

# Congregational Church of the Messiah

July 20, 2008

## **“What Is Success?”**

Psalm 24:1-5; 25:1-5

Dr. David L. Gray

Other people often define success: If you have a large amount of money, major political power, influence over other people, own large parcels of land, most people would say you are successful. If you are healthy and are free to determine your own coming and going, most people would say you are a success.

If you have studied hard to pass a driver's test, correctly answer all the questions, passed the driving test with flying colors and received your driver's license, you would be correct in saying that you were successful in renewing your license.

However, not everyone has lots of money, influence, power, and health. Persons who achieve significant goals in life are not necessarily happy because things rarely satisfy the deep inner hunger inside a person for peace and lasting joy.

Saint Augustine confessed: “Our soul is restless until we find our rest in Thee.”

When success is tied to temporary things we can buy and sell, they can come and go with little lasting value.

In our scripture this morning, the Psalmist was very conscious of these distinctions. The Psalmist was frustrated by the worldly gains of those persons who were cynical about God and wicked in their ways of achieving wealth. The Psalmist wanted to make it absolutely clear that the ultimate reward of those who obtained their wealth in a wicked way would be to perish. God knows the way of the righteous, and God will reward the righteous with prosperity that would last forever. The Psalmist called this heavenly reward “salvation.”

The key to the entire Psalm concerns where we stand in our relationship with God. We are to remember all the benefits God has given to us as we strive “...to do justly, love compassionately, and walk humbly before our God.” (Micah 6:8)

When persons do that to the best of their ability, their lives flourish, their spirits steadfastly reflect the love of God, and their reward is salvation.

Your closeness to God determines whether God thinks you are successful or not. The true meaning of success is being and doing God's Will in your life.

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When we celebrate the life of a person, rarely do we celebrate how many CDs the person owned, how much money the departed person left to other people or organizations. Rather we focus on the quality of his or her relationship with other persons and with God, which alone can bring deep peace and lasting joy.

The way we live, speak and act reflects our relationship to God. When we live out of a heart that overflows with gratitude for the benefits God has given to us, we are successful. If we constantly complain and withdraw, not using the gifts God has given us to benefit others, we negate part of God's creation.

Often, if we are looking, we can see ourselves in the lives of others. We can redirect our own thinking and talking. There may be times when we need to hear the truth spoken in love from a friend or family member to remind ourselves how much God is blessing us in our life right now with opportunities to experience His love and share it with others.

Just before I came to Messiah, I organized a world assembly of Congregational youth (CWAY) from Congregational Churches around the world. The participants came from Congregational Churches in Australia, New Zealand, Samoa, Argentina, Brazil, England, Wales, United States, Germany, and Nova Scotia. We met at St. Mark's Berean Church in Port Elizabeth, South Africa. God's Spirit was close to us throughout three days and nights there.

Success and failure, prosperity and poverty are starkly evident in South Africa. It is a land of great contrasts where the rich are very rich, and the poor are very poor.

Repeatedly, Jesus pointed out how we should not use ordinary criteria to determine our acceptability to God. Some faithful people were rich, but wealth or lack of it was not to be used as a measure of a person's faith. The person was to be faithful with however little or much he or she had of this world's goods.

I stayed in the home where family members were active in our host church, St. Mark Berean Congregational Church. The home was a splendid white ranch-style structure with thick walls, a swimming pool, air conditioning throughout, cell phones, late model BMW, Mercedes convertible, and Toyota RV in the driveway. The family also had daily laundry service done in another building on the beautifully landscaped grounds, separate mother-in-law quarters, concrete bike paths for the family's two kids to ride on, large well-kept gardens in the back for fresh vegetables each day. A high white wall with a single large gate surrounded the entire compound. As we approached the gate, two big men smiled, waved, and welcomed us as the owner drove his BMW into the compound. I have no doubt they could have kept anyone out who was not wanted. There was total security within the grounds.

Within 20 minutes by car from the well-secured compounds where the very rich lived, thousands of poor people lived in small metal or cement shelters, some without electric-

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ity, all without regular heat. Over 40% had no regular source of income for their families. Crime was an accepted part of daily life in Motherwell. Black magic and witchcraft were practiced openly by thousands of people in poverty in that area.

Culture said those people who had money and power were successful. Those who were poor were not worth anything.

Both in Motherwell and in the secure Christian home in the compound, we got to know deeply dedicated Christians who did not use money or power to decide whether a person's life had value or not.

Success and value of persons before God for those Christian Believers was measured by a person's faith in Jesus Christ as the Son of God. Nothing else was as important—not food, clothing, health, or having a car or job. Whatever they did or did not own or whom they knew had little to do with those Believers' relationship with God in Christ.

One Sunday while we were in Port Elizabeth, we worshipped in five different Congregational Churches. We began worshipping at 8:00 am in one Congregational Church, then into cars and on to another Congregational Church for the first part of the 9:00 am Service. We were soon back in the cars and a short ride to a 9:30 am Worship Service in another Congregational Church in the area and to a third one for their traditional 11:00 am Worship Service. We spoke and sang at each Service.

Then there was a 2:00 pm Service at a Congregational Church in the middle of the shacks of Motherwell on the outskirts of Port Elizabeth that I will never forget. Dust blew everywhere as our cars drove into the dirt parking area behind a lone general store in the middle of this poverty stricken area where thousands of black and racially mixed South African people lived.

Inside a non-descript building with the ceiling made from corrugated metal sheets, there was sort of hall that could seat perhaps 200 people. Simple wooden chairs took the place of pews.

When the worshippers began to sing, my how the music and prayers filled that space for the next hour and a half! We were worshipping with Congregationalists in Motherwell who were filled with joy overflowing into music from their hearts and expressed in passionate prayers welling up from deep inside the hearts of those people both young and old, not just from the ministers up in front.

Their enthusiasm and spirited-filled singing drew us together as we praised God from whom all blessings flowed on us all that Sunday in a simple dusty hall in South Africa surrounded by some of the worst living conditions in that incredible country.

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As we moved outside toward our cars following the Service, we were a mixture of persons praying for one another; savoring the time we had spent together worshipping God and sharing an Oneness in Spirit because we were one in the Lord.

Waving as our cars turned and drove away and back down the dusty road, we watched as the members began to walk back to the cold, dimly lit shanties they called home. They walked with a lighter step, laughter and a song of faith in their hearts to give them courage for the living through that night and the days ahead.

Later our St. Mark's Berean Church host minister, Rev. Bruce Woolard, told us that over 98% of Port Elizabeth's white population had never ventured as deeply into that poor black area as we had. It was only because the Congregational Church there was a mission outreach of St. Mark's that we could go there safely.

Success in the Congregational Church in Motherwell was not measured by the number of people attending or amount of money in the offering. Success was decided by the joyful sharing of the Good News of Jesus Christ and the dramatic change within the lives of each Believer when he or she came to know Christ as his or her personal Lord and Savior.

That Sunday we were filled with an overflow of receiving and sharing faith in a Congregational Way. Our faith was nourished. Our spirits soared. We were strengthened, and so, I believe were others who shared the joy of seeing once more our Oneness in Spirit when we are one in the Lord.

In Christ we truly are members one of another. When one suffers, we all suffer. When one is honored, we all are honored. That Sunday was a day in which we all prospered and gave thanks to God for all the benefits we had received. One of those benefits was being able to pray for you here at Messiah while worshipping in South Africa. Worshipping and serving one another and reaching out through our giving to others through missions you help spread the Good News of Christ in this community and around the world.

Neither in South Africa nor here in America do we have to limit our understanding of success to what society or other people say. Those who know the Lord and live as His people have purpose and meaning in life both now and forever.

We are successful when we choose not to become a cynic or scoffer, when we choose not to belittle the enthusiasm of believers who are trying to grow in their faith and learn to trust more in Jesus Christ. We are drawn closer to God when we are willing to take the risk of speaking the truth in love whether in Motherwell or Port Elizabeth or Westchester. We are blessed by God when we increase our knowledge of God and deepen our commitment to Him.

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We are successful when we rejoice and thank God for so many benefits He has given to us especially as the Congregational Church of the Messiah.

It is serious when we reach nearly 7% unemployment in California but that is far from the 40% unemployment in Motherwell.

We are blessed to live in America with many fine social service organizations in our area and country and to be able to contribute to strengthen them through our benevolent giving. Through Messiah and your pledges to missions, we help support the Airport Marina Counseling Center, the Young Men's Christian Association, the LAX Food Pantry, Salvation Army, the Venice Boys and Girls Club to name just a few

In addition, here at Messiah we are blessed with marvelous facilities for serving others in Christ's Name. We encourage others to express their faith through community service groups, through the Westchester Parents Nursery School, the Al-Anon and CoDA support groups, and other community groups.

Most of all, we have the joy and responsibility of seeking first the kingdom of God and expressing our faith as we believe God wants us to. We often find God's Spirit in our midst as two or three or more gather together in Christ's Name and Spirit in committees, boards and meetings for many different purposes.

Therefore, I am honored to be part of such a Congregational Church family and to speak confidently to others about what we are seeking to do here at Messiah as our part of the Lord's work on earth. It is a privilege to pray and prepare for continuing our journey of faith together by growing food and flowers instead of ivy, bringing inspiring music to every Worship Service on Sundays, praying and encouraging one another as we live out our faith day by day.

As it is written in Psalm 24:1, "The earth is the Lord's and all that it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it."

To be successful means to be alive with the joy of the gifts God has given us that others too might find the peace and joy God intends for all His creation.

I close with a prayer written by a man who loved to play sports.

Dear God,

Help me be a top sportsman in this little game of life. I don't ask for any easy place in the line-up; play me anywhere You need me.

I only ask for the stuff to give You one hundred-percent of what I've got. If all the hard drives seem to come my way, I thank You for the compliment. Help me to remember that You won't ever let anything come my way that You and I together can't handle.

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And help me to take the bad break as part of the game. Help me to understand that the game is full of knots, knocks, trouble, and make me brave so that the harder they come the better I like it.

And, O God, help me to always play on the square. No matter what the other players do, help me to come clean.

Help me to study the Book so that I'll know the rules and to study and think a lot about "the Greatest Player" that ever lived, and other players that are portrayed in the Good Book.

If they found out that the best part of the game was helping other guys who were out of luck, help me to be an inspiration with the other players.

Finally, O God, if fate seems to uppercut me with both hands and I'm laid on the shelf in sickness or old age or something, help me to take that as part of the game of life too. Help me not to whimper or squeal that the game was a frame-up or that I had a raw deal.

When, in the falling dusk I get the final bell, I ask for no lying complimentary tombstones. I'd only like to know that You feel that I've been a good game guy, a saint in the game of life." (Anonymous)

Amen.