

Essential Elements of Success

What's your definition of success? There are many pithy sayings about how someone can achieve success. Here are a few "fractured success sayings":

- The early bird may get the worm, but the second mouse gets the cheese.
- Borrow money from a pessimist. They don't expect it back.
- Experience is something you don't get until just after you need it.
- If at first you don't succeed, then skydiving isn't for you. ⁱ

It's critical how we define success, because otherwise we could get to the top of our ladder and find that it's leaning against the wrong wall! Oswald Chambers said this about Christ:

Sum up the life of Jesus by any other standard than God's, and it is an anticlimax of failure. ⁱⁱ

We come now to the conclusion of the book of Numbers. Joshua has been hand-picked by God to take the people into the Land of Promise. The last nine chapters are Moses' farewell speech. In these words, he is defining success for the people. The way Moses defined success for the Israelites in the Land of Promise is also a definition of success for us in the Land of Today. Let me point out four of Moses' essential elements of success. First...

I. The Essential Element of Keeping Vows Sacred.

We live in a culture that is deconstructing language. What do I mean by that? I mean, our culture is changing the meaning and even the purpose of words. In Maine, where Liz and I love to vacation, they have a saying to describe something they like. They say, "That's wicked good." What??? Which is it? Wicked? Or good?

In past centuries, if someone said, "I give you my word," he meant that he was making a promise and he would rather die than not fulfill that promise. Today, when a person says, "I promise," they mean, "When the time comes, if it's convenient for me, I'll TRY do what I said I would do."

We live in the age of the "renegotiated contract," the "it's easier to ask forgiveness than ask permission" attitude and the "You misunderstood what I said" excuse. In our courts today, it really doesn't matter what a person says. The judge only wants to know, "Did you get that in writing?"

Moses, (and actually it's God THROUGH Moses) gives the Israelites a different standard. In chapter 30 he says:

...This is what the LORD commands: When a man makes a vow to the LORD or takes an oath to obligate himself by a pledge, he must not break his word but must do everything he said. (Num. 30:1, 2)

Technically, when a person in Moses' day made a vow or took an oath, he was saying, "If I do not keep my word or fulfill this pledge, may the Lord Himself curse me." Is that what you mean when you make a promise?

Fred Smith tells of stopping at a doughnut shop in Grand Saline, Texas. He writes:

There was a young couple sitting at the table next to mine. He was wearing overalls and she a gingham dress. After finishing their doughnuts, he got up to pay the bill and I noticed she didn't get up with him. But then he came back and stood in front of her. She put her arms around his neck, and he lifted her up, revealing that she was wearing a full-body brace. He lifted her out of her chair and backed out the front door to his pick-up. As he gently put her into the truck, everyone in the shop watched. No one said anything until the waitress remarked reverently, "He took his vows seriously." ⁱⁱⁱ

Christian Counselor and author, Lewis Smedes writes these words of hope:

Yes, somewhere people still make and keep promises. They choose not to quit when the going gets rough because they promised once to see it through. They stick to lost causes. They hold on to a love grown cold. They stay with people who have become pains in the neck. They still dare to make promises and care enough to keep the promises they make. I want to say to you that if you have a ship you will not desert, if you have people you will not forsake, if you have causes you will not abandon, then you are like God. ^{iv}

This advice isn't just for the Israelites. It's good advice for us too. Next, he speaks of..

II. The Essential Element of Faith.

Now, most of us would probably say, "Hey, wait a minute! Shouldn't faith be the first element?" Well, consider this; if words don't mean anything, if promises don't mean anything, then where will our faith come from? Paul wrote:

...faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ. (Rom. 10:17)

We have to trust that God's Word is true before we put our faith in it, so maybe understanding the importance of truthful words DOES come first.

Now, in chapter 31, we find not only instructions from Moses but an actual battle against the Midianites. If you remember from last week, it was the Midianites who deceived the Israelites into worshipping demons at Baal Peor. The Israelites were judged for that – 24,000 men died – but then the whole nation repented and was forgiven by God. Do you see God's grace here again? We must never think we have sinned so badly that we can't be forgiven. As we talk with friends or relatives who have worshipped or who are today worshipping Satan through psychics or witchcraft or whatever, we must always show them that if they repent, they can be purified because we have a God who is full of mercy and grace.

But now, here in Num. 31, God sends the nation of Israel into battle to remove the source of the temptation. Now, let me be clear here. God sent the nation into battle. He did not send individuals into battle. Individual Christians are never sent to do physical harm to sinful people today. Our battle today is not with "flesh and blood" (Eph. 6:12). We are called to do battle, but it is a spiritual battle with spiritual weapons. So, what can we learn about going into battle spiritually from this physical battle between the nation of Israel and the Midianites?

We need to learn this: victory comes by faith. The Israelites did as God instructed them and what was the result? Not one Israelite died! Have you ever heard of such a thing? All the Midianite soldiers died (including Balaam, the false prophet, by the way) and not one Israelite. How was that possible? They fought by faith. They did exactly what God told them to do and the result was that God

miraculously protected them and enriched them with rewards which they turned around and gave to God as an offering.

Then the officers who were over the units of the army... went to Moses and said to him, “Your servants have counted the soldiers under our command, and not one is missing. So we have brought as an offering to the LORD the gold articles each of us acquired... to make atonement for ourselves before the LORD. (Num. 31:48-50)

Are you willing to live this way? Are you willing to do spiritual battle?

Philanthropist John Shedd said:

A ship in harbor is safe, but that is not what ships are built for.^v

What’s the purpose of the church? Our purpose isn’t to stay in the harbor! We’re sent out on rescue missions, to free people from the enslavement, from the deception of the evil one. The enemy is the spiritual power of darkness who can only be defeated with spiritual weapons like prayer, fasting, witness, actions of love and the Word. That’s how we fight by faith. Starting next week, we’ll begin a study of the book of Judges which is all about fighting by faith. We’ll speak more of this for the rest of the summer. Basically, we’ll be going into Spiritual Boot Camp. I hope you’ll join us.

The third essential element for spiritual success is the...

III. The Essential Element of Loyalty to One Another.

Num. 32 is Moses’ call for unity. Two-and-a-half tribes have decided that they want to live on the east side of the Jordan River. This is NOT part of the Land of Promise, by the way. But, since they’re “across the river,” Moses demands that they all strap on their swords and come help the other 9½ tribes secure their land. The two-and-a-half tribes are more than willing to do so. For Moses, it wasn’t just about having a larger army. It was more about the element of loyalty and unity.

Moses understood that there is a synergy in unity. There is something produced that is greater than the sum of all its parts. There is a power in “we” that is greater than merely adding together “you” and “me.” Some of the most popular stories in sports are the stories of a small, outnumbered or outclassed sports team that somehow beats the much more highly skilled, talented and funded mega-team. Movies like *Hoosiers* or *Mighty Ducks* or the true story of the United States 1980 hockey team that beat the best teams in the world to win the gold medal in the Olympics are favorite stories for U. S. A. sports fans. How are these things possible? How could the U. S. hockey team, made up of college hockey players, beat what was essentially the Russian professional hockey team? It was the power of “we” over the power of “you” and “me.”

Jesus totally understood this power and strongly advocated that it be used in His church. Jesus believed in this so much that He made it a command:

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another. (John 13:34, 35)

Geoff Gorsuch wrote this in *Discipleship Journal*:

The question to ask at the end of life’s race is not so much “what have I accomplished?” but “Whom have I loved, and how courageously?”^{vi}

If you applied that measure to your life right now, how successful would you say you've been? Not how much have I accomplished in my vocational arena. Not how many awards have I earned. Not how many degrees have I acquired but instead, how many people have I loved and how courageously have I loved them?

- Did I just love people when they loved me back or when they hated me?
- How many annoying people did I love?
- How many "fun things" did I pass up to courageously help a person in need?

If THAT were the scale of success, have you succeeded in life yet?

Philosopher Ronald Dworkin points out that since 1950, the United States has witnessed a hundredfold increase in the number of professional caregivers - social workers, life coaches, substance abuse counselors, etc. etc. If you add them all up, it comes to the hundreds and hundreds of thousands. Dworkin writes:

Most of these professionals spend their days helping people cope with everyday life problems, not true mental illness. [This means that] under our very noses a revolution has occurred in the personal dimension of life, such that millions of Americans must now pay professionals to listen to their everyday life problems. The result is a nation where gurus and therapists have filled the roles once occupied by spouses and friends.^{vii}

In Moses' farewell address, he emphasized "loyalty to one another." In Jesus' farewell address, He emphasized "love one another." As a church, we can come up with the latest and fanciest and most technologically sophisticated outreach plan on planet earth, but if it isn't dripping with "love for one another," we'll never succeed.

This past week, Liz and I were watching the evening news and a story came on about a young boy in maybe 3rd grade, who was going through some kind of chemotherapy so that his hair had all fallen out. All the other boys in his class went to the barber and had their heads shaved so he wouldn't stand out as being "weird" in their class. The reporter had a great final line. He said, "His friends walked into the barbershop as boys but walked out as men." What are we gonna be?

For a wedding present, one of our friends gave me and Liz a framed needlepoint saying that says, "May there be such oneness between you that when one weeps, the other will taste salt." Jesus calls us, He commands us, to live as men and women who love one another like that, if we want to be successful in His eyes.

Finally, Moses' last piece of advice is regarding...

IV. The Essential Element of Keeping Our Focus on God's Inheritance.

From the end of chapter 33 to the end of chapter 35, the Land of Promise is mentioned 16 times. Apparently Moses really wanted them to focus on their inheritance. Why is this important?

We have a God Who is perfect in every way. So, He demands very, very high standards because He knows that perfect joy is possible only where there is perfect goodness. So, not even one atom of evil will be allowed into His presence. This is why no one gets into heaven by their own efforts, because we can't meet that standard. It's only if a perfect Savior, Jesus, washes us clean that we can get in.

But here's the truly remarkable thing - God never forgets what we are.

**Ps. 103:13, 14 As a father has compassion on his children,
so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him;**

for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.

Is. 42:3a **A bruised reed he will not break,
and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out.**

The Lord knew that the future generations of Israel would blow it. He knew that this generation going in first wouldn't drive out all the nations they were supposed to drive out. That's why He said in Num. 33:55:

But if you do not drive out the inhabitants of the land, those you allow to remain will become barbs in your eyes and thorns in your sides. They will give you trouble in the land where you will live.

Who's firing rockets into the cities of Israel today? The Palestinians. Where are the missiles launched from? From Gaza, one of the cities the Israelites did not conquer 3400 years ago. What can we surmise from all this?

We should surmise this: Don't set your goals on this life! Don't measure your success by whether or not you fulfill your bucket list of "fun things I always wanted to do" before you die! Why not? Because this world is NOT your inheritance!!!

Remember back in earlier chapters how we noted that the Levites didn't receive a "land" inheritance? Why was that? Deut. 10:9:

That is why the Levites have no share or inheritance among their brothers; the LORD is their inheritance...

We've also noted that in the New Testament Christians are called the Priests, the Levites. We are a "priestly nation." So, the health and wealth preachers today have it all wrong! We are NOT promised a great inheritance in this life. We're priests!! The LORD is our inheritance!! That's where our focus should be!! On Him!!! My success is defined by Him, not me.

If I live my life like Christ, it's possible I won't win a single award in this life. Jesus didn't. It's possible I will be misunderstood and even mocked by people in authority. Jesus was. I may not be considered a success in any way. Jesus wasn't. But when this life is over, I will be awarded crowns and rewards and be reunited with friends and family who will cheer as I walk through the gates of heaven. And I will live in a Land of Promise that isn't just flowing with milk and honey, but with abundance and beauty and health and unquenchable joy. Why will these things happen? Because my inheritance is Jesus Christ! And my inheritance has said to me:

Behold, I am coming soon! My reward is with me, and I will give to everyone according to what he has done... Yes, I am coming soon.

(Rev. 22:12, 20)

What is success for a Christian? It's keeping our vows sacred, it's knowing that real victory comes only by faith, it's being loyal in our love for one another and it's keeping our focus on our eternal inheritance. Paul said it simply:

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. (Phil. 1:21)

May we live like that, this week. Amen.

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- ⁱ PreachingToday, "Wry Observations on Life," 2000/October
- ⁱⁱ As found in George Sweeting's, *Who Said That?* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1994,1995), p. 413
- ⁱⁱⁱ Leadership, Vol. 16, no. 1
- ^{iv} Lewis Smedes, *The Power of Promises* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994)
- ^v PreachingToday.com/illustrations/2005/august/safetyversuspurpose.html
- ^{vi} Goeff Gorsuch, "Journey to Adelphos," *Discipleship Journal*, Issue 14
- ^{vii} In Ross Douthat, *Bad Religion* (New York: Free Press, 2012), pp. 240-241