

Success by Focus

Nehemiah 5:9-18; Luke 9:18-27; Philipians 4:4-13



“Aim for success!” The words sound positive and triumphant—a life of joy and fulfillment seem poised one step ahead. Success is our focus in life. It is our goal as individuals, families, institutions, and societies. Success is that illusive ideal we strive to attain one day. Our world describes achieving success as “living the good life.” It is the focal point for our greatest efforts.

We define this good life in concepts of comfort, entertainment, wealth, education, standing, health, and power. Our Declaration of Independence alludes to success as “the pursuit of happiness.” The striking problem with these definitions is that success remains forever an alluring, yet allusive target. We once defined comfort as indoor plumbing, wealth as eating meat weekly, entertainment as swapping stories by firelight, education as the ability to read, standing as an honest reputation, health as the strength to work, and power as security. These definitions sound woefully outmoded.

Were yesteryear’s definitions of worthless? How will today’s definitions stack up before a future generation? In our new context, the old targets seem pale and insufficient. Perhaps the greatest problem is that our definitions for success are based on the concept of “more”. More is a relative term, and an eternally moving target.

Paul’s words strike a dissonant chord against our societal message. He begs us to seek joy in a distinct source. His seems to shove aside our drive for success. Rather than some far off goal, Paul points us to God as our source of joy. There is no reason for anxiety, nor striving to achieve an illusory dream. True joy and fulfillment are at hand.

Paul’s words appear perhaps a little too simplistic. After all, he reminds us to set our petitions and requests before God in thanksgiving and worry no more. The words sound trite and shallow. Who has not presented requests before God, yet agonized over the unknown results of our petitions for days and weeks on end? Paul follows up his trite response with a new means of occupying our thoughts. We are to offer our petitions to God with thanksgiving, then dwell on those more excellent things—the very attributes of God.

We know better. It still sounds trite and overly simplistic. It will work for what, ten minutes? Twelve? What could Paul have been thinking? He must not have had much to agonize over as we do. If he had really experienced the kind of problems we face, how could he have ever dished out such pithy nonsense? Obviously, he had never heard of cancer, corporate downsizing, 9/11, depression, or church dissension. Could he really have been so clueless?

Wait a minute. Wasn’t Paul writing this letter from prison? Hadn’t he faced death threats and torture? Is this letter some farce? Could this advice somehow be more than a simplistic answer to a deep quest for peace and rest for the soul? Had Paul become “touched in the head” by one too many rocks?

Rejoice in God. Present our cares to Him in thankfulness. Remember God’s presence. God’s peace will watch over us. Dwell on the excellence of God’s attributes. Live as Paul had modeled. God’s peace will guard us in Christ Jesus. Is this guy for real?

There has got to be more to it he just didn't tell us. After all, he then goes on to talk about the financial support the Philippians had sent. Now, this is practical. This is real-world stuff. It seems he just changed the subject, thinking we'd overlook his unfinished answer. Likely, he didn't have one, right? He just needed to sound pious. I mean, here he was under house arrest with people trying to make life harder for him. Chained to guards, he couldn't do his tent-making to earn his keep. He could not go to sell his goods in the marketplace. Sure, he was thankful for the financial support the Philippians sent, for he needed some way to survive!

But did Paul really change the subject? Look at what he says. "Not that I complain or want, for I have learned in whatever state I am to be content." I don't know about you, but that doesn't sound like the pursuit of happiness and the American dream to me. It almost sounds like he might really mean that this recipe against anxiety has more to it than a sappy surface quality. Could Paul really believe this, or was he just off his rocker?

"I have learned the secret of being content in whatever situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." That just doesn't sound like much of a secret to me! Doesn't measure up to the kind of life I dream to build. I don't like the concepts of hunger and want. I don't relish the uncertainty behind being unfilled or unfulfilled. My definitions and aspirations of success fight against these categories. I want more, better, newer, faster, improved, easier, the next generation. Isn't that what success is about? Who wants to learn to settle for whatever comes along? My parents taught me better than that!

Pretty soon, this is going to start sounding like denying myself and taking up a cross I don't want to carry. Why, Jesus spoke like this as he talked about gaining the world and losing our very lives. What kind of success demands accepting less than the best? As a child of God, don't I deserve better than average? Shouldn't a child of the king live in splendor?

On the other hand, neither Paul nor Jesus had running water or indoor plumbing. Well, that was not available in their day, but they didn't have the best of what was available, either. They had no latest model chariot, nor wide screen theater box seats. They did have one thing that my definition of success seems to ignore altogether. It was the sense of peace Paul mentions: "The peace of God which guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus."

Right there with his comment on contentment, Paul says "I can all things through Christ who strengthens me." The Greek here is clear. Paul does not speak of accomplishment, but of accepting everything with contentment and peace. This is his definition of success. Success is no shimmering goal always dangling out of reach. It is a prize he has already attained. Paul's life centered on accepting the contentment achieved in the peace of Christ Jesus.

Paul was no lunatic. He was not deprived of reason for anxiety and suffering. He experienced more than his share of hardship. Even so, he achieved fulfillment in this superior definition of success. His life focused on present contentment through Christ—success in the now. Could we live with this definition? The old definitions are ever out of reach. Focus on a contented present is tangible. It may be tough to retrain our thinking. If Paul could find peace amid the disasters of life, why not I? Aim for success? God's peace is a nearer and loftier ideal. Why settle for what will never be sufficient?

—*Christopher B. Harbin*