

How Do We Measure Success?

Part III

by Lois Mitchell

Nov. 23, 2004

How do we measure success in our Christian life, both individually and corporately? I really had intended for this to be a two-part series. However, if you read the last issue, you might remember that it was a bit of a cliff-hanger. I had talked about how I think we ought to measure success – “it’s all about obedience and living according to the teaching of Jesus, even in the midst of this land for which the truth of the gospel is foreign. It is about letting God be God and displaying His authority in diverse and marvelous ways” – and then I had asked, how God measures success. The final words of Part II were: Maybe He doesn’t.

I remember very clearly the day I wrote that article. I had fully intended to conclude that God measures success the same way we do (or at least the way I think we should). That is, I had planned to argue that God looks at our obedience and our willingness to submit to Him and Him only. But as I was about to type those words, I had an overwhelming sense that God really doesn’t measure our success at all. In fact, had I been more faithful to this prompting I would have stated it more emphatically – God doesn’t! But what does this mean? I confess that I’ve puzzled over this for the last two months.

Can it be that God isn’t concerned with our “success”? That success is a human construct and not part of God’s vocabulary or worldview at all? A quick concordance search reveals about 24 instances of the word “success” in the bible (NIV) and all of them in the Old Testament. For the most part, they refer to success in worldly endeavours – in battle, in relationships, in business. Interesting, isn’t it, that the word “success” does not appear at all in the New Testament.

This is like a loose thread on a garment. At this point, I’m not sure if we pull the thread if it will simply come clear, or if it will unravel the garment. Here’s what I’m thinking. In Parts I and II of this series, I began by considering how we measure success in the area of public witness and suggested that successful public witness is not so much about outcomes – public policy which lines up with Scripture – as it is about process. That is, who we are as we live in the public square. But what about the local church level. How do we measure success in our local church ministries? Are things like church attendance, building projects, solid financial giving, number of baptisms, good works performed by the congregation accurate indicators of spiritual maturity and productivity? Are these things “the prize” for which we strive? Certainly each of these things is commendable, but do they get at what’s most important?

When God was selecting David to be King of Israel, Samuel asked Jesse to gather his sons together to see which one would receive the anointing. One by one, Jesse’s sons were considered and God did not speak to Samuel. When he got to the end of the line, he asked Jesse if anyone was missing. David, the youngest, was off tending sheep and so they sent for him to come. He was the one. Ray Boltz sings a song (The Shepherd Boy) about this event and the chorus says:

But when others see a shepherd boy
God may see a king.
Even though your life seems filled
With ordinary things;
In just a moment He can touch you
And everything will change -
When others see a shepherd boy
God may see a king.

Even Samuel was a bit confused by God's choice, thinking that perhaps Eliab must be the one. However, we read in 1 Samuel 16:7:

But the Lord said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart."

Do our measures of success fall in the category of "outward appearance"? "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." I wonder, are we so caught up with our desire to be successful that we have forgotten this simple truth? God calls us to be salt and light in the world. At the Algonquin Conference, Mark Buchanan reminded us that God calls us to come to Him ("Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" Matthew 11:28) but He also tells us to "go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19).

We are to be salt and light in our world, being and doing according to the ethics of the Kingdom of God. We need to be careful that we are not conformed to the pattern of this world (Romans 12:2). We need to see our culture for what it is and consider it in light of the Kingdom. The individualism and competitiveness and striving for success that are so much a part of the fabric of our society are simply not characteristics of the Kingdom.

I think that God doesn't measure success – He simply looks at the heart. He beckons us to come to Him and then to go forth, for Him, trusting not in ourselves and in our efforts and abilities, but trusting only in Him. It's really that simple.