or aspirations? Well, know right from the start that if your aspiration is to bring about world peace, you will be disappointed. Jesus said so. **"But when you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be troubled; for such things must happen..."** (Mark 13:7) If your aspiration is to eliminate poverty, you will be disappointed. Jesus said so. **"For you have the poor with you always, and whenever you wish you may do them good..."** (Mark 14:7) If your aspiration is to make a name for yourself and to go down

in history as a great individual, you will again almost certainly be disappointed, for **"God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble."** (1 Peter 5:5)

Add one more to that list: If your aspiration is to make the whole world adopt a vegan diet, well, suffice it to say that you are in farm and ranch country here and you would probably have a better shot at wiping out war and poverty.

The problem, of course, is that God nowhere commanded you to bring about world peace. Nor did he command you to wipe out poverty, make a name for yourself, or eliminate the consumption of all meat and dairy products. But he did tell you to **"go and make disciples of all nations."** The fact that God commanded this should tell us something. It should tell us something about God's idea of greatness and of the direction of our aspirations and desires.

You've probably heard it before, but it certainly bears repeating: *When you stand before the Almighty Creator-God on Judgment Day, and when all of the vanities of this present life are swept aside, what alone will be left?* The answer, of course, is every single human soul. Each of those souls must then face an eternity in heaven or in hell. The Bible teaches this with perfect clarity: **"And He will set the sheep on His right hand, but the goats on the left."**³⁴ **"Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world...'"**⁴¹ **"Then He will also say to those on the left hand, 'Depart from Me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels...'"** Matthew 25:33-41. All who believe in Jesus Christ will be saved. Those who do not will be damned.

Judging then from that vantage point, answer for yourself who or what should even now be considered great. The billionaire? The philanthropist? The inventor, musician, athlete, singer, dancer, politician? Will it be important on Judgment Day that you were able to hit a 95 mph fastball or throw an 80-yard touchdown pass? Will it matter how much money you made, how big your house was, or how many people recognized your face? Obviously not. God's idea of success always centers around eternity – and the souls that will experience one of two possible judgments.

In fact an awareness of eternity was virtually *always* on Jesus' mind, even while he walked this earth and had to deal with the same distractions as you and me. So also in our text he defined success for us in terms of a single lost soul that is returned to the fold of his Heavenly Father – an

occurrence so dramatic and so significant that it causes **"joy before the angels of God."** Try as you might you will not find another action on the part of man that produces such a spectacular reaction among God's holy angels. Truly remarkable.

The first key to success, therefore, and to gaining a proper sense of purpose and direction, is to adopt God's idea of what is and is not truly great.

The second problem with man's natural pursuit of what he considers to be a noble ambition is the misconception of just how that goal is reached, and from whom the power to accomplish that goal originates.

Ever listened to a motivational speaker? If you have, you've probably noticed that they are all pretty much the same. The general themes are: 1) *Dream big and then pursue that dream*, 2) *You have the power within you to do great things – much more than you ever thought possible*, and 3) *Don't get discouraged - I did it, you can do it*.

Ever hear motivational speeches like that? If so, did they do anything for you? I mean *really* do anything for you – other than get you pumped up for a few minutes or maybe a few hours? Most of the time the motivation lasts no longer than the car ride home.

Again, God will be unimpressed on Judgment Day with things have no bottom, no substance or lasting, eternal worth in his eyes.

The big problem here is that the world's idea of motivation conditions us to look *inside* for greatness. Our text – in fact the whole of Scripture – teaches us to look *outward* rather than *inward*. The key to Jesus' parable had nothing whatsoever to do with introspective analysis on the part of the shepherd – as though he struggled mightily to determine if one of his strengths lay in seeking out lost sheep. A sheep was missing and he went to look for it. Virtually anyone could do it. And he found it – a truly great event in the estimation of the angels – since the lost sheep obviously represented a human soul.

One human soul. And angels shouted for joy.

What this means is that the potential for success – as God defines success – is literally all around us, since there are *many, many* lost sheep. There are countless souls that now wander far removed from the Good Shepherd, their Savior Jesus. What is the special talent required of those who seek out these lost souls? Go back to Jesus'

parable in our text. What special gifts or attributes were ascribed to the shepherd? None that you and I do not already now possess. Mostly the shepherd just loved and valued that which was lost. Where the shepherd laid the lost sheep on his shoulders, you can easily lift the lost sinner with the simple message of law and gospel – man's sin debt paid in full by Jesus Christ. It is Jesus who has already done all of the heavy lifting, having carried the punishment of every lost sinner upon *his* shoulders, and on the cross of Calvary made full and complete payment for all that you and I (and our neighbor) owed. Again, you want to succeed in God's eyes? Remember that your God and his power are without limits, and *that* is the source you want to tap.

The final obstacle to true success for the Christian is the matter of scale. We find it way too easy to remain paralyzed and inactive because we are intimidated by the enormity of the need and the sheer magnitude of the Great Commission. In other words, I can't save *everybody*, so I don't reach out to *anybody*. Again our text teaches us to think small if we want to accomplish those things that our God labels as great. The shepherd didn't search for the whole flock; he found one lost sheep. And the angels rejoiced. The woman didn't look for Aladdin's Cave of Wonders; she looked for one lost coin. And the angels rejoiced.

You and I need to adjust our scale – to think small – and great things will happen according to God's power and direction. To put this into practical terms, that means that you and I are not to think in terms of the masses, but to think in terms of your neighbor, your friend, your family member. Not the whole auditorium, just the guy in the seat next to you. It means that you succeed as a dad when you bring up even one child to know his Savior Jesus; or as a mom when you teach your child her prayers and sing her to sleep with the songs of her salvation.

What all of this means is that we will now consider success in terms of kingdom work and the rescue of souls. It means that we will look for the power to accomplish that most worthy goal in Jesus, our Savior, and there and only there direct the attention of the lost that we seek to rescue. And it means that the rescue of even one soul represents true success in God's eyes. Even just one. Amen.

Scripture Readings

ESV **Ezekiel 34:11-16** "For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. ¹² As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness. ¹³ And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. ¹⁴ I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. ¹⁵ I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. ¹⁶ I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

ESV **1 Timothy 1:12-17** I thank him who has given me strength, Christ Jesus our Lord, because he judged me faithful, appointing me to his service, ¹³ though formerly I was a blasphemer, persecutor, and insolent opponent. But I received mercy because I had acted ignorantly in unbelief, ¹⁴ and the grace of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus. ¹⁵ The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost. ¹⁶ But I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience as an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life. ¹⁷ To the King of ages, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory forever and ever. Amen.

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The 17th Sunday after Pentecost – September 11, 2016

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 534 (Red Hymnal)

"God of My Life, to Thee I Call"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson: (Ezekiel 34:11-16) Our all-knowing God certainly is well aware when and how his children suffer. He sees the mistreatment of his people by the ungodly, and he knows when and how we are being treated unfairly. The Lord not only knows, our first lesson assures us that all will be set right on the Day of Judgment. "Come Lord Jesus!"

The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 23 (Page 36) (Brown Hymnal)

The Second Lesson: (1 Timothy 1:12-17) Note especially in our second reading how Paul in no way attempts to justify his sinful conduct, even though he thought that he was doing the right thing by persecuting the early Christian Church. Nor did he imagine that the work that he did for his Lord following his conversion in any way paid for his past sins. Instead he freely acknowledged his own sin and trusted in his Lord for full and complete forgiveness – even referring to himself as the "**chief of sinners.**" That is the attitude Christians want to adopt, especially now that the denial of sin has become so fashionable.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – page 5. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 767 (Verses 1-3) (Brown Hymnal)

"Church of God, Elect and Glorious"

The Sermon – Text: Luke 15:1-10 (Back page of this bulletin)

"**Success, as God Sees It**"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Offering followed by the Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn -390 (Red Hymnal)

"Drawn to the Cross"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Brown Hymnal page 17)

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving (Brown Hymnal page 20)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn - 767 (Verse 4) (Brown Hymnal)

"Church of God, Elect and Glorious"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here! **To our Visitors seeking an altar at which to commune** – Since we desire to follow the words of our Savior, we practice "Close Communion" – a practice that is not new to confessional Lutherans. This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting them to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please first meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word.

Attendance - Sunday (41) Average (48)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	- 9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/ Holy Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship and Coffee time
	-11:45 a.m.	– Quarterly Voters' Meeting
	-6:00 p.m.	– Women's Fellowship Salad Supper
Tues-Thurs	-9:00 a.m.	– WCPC in Mapleton, ND
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time

CLC News – Zion of Lawrenceville (Atlanta) GA has called Pastor Michael Roehl. Pastor Nathan Pfeiffer is considering the call to Faith of Markesan, WI.

Quarterly Voters' Meeting – The Voters are scheduled to meet this morning following the fellowship time.

Women's Fellowship – The annual Women's Fellowship Salad Supper meeting is scheduled for tonight at 6 pm. Please see Cindy Ollenburger for details.

WCPC – Pastor Roehl is scheduled to attend the West Central Pastoral Conference in Mapleton, ND this week from Tuesday through Thursday. **Please note that there will therefore be no Confirmation or midweek Bible Class this week.**

Aid Opportunity – A member of our sister congregation in Jamestown, Loren Hillstrom, has been diagnosed with cancer and is in need both of our prayers and our financial support. Please see the Pastor for additional details on how you can help.