

Series: A Missional Church for a Pagan Culture

VBC

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1 Corinthians 4:1-5

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“How God Measures Success”

INTRO

Too Great a Temptation is the tragic story of a pastor caught up in getting to the top, attaining success in ministry

- leaving a 10,000 member church for something bigger
- along the way – he tells the sad story of others caught up in the same ladder climbing
- moving from church to church – ever after status, influence, power

-one of my favorites is a pastor who announced at the end of his sermon that he was leaving because Jesus called him to serve at a more influential church

-and the worship leader – caught by surprise – and never overly fond of the man was left to close the service with an appropriate hymn – which he chose, “What a friend we have in Jesus.”

You get the impression that a lot of this kind of spirit was in play in the church at Corinth

-for all the same reasons it’s still in play today

1. for one-the surrounding culture was into ambition, competition
 - awed by power – it is said that Corinth aspired to be more like Rome than Rome itself
 - there was also the resident Hellenistic culture that gave huge weight to wisdom – to the intellect – to rhetoric – -to -they loved to listen to orators who were more about form than content
2. like our age – getting ahead was the name of the game –
 - in the marketplace
 - in the theatre
 - in the sports arena
 - in the intellectual world
 - and even...in the church!

-the early church viewed their new found faith in the same way they viewed the Roman imperial cult

-as a place to gain influence – enter the elite strata of society-achieve success

- they were enamored with self importance – with rank, position, prestige
- so receiving certain spiritual gifts became the means for attaining a special standing
- aligning with “celebrity preachers”, rock star pastors was a way of gaining authority
- it all led to personality cults, factional squabbles, personal rivalries, pecking orders, haves and have nots

The problem was not that the church was in Corinth, but Corinth was in the church

What was needed was a centering word from God – and Paul’s letter was this

- the first three chapters –
 - confronted this elitist spirit
 - knocked the props out from all human boasting
 - clarified what it really means to be a follower of Jesus
 - and concludes with this exhortation – read 3:21-23
- these were words meant to bring everyone to level ground
- remind them and us that all of us belong to no one but God – that’s all that matters
- but turning to chap 4 – it is clear that there was still more to be said
- it’s here Paul delves deeper into the subject of success

It’s pretty clear what our culture has defined as success-

- go to the right college-become sophisticated, urbane
- launch into the best career
- achieve the highest position
- accumulate the most toys
- enter the elite strata of society
- retire as early as possible

But coming to Christ actually redefines a lot of our assumptions

- in His kingdom – there is a whole different framework for success

1. TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN GOD’S KINGDOM, YOU MUST COME TO GRIPS WITH A CRUCIFORMED LIFE – read 4:1

- to all caught up with image, impressing one another, gaining position, hobnobbing with the beautiful
- Paul pitted their image of success against God’s definition
- the values of the world against the values of the cross

- in God's kingdom – it's about a willingness to descend – not a striving to ascend
- and unless you are willing to make this descent – the message of Christianity will be obscured, corrupted
- there will be no real transformation of culture

- note that Paul does not say –
- let a man regard us as part of the elite – the top drawer, cream of the crop
- as those to be served – rather

a. REGARD US AS THOSE WHO SERVE

- as the under rowers of culture
- this is where a cruciformed life is willing to live – below the main deck – among the unseen, unnoticed, the marginalized
- not caught up with the flow of power – striving to always get to the top
- willing to serve at the beat of another – following His rhythm – not ours
- willing to do the menial tasks of cleaning up the dirt
- the mess in other people's lives
- if you're going to weigh on your estimation of us –

b. REGARD US AS STEWARDS, MANAGERS

- cruciformed lives recognize that everything we have is acquired – it all belongs to God
- everything is simply on loan for a season – our skills, our assets, our influence
- each day is simply an entrustment, a moment to seize for Him
- everything given is to be invested – with the anticipation of future dividends

- to boast in them – well – you might as well brag you are left-handed

- but in particular – here's what we are called to manage – the mysteries of God

- what are those? He's already told us –
- it's the amazing news of God's grace
- the willingness of God to reconcile all men
- the plan to include everyone-Jew and Greek

- it is this message we have been entrusted with
- servants have a fundamental charge to defend, declare, dispense, live out

- and when you do – don't be surprised if it ruins your status in the world's eyes

- this is what Paul spends the rest of chap 4 saying –

- i. don't be alarmed in defending the Cross you end up feeling like you are on stage in a theatre – and no one wants to buy a ticket
- ii. don't think it strange if you are viewed as like an accident in a street
- iii. on display at the end of the procession – like men condemned to die-4:9
- iv. don't be amazed if you are one of the messiah's misfits
- v. "treated like garbage – potato peelings from the culture's kitchen" (Peterson)

Not that Paul was lamenting his life

- he was glorying in the privilege – in the status – of being identified with the cross
- and challenging them/us – to have the same ambition

2. TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN GOD'S KINGDOM, YOU MUST SUBMIT TO GOD'S PERFORMANCE STANDARDS-read 4:2

- in our culture – here are the metrics for success
- a solid degree, obtaining substantial resources, driving the right car, living in the right home, schmoozing with the right crowd, wearing the right clothes

Illustration – I used to be so caught up in this – measuring my year by how many trophies I won in tournaments, what position I achieved on campus, what networks I was part of

But in God's kingdom-it comes down to one benchmark –

- there is one central criterion by which God measures our lives – it's not looks, eloquence, wisdom, amount of sales
- it is faithfulness to God*
- which speaks a lot to constancy – unwavering steadfastness
- how faithful we have been in the management of our lives, our calling, our gifts, His mysteries

3. TO BE SUCCESSFUL IN GOD'S KINGDOM, YOU MUST LIVE FOR GOD'S PRAISE-read 4:3-5

- these are some of the most liberating words of Scripture
- for all of us get easily caught up in one another's opinions

Illustration – RD – we spend the first third of our lives obsessed with what others think

- the second third – we could care less what people think
- the final third – we come to a realization no one was ever thinking about us

- the truth is – it is easy to get caught up in what the polls say
- Paul was liberated from world opinion
- it's not that man's opinion does not matter – but in the whole scheme of things – it's not that important
- it's not that reliable for one

Illustration – I tell my students – you're not as great as people will say you are – and you're not as bad

- our own judgment cannot be completely trusted
- sometimes our clear conscience can smell the same as self-righteousness
- I am apt to think more highly – to think too lowly

Point – no human judgment is final – no human judgment can be fully trusted
-at the end of the day – God's judgment is the only judgment that counts

So stop judging before the time

- let God bring everything out – as He will
- He will bring to light the things hidden
- He will reveal the purpose, intent of the heart
- He will give the appropriate praise
- it is the only praise that matters

CONCLUSION

Whose praise are you living for?

- does our desire for man's approval outstrip our desire to hear God's "Well done"?
- what metrics are you using to measure your life?
- are you more into ascending than descending