

SERMONS FROM ST. MATTHEW'S

The Secret of Success

Sixth Sunday After Pentecost

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Galatians 6:1-16

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. ² Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. ³ If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. ⁴ Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, ⁵ for each one should carry his own load. ⁶ Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor. ⁷ Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. ⁸ The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. ⁹ Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. ¹⁰ Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. ¹¹ See what large letters I use as I write to you with my own hand! ¹² Those who want to make a good impression outwardly are trying to compel you to be circumcised. The only reason they do this is to avoid being persecuted for the cross of Christ. ¹³ Not even those who are circumcised obey the law, yet they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh. ¹⁴ May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world. ¹⁵ Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision means anything; what counts is a new creation. ¹⁶ Peace and mercy to all who follow this rule, even to the Israel of God.

Today is Independence Day. The founders of our nation began the wonderful experiment of our democracy by declaring themselves independent from the British Empire 234 years ago today. Though many of them lived to see the new nation become a reality, I doubt that they had any idea their experiment would succeed the way it has. The United States is the most powerful, most wealthy and most influential nation in human history. The freedom for which the founders worked and sacrificed guaranteed an environment where their descendants were more free to succeed than anywhere else in the world up to that time. It's not perfect, but our democracy has served as a model for others for over two centuries.

Personal success is part of our American heritage. But how do you define success? The dictionary definition is “a favorable termination of a venture”. In its broadest sense it's accomplishing something. We measure success by the goal we're trying to accomplish. We may define progress towards a goal as success—becoming a better person, for example, or losing seven pounds instead of ten. Or we may define success as having a particular kind of job, or making a specific salary amount, or having more responsibility and challenge. Another measure of success is often what people think of us.

I'm sure we could all define success as well in terms of people we love. Having enough income to provide a good living for your family, for example, or having good, loving relationships with your spouse and your family and friends, and so forth.

All these are measures or definitions of human success. How does Jesus define human success? In Matthew 16, after the Father reveals to Peter that Jesus is **“the Christ, the Son of the living God,”** (Matthew 16:16), Jesus predicts that he must die on the cross and be resurrected from the dead. To Peter and the disciples, this is an unthinkable failure. They want Jesus to succeed, and Peter objects. In his most passionate rebuke of his disciples, Jesus accuses Peter of siding with Satan, not God. Matthew tells us, **“Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. ²⁵ For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it. ²⁶ What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?’”** (Matthew 16:24-26)

For Jesus, human success is accomplishing God's will for his life. And he defines success for us as our soul with God now and in eternity. That's the “favorable termination” of the “venture” of life. Gaining this world's goals—even the world itself—is futile if we lose our souls when this world comes to an end. But Jesus assures his disciples that there's a new world coming (Matthew 19:28). This

is the “**new heaven and a new earth**” promised by Isaiah (65:17) and seen by John in Revelation 21:1. It’s the final and eternal perfecting of all things, including human beings, in Christ. This, says Jesus, is human success. No wonder C.S. Lewis says we humans are really guilty of setting our goals too low. We fool around with money and sex and power and security and happiness, but God’s goal for us is the ultimate fulfillment of our whole being as well as the universe.

God has provided tangible evidence of this new heaven and new earth. It’s the new Jesus who appeared to the apostles and “over five hundred of the brothers at one time” after they had seen him crucified, dead, and buried (1 Corinthians 15:6). The transformed, resurrected person of Jesus is the first shipment, if you will, of the furniture of the new universe. And well he should be, since he is the eternal Word who designed the universe we live in and brought it into being. He’s the center of the new universe and the new humanity as well. Only through faith in Christ’s death on the cross and his resurrection from the dead are human beings guaranteed to be participants in the new creation of the universe and themselves.

That is Paul’s overriding concern when he writes to the Galatians and to all his churches. He’s deeply concerned that his gentile readers are being influenced by Jewish believers to think that their faith in Christ needs to be supplemented by some sort of “success” at following their religious program—following the Jewish lifestyle and being circumcised. By convincing the gentile Galatians to become Jewish, Paul points out that these Jewish folks will be able to boast that they’ve won converts to Judaism, or at least to their way of thinking. In verse 13, he says, “**they want you to be circumcised that they may boast about your flesh.**” In other words, so they can brag about converting the Galatians.

Paul summarizes his deep concern in verse 14, by contrasting their boasting in human religious success with his boasting in Christ’s success: “**May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.**” Like Jesus, Paul is focused like a laser on God’s ultimate success: fulfilling his purpose for his life—and on God fulfilling his purpose in the life of each of his readers.

God’s success for you and for me is Jesus’ death on the cross. It’s only through Christ’s death that God carries out his dreadful judgment against guilty human beings. And it’s only through Christ’s resurrection that he recreates them as part of a perfect eternity. So in verse 15, Paul says that human religious success—“circumcision or uncircumcision”—or any other human success—doesn’t matter at all. “**What counts is a new creation.**” That new creation begins for men and women and boys and girls now, in this world. When we confess our sins

and our need for Christ, and accept his gift of himself on the cross, and ask him to fill us with his Holy Spirit, we become new creations in Christ.

Christ's cross is the very definition of success. Not only does it accomplish something, what it accomplishes is what no other human being could. There are people who can accomplish feats that most of us can't: make a 10-foot replica of the Eiffel Tower out of toothpicks, or write my name on a single grain of rice. I can't do those things, but they're not things that are needed. People do them, but I confess I don't understand why. They have nothing to do with me, and many of you probably feel the same. But what Christ accomplished no one else could have—he restored the relationship between fallen sinners and the only righteous and true God. It's the one thing every person needs because it's the one thing no other person can do.

There's a secret to God's success. The secret of Christ's brilliant success on the cross is our abysmal failure in this life. Christ's cross shows all creation, for all eternity, that we are sinners. We try, but we can't do what's right. We are weak and incapable of restoring our own souls and bodies. Someone else has to help us—and Jesus has. Only Christ can take our sins on himself. And only Christ can replace them with his standing, his righteousness, so that in God's sight we are as he is. Christ's success can only be our success if we clearly see our efforts to love God and our neighbor on our own as so much failure with God. Through faith in Christ's cross alone, God makes us share in Christ's success, the new creation of human being, the universe, and life perfected. As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5:17, **“If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!”**

How then should we live? In verses 7-9 of our reading this morning, Paul uses the metaphor of sowing seed to show us. It's simple. Whatever you plant, you reap. Whatever kind of seed you put in the ground, that's what you harvest: **“The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. ⁹ Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. ¹⁰ Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.”**

Are we to **“sow to please the sinful nature”**, to pursue our own, human success? Or are we **“sow to please the Spirit”**, to pursue God's success in Christ's cross for the souls who live around us, here and everywhere? God is faithful. He never fails. He is leading our Mission Task Group towards a way each one of us as part of St. Matthew's can sow to please the Spirit by bringing the new creation to others. The way is not obvious right now, but we've all been moving

towards it, some of us for many years, some not so long. God has made us part of his new creation so that we might love God and others and see them participate in that new creation with us. He does not guarantee us success because the success is his. It's already been achieved. He commands us only to turn away from our ideas, our desires for accomplishments and our plans and to follow him. Please pray for the Mission Task Group and for our parish as we seek to follow Jesus as he enlarges his kingdom through us.

Let us pray.