

Spiritual Success

A sermon by the Rev. Grant R. Schnarr

If we look up the word 'success' in a dictionary, it will say that being successful is "Achieving one's goals." Let's face it, in the world today, what are many of the goals? What do many people consider success?

One of the first things, of course, would be having money. Anyone who has made a great deal of money is usually considered successful today. Think of things that money can do. It gives us such freedom, freedom not to worry about paying our bills, freedom to go places we'd like to go, to do the things we'd like to do. As it says in the commercial for City Bank Mastercard, "Master the possibilities." The things that you can do with money. And we can see it all over television, newspapers, and magazines, that success and money go hand in hand.

Beyond that, what else do we think of as success? Fame, popularity? Not too long ago there were several articles in the papers of Los Angeles about all the people who had flocked to Hollywood as actors and actresses trying to make the big time, and how many of them today are busboys, waitresses, parking lot attendants, etc., because it is so hard to make it. And yet they still flock there by the hundreds each year for that hope.

But it's not just fame that people look for, it's also popularity. The successful person is well liked and looked up to. He or she doesn't have to be well known. But everyone who does know then has great admiration, love and respect for the successful person and the things he or she stands for.

Beyond that, another factor in being successful is power. You don't have to have money to have power. You can have an important position at work, have a great deal of authority over many people, be able to move things and people to get things done. That's looked upon as part of success.

The Writings of the New Church do not say that these type of goals are evil. In fact, you can actually try to move up in your business for good reasons--because you care about your company, you want to have more control in it so that you can run it the way that you really believe will work the best. Or an artist, for example, who promotes his or her

artwork may not be in a love of fame. He or she may love a piece of artwork so much that they want to share it with other people, and fame and popularity are a means of bringing that about. Money, power, fame, the teachings of the New Church tell us, are neutral. They can either be used for good or evil. They can be sought after from good intentions or bad intentions, but in themselves they are neutral.

And yet, we can look at these things see that if these earthy treasures are our only goals, how empty life would be. The Writings of the New Church give an example of that. You can imagine, they say, a king sitting at a table, feasting with all the delicacies of the world, drinking the best imported wine, perhaps having the best entertainment, and yet look into his eyes and find the look of misery because inside he may have nothing. On the other hand, you could look at a pauper who is sitting in his grubby little hut with his grubby little clothes on, eating some moldy cheese, and maybe drinking some homemade brew, has nothing. And yet, you could look into his face and see a real joy, a real happiness there, a real contentment.

We can all see what is being taught in this illustration from the Writings, that it really doesn't matter externally what we have if we are a mess within. We can have the whole world and lose our own soul because these things don't necessarily lead to happiness. They are neutral. The Lord said, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you," All the delights that He wants us to have, all of the joy in life, all of what it really means to be fulfilled within oneself comes from trying to be spiritually successful, from taking the Lord's goals, making them our own goals in our life, and becoming a success within. And the beauty of that is when we obtain those spiritual goals it doesn't matter whether we work down in the Loop for one of the big corporations there, or whether we are a busboy, or work on an assembly line. Whatever we do, we can be a success. We can be genuinely happy. And that's the Lord's promise to us.

What does it mean to be a spiritual success? Perhaps to look at that we should look at what it means to be a spiritual failure first.

To not pay attention to a higher realities of life, to make the mundane, earthly world the only reality, to make goals based on our hereditary inclinations to do evil instead of listening to the more noble parts within us and following the teachings of the Lords Word Lord's Word--these are the things which lead to spiritual failure.

Spiritual failure is the kind of person who works his way right up to the top in his company, but when he gets there he doesn't have any friends because he's used them to get to the top. The person who is a spiritual failure has made the goal to have as many lovers as as possible, thinking that will be macho or successful. And they may have so many lovers, but they never knew love, only emptiness and pain.

The person who is a spiritual failure is somebody who has taken these beautiful talents that the Lord has given each one of us, and instead of using them, has laid them aside to lead an idle life or a life of self-gratification. Or, even worse, the spiritual failure has taken these talents which the Lord has given each one of us to use for good, and instead of using them for good, he or she uses them for gain, to take, take, take, instead of give; to tear down instead of to build up in other people's lives. That's spiritually failing.

The spiritual failure is the kind of person who, when they feel the inclinations to do evil, the destructive inclinations come up within them, instead of spurning them or shunning them as a sin against the Lord, they play with those feelings, they toy with them and let them come out into life. And the more they come out into life, the more those feelings from within take over, and they find themselves going off the path to heaven into a path that leads to selfishness, human desolation, misery and want. They are caught up and smothered by their own disease.

What the Writings point out is that the reason the Lord has told us to follow His way is because that is the way to happiness. It is not that God simply wants us to obey Him for the sake of obedience. He tells us that His way is the right way because His way leads to happiness. His way leads to fulfillment. His way leads to the sort of success in our lives which is genuine, real and lasting. Not the other way.

Yet so often in our lives we see falsity painting this picture of evil, as if it is so beautiful, that it is actually good, that it is right for us. And yet, when we follow that path the picture changes so quickly, and what we may have thought we would achieve in the world of evil, namely happiness, disappears. It disappears because evil cannot bring such a thing.

The effects of seeking after success through selfishness are devastating. Everything happens to the person that they didn't want to happen. They become filled with bewilderment and anxiety. They don't

trust anyone anymore, including the Lord. They only trust in themselves. And that trust is a trust in something blind. In fact, they keep running into the wall and they can't figure out why they are getting hurt. They keep hitting that wall, and something inside them tells them to do it again. "Maybe it will work this time." But it doesn't work the next time. They keep putting their hand into the fire, and they feel the pain, and they blame other people for that pain, or they blame God, not realizing they are burning themselves. And they keep on burning themselves. That's what hell is. Hell isn't a place where God punishes us. Hell is a human condition. Hell is something that we create within ourselves. Hell is frustration and dissatisfaction because evil is frustrating and dissatisfying. And that hell continues on after death for those who have made it their life. Thus the ultimate spiritual failure is the spirit in hell.

A person who is moving toward spiritual success has seen that false picture of happiness which hell has painted and he or she knows that it is a lie, it isn't going to lead to happiness. They hear the Lord speaking to them, telling them that it is not the right way. They see the truths which lead to heaven and obey those truths, or at least try. Sometimes he or she falls down, but they get up, brush themselves off, and try again. And each day they move a little closer on the path to heaven. Each day the fire of love burns a little warmer, the light of wisdom burns a little brighter, and their happiness becomes more and more a living reality in their lives.

What they have done is taken the Lord's goals for the human race, and have made them their goals: the Ten Commandments, the Golden Rule, love to the neighbor, a life in order in life. By applying these goals to their lives a change begins to take place within them, a certain peace comes over them, a certain wisdom, a wisdom that they know the right path to follow.

The person in spiritual success believes in themselves, but it's not a belief solely in themselves, it's a belief that the Lord has put them here for a purpose, that the Lord loves them, that the Lord cares for them, and that they've got a job that they can do here. It may not be some grand job to save the world, but maybe to help out the people who are around them, to give them a little more comfort in their life, to give them a little bit more truth, to give them a little peace of goodness in their lives. And that satisfies them. Two examples of this. When we were down at Myrtle Beach, there's a girl that I know, and she's the most pleasant girl, just has a great character and has many friends, does

many good things, is really nice. We were talking, and she doesn't belong to the church or anything. In fact, she said, "I've had a lot of problems in my life." Her mother was an alcoholic, and she had a little daughter. Her mother accidentally set the house on fire with her daughter in there, and left the house with her daughter in there, and her daughter was burned up in that fire. There were several other things that happened to her as well, having to do with her father, having to do with some of her boyfriends, and yet she said to me, "I don't know about this Swedenborgian religion. It's pretty intellectual to me. I know if I just follow the Lord and His teachings, He'll take care of me."

I could see it in her eyes that she really meant that in her life, deep within. And there was a peace even though all those things had happened to her, a real peace and a real trust in the Lord. And no matter what happened, she still had that success within, that feeling of happiness within, that the Lord was leading her through the stream of Providence.

How many of us have had a life of terrible things happening to us. Not many of us, that bad. And yet, if the Lord can make someone like that happy, can't he make us happy and successful? It doesn't matter what happens to us, we can still have that success.

There's another friend that I knew in elementary school who I used to pal around with. (I do have a lot of normal friends, but they are not interesting enough to talk about.) This guy was really into drugs and alcohol back even in elementary school--really, really hard. He went off into this, he quit school, he got married when he was 17, divorced when he was 19, and then at 19 he did something really stupid. He robbed a gas station. He went to jail for two years. He was the kind of person in the small town that we were in--and it was a small town--the kind of person everybody says, "Stay away from him." It was like, "I don't want you to grow up and be like this guy," your parents would tell you. About a year and a half ago I found out that this person had finally woken up, something inside, and he went to get help, help for his alcoholism, help for his drug addiction, and that now he was back into college and helping out in the community, and he had dedicated his life to helping out people, or kids, so that they don't end up the same way he did and have to go through the same things he did.

I went and I talked to him, and I knew him in elementary school, and he was a different person, completely different. Any kid that would go to him, they couldn't say to him, "You don't know what it is like."

He would say, "You bet I do. I've been there. I've been all the way down to the pit of hell, and I climbed out." That guy today, I don't know what will happen tomorrow--and I'm sure he'd say the same thing--but that guy today is a prince. He's a prince. He's climbed out of the pits of hell, and he's there helping people. He doesn't have a whole lot of money. He doesn't have a great deal of popularity. He doesn't have any power. And yet he's successful.

Success is more than the life of the body. Success is more than the treasures of the world. Real success comes from within, and that's what the Lord is pointing out to us here.

Briefly, what are the steps to the sort of success like this? It's already been said. One is--and it's given in all the 12 steps, and the 12 steps were taken from Emanuel Swedenborg's works--acknowledging a power greater than ourselves that can help us in our lives. And that power is the Lord Jesus Christ. To recognize that there's a loving God up there that wants to help us in our lives, that is willing to share with us all His power to lead us away from the evil and falsity within us. To recognize that there is a higher spiritual reality. To recognize the Lord's goals that He's given us in His Word and to make those goals our goals. That's the first step.

The second step is, take those teachings and look at them and then look at ourselves. See where we line up with those teachings. All the different commandments, "Here I really fell down. Here I'm doing OK. Oops, here, that's another battle in my life." Look at those things and be honest with ourselves. Don't get full of guilt. That's not going to do any good. Where do I line up with these teachings?

Once we see that and take an honest look at ourselves, the next step is to shun these things one by one, because they are hurtful, hurtful to society, hurtful to God so to speak, and hurtful to our own selves. Not to take on our whole personality and tackle that at once, not to take on all the evils that come up in our life; pick one or two the Writings say, and work on them for a while. "Well, I've really got a problem with my love life, but I also gossip so I'll work on gossip for a while, leave the love life go." Then you work on your love life a little bit later. "I've really got a

problem with the way I have been dealing with people at work. I can work on that for a while. Try not to do that any more because it's wrong, because the Lord has said not to because I want to make His goals my goals."

And what the Lord promises is, even if we take one little thing and we work on that He can come into our lives and begin to change and mold us, and we can be reborn. Rebirth isn't something that takes place overnight. It's a process that we're going to go through our whole lives. But it's like that grain of mustard seed, the Lord says. If we begin to try to change our lives, that mustard seed will grow into the greatest of herbs. That goodness within us will grow within us. And that's what it means to be spiritually successful, because with that goodness, with that truth in our lives, with following the order that the Lord has set up for us, for each one of us comes happiness. Happiness and goodness are synonymous. The Lord is love itself, wisdom itself. He wants us to have those things within us because the Lord is also happiness itself and joy. And when we follow that path, when we follow His teachings, the happiness and joy become part of our lives too, and we'll be with the Lord and the Lord is with us.

When we think about what we want to be in our lives, sure we can seek after money, fame, riches, that's fine, but let's not put our hearts in them completely. Let's also take a look at the Lord's goals for the human race, make them our goals, start working on those, and then real success will come into our lives, something that the Lord wants each one of us to have; to seek first the kingdom of the God and His righteousness, and we are promised that all of these things, all of these blessings will be added unto us.