

Text: [2 Corinthians 12:1-10](#)
Date: November 17, 2019
Title: “Living with Success (& Failure)” – Humility Series, week 2
Theme: Humility means allowing ourselves to be perfected in weakness.

Intro

Last week we began our humility series by talking about pride
This week, we’ll talk about success & failure
Next week, we’ll look at true greatness and what it means
We’re also following this theme of humility right now in our daily devotionals
– which you can get M-F through the app, at our Facebook page, or
directly from our website

Question

What have you learned either from success, or from failure?

1

Self-confidence is a good thing
Without it, we’d never get anywhere

But there’s something you need to be careful about:
You can’t believe your own hype
Jesus himself warns us: “woe to you when all people speak well of you”
(Luke 6:26)

Politics, corporate America, and professional sports are full of examples of
not only overconfidence, but outright hubris

I love this political story, from the 1934 California governor’s race
Upton Sinclair, the famous author, writer of *The Jungle*, the gruesome
expose on the meatpacking industry in Chicago, was running on a
populist platform
He decided that the best way to help his campaign was to do what he did
best – write a book
You know what he called it?

I, Governor of California and How I Ended Poverty

It outlined, in the PAST tense, his brilliant election campaign and amazing policies that ended poverty

Guess who DIDN'T get elected governor?

(I personally wouldn't have voted for him just because of the title!)

2

The problem with success is that it often teaches us all the wrong lessons
For example, that we got to where we are because we are smarter, more talented, or more deserving than others

If we are people of faith, we might be tempted to say that we are more BLESSED than others

Now, it may be true that we have certain talents in a greater degree than our peers

But the risk is, that if we believe our own hype, we'll start to think that every idea we have is a winner

That people who give us advice we don't like don't know what they're talking about

Till we start believing that we don't need anyone's advice

And everyone who used to know us starts saying,
"Success really changed them, hasn't it?"

3

Paul is an interesting character to look at for this kind of study

I can't tell you how many conversations I've had with people who say:

"I can't stand reading Paul, he's SO arrogant"

I'm not sure how to answer that – I've read him for too long to be a good judge, to where he's just "Paul" – he is who he is, like an old friend

But certainly we hear some of that arrogance though in today's passage

The church at Corinth was a community with whom Paul had a rocky relationship

He founded the church but it quickly descended into infighting

The preachers who followed Paul talked down his importance and talked up their own

Until the people didn't know whose gospel to believe and couldn't agree on what was right, and factions emerged
Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians, calls these subsequent leaders "super-apostles" (2 Corinthians 11:5) – and he didn't mean that positively

It's clear he felt like he was in competition with them, particularly because they were better preachers than him
(Though Paul is usually said to be the second-most important figure in Christianity after Jesus, by all accounts - even his own - he really was a poor speaker)

And so he feels compelled to talk up something that he felt was a real positive for him
Paul didn't know Jesus personally – he was too young to have ever heard him preach
So he relied heavily on the fact that he had several mystical experiences of the risen Jesus – they're described at various points in the New Testament (Acts 9, Galatians 1-2, and here)
He talks about being "caught up into the third heaven" and hearing "unspeakable words that...no one is allowed to repeat" (v.2-4)
Ignore the fact that he says, "I know a man"
He's DEFINITELY talking about himself

These are some remarkable claims
Ones that make you say, "I want to hear more about that"

4

But that's actually NOT the story Paul wants to keep telling
Instead, he wants to talk about his struggles

About his famous "thorn in his flesh"
What he means, no one is sure
It was some trial that he had to endure – whether a physical, mental, or spiritual condition we can't say

But whatever it was, it was awful enough that he prayed repeatedly for God
to remove it from him
And in each case, he kept receiving the same answer to his prayer
“My grace is enough for you, because power is made perfect in weakness”
Which is a really gentle way of saying: NO

5

At this point, Paul has a choice
To rebel against and reject God
To say, “You’re wrong. I can’t believe you’re treating me like this after all
I’ve done for you.”
Or to keep going, to keep pressing, to see what there is here to learn

Which is not unlike the choice before us in our failures
Either we remain absolutely convinced that we were right
So that we get angry at God and the world around us, and learn absolutely
nothing
Or we allow ourselves to be humbled so that we can learn, refine ourselves
and our approach, and try again

6

Paul knew both the highest highs and the lowest lows
He knew what success felt like – he had been a rising star among rabbis
before Jesus got a hold of him
And he knew what failure felt like – to have people you raised up in the faith
turn on you and betray you
To suffer in just about every way imaginable for your faith
To be a great servant of God, but then to pray for relief for some sort of
debilitating condition, and to have God flat-out deny you, not once,
but three times

Success is great, except it has very little to teach us – at least from a
spiritual perspective
Where the lessons are at are really in our failures
It seems to me that we can sum it all up in God’s response to Paul:
“My grace is enough for you, because power is made perfect in weakness”

Relying on God's grace
Being made perfect through weakness instead of power
Through failure instead of success

It seems to me that this is THE definition of humility
Allowing ourselves to be made perfect through weakness
Until we are fully reliant on God

In our lives we will know good days
And we will know bad days
The highest highs and the lowest lows
Because that's life

When you encounter a trial this week
When you've made a mistake
When you've failed

Will you allow yourself to be perfected through weakness?
Will you allow humility to be your teacher?

Amen.

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