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# BULLETIN

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# Faith for Failure: A Meditation on Motivation for Ministry

by Vernon Grounds

For some time one spring I carried on a running conversation with a student. We talked together repeatedly about the meaning of success. He was wondering what difference it would make if he flunked his courses and went down on our records as a dropout. What difference would it make if he failed to achieve those vocational goals which family, church and seminary seemed to regard as the essence of shining success? What is failure anyway, he wondered. And I wondered with him. So I began to do some focused reading and thinking on this whole matter. Let me share with you some of my provisional conclusions.

What is success, anyway? It seems to me that we will make no headway in clarifying this foggy concept unless we immediately split it down the middle. Worldly success is one thing; spiritual success is totally different. Worldly success is success judged without reference to God or eternity. Spiritual success is success as judged by God, success from the perspective of eternity, success without reference to the world's evaluation.

Suppose, to begin with, we think about worldly success. In my opinion, we must, like good scholastics, insist on a further distinction. The world judges a person from two standpoints: private experience and public impact. Often in private experience a person is enviously successful. He does work which he finds self-fulfilling. He earns money enough to meet his needs and even gratify some of his more pressing wants. He is respected by his neighbors, and suffers a minimum of pains. He enjoys good health, peace of mind, and freedom from guilt, depression, or regret. He dies easily at a ripe old age, is decently buried and appropriately mourned. Such a person—his number is by no means legion—the world judges successful, in his private experience at least. Yet in his public impact such an enviable person may be a failure, a mere nobody, an insignificant drop of water in the vast ocean of humanity.

Consider the reverse of this. A person may be judged remarkably successful in his public impact even though he is a miserable failure in his private experience. For success in public impact, as the world judges success, really has nothing to do with an individual's emotions, his intimate relationships, or his qualities as a human being. Success in public impact is judged entirely by superiority in beauty or brawn or brains. An individual is judged successful because (ordinarily, of course, this applies to her rather than him!) she is superior in beauty—Brooke Shields, for instance. Or an individual is judged successful because he is superior in brawn—Sylvester Stallone, for instance. Or he is superior in brains—Albert Einstein, for instance. A superior creature in some respect, the superior person occupies a higher status in society than run-of-the-mill mortals. He is an object of admiration that may camouflage envy and resentment. Popularity, fame, influence, political power, rare creativity, remarkable talent, enormous wealth—these are the earmarks of the successful person as the world judges success.

Unfortunately, we human beings are all of us the fallen descendants of Adam and Eve. Which means that we are ego-centric sinners. Which means further that pride motivates us to exhibit and exercise our superiority, if we have any, in order that we may be noticed, applauded, and rewarded, preferably with money. In fact, when the Apostle John in his First Letter is analyzing the constituents of the world-system, he singles out the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. And the pride of life is nothing other than the selfish desire to be noticeably superior—even, as we sometimes joke, if our superiority is only conspicuous humility! The pride of life, the selfish desire to be noticeably superior, is the great dynamic of human striving. It is the dynamic which explains our winner-complex. As Vince Lombardi, one-time coach of the one-time invincible Green Bay Packers, crudely put it, "Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing." This desire is the dynamic which makes Hertz boast, "We're Number One," while Avis in the number two spot inspires the Horatio Alger message repeated in dozens of books which I devoured as a boy, *Bound To Rise*, *Rags to Riches*, and *Struggling Upward*. This is the dynamic which accounts for some of the worst aspects of capitalism. So steel magnate Andrew Carnegie counseled aspiring young men in his famous *The Road to Business Success*:

My advice to you is "aim high." I would not give a fig for the young man who does not already see himself the partner or the head of an important firm. Do not rest content for a moment in your thoughts as head clerk, or foreman, or general manager in any concern, no matter how extensive. Say to yourself, "My place is at the top." *Be king in your dreams.*

This is the dynamic which pulsates through most of business and industry today. Peter Cohen in his study, *The Gospel According to the Harvard Business School*, says that the apparent ethic of that sophisticated institution is "the American way . . . which urges people to compete for the sake of competing, win for the sake of winning, and which honors him who does all of this without pause or letup—the fastest, the nicest, the sportiest, the artiest; because things wouldn't be the way they are unless God meant them to be."

Before you fault me for picking on business and industry—I could just as easily pick on education or government or military defense—let me focus our attention on the church. For unless I am mistaken, this is the very dynamic which likewise operates in much of Christian service—the sinful desire to be noticeably superior, first if possible, number one and never number two. Yes, as I see it, the church has allowed the world to impose on Christian service standards of success which are utterly non-biblical; and when I talk of the church in this context I mean American evangelicalism. Some of us evangelicals may criticize Robert Schuller's theology, but we tend to buy his psychology and methodology. We agree with him that the right kind of thinking plus the right programming and motivating plus the right battery of techniques will change any failure into shining success. We agree with him that faith

turns losers into winners. Faith? Well, possibility thinking. Faith? Well, confidence in one's own potential. Certainly! Didn't Jesus assure us that if we seek God's kingdom first, everything—everything!—will be added to us? Then why drive a VW when, as God's successful servant, you ought to be driving a Cadillac? Why shepherd a little flock when, as God's successful servant, you ought to occupy a commanding pulpit and be a magnetic TV personality? Why remain satisfied with a small but sufficient income when, as God's successful servant, you ought eventually retire to Florida in comfort and security, playing golf daily until you are welcomed into heaven's country club?

Am I being sarcastically unkind? Perhaps. But I am honestly afraid that American evangelicalism is guilty of idolatry. It is bowing down, if I may borrow a biting phrase from philosopher William James, before the bitch goddess of success. It is worshipping at the shrine of sanctified (or unsanctified) statistics. And that idolatrous spirit has affected Christian services. As disciples of Jesus Christ, too many of us are sinfully concerned about size—the size of sanctuaries, the size of salaries, the size of Sunday schools. Too many of us are sinfully preoccupied with statistics about budgets and buildings and buses and baptisms. I say it bluntly: too many of us American evangelicals are worshipping the bitch goddess of success.

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*Many of you will steadfastly seek to do God's will all through your lives without shining success as the world judges success. My guess, therefore, is that as the world judges success the majority of you may be failures.*

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I share with you another fear. Maybe in our colleges and seminaries we are unwittingly inoculating students with the virus of worldly success. Maybe we are subtly communicating the message that success in God's service is to be noticeably superior. Maybe we have been failing to communicate a clear-cut biblical understanding of success. And maybe, therefore, we fail to prepare our graduates for an experience of failure which from God's standpoint is praiseworthy success. Thus let me sketch lineaments of that faith which will help all of us face failure successfully.

Remember, for one thing, that God's standards of success differ radically from those of the world. So in Luke 16:15 our Lord Jesus flatly affirms, "What is highly esteemed among men is an abomination with God."

Remember, for a second thing, that the Bible transvaluates values, if you will forgive my purloining Nietzsche's language. In other words, the Bible turns values topsy-turvy, puts on top things fallen man puts on bottom, and ranks last things fallen man puts first. It praises the weakness which is strength and denounces the strength which is weakness. It praises the poverty which is wealth and denounces the wealth which is poverty. It praises the dying which is living and denounces the living which is dying. No wonder, then, that it praises the

failure which is success and denounces the success which is failure. No wonder, either, that in I Corinthians 3:12 Paul warns us that the achievements which the world prizes as gold, silver and precious stones God may write off as wood, hay and stubble. No wonder, moreover, that when the apostle in Hebrews 11 calls the roll of God's shining successes the overwhelming majority turn out to be failures as the world judges failure, people in conflict with their societies, people who like Jesus, Stephen, Paul, and Peter died as criminals—not exactly the sort of ecclesiastical dignitaries who get invited to a Presidential Prayer Breakfast.

Remember, for a third thing, precisely what standards of success God has established. According to I Corinthians 13:1-3, one basic criterion is not persuasive pulpit eloquence, communication skill, penetrating insight, remarkable gifts, encyclopedic knowledge, mountain-moving faith. No, God's absolutely basic criterion of success is Christlike love.

According to Matthew 20:25-27, another absolutely basic criterion is service—service inspired by Christlike love and thus a service which forgets about any egocentric display of superiority. "Jesus called them unto him, and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you, let him be your minister; and

whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant."

According to Matthew 25:21, still another absolutely basic criterion of spiritual success is the diligent use of whatever abilities we possess in a self-forgetting service inspired by Christlike love. "His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant; thou has been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter into the joy of thy Lord." Whether we have five talents, two talents, or one talent, the criterion is the same—diligent faithfulness. Service inspired by love and performed in faithfulness is what constitutes success in God's eyes. Love, service, and faithfulness, these are God's standards, and only God in His omniscience can use these standards in evaluating the work we do as disciples of Jesus Christ.

Now what about you and me, I looking back on my earlier years of ministry, you looking ahead. I have no desire whatever to diminish your legitimate ambition. Nevertheless, I refuse to be unrealistic as I think about the future vocations of you who are now students. Some of you will become shining successes even as the world judges success. But many of you will steadfastly seek to do God's will all through your lives without shining success as the world judges success. My guess, therefore, is that as the world judges success the majority of

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you may be failures. When you reach the journey's end, there will be no obituary in the *New York Times*. (Cheer up! I don't expect a *Times* obituary either!) In the sweep and onrush of global events, your passing, like my own, will undoubtedly be as unnoticed as the falling of a maple leaf on the slopes of the Rocky Mountains. Your name is unlikely to be so much as incidentally mentioned in the history some future scholar is going to write. Neither will mine. Yet I pray that your life and your service as disciples of Jesus Christ will be as happy and joyful as my own has been. I pray that no matter what your vocation, you will be grateful for the tremendous privilege and exciting assignment of being our God's co-laborer in the working out of His cosmic purposes. I urge, though, that you go back repeatedly to I Corinthians 4:2-5, especially when you pass through times of dark discouragement.

Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful. But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged of you, or of man's judgment: yea, I judge not mine own self. For I know nothing by myself; yet am I not hereby justified; but he that judgeth me is the Lord. Therefore judge nothing before the time, until the Lord come, who both will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the hearts; and then shall every man have praise of God.

Do you have faith to face failure? Do you believe that success as the world judges it is wood, hay, stubble? Do you believe this, even while recognizing how often the church judges success from the world's perspective? Do you believe that spiritual success, often written off by both world and church as failure, is gold, silver, and precious stones? Have you honestly considered that God may be calling you to a career of tedious mediocrity? Do you believe that, even if He is, nothing will really matter in eternity but God's approval of your service regardless of how tedious and mediocre it may have seemed? Do you believe it is infinitely more important to follow God's unique blueprint for your life than it is to be a lengthy entry in *Who's Who*? Do you have the faith to hang on to biblical principles of success despite worldly failure? Do you have the faith to keep doing God's will even if you are unappreciated, unsung, and unapplauded? Do you have faith to face failure?

My meditation, then, is summed up in a probably apocryphal story, a story which nevertheless rings true and which

grips my own soul every time I repeat it. Whatever may be one's taste in music, one will agree, I am sure, that Beethoven's Ninth Symphony is a spine-tingling masterpiece. As a musical illiterate, I judge what I hear sung or played by my visceral reaction, and when I hear the Ninth Symphony, something electrifying happens to my viscera! One night Arturo Toscanini, perhaps the most dynamic of modern maestros, led a simply spine-tingling rendition of Beethoven's immortal masterpiece. The audience went mad. People clapped, whistled, and stomped their feet. Toscanini bowed and bowed and bowed. He signaled to the orchestra, and its members stood to acknowledge the wild applause. Eventually, of course, the pandemonium began to subside, and with the ebbing applause as background, Toscanini turned and looked intently at his musicians. With almost uncontrollable emotion he exclaimed, "Gentlemen! Gentlemen!" The gentlemen in the orchestra leaned forward to listen. Why was the maestro so disturbed? Was he angry? Had somebody missed a cue? Had the orchestra flawed the performance? No. Toscanini was not angry. Toscanini was stirred to the very depths of his being by the sheer magnificence of the Beethoven music. Scarcely able to talk, he said in a fierce whisper, "Gentlemen, I am nothing." (That was an extraordinary admission since Toscanini was blessed with enormous conceit!) "Gentlemen," he said, "You are nothing." (That was not exactly news. The members of the orchestra had often heard the same message in rehearsal!) "But Beethoven," said Toscanini in a tone of adoration, "is everything, everything, everything!"

Looking back across the years of my life, I can with no false modesty admit that I am nothing. Oh, I am grateful for whatever gifts God has entrusted to my care. I am grateful for anything I may have been able to do for my Lord and for people. Yet with no trauma whatever I realize that from the world's perspective I am nothing. After a few short years I will be gone, and except as here and there the Holy Spirit has allowed me to touch some life for Jesus Christ, my influence will speedily be erased.

You—please understand me—are also nothing. Regardless of your talents, regardless of your achievements, from the perspective of eternity you are, as I am, nothing. But Jesus Christ, our blessed Lord and Savior, is everything, everything, everything! Enabled by the Holy Spirit, following the principles of love, service and faithfulness, be steadfast disciples of Jesus Christ. Then regardless of how the world may judge your service, you will be an eternal success.

## Whitefield and Wesley on Righteousness by Grace

by Timothy L. Smith

Renewed concern in all Christian traditions for a life of personal holiness seems to most of us a biblical response to the moral confusion of modern culture. Despite the spreading revival of the past fifty years, we evangelicals have often neglected to stress ethical discipleship. Our long-standing rejection of the idea of salvation by works led many of us to so emphasize grace as to forget that the fruits of the Spirit are an indispensable mark of the new birth. The tendency grew to celebrate the emotions of peace and joy and to mute the

call to the righteousness that is their root. Some evangelical communities laid increasing stress on physical and external miracles and on spiritual gifts that were manifest primarily in audible or visible signs. Others cultivated emotional or mental satisfaction in the drama of Christ's incarnation, whether through a high liturgy of Holy Communion or in mystic awe before the doctrines of Christ's atonement and resurrection. Still others allowed their particular vision of the end times to divert their attention from the duty of taking up the cross of Christian discipleship. In these circumstances, the ethical renewal that Moses and the prophets foresaw and John the Baptist and Jesus proclaimed became a secondary concern.

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