



Pilgrimage:

A Newsletter of Christian Spirituality

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SUCCESS & FAILURE

The college graduate gets his first job in the business world. He approaches it with some trepidation but also with excitement. He assumes that if he just works hard and does his job, he will get ahead. He looks forward to some glory as well as income. Now comes the payoff for all his years of school -- the beginning of it, at least. But then after a time, he finds that others less talented and conscientious are getting the promotions and the raises. It seems that they are better at the office politics (often involving deceit and manipulation) than he is. So he misses out on the success he so expected -- and deserved.

Or there is the parish priest who puts so much effort into the parish -- long hours visiting the faithful and being there for them; faithfulness at prayer and worship; being available at all hours to those in need; doing his best at preaching and teaching. Yet in spite of it all, the parish doesn't grow. To all appearances he is a faithful priest, yet there is no success: no increase in attendance and membership, no increased mission giving, no increase in the budget. He tries to be faithful, yet the payoff isn't there.

Or the stay-at-home mother, who strives to make a nice home for her family. She, too, does her best. In addition to doing things with and for her children, she expects to have a nice and productive garden, make clothes for the children (and herself), keep the house reasonably clean, and volunteer at church and school. Yet somehow success eludes her. She never quite gets to the long term projects -- there is too much immediate stuff to do. Not only does she not have a successful career to feel good about, but even the immediate home stuff doesn't get done to her satisfaction -- the house is never as clean as she thinks it ought to be, and she feels that she never gives enough attention to the children.

Or the retired business man, who is embittered because every time in his career he was about to achieve some striking success, something beyond his control intervened -- the oil embargo or a change of management or a takeover or a recession. He is now comfortably retired, yet that one great triumph, which he feels could give him a real sense of accomplishment, always eluded him.

Our nature is such that we expect our efforts to be rewarded with success. We assume that if we do our best, then success should follow. If it doesn't, we feel cheated. Things shouldn't be that way. We resent failure, even when it is largely our own fault, because it is humiliating. How much worse, when we have done the best we can, and we still fail.

The same is true for us as Christians. We try to do our best as Christians -- to resist temptation, to say our prayers, to be good to other people, to be in church faithfully. Yet we often fail. This is particularly upsetting when we fail after putting forth our best effort -- to get a daily time of quiet perhaps. Then our failure pushes us toward despair. We feel as though we will never be able to accomplish anything in the Christian life. We feel as though we might as well give up.

We also have difficulty when our efforts at Christian life fail to protect us from pain and adversity. Perhaps our central relationships go bad, or we find we cannot sleep at night, or cancer is diagnosed -- it makes us wonder whether there is any point to Christian life. Our efforts there have not brought us a successful life.

There are two problems with this way of looking at success and failure. First, we do not have quite the right understanding of which is which. The Cross is in one sense failure: pain, death, humiliation, the end of all Jesus' earthly work with His disciples. Yet it is a failure which God uses for His own great purpose. It is not a failure to be avoided, but one to be embraced.

This means that we cannot treat "failure" as purely evil. In worldly terms, failure may be "bad", but it is something that God can use for good. Failure need not be a pejorative term for Christians.

The second problem we have is that success may sometimes be bad for us, and failure good -- when viewed from the perspective of what God does in our lives. Jesus' "failure" on the Cross was good, and the prospect of worldly success was a temptation to be resisted. (St Matthew 4:8)

What normally happens when we succeed? If it is success in prayer or Christian life, we tend to become smug with a sense that we have finally got it right. We then lose some of the urgency of our need for God. We wander off,

imperceptibly perhaps, on our own and away from God. It may not be our intention, but we take credit for the success: even if we admit that God gave the success, we feel it must be due to our good effort or condition, a reward for something we did right. In any event, with the success behind us, we feel less need for Him. We are more ready to be independent, to stand on our own. (This is exactly what we see in the history of Israel after the Exodus: when their enemies are subdued and they have enough to eat, they go off after the local idols. In time of foreign oppression or famine, they consider turning back to God.)

Success thus leads us astray. The aim of Christian life is intimate dependence upon God. He must be Lord, and we His loving and obedient children. Success is often an obstacle to the goal, because it can come between us and God. It dissolves our sense of need and dependence, and shifts the focus of our life from Him to us and to our success.

Similarly, failure can do us a world of good. It keeps us from trusting in ourselves. It reminds us that God is all that matters -- not God and success. It keeps us from taking credit for what we have done, and reminds us that "we are unprofitable servants." (St Luke 17:10)

Failure is humiliating, especially when it is not our fault. Humility is, however, a virtue, and an essential one. Our pride is the biggest danger to our acceptance of God's offer of heaven. Pride is offended by failure. This often keeps us from reaping the spiritual benefits of failing: we become defensive, or resentful, or angry, or envious of those who succeed. Yet if we are willing to humble ourselves under the hand of failure, we can learn that God's love is still triumphant. That we have failed does nothing to undermine His love.

This is the center of Christian life: God loves us. He loves us not because we are worthy of it, but because it is His nature to love. Our pride makes this a hard lesson to learn. He teaches it to us Himself. And He uses success and failure to do it. This requires that we lose the sense that there is a connection between success and Divine favor. So long as we assume that the one is indicative of the other, we will fail to understand the Cross of Christ -- and thus the love of God which is manifested by the Cross.

To help us dissolve the connection between His favor and success, God does two things: He gives us failure when we expect success, and success when it is obvious that we do not deserve it. The parish priest may be doing everything he can think of to help the parish grow -- including prayer, long hours, calling and all the things the church growth people say to do. Yet if God were to give him success (in the terms he expects: numbers) he would attribute it to his efforts. He could hardly do otherwise. Conversely, when he has given up in his quest for success, and acknowledged that he is unequal to his task, a sinner and

a failure -- then he is surprised when the numbers start to increase. He knows that it is not his doing.

So long as we are working for success, we are working for something other than (and less than) God. As such, we are out of order. God is the only worthy goal. God will purify our desire by giving us what we need rather than what we want -- which is, in this case, failure. This is the way He can call us back to His love: that it is enough for us to be in His hands, whether we are successful or not. It is His love that matters, not our standing in the world. We are better off trusting ourselves to Him than we are insisting upon success. We can leave the results in His hands.

This attitude of trusting love can then shape the way we deal with success and failure. We know on some level that failure can build character. Thus, for example, we are glad when our child's soccer team loses once in a while, so that he will have the experience. On the other hand, we don't want him to have too much of that experience (or his coach will hear of it)! Knowing that some failure might be good for the character can lead us to begin to trust God in time of failure.

Then we can go on to learn to leave success and failure in God's hands. Rather than being preoccupied with the outcomes, we will focus upon God, our loving Lord. If we fail, He is still Lord, and still as loving as before. Failure is no reason to distrust Him. We can accept the failure as good for us (because He has allowed it), and as a loving touch from His hand.

For most of us, this is not as easy as it sounds. It is especially difficult when it comes to our temptations. When we struggle against sin, and fail, we are tempted to despair in proportion to our effort which preceded the failure. We feel we have failed not just ourselves but God. How can we conceive that God might use such a failure? Yet this is the message of the Cross: Christ died for our sins. Sin need be no obstacle to His love. Indeed, sin is a great incentive to penitence, and humility, and true love -- if we can get over our shame (rooted in our pride), and accept His forgiveness. Rather than hiding like Adam and Eve in the Garden, we should come out and throw ourselves upon His mercy.

Most of us need a lot of practice to develop detachment from success and failure, to come to the point where we are willing to accept whatever comes as coming from God. We are to be thankful both ways -- and by His grace, we can be. That is the way God treats children whom He cares about. As Thomas Merton once remarked, "It is better to fail well than to succeed badly."