

Listening Prayer and Reflection: My Definition of Success

(Adapted from *Movements from the Inside Out*)

We encourage you to read the following excerpt and prayerfully consider the questions for listening prayer that follow.

"We are not called to be successful, but faithful."

- Mother Theresa ¹

Our understanding of our role and purpose in God's mission is critical to our fruitful participation in that mission. Humanity (perhaps more especially in the West) has an addiction to "success" stories - and perhaps rightly so, as such stories can remind us of what is possible, even in the face of daunting opposition. One problem with our fixation on success, however, is that the world's picture of success always diverges from the pictures of success that we see exalted in the kingdom of God. So how is success defined in the kingdom of God? And are we even called to "success" as we commonly imagine it, or are we actually called to something deeper, more beautiful, and more difficult? We believe that the children of God are genuinely called to fruitfulness; but that fruitfulness can only come about through a life of faithfulness. Further, success and fruitfulness are very much not the same thing. The life of the prophet Jeremiah illustrates the divergence between these two ideas. Recall for a moment the life and ministry of Jeremiah, known as "the weeping prophet". His ministry was one pressed on all sides by opposition, rejection, and imprisonment. Jeremiah was a prophet called to be God's voice to His people, and almost the entirety of his decades-long ministry was marked by the people of God ignoring his prophetic warnings. Was Jeremiah a success? To claim that he was a success requires a radical redefining of the word, and that is our point. Jeremiah was a dramatic failure in the eyes of the world; but a profound success in the eyes of God.

Success as we commonly conceive of it is too often defined by external markers of success, but faithfulness and fruitfulness in the kingdom is marked by right discernment of and radical obedience to the Spirit's leading² - which may or may not result "success" as the world knows it. Don Cousins has defined kingdom success as being faithful, bearing fruit (both internally and externally), experiencing fulfillment and joy as God works in and with us through our particular God-given gifts, and by making God famous through our obedience

¹ quoted in Boyle, Gregory. 2010. *Tattoos on the Heart: The Power of Boundless Compassion*. New York: Free Press. p167.

² this is our revision of a definition of success coined by Peter Scazzero in *The Emotionally Healthy Leader*

and faithfulness to his leading. As Cousins goes on to say, by that definition, all of God's people are called to be a success.³

Excessive focus on the outward trappings of success as the world defines it will almost inevitably lead us away from the people with whom God intends for us to work. Many missional strategies rightly encourage a focus on responsive groups and individuals - either for movement training or for initial evangelism; and if our goal is rapid progress above all else, it certainly makes sense to focus on the responsive. When we do this at the expense of waiting on God, however, we risk missing genuine opportunities. We have known many individuals who initially rejected the gospel, only later to become fervent, reproducing disciples. Likewise, many of the most fruitful movement practitioners we have met were initially skeptical of or outright rejected movement principles. A focus on success will lead us to the well-spoken, the influential, the relevant; but God has chosen the foolish things of this world to shame the wise, and the weak things of this world to shame the strong (I Corinthians 1:27). There is a mystery here that too many missional training manuals do not address. God calls us first to people, to broken people who have rejected him. Of course movements are comprised of these people, but movements are not the end goal of our work, nor are they to be our calling. Movements are simply one by-product of loving broken people well, and of that seed of the kingdom taking root in the hearts of desperately wounded people and spreading uncontrollably to everyone around them.

Success doesn't make sense of a self-giving love that is offered even to those who betray, deny, abandon, and doubt us. But according to Scripture, faithfulness in loving our friends - whether or not we see immediate results - does yield a harvest of fruit. And together we are drawn closer to the heart of God.⁴

When we focus on success over people, we miss the heart of God as well as our best hope for joy in our work with him. Perhaps Father Gregory Boyle puts it best:

Jesus was always too busy being faithful to worry about success. I'm not opposed to success; I just think we should accept it only if it is a by-product of our fidelity. If our primary concern is results, we will choose to work only with those who give us good ones... If success is our engine, we sidestep the difficult and belligerent and eventually abandon "the slow work of God".

Do we mean by all of this that numerical growth in gospel work is unimportant? Of course not! Numerical growth was avidly recorded by Luke in his chronicle of the early church (Acts 1:15,

³ Cousins, Don. 2017. *Experiencing Leadershift: Letting Go of Leadership Heresies*. Ladera Ranch: Shift Press. p241-242.

⁴ Heuertz, Christopher L. And Christine D. Pohl. 2010. *Friendship at the Margins: Discovering Mutuality in Service and Mission*. Downers Grove: IVP Books. p34-35.

2:41, 2:47); and just as in the book of Acts, the spread of the gospel will always (though not always immediately) result in numerical, even exponential, growth of the church. We simply mean that success for the kingdom worker is far more about faithfulness, perseverance, and keeping in step with the Spirit (Galatians 5:16-25) than about numbers. By all means, seek to grow your church, sow the gospel seed broadly using methods that are easily repeated and reproduced in the lives of new disciples. Pursue growth, but do not idolize it. Numbers alone do not tell us whether we are keeping in step with the Spirit. Numerical growth alone does not tell us if we are seeing success, or even if something is good or not! After all, cancer grows, and rapidly. We can only know if something is "successful" in the kingdom of God if we are keeping in touch with God's heart and the leading of his Spirit.

Questions for Listening Prayer & Reflection

- 1) Lord, would you reveal to me how have I really defined "success" for this ministry?
- 2) Lord, where and in what ways have I pursued my own definition of success in this season? What do you want to say to me about that?
- 3) Lord, what does "success" look like for me now, and in the coming season?
- 4) Lord, how have my faulty ideas and assumptions about success hindered what you want to do in me? How have the hindered what you want to do through me?
- 5) Lord, how can we focus less on our ideas of success and more on what you are entrusting to us in this season?
- 6) Lord, what do you want to say to me \ us (reminder? Encouragement? Rebuke? Correction?) about how we are partnering with you in your mission?

Thank you, Lord that you are more concerned about how we love you and how we receive your endless love for us than you are concerned about what we produce for you. Help us, Lord, in our weakness - to listen to your leading, to follow in your footsteps, and to continue to persevere in what you are leading us to do even when we may not see external results. We declare again that this is your mission, Lord. Teach us to walk lovingly with you, to love you and receive your love as our first and foundational act of worship.