

“THE CHRIST OF FLAWLESS ANCHORAGE”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Lk 19:28-40

The real mark of a man, the real measure of his stature, is not what he does with failure, but what he does with success. Failure has a way of bringing out hidden qualities of character which are often the making of a man.

This is rarely so with success. The mantle of fame or fortune is not easily worn. There are very few who can withstand the pressures that play upon those who attain the top. The sweet nectar of success is “heady stuff,” and not many can drink deeply of that intoxicating brew without losing their equilibrium.

In the last analysis it is easier to be a failure than a success, to bear poverty than riches, and mediocrity than magnificence. One salient exception to this rule was the Lord Jesus Christ. Throughout his lifetime he confronted both triumph and disaster, but Jesus was so strong in himself, and so tightly tied to the will of his heavenly Father, that while he was touched by them both, he was affected by neither.

In fact, one of the most striking things about the master’s triumph on Palm Sunday is the fact that he wasn’t taken in by it. He somehow seemed to know that this sudden outburst of success was just an episode. The pageantry of that tumultuous hour, ecstatic crowds, waving palm branches, and wild hosannas, were just the product of the moment.

He seemed to sense that the fickle flame of fame which had flared so quickly would soon fade into embers. The real arbiter of his fate was not the gallery, but Almighty God. The sweet smell of success, the applause of the people and clamor of the crowd, could not stampede him into forgetting his real mission in life. No, thank God, the Lord Jesus was not taken in by the triumph of Palm Sunday.

Nor was he disturbed by the disaster of Good Friday. As the prophet Isaiah said,

“He was despised and rejected of men. A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.”

In the end it became his lot to bear a cross up the hill of the skull where he was crucified between two thieves. “But,” as one commentator has said, “neither the cheers of Palm Sunday nor the jeers of Good Friday” were able to get to him.

To him they were both imitators. To him success and failure were mere incidental incidents along the way and were utterly irrelevant to the final outcome of things. He refused to be taken in by them. He was anchored in the will of God, and neither triumph nor disaster could deter him from his destiny.

It seems to me there is a lesson here we would all do well to learn. No one can do or be his or her best by playing to the crowd. If we have our eyes fixed on the spectators we shall soon forget about God. The moment we do, we are in for trouble.

If we set too high a premium on what the world calls success, we are in for some sad surprises. As Rudyard Kipling reminds us, “Success and failure are both imitators, and we must learn to take them in our stride.”

Actually, as someone else has said, “What seems like success may be abject failure, and what seems like failure may be a triumph of the first order.” A rather homely illustration of this is found in the thing that recently happened to Donald Kuske of Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

He had gone deer hunting for two days without even seeing a deer. On the third day, completely disillusioned on the subject of deer, he went over to a nearby marsh to hunt for geese. Within the first half hour he bagged a beautiful buck. He’s ready with some advice. “If you want to get a deer, go after geese!”

Success does come by a rather circuitous route sometimes. Dr. Roy L. Smith tells the story of a young certified accountant who, barely able to pay his bills, was offered a job of auditing the books of a company with a bad reputation. The third week he was on the job the president of the company ordered him to insert some phony figures in his report. He refused. He saved his self-respect, but he went home to report to his wife that they were on a starvation schedule again.

Three weeks later the leading banker of the town sent for him. “I know what happened,” the banker said, “and I’d like you to audit the books of three reputable businesses in this town. I’ve been looking for an accountant with a conscience and you seem to be the man.” Dr. Smith suggests that many times in life we go after one thing and get another. The apparent failure we fear is a stepping stone to success of which we never dare to dream.

In the final summing up, success and failure are both liars. We would do well to remember that. In the long run, the only thing that really matters is that we remain true to ourselves and to the will of our Father who is in heaven.

Van Cliburn, the talented young pianist, demonstrated a remarkable maturity for his twenty-odd years when, after his tumultuous ticker-tape welcome back from his Russian triumph he was asked, “What do you think of your success?” He answered, “This is not success. It is sensation.” Writing about it later in “Guidepost Magazine” he said,

“All I saw at that moment was the desperate need to pray for the strength to continue whatever was meant for me.” Then he goes on to add, “God was with me along the invisible path from the beginning. And he is with me now, under the push and pressure of material success, when I have to hide in order to find the privacy to practice. A closeness to God is the only real immortality. It is the only real success, too.”

I don’t know Van Cliburn except what I’ve read in the newspapers, but I predict that as long as he maintains that frame of heart, he will wear the mantle of fame graciously.

But not all can succeed with success. Many have gone down under the pressure of the pinnacle. Some folks lose their heads immediately when the first clear signs of success come. Others run well for a while, then as victory after victory piles up they begin to falter, totter and then topple from their high attainments.

It may be they went up the ladder too quickly. It may be the elevation was too sudden. The position too lofty. The air at the top too rarefied. But, whatever the reason, they were not up to it and they fell.

I'm not suggesting they lost their prominence or affluence. Quite often their name and position remained the same. But down deep in the soul, where it really counted, they became haughty instead of humble. Though they had once been great in their smallness, now they are small in their greatness. Success can be terrible quicksand, and we must be tied to a flawless anchorage lest we become its prey.

There is a bit of sober wisdom in the words of Moses to his brother, Shendi, in Christopher Fry's play, “The First Born.” Shendi has become a tool of the Egyptians, a captain in Pharaoh's army. Quite naturally, Moses is troubled and urges his brother to abandon his success on the altar of justice for his oppressed people. But Shendi refuses. Then Moses says, “Make yourself live then, Shendie. Be sure it is life. The golden bear of success hugs a man close to its heart; and breaks his bones.”

Jesus put it this way,

“What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his soul?”

It is better, he said, to be “despised and rejected, oppressed and afflicted,” than to betray one's soul.

Jesus wasn't making virtue out of failure. He wasn't suggesting we do obeisance before the altar of defeat. What he *was* suggesting, however, is that success is not always what it seems to be.

“The great and enduring satisfactions of life do not arise from petty conquests on the field of self-assertion.” True success is not a matter of what kind of money a man makes, but what kind of man his money makes of him!

How are we going to succeed with success? How are we going to use it rather than be used by it? It seems to me that at least part of the answer lies in linking our lives to the same flawless anchorage which sustained Jesus.

Jesus thought a lot about people and he cared what people thought about him. But as someone observed,

“He never gave his mind over to anyone but God. He was not deceived by his friends when they tried to keep him from danger in Jerusalem. He was not crushed when those he loved most, his own family, said, ‘He’s mad.’ He was not awed by Pilate, nor was he fearful of the Pharisees. He stood on the integrity and goodness of all mighty God.”

In other words he linked his life to the flawless anchorage of the word of God, to the unchanging purpose of the One who “holds the whole world in his hands.”

And if we would learn to “meet triumph and disaster and treat those two imposters just the same,” then we, too, must link our lives to the unchanging love and goodness of God. We must stand with our feet planted firmly on him, and on those values that cannot be shaken, because they are rooted in him.

As Sidney Lanier says so beautifully in his masterpiece, “The Marshes of the Glynn.”

“As the marsh-hen secretly builds on the watery sod
Behold, I will build me a nest on the greatness of God.
I will fly in the greatness of God as the marsh-hen flies
In the freedom that fills all the space ‘twixt the marsh and the skies.

By so many roots as the marsh-grass sends in the sod
I will heartily lay me ahold of the greatness of God.”

And then, when we have linked our lives to that which is lasting, we will no longer be captive to the moods of men. We will be able to see things from God’s perspective, and will know those things which really count.

The other day I learned there is a new book to be published entitled, The One Hundred Most Important People In The World Today. According to Pocketbook Publishers, the list will be changed as the years go by. But even so, the whole idea struck me as a “piece of monstrous impertinence.”

Who on earth is competent to list the 100 most important people living today? What scales will be used to weigh these people? If we go back in history, we would quickly learn that no one can ever tell on any day who might be the most important person living.

Take February 12, 1809, for instance. I suspect that anyone living then would have said that on that day the most important living person was Napoleon. He was then at the pinnacle of his power. But they would have been wrong. The most important person, as seen 150 years later, was undoubtedly a baby, a few hours old, born in a one room log cabin on the frontier of Kentucky by the name of Abraham Lincoln.

And even today, no doubt the most important person now living is a baby, born a few hours ago, in a hospital, farmhouse or tenement. “Great events and great people have a way of coming on quiet feet,” said one writer. And I’m inclined to believe that if God were to make a list of the 100 most important people -- which quite obviously he won’t because for all service ranks the same with him -- we would be terribly surprised.

We have a clue. Three times Jesus singled out people for honorable mention. But in each case

they were people whom others standing by, including his own disciples, didn't notice at all.

One was a roman centurion, a member of a class of people whom the Jews heartily despised. And yet Jesus made it clear that this man was truly great for he said, “I have not found such faith in all Israel.”

Another was a poor widow, putting two small coins in the alms box. Jesus stopped and awarded her a distinguished service medal in his words, “She has put in more than them all.” In his eyes, she was one of the truly important people in Jerusalem.

And so with the third person. She broke an alabaster box of precious perfume out of love for him. She didn't count the cost. And, as a result, Jesus said of her that she would have an everlasting memorial in the minds of men, and that from God's point of view she was a V.I.P.

God's sense of values is often different from ours, and when we begin to get his perspective on things, when we begin to see things as they really are, we also begin to understand what counts in the long run. And by that I mean, the *really* long run. *Eternity!* When we measure people and events and things with eternity's values in view, then triumph and disaster, victory and defeat, profit and loss, are whittled down to size, and like Jesus we are no longer taken in by them.

So let the Pocketbook people publish their list of The One Hundred Most Important People in the World Today. For the people of God, there is another book which is far more important than that little volume. Or Who's Who In America. Or The Social Register.

It's called “the Lamb's book of life” (Rev. 21:27). When your name is written there, men's measurements don't seem to matter anymore. Having linked your life to that which is lasting, you are no longer touched by that which is transient.

“By as many roots as the marsh-grass sends in the sod,
I will heartily lay me a hold of . . . the greatness of God!”