

Live In The Light of Eternity

Definition of a Successful Life

“This is what the LORD says: ‘Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows Me’”

Jeremiah 9: 23-24

The first church where I was a pastor, one summer I started a softball team. We were lousy! The first season we lost game, after game, after game. The league had a mercy rule that if the other team scored 10 runs in an inning, that was the end of their inning. That happened to us many, many innings. We were losing games by scores of 30-1 and 40-1. It was humiliating. It’s hard to have fun and keep going when you are losing game after game. If you’re a Cleveland Browns fan, you know what I’m talking about.

All games have score keeping. The WAY each game is scored, tells players which achievements count. Touch downs are worth more points than field goals. Score keeping tells players what to do in order to be a winner – in football, score touchdowns.

Monopoly players keep score with money. Poker games use chips. In most games, players want to score as high as possible. In golf, you would want to have the lowest score.

We are by nature, score keepers. We crave feedback. We want to know how we’re doing.

To talk about how we keep score, is really to talk about what we think is success. And as we live, we *learn* how to keep score from others.

For most of us, we learned score keeping from our parents. We want to know how to win their smiles, win their attention, and win their approval. Many adults are still trying to win their parents’ approval.

We learn score keeping from teachers. Report cards and grades are the ways to keep score.

Later on in life, it is bosses, or co-workers. In our jobs, we compare salaries, titles, promotions, and office size and office location.

Score keeping, makes it easy for us to figure out who is number 1. We want to be #1! No sports arena sells a giant foam hand holding up TWO fingers. We want to be #1! – the fastest, the smartest, the best.

Score keeping leads to competition, and competition is not, intrinsically bad. In athletics, in business – competition can spur you on to new levels of performance. You can achieve new levels of excellence that you never knew you had in you.

But take this competition, and infuse it with the dark side of our sinful nature, and it becomes a poison to your soul. You get envious of others. “Winner” and “Loser” become labels we stick on people, and even on ourselves. We see a person’s worth -- and our own worth – only as a “winner” or a “loser.”

Take this scorekeeping, and infuse it with our sinfulness, and often the goal of a game isn’t to do our best, or even to win. The goal of the game becomes to defeat others. Novelist Gore Vidal said, *“It is not enough to succeed. Others must fail.”* This is normal in our world, but it also happens to be very wrong.

The truth about our human condition is that we are all sinful. Most people in our world think sin is doing something bad, something very wrong. God tells us this truth: that sin is much deeper and more serious than just doing something bad. Sin is your condition. It’s that your relationship with God is broken. In our hearts and minds it is not natural for us to follow God’s way. And when it comes to what we think success is, we don’t follow God’s idea, His definition of success. We follow our human, dog-eat-dog world ideas of success.

Climbing the ladder, being #1, winning, becomes *everything* to us. The ladder becomes god in our lives.

We look at people higher up on the ladder and feel discontent with where we are. The people on the next rung higher have a bigger house, a bigger salary, a newer car. And you look at your house, your salary, your car – and you become discontent. Jealous. Envious. You WANT what’s on the next rung! You DESERVE

what's on the next rung! You NEED to make it to the next rung higher.

So you do. And sometimes getting to the next rung up on the ladder means compromising your integrity, doing things you swore you'd never do. But you do it.

And when you're young, getting to the next rung, gives you a lot of pleasure. But funny thing, the pleasure is never enough. You've got to climb higher. And pretty soon, climbing the ladder is a way of life – and maybe you never even noticed that you're doing it. Climbing the ladder becomes *EVERYTHING* to you. It's the way to keep score. It's the way win. It becomes your identity, your self-worth.

There is a real danger in this! And we are facing this danger now in our country, in our state and community. The coronavirus pandemic has affected all of us.

Many people are out of work. Millions of people are unemployed. Lines at food banks are massive. People can't pay the rent. Business owners fear going bankrupt. For a lot of us, maybe for you, the things that we use to mark a successful and meaningful life are being stripped away. Money is a lot harder to come by. Job positions and work status are gone. Networking, popularity, and being liked by others are replaced by isolation. And for those who catch the virus, youth and vitality vanish.

This is why fear, and anger, and depression are common. Domestic violence, despair, and suicide increase. When we use the wrong yard stick to measure our lives, then when those things are taken from us, we CRASH. We have nothing left. Our identity, and self-worth are gone.

Let me ask you: Is your idea of what makes you worthwhile tied to what you own, or achieve? Do you feel depressed or despair because you are out of work, money is tight, or you aren't getting the acceptance and approval from others that you crave? Are you angry? Temper is more out of control? Are you fearful? These are signs that your idea of what makes life a success or a failure is a

HUMAN, a worldly, a shallow standard. Are you using the wrong yard stick to measure your life?

Its normal and natural for us to do this, because we are human. We all, by nature, are born with a broken relationship with God. We turn away from Him. We use our own definition of success. And this is destructive, it's sinful, it's wrong. We deserve to be forever apart from God in an eternity in hell.

So maybe, you need a better way to keep score.

Robert Roberts writes about a 4th grade class in which the teacher introduced a game called the "balloon stomp." A balloon was tied to the leg of every child. When the whistle blew, the object of the game was for the students to try to pop everybody else's balloon, while protecting their own. The last child with an un-popped balloon, would be the winner.

You can guess how this thing turned out. Balloon stomp is a game where "if I win, you lose." To win, you've got to ruin everybody else's chances of winning. It's survival of the fittest, and meanest.

The whistle blew, and some of the kids really went at it! But their balloons got stomped also. Some of the kids shyly hung on the sidelines, but that didn't help them. Their balloons were flattened just the same.

The battle was over in just a few seconds. Only one balloon was still un-popped. And the winner, became the most disliked kid in the room. It's hard to really win at balloon stomp. Even the winner is a hated and a loser.

But then, something UNEXPECTED happened. A second class was brought in the room to play the same game. Only this time it was a class of developmentally challenged children. They were given the same balloons and the same instructions. The whistle blew, and everyone watching got a sinking feeling in their gut, because of what they expected to happen to these developmentally challenged children.

But something unexpected happened. Instead of fighting each other, these kids got the idea that they were supposed to help one

another pop the balloons. So they formed a kind of “balloon stomp co-op.”

One boy was getting frustrated because he was trying to step on a balloon that was tied to the leg of a girl, but every time he went to step on it, the balloon moved. So the little girl, knelt down, and held her balloon carefully in place, like the holder for a field-goal kicker, while the little boy stomped it flat. Big smile from both of them. The he knelt down and held his balloon still while she stomped on it. Big smile. On and on it went, all the children helping one another stomp the balloons.

And when the last balloon was popped, everybody cheered. Everybody won!

It was a different way to keep score. Instead of winning by going UP the ladder, it was a way of winning by kneeling DOWN.

God keeps score by coming DOWN. The entire life of Jesus isn't the story of somebody climbing UP a ladder, it's a picture of someone coming DOWN – down a series of Demotions.

Jesus pictures for us what winning looks like in God's eyes. This is what Jesus once said about God's way of keeping score: ***“You know that the rulers in this world lord it over their people, and officials flaunt their authority over those under them. ²⁶ But among you it will be different. Whoever wants to be a leader among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first among you must become your slave. ²⁸ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve others and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*** Matthew 20:25-28

The life of Jesus isn't about Him climbing up a ladder. His story is just the OPPOSITE! Jesus, who IS God, He is at the very top of the organizational chart of the whole universe. But instead, out of His great love, **Jesus went down the ladder for you!** He gave up the right to have things His own way. He came down here to live as a human being. He took on our human flesh and blood. He took on all our needs and all our limitations. But even some people live as kings and celebrities – so He went lower. He was born in a stable –

the peasant son of a poor couple. But then He went even lower – He suffered horribly, and He gave up His life for you.

His death was Jesus biggest achievement. In His death, He gave His life as a trade for your life. Your sins and selfishness deserve the punishment that HE took for you. His perfect life – is credited as *YOUR* sinless innocence. Even His death was not glamorous. It was on a cross – bloody, bashed up, wracked with pain – He *STILL* chose to go that low, because His love for you is that great! He would rather die *for* you, than live in heaven *without* you.

And ironically, *that* moment, when Jesus looked most like a failure in the scoring system of this world -- *that* moment, was His greatest triumph in the eyes of God the Father. In that moment, when He couldn't have gone any farther down, Jesus won forgiveness for you, hope, and the certainty that you can be with Him forever in heaven.

500 years ago, Martin Luther talked about what he called “the theology of the cross.” Basically Luther said, we may TRY to know God up in His power and glory in heaven, by climbing up the ladder to Him. But that is a human, this world, achievement-based idea of success. Instead, we find God, where He, in love for us, has come DOWN to us. You'll find God's love and grace, in a baby in a stable in the arms of a peasant mother, in a bloody man dying on the cross for you, and in simple bread and wine on the altar in Communion for you.

Jesus makes it clear that going down is success in God's eyes. Your life should be headed in the same direction that He is going. So let me ask you: **Which direction are you going on the ladder?**

You see the problem with spending your whole life *climbing up* the ladder, is that you are to be WITH Jesus. Climbing up, you will go right PAST Jesus, because He's coming DOWN!

Serving, in self-giving love, is the most Christ-like -- and that means the most successful – life for you.

Here is another way God describes the winning score is in His eyes. ***“This is what the LORD says: ‘Let not the wise man boast***

of his wisdom or the strong man boast of his strength or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows Me” Jeremiah 9: 23-

24 The winning score is knowing God.

Success in our world is climbing the ladder to more knowledge and wisdom, more strength and power, more wealth and fame. But God isn't impressed with any of that. None of that will last – it will all end up going back in the box. The winning score – success in God's eyes -- is knowing God. – deeply, intimately, completely – knowing Him and being with Him. Because what God wants is you! He wants your heart.

And when you know the amazing depth of God's love for you, and you love Him back, then ...

- **God's love & grace produces kindness & compassion in me.**
- **God's truth produces justice in me.**
- **God's purity & holiness produces moral purity in me.**

In the NEW Game – in God's game – people who stick with Jesus, make themselves servants, humbly, honestly, joyfully. And they end up being the biggest winners.

So let me ask you today: if you're real honest, if you take a close look at your life **How have you been keeping score?** Have you been trying to win this game of life by climbing up the ladder? Have you been more concerned with getting money, status, security, promotions, awards, the next new thing?

Will you, for Jesus' sake, adopt a new definition of a successful life? Will you, simply seek to know and follow Jesus?

Amen.