

A Sermon Preached by Gregory Hall at Clarence Presbyterian Church on October 9, 2022

SURVIVING SUCCESS

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples. "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" Mark 10:23

The year was 312AD. The Christian movement was now closing in on 300 years of history. It had grown from being a small sect of Judaism in Palestine to now being a significant minority in the Roman Empire. Many scholars believe that by this time Christians made up about one third of the population of the Empire.

Prior to this, it had not always been an easy time for the followers of Jesus. They were always a little suspect to the authorities. They refused to sacrifice to the God's meant to protect Rome, so they always appeared to be traitors to the Empire. From time to time there were periods of persecution. In the first Century, when there was a great fire in the Capital City, Nero blamed the Christians. It is believed that Peter was killed during this time.

Christians during most of this period lived on the margins of society. They met on Sunday mornings in homes. As the movement grew they relied on the more well off in the church to open their homes for worship. During the periods of time when the ruling authorities were more accommodating, the churches bought some larger buildings in order to worship. During this time period, being a follower of Jesus was seen as being a barrier to worldly success. Being a Christian could keep you from advancing in your career.

In short, Christians were a significant minority living on the fringes of society. Their situation was always precarious. In fact, in 302 AD the Emperor Diocletian, seeing how the Church had grown, had begun the most severe and Empire wide persecution of the Christian movement in history. He ordered the destruction of Church property, the burning of books, the dismissal of Christians serving in the government and the enslavement of Christian households. He tried to make Christians recant their faith under threat of torture. This oppression continued into the year 312.

Diocletian retired as Emperor and a civil war ensued. One of the aspirants to the throne was a General by the name of Constantine. His mother was a Christian and his father a pagan. He had not chosen either.

On October 27, 312, Constantine and his forces were prepared to cross Milvian bridge to engage the enemy the next day. That night we are told that Constantine saw a sign in the sky. There are two reports as to the nature of the sign. One says that Constantine saw a cross, while another reports that he saw two Greek letters, Chi and Rho which are the first two letter of the Greek word Christos or Christ. Beside the signs were the words, "In this sign you shall conquer."

Constantine went on to victory. He became the Emperor of the entire Empire. The next year he proclaimed the Edict of Milan which ended the second-class citizenship for Christians. He and his successors went further, they started to favor Christians and the Church. For example, Constantine's mother made a trip to Israel. Helena visited all the

traditional sites associated with Jesus's life. She then ordered that a Church be built on the traditional places associated with Jesus' life. She is responsible for the building of the Church of the Nativity and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

The support and patronage of Constantine marked one of the great changes of the Christian Church. On one level, this was a great positive. Christians were now free from the fear of physical punishment because of their faith. Indeed, now the church was even favored by the government. If you were looking for a job, you no longer had to hide your faith, you could put it on your resume.

The challenge for the Church was no longer persecution, the challenge was to preserve the faith in one whose kingdom was not of this world. The temptation was to materialism and power. Following Jesus before Constantine would limit worldly success; after Constantine believing in Christ could aid your advancement. The danger was replacing the goal of faith as being growing in the love of Jesus and neighbor, with the goal of allowing God to bless one with riches. How was the faith to survive success?

Some remembered the words of Jesus, **“How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”** Jesus is warning of the danger of seeing all of life as being about grasping the goods of this world. The temptation of seeing success in materialistic terms that Constantine's conversion brought to Christianity continues today.

The modern-day prophet Madonna sang:
**'Cause the boy with the cold hard cash
Is always Mister Right
'Cause we are living in a material world
And I am a material girl.**

In many ways Madonna speaks for our generation. We are men and women who often define success as being the accumulation of wealth. We can sometimes allow our quest for material goods to keep us from being the person God wants us to be.

The first lesson of the spirit is that we do not live by bread alone. We need to be reminded that we human beings cannot be fully satisfied by anything in the created order. If we are to grow in our discipleship we have to acknowledge that there is no amount of goods or combination of goods that can satisfy the basic hunger at the core of our being.

I should be clear **one does not live by bread alone** does not mean that we do not need bread. Jesus is not telling us that we can live without material goods. The Bible does not tell us that the created world is evil. All too often some Christian teachers have made it appear that Christians are to hate the goods of this world. It has sometimes been implied that material things should not bring us any joy or happiness.

This is a form of false asceticism. Our God is the creator of the material world. There is an essential goodness in creation that we share. What is more is you and I are part of the created order. We require food to survive. We need shelter and clothing. We crave the experience of beauty and the joys of human companionship.

It is because material goods give us some experiences of joy that we can be tricked into thinking that they can completely satisfy us. We can be deceived into thinking that if we could just have more money we would be fulfilled.

After Constantine, how did the Christian movement adjust to remind people that life is more than the accumulation of earthly goods and pleasures.

The response began with one person named Anthony. We know about him thanks to Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria, who was so inspired he wrote his biography. Anthony was born in Egypt to a well-off Christian family. His parents died when he was 18 years old, leaving him to care for his sister and their 200-acre estate.

The story goes that one day he entered church just in time to hear the verse from Matthew's gospel: "Go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, then come, follow me."

Anthony heard this as both a personal and literal word to him from God. He sold the farm and his personal property, holding back just enough to care for his sister. At first, he lived as a poor laborer at the edge of town. But after a short time, he gave away the rest of his income, put his sister in the care of a women's community.

Leaving behind all his worldly goods, as well as rich foods, rest and sleep, he headed to the desert and entered a life of poverty, celibacy, fasting, and silence.

Soon after others began to join Anthony in the desert. And so began the monastic movement. Men and later women left their homes to fully give themselves to God. They modeled for all Christians that true meaning in life is found in God. It has been the monastic movement that has served to model for us all that worldly success is not a substitute for God.

The reformed tradition rejected monasticism, but not its spirit and purpose. The reformed tradition, especially the early puritans, brought the spirit of monasticism into everyday life. It was the emphasis on simplicity in lifestyle that pointed beyond the material to God.

But after several generations the focus on simplicity in life was lost. Protestants began to buy into a worldly definition of success. The defining of success in material terms can corrupt our faith in Christ as well. It has worked very well in destroying many of our symbols of faith. A clear example is what has happened to Christmas. Christmas is a major Christian feast that celebrates the coming of Jesus into the world. Yet in our culture its major function has been to become the great shopping season that stretches from Halloween to New Year's.

Since Constantine, the allure of worldly success has corrupted the Christian message at times. Much of what passes for popular Christianity makes a similar promise. We are told that if you put your faith in Jesus then your business will prosper. Both Robert Schuler and Joel Osteen come very close to this emphasis in their teaching. The God of consumption is baptized and Jesus takes the place of the golden calf who will guarantee material success.

Now why am I pointing all of this out? It is not just to make us all feel guilty. For we all have, to some extent, worshipped the Golden Calf of Consumption. It is not because the things

of this world are evil and bad for us. It is because to give our lives totally to material goods leads to a dead end.

In our New Testament for today, Jesus tells the story of a rich man. The man had a big problem. He had a bumper crop and did not know how to store it. So, he had his barns pulled down and bigger ones built. The man sat back confident that all was right with the world. He had an abundance of the world's goods.

Then notice the reaction of God. The man is not condemned by God. He is not labeled as being evil. It is not suggested that he has gotten his wealth by devious means. The story does not indicate that his wealth came at the expense of others. He is not castigated as an opportunistic rich person who has exploited the labor of others. No, the problem for this man was that he placed his love and confidence in material goods.

God does not call the man bad, but rather foolish. He is called a fool. He thought his possessions could give him security and joy. Yet that very night he was going to die and what good would his material goods be in eternity.

The material things we enjoy are good, but they are transitory. We have been made for more than this material world can offer us. We have a need for the love of God and the companionship of others. When we worship the god of consumption, then our hearts are set on things which cannot satisfy us.

How are we to escape the consumerism that can shape our lives. How do we survive success?

One tool for helping overcome our attachment to material things is thanksgiving. Thanksgiving can cause two different movements of the spirit. The first movement changes our focus towards what we have and enjoy, and away from a concentration what we desire and want. This can still our being and give us contentment.

Secondly thanksgiving moves our hearts towards God and away from this world. We focus on the giver and not the gifts.

St. Anthony tells us **When you lie down on your bed to sleep, remember with thanksgiving the blessings and the providence of God.**

So today I give you one simple practice to try this week. As you put your head on your pillow-take time to thank God for your experiences that day, for food to eat and the shelter you enjoy and all the gifts that you have been given. Be thankful for the gift of Jesus and grace he brings.

If we learn the practice of giving thanks, we can survive the challenge posed by success.