



Faithfulness Before Success

Christ did not call us to be successful but faithful. Our first allegiance is to Christ, to serve Him with all that He has gifted us with. Our identity does not reside in our gifts but in the Gift Giver. If the exercising of our gifts should prove "successful" or "unsuccessful" our identity will be still be intact since its foundation is rooted in Christ.

In the Western tradition, we make a distinction between the physical self and the spiritual self, i.e., body and soul. (More sophisticated anthropologies further differentiate component parts of the latter, drawing upon very biblical terms such as spirit, will, mind, heart, etc.) Yet the Bible makes no such clear distinction. The physical and non-physical components of the self may be distinguishable, but they remain utterly inseparable and interdependent. If you don't believe this, try sharing the gospel with a man who has missed his last three doses of lithium.

Our daily lives also reflect this reality. My inner "self," that part of me that engages in things like feelings, emotions and will, moves in a physical world, and the people in that physical world with whom I come into first contact generally ask the same question: "What do you do?" In other words, we play an elaborate game of evaluation of the worth of others (and self) based upon the comparative physical activities of others. The people who do or abstain from those activities that merit our esteem-or envy-are the ones we deem "successful." "Unsuccessful" people are the ones who fail to accomplish what good people do, and engage in behaviors that good people avoid. In other words, my sense of self and self worth may well hang upon the valuation that others put upon the things that I do or don't do.

Is this wrong? Not entirely. God does make us with both physical and non-physical characteristics, and he has placed us in a physical world. Numerous commandments and admonitions within the biblical text point to doing and not doing, productivity and sloth, success and failure. Moreover, the Bible also teaches that we will be judged on those same criteria-how did we live our lives? What did we do and not do? (Fortunately, sins of omission and commission will be forgiven for the believer.)

Whoa! Did you catch that? Some day you will be judged for the physical actions you did and didn't take, and your eternal destiny in Heaven will be determined at this judgment. That means we need to be both biblical and clear headed in our thinking about how to live our lives. So then, how should we live? What should we do? What is the purpose of our lives?

A partial answer lies in our physicality. God gives us bodies and he gives those bodies gifts. Some of them are non-physical (e.g., the gift of mercy) but many are physical. While some theologians call the physical gifts "abilities" or "talents," the point is that God made some to run fast, others to paint on canvas, and still others to sing or dance or swim. Why does God distribute those gifts? Because he intends their use and obviously, the person who possesses the gift is the agency most responsible for its effective deployment.

So the question, "What should I do with my life?" is answered, in part, "live out of the gifts God has given you." "How should I live my life?" That answer is also connected to gifting: Live your life through your giftedness in a way that is pleasing to God. In other words, the purpose of my life is more than just my gifts, and the purpose of my gift isn't just to use it, nor do I have permission to use (or neglect) my gift according to my will or purpose alone. With all due deference to "purpose-driven" living, my "purpose" is bigger than doing anything because God's purpose for me is bigger than just "doing."

The inexorable logic and plethora of commas presented so far has brought us down to this singular question. What is God's purpose for any human life? In the language of Romans 8:28-29, God's purpose is for us to be "conformed to the image of His son," or more simply, to look like Jesus. Humanity in the Garden was created in the image of God, but we sinned. So Jesus, who was God in the image of humanity, came to set us free. Free from what? What we now are in our broken state-and free to become the image we were always meant to bear.

Our identity comes from God-even our fallen one, because it is the marred image of the one who made us. And the whole salvific movement of God is, in effect, to change our identity, to morph it back into what it was always meant to be. Christ didn't die for our gifts. He died for us. That and that alone gives us value, purpose and meaning-that is what "saves" us. Strangely, however, we can participate in our own salvation through the use of our gifts. By faithfully using that which God has entrusted to us, we become more like him. The use of our gifts on behalf of others helps peel away the false self, and begins to reveal the True Self of Christ at work in us.

But danger lurks. In this fallen world, we are tempted to measure our self-worth by the number and kinds of gifts that we have, and worse, to measure our worth by how well we measure their effective use. But those aren't God's measures. We have no reason to praise or mock the giftedness of others, because no one does anything to get a gift. Nor can human beings effectively measure the effective use of a gift because our value system is fallen. Quick example: the widow who gave two mites to the Temple treasury. In human measure, it was nearly

worthless (2 cents!) but in Jesus' measure, it was the most valuable contribution of all. Jesus' measure wasn't the amount she gave, but the fact that she gave everything she had. She was, in a word, completely faithful. Having only two coins left in the whole world, she gave them back to God, and had the faith to believe that her contribution, though small, was what God was asking of her.

In our fallen state, we tend to think that the man who is the most successful is the most faithful. But God's measure is just the opposite. It may appear that you are "successful" in any endeavor, but if it comes without faithfulness, you will be found wanting. In turn, if you are successful but find no appearance of "success," you must remember that your identity comes from Christ. If you are found faithful by him, how can you feel anything other than success?

Well done, good and faithful slave; you were faithful with a few things, I will put you in charge of many things, enter into the joy of your master.'