

# PERSPECTIVE ON SUCCESS

by Rich Carlson

The year is 56 or 57 AD, and the apostle Paul is under attack. Since he wrote to the church at Corinth, some men have stirred up the people against Paul. They claim he is not a man of his word. He is being forced to defend his decisions about not visiting Corinth. They say he is proud. They say they aren't impressed with his speaking ability or his appearance. They challenge his apostleship. They even question his ministry: Is it real? Is it what should be expected of a real apostle? Is it worthwhile? This is the part of the attack that really bothers Paul, and stirs his emotions. Is what he has been doing worthwhile? Is it successful?

How would you respond to a similar attack? Is what you are doing worthwhile? Are you succeeding? The dictionary defines success this way: "The degree or measure of succeeding. A favorable termination of a venture." It adds, "Specifically, the attainment of wealth, position, or reputation." I find the latter very interesting. In fact, the world around us thinks that success begins with the letter "p": profession, position, performance, possessions, prestige, power. But the question I want to address is not what the world thinks. It is what you think. What is your definition of success? What is the favorable outcome you are seeking?

## LIVING IN TRIUMPH

Let's look at how the apostle Paul answers this question. As a master teacher he chooses an illustration that his audience already understands. He uses it to describe to them the spiritual concept of triumph. Let's read 2 Corinthians 2:14-16:

**But thanks be to God, who always leads us in His triumph in Christ, and manifests through us the sweet aroma of the knowledge of Him in every place. For we are a fragrance of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing; to the one an aroma from death to death, to the other an aroma from life to life. And who is adequate for these things?**

As an old soldier, I love Paul's choice—a military parade. Everyone enjoys a parade, and the Romans were no exception. A "triumph" was a Roman parade for a returning conquering general. The standard operating procedure (SOP), as described by William Barclay, was as follows:

- He had to be the supreme commander.
- He had to have finished the campaign, pacified the people, and brought the troops home.
- At least five thousand of the enemy had to have fallen in one battle.
- The victory had to be over a foreign power.

Of course, all military processions have a prescribed order, called the order of march. Again, William Barclay enlightens us:

1. The standard-bearer carrying the unit's flags.
2. A carried platform holding the statue of Jupiter, the supreme god of Rome.
3. Several platforms holding the spoils of war.
4. Pictures, models, and material from the conquered land.
5. The pipers.
6. Several white bulls to be sacrificed in thanks to the gods.

7. Prisoners of war in chains, marching to servitude, possibly to death.
8. Horn-blowers.
9. Priests swinging censers with sweet-smelling incense burning in them.
10. Kings and chieftains in carts drawn by oxen.
11. Another group of prisoners.
12. The victorious general riding in a golden chariot drawn by four white horses. He was dressed in a purple tunic embroidered with golden palm leaves, and over it he wore a purple toga marked out with golden stars. In his hand he held an ivory scepter with the Roman eagle at the top. Over his head a slave held the crown of Jupiter.
13. The general's family.
14. The victorious army in full dress shouting, "Lo, triumph!"
15. The Roman hierarchy, from senators to magistrates.

What a magnificent picture! There is something about being in a parade for someone important that moves you.

During my years at West Point, we had parades for Generals of the Army Bradley and MacArthur and for presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Nixon. The beat of the drums, the music, being part of a unit, being in uniform, trying to keep in step with everyone else, the sounds, the sights, the smells, the atmosphere, and the crowd motivated you. They challenged you. Being in that type of parade reminded you who you were, what you believed in, and what commitments you had made.

That is what Paul is trying to show us. Don't miss the symbolism of Paul's description and how it fits his purposes:

Who is leading the parade and who is the conquering general? God's Messiah, the Christ.

Are we in the parade? Yes, in Christ we are part of God's family. We may also be seen as part of the victorious army in full dress, which is his robe of righteousness, freely given to us when we placed our trust in him and chose to make him our Lord.

What is our part? Manifesting; that is, showing, demonstrating or making something real and apparent.

Why? Because this is who we are as a result of his being in us. We cannot help ourselves.

What is the fragrance? The sweet aroma of us? No, the fragrance of the knowledge of him.

Where? Every place he leads us!

To whom are we a fragrance? God first! Then, to the prisoners who are being led to a life of bondage and to death, we are a stench. But to the family, soldiers, and fellow citizens watching, we are the fragrance of continued freedom, access to spoils of the battle, and all of the possibilities offered by the conquered lands.

Look at Paul's perspective: First triumph and thankfulness! He sees God always leading us into something consistently worth celebrating. Paul is gratefully convinced that Christ is leading in his current circumstances.

How do you see your life? When I asked, "Is what you are doing worthwhile?" did you immediately think of your job or vocation? When someone asks you what you do, do you answer, "I work for Intel"? Do you really

work *for* Intel?

We need to see life as God's triumphant parade. His idea of success is not making us look good. Success from God's perspective doesn't depend on where we work, how much money we make, the rank we attain, or the price of the toys we can afford. It is his triumphant procession, not ours. Yet we are in it.

Paul is telling us that God leads us. You don't really think that you showed up at Intel by accident do you? He called you. He placed you right in the middle of Intel! Isn't that exciting? And they have agreed to pay you to support your ministry and to feed your family. How ingenious of God! Should you work hard and be the best you can be? Absolutely!

But why does he have you there? Look at Paul's perspective again. God has you there in Christ for penetrating impact, demonstrating something consistently worthwhile. What a great illustration Paul has used. There is nothing more penetrating, nothing that makes a more lasting impression, than a smell. To those around us we are either White Shoulders or burnt toast. White Shoulders was the perfume I bought for my wife when we were first married. If you walk past me wearing that scent, the image of my wife in all her glory, all she is and means to me, comes to my mind immediately. The penetrating smell of something burning brings an immediate but entirely different reaction. It motivates me to move quickly. It speaks of danger, destruction, and death. Both smells penetrate with a lasting impression, and the type of impression depends on whether those around are running toward or away from Jesus, toward life and all of its prospects or toward slavery and death.

What is the fragrance that we are to wear? It is the fragrance of the knowledge of Christ. We must know him. It is his aroma, not ours, that we are manifesting, yet we are involved because he is in us.

#### THE IMPACT INTEGRITY MAKES

But how are we to go about penetrating the environment where God has placed us? Look at Paul's perspective once again in verse 17:

**For we are not like many, peddling the word of God, but as from sincerity, but as from God, we speak in Christ in the sight of God.**

We are not trying to sell a product, but notice how we act: We see ourselves sent by God. When we speak, we speak in the power of Christ as if our Father were watching. We represent Christ in a way that pleases him. In other words, we are sincere. What you see is what you get. Our lives are known for their integrity, for their reality.

Now that is how the apostle Paul characterizes success-triumphant impact with integrity. He sees us being led in triumph as we unforgettably impact those around by our authentic lifestyle.

#### THE MEASURE OF CHANGED LIVES

In verses 2:14-17 we saw the character of success. Now in verses 3:1-3 we see the measure of success:

**Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, as some, letters of commendation to you or from you? You are our letter, written in our hearts, known and read by all men; being manifested that you are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone, but on tablets of human hearts.**

Paul now asks those who are challenging him if they thought that he was bragging. He asks if they would like him to submit letters of recommendation to them. Then he startles them by saying, "You are our letter."

Paul uses the word "manifested" again in verse 3. He used it previously in 2:14. If I manifest something, I display it for what it really is. Here is a picture of reality breaking forth. Note how he describes this reality: It isn't something that humans could write with a pen on a physical surface like a parchment. It is written on

human hearts. Paul is describing the work of the Spirit of God as foretold in Jeremiah 31:33: "'But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,' declares the LORD, 'I will put My law within them, and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.'"

Here is the principle: The accurate measure of success for the Christian is the reality of changed lives. As a boat leaves a wake in the water as it proceeds, so a successful life can be measured by its wake of changed lives. The triumphant procession in which Christ leads us leaves behind it men and women who will never be the same.

## THE SECRET OF LIVING IN THE SPIRIT

The character of success is triumph, impact, and integrity. The measure of success is the reality of changed lives. Now what is the secret of having such a life, a life characterized by thankfulness because we know that God's Son is leading us in a victory celebration that impacts people in such a real and authentic way that they will never be the same? Paul gives us the secret of success in 3:4-6:

**And such confidence we have through Christ toward God. Not that we are adequate in ourselves to consider anything as coming from ourselves, but our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant, not of the letter, but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life.**

We are not adequate to live such a life. We cannot consider such triumph, such impact, such integrity, such authentic life change as coming from us. Yet we have confidence in Christ toward God. In 3:12 Paul will say, "...We use great boldness in our speech...." and in 4:1, "...We do not lose heart...." How can this be?

Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing." (John 15:5.) The source of life is the vine. The objective of the Vine-dresser is to produce fruit. The branches merely connect the vine to the fruit. We're channels, a part of the process. He is manifesting fragrance through us. We can't produce fruit. That takes the Spirit of God working in hearts.

I was talking to one of our missionaries who was returning home, and she said, "I'm so fearful people will think *we* did that translation. God did it!" "...Our adequacy is from God, who also made us adequate as servants of a new covenant...." That's good news! Within us there is a new creation that takes place. His Spirit has implanted his very seed in our hearts. We are something new; we've been made alive. And he has put together our spiritual gifts, talents and personality in just the right way to equip us for our task. Yet, it's his Spirit working in us making us into the people he wants us to be, conforming us to his image. And he says he has made us adequate servants of this new arrangement.

Notice that it concerns not the letter of the law, but the Spirit- "...For the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life." Do you ever notice how the letter kills, how it doesn't in fact motivate us or empower us? It does the opposite. If you're walking down the street and you come across a sign that says, "Don't spit on the lawn," you probably hadn't even thought about spitting, but all of a sudden that saliva just starts getting ready, and you think, "I have a tremendous desire to spit on the lawn!" The letter of the law just brings out our rebelliousness.

But the Spirit gives life. When I realize I'm not adequate for something and it's going to take the Lord to do it, then I say, "Lord, I'm, not adequate. He says, "You're right, but I can work through you." Now, that is the law of life in the Spirit of Christ. It sets us free from the law of sin and death. It's not our adequacy, but he has declared us adequate servants of a new arrangement for living that is dependent on his life-giving Spirit within us. It was in fact the Spirit of the living God doing the writing on human hearts. It is not our adequacy, because meeting the demands of God's righteous requirements cannot be done in the flesh. Only the activity of God's Spirit brings life.

Paul has admitted that already in 2:16: "And who is adequate for these things?" His implied answer is, "No one." As Paul looks at this perspective on success, he understands he cannot live this way by his own effort. Nor can he change a life. Only God can do that through Christ as he captures us with his love, showers us

with his grace, and writes on our hearts with the indelible imprint of a new creation in us accomplished by the power of the Spirit. But he has made us part of the process, precious because of the price paid to redeem us and because of the Person who resides in us. We are not selling pots, but we are displaying a Treasure, Jesus Christ himself, for all to see.

## WHAT IS THAT FRAGRANCE?

I asked you, Do you work *for* Intel? Since returning from Europe, Marti and I have been disturbed to see how important the work-place has become. In the book *No God But God: Breaking with the Idols of This Age*, the editors call the work-place one of the idols of our time. The company name and position title determine who people are. Their performance and upward mobility satisfy their search for significance, and their medical benefits and retirement plan meet their demand for security. Now, don't get me wrong-the Scriptures teach that work is a good thing, and that we are to be good workers, working as unto the Lord. Our performance and integrity on the job will give us a right to speak in that setting. Yet the work place is not to be all things, completely dominating our mind and time, thus becoming our god. Do you work for Intel, or are you being led to do work for Someone and something else at Intel?

During my last tour of duty, I taught Defense Economics at the Navy War College. I taught a wonderful group of men. Of the one hundred officers who start out in any service, only one makes it to a war college, which is the last rung of military education. These men were the winners, the cream of the officer corps. They had competed, passed all of the hurdles, made all of the promotions, many of them early, and had arrived at the desired destination. But some had destination sickness. They had arrived at the exact spot for which they had aimed, and it was hollow. Very few of them would ever be promoted again. They had loved competing for the next promotion, and it was over. For most, there would be no more promotions. What was the measure of their success? If it was just about position and power and prestige, these men had it all, and it meant very little. But the real question is, What impact had they had on those they led?

How about you? For what are you aiming? Are you in danger of having destination sickness? Whatever you do, whether you work in the home or outside it, why do you do it?

My two years of command of an artillery battalion in Germany in 1977-79 were not easy ones. We had 450 troops and 32 officers. We had a race problem and a drug problem. In the midst of these challenges, we were responsible for the delivery of nuclear weapons and for training people to assemble them. We had to be ready to move to our war-time positions at any time night or day and able to leave the compound within an hour and a half.

In the midst of this situation my executive officer (second in command), a man by the name of John, stuck with me through thick and thin. Although he showed up a few times at a Bible study, clearly heard the gospel in the sermon I preached on Thanksgiving Day, and with his Catholic background occasionally discussed the Lord with me, I never knew where he stood with Jesus. I knew he had watched closely and had seen that I was very human. He had seen me struggle in the midst of several technical nuclear inspections, an accident that took the life of two German civilians, and a married officer's involvement with another officer's wife. He had seen me relieve several commanders, lose my temper at staff call, and struggle to maintain my loyalty to my superiors.

But in spite of this, several years after serving with him, he called and asked us to visit him and his family. He was about to take over a command of his own, and he wanted me to help him design a training program for his first six months. As walked into his living room and sat down, he asked a question I will never forget. I was startled. The question had to do with training, but it was not what I expected. He said, "Rich, what kind of a study Bible should I buy?" I said, "John, why do you want to know?" He said, "I want you to know that I now understand what it means to make Jesus Lord." I was so moved, I couldn't answer. Some would have said that my time as a battalion commander was not very successful. In many respects I would agree. Yet when it came to what God did, I am very grateful!

Now that is what Paul is-grateful. Thankful. Please grasp Paul's perspective on success. It is characterized by triumph, impact, and integrity. It is measured by the reality of changed lives. Its secret is the power of the

life-giving Spirit of God himself who lives and works within us.

How does he want you to see yourself? He wants you to be thankful because you are doing something worth celebrating, something consistently worthwhile, something marvelously real. The result is that lives around you are being changed in ways people would never expect as they come face-to-face with a person whose adequacy is based on the Spirit of God, something they will never be able to explain.

Friend, the fields around us are white unto harvest. And you are in exactly the right spot to let God in you manifest to all around who you are because of who he is in you. You really don't have to say a word except to answer the question, "What is that fragrance?"

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