

Success & Failure

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[0 : 00] I think entirely appropriate is that on June the 6th, Tom Cooper is talking about anxiety. And I trust he'll be an expert by then, if not already.

You may know that on the 6th of April, Fran and I went to Kenya.

And one of my illusions is that I stand 6'5 in Vancouver. By the time I'd been in Kenya for about an hour and a half, I was down to about 1'3.

Vancouver is a small place when you see it from Mombasa. I mean, people have very little idea about it.

And to try and persuade them how important I am and what a significant person I am was an exercise in futility. It just didn't work. I couldn't get it across at all.

[1 : 17] And so I just got smaller and smaller and smaller, which I'm sure was very helpful. But they know that Canada is cold and Vancouver is somewhere, but that's about all.

And just the sheer mass of humanity. You know, and I am beggars on the street really were very hard for me to encounter a fellow who sat on a tire all day long and smiled beautifully at us as she went by from blind eyes and crippled feet.

And you realize that the God of creation, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, probably thinks he's as important as I am.

And that was very helpful in a funny kind of way. But, you know, you just are made to realize what an insignificant fleck of humanity you are.

There is something which I was very much aware of, which I think you might call it Vancouver.

[3 : 03] Think, you know, that that's something that happens. And as though, you know, the feeling that the whole of the distillation of the whole of philosophy and knowledge and understanding for all the ages of the human race have been condensed into the periphery of our intelligence, into the sort of orb of our intelligence here in Vancouver, and that we know most of the answers to most of the questions.

And to recognize that we hardly know any of the questions. The conference I was at emphasized, because it was largely dominated by people from what we call the one third world, they called the two thirds world, because the vast majority of people on this globe come from the two thirds world. And each of the people that was at the consultation on evangelism was there to try and explain evangelism.

Evangelism in India, evangelism in Nigeria, evangelism in Kenya, evangelism in South Africa, evangelism in Brazil, evangelism in Chile, evangelism among Jews in the United States.

All these people came with different presentations to make. And my responsibility was to talk about evangelism in a secular, an affluent secular society.

[4 : 46] And in a conference in which the two thirds world is well represented, the affluent secular society that I take to be the forefront of all that is good in life, was considered very peripheral indeed.

And some strong suspicion that we didn't even begin to understand what the gospel was about.

And that we had successfully accommodated the gospel to our way of life without it making much difference.

And so that it was a very humbling situation to be in. And, you know, pushed me into the kind of corner where I felt that what we're doing in trying to put the gospel in the midst of us and say, what does this mean and how do we respond to it and what are we going to do with it and what it's saying to us is very important.

You get, I mean, I have the strong conviction that it really is the matter of ultimate importance as far as humanity is concerned the world over.

And when you see the kind of response that much of the world is making to the gospel and the relative insignificance and irrelevance of the gospel to us in Western society, you really are forced to wonder whether we haven't gained the whole world and lost our soul, which, of course, is the subject of the passage we read from Scripture today in Luke chapter 12, verse 16.

[6 : 47] The land of a rich man brought forth plentifully. Now, the words that Tom and Lisa have put together here are the words success and failure.

And the interesting thing is that those are probably fairly important words in our society, in the creation of our city and the creation of our community.

We are required to succeed and we hate the prospect of failure. So whether you succeed or whether you fail is a matter of great importance.

The first thing I discovered about both the words is that they virtually don't appear in the Bible. Success and failure are not biblical concepts at all.

And when you look at success as a word, it originally was used to describe something that a landlord might do to his tenant to have him evicted.

[8 : 01] He would be successful in getting him out of the way. And you will recognize that succeeding and successful are closely related.

And the prince succeeds to the throne at the death of his father. You know, and that. Am I doing something wrong? No, it's just distracting. So that success means replacing somebody else.

Taking over. So that you get. And successful is a very amoral word. You can be a successful murderer or a successful bank robber.

You can be a successful cheat if you want to be. So it's success becomes a kind of very limited word.

Now, the pursuit of success is important to us. I mean, who wouldn't want to be a success like Wayne Gretzky? Who wouldn't want to succeed in conquering Everest?

[9 : 11] Or who wouldn't want to succeed in making one of the great modern medical miracles, the breakthrough to achieve such a miracle? Success is something that is a powerful motivator, the pursuit of success.

But it's a word that lacks any kind of ultimate meaning. It's something which is very temporary and, in fact, probably fairly accidental.

If you go to that wise book called the Book of Ecclesiastes, you will find that success and failure are dealt with in chapter 9, verse 11, which tells you that the race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise, or wealth to the brilliant, or favor to the learned.

But we are all subject to a process of time and chance, and whether or not that time and chance affords us success or failure is something over which we have little or no control.

So when you see the picture of success in the parable of the rich fool, you see that at the very point that he reached the pinnacle of his success, he also confronted his ultimate failure, that he had failed at that very point.

[10 : 44] Failure, in the same way, is not a biblical word. Failure is largely regarded as something that happens to your heart, maybe, or it happens to your car engine, or it happens to a scheme that you have concocted.

But failure doesn't happen to people. What happens to people is that they sin. It's impossible in the scheme of things for a person to fail.

Failure, they can disobey, but they can't fail, because there is nobody else in the world quite like you, and all you are responsible to do, ultimately, is to be who you are, and that you will not be who you are, only if you choose to be disobedient to who you are as a child of God, an inheritor of the kingdom of heaven.

So that if you rebel against that, then you are, that's sin, that's not failure. So failure is something that happens to things, but we've imported both words into our society so that we measure most of what happens in our world by success and failure.

And when you look at the man who's spoken of in Luke chapter 12, the ground of a certain man produced a good crop, and he thought to himself, what shall I do?

[12 : 21] And being a rational creature, he said, I have no place to store my crops. This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones.

And the confusion that he was under was that because his crops had succeeded, he had succeeded, and that the meaning of his life was to be derived from the things that he possessed.

And so if he possessed more, he was more. He was, he was, the whole of his life was to be found in the meaning of the things that he had or possessed.

So he decided that if he had more, he would be more. And so he decided to tear down his barns and build bigger ones, and there he would store all his grain and his goods.

And then he had this little conversation with himself. You remember that other character from Luke that prayed thus with himself.

[13:30] Well, this man talked thus with himself. And he said, soul, you have plenty of goods and things laid up for many years.

Take life easy, eat, drink, and be merry. Well, the thing that he couldn't distinguish at this point seems to be that these things were, belong to him.

These are mine, he said. And then he talked to his soul and said, this also is mine. And I will say to what is mine, eat, drink, and be merry, for you have lots laid up.

So he treated his soul as something that belonged to him, not as something that ultimately had been given to him, but belonged to God.

And so he got caught in this particular cycle, and he had successfully deceived himself.

[14:42] And so the story ends with that very night, or the Lord saying to him, this very night, your life will be demanded from you.

And that doesn't mean that having prospered and done well and eaten and drunk fully, that he would drop dead of a heart attack. But that in this decision that he made, in the moment of that decision, he was in effect shaping the whole direction of his life.

And it was wrong. It was the wrong direction. When it says, this night thy soul shall be required of thee, really looks forward to the moment of judgment under which all our lives must ultimately come.

And what is being said to him, that when you face judgment, the decision you've made at this moment is the basis on which your life will be judged.

This is the decision you've made, and this decision has revealed, down to the very core of your being, who you really are and what you really want.

[16:00] And so the story ends with that. And the question is asked, who will get what you have prepared for yourself?

Now, in fact, the question is quite a penetrating question because he had found his identity in the things which he possessed.

And there would come a moment when he could no longer hold on to the things that he possessed, when he would recognize that you can't take it with you.

And if your life is entirely caught up in the success you have enjoyed in acquiring things to possess, then when those things are stripped away from you, what's left?

Nothing. There just isn't anything left. And that was the home truth up against which he found himself in that moment.

[17:10] You lose all your possessions, and your life, which was your possessions, loses all its meaning. Well, that's the story.

And so that you see in terms of our human life that at the moment of success, there was a massive failure, a failure to understand what life was all about.

Now, what I want to do is illustrate this to you with a little picture here. And this is how I think it works.

What you start with is, you start with the process of life here, and then this is the upswing, which goes like that, and that's called success.

Or else life can go like that, and that's called failure, you see, so that both those things can happen. Now, Ecclesiastes tells you that both success or failure can happen to anybody.

[18:28] It's just a matter of time and chance. It doesn't have a lot to do with who you are, whether you're intelligent, whether you're wealthy, or anything else. You are caught in circumstances which may lead.

This, then, may lead you into establishing yourself in terms of pride, which is what the rich fool did. He took his pride, his sense of worth, out of the things which he possessed.

This, in the same way, can lead you into a sense of despair, so that success leads to pride, failure leads to despair, and both of them lead to ultimate oblivion, meaninglessness.

But what has to happen is that you travel either by the process of failure or through the process of success, and God seems to be quite indifferent as to which it is, you know, because some happen to some and some happen to the other.

And if this ends up in pride, then you've been better to fail. And if this ends up in despair, you might have been better to succeed.

[19 : 45] But neither of them is of ultimate importance because the thing that has to happen to you is that you have to face the judgment of God. And what the judgment of God is, is this.

You are, your life, the kind of basic decision which your life represents is, in a sense, put under the light.

And it's examined. So that when you come to judgment, you may say, well, I have, I don't need to face this of ultimate possibility because I have these possessions and I have, my life is totally tied to my possessions, to my success.

Or, you may say that I have failed completely and therefore I despair of any good thing. But judgment has nothing to do with this because judgment is, in a sense, your response to the ultimate purpose of God which is expressed in the establishment of his kingdom through faith in Jesus Christ.

this is the ultimate meaning of your life. And God's purpose is that as you travel through life, whether by failure or by success, and God can use either of them equally well, it doesn't matter to him.

[21 : 24] It may be of the utmost importance to you, but it doesn't matter ultimately to God. whether by success or by failure, you ultimately come to say what is your life all about?

And at that moment, you come under the judgment of God and the judgment of God is to see whether the grace that he's revealed to us in the person of Jesus Christ is something to which you say yes or something to which you say no.

And despair might lead you to say no as pride might lead you to say no. Despair saying I am unworthy or pride saying it is unnecessary.

And so you don't worry about anything beyond this. Your mind doesn't go. And yet the purpose of God is always beyond this. Take a particular day in your life, for instance, you know.

And you get up a few minutes late and breakfast isn't ready and the coffee hasn't been prepared and you get down to work late and somebody has given you the wrong phone numbers on your pink slip and you can't get back to the people you're trying to get in touch with and an important call doesn't come through and this kind of thing goes on all day long.

[22 : 50] So what do you do? Shoot yourself at 4.30? No. What you try and do is recognize that there is another day, there is another time, there is another possibility.

Now what Christian faith calls us to do is to deal with whatever circumstances come our way, whether they are marked by success or by failure and to know the ultimate reality, whether it is one or whether it is the other, has primarily to do with the grace of God and the kingdom of God which he's revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

and that our only stability and our only peace of mind and the only meaning and purpose in our life comes from the awareness of the ultimate reality of God, God's kingdom revealed in Jesus Christ. You can't live today apart from that ultimate reality. And I say that, you know, I mean, you can believe me or you can't.

I don't care. I guess I care. But the fact of the matter is that success or failure are very much coincidental realities in our life.

[24 : 24] The eternal purpose of God revealed in Jesus Christ is the basis of the ultimate reality of our life on which our life is based.

And the danger of living in a society that is so success-oriented as our society is that there is a very real tendency to despair if you fail to make it in a society where every opportunity is here for you to make it if you fail.

That seems to be an unmitigated tragedy when in fact it doesn't really matter very much at all. You know, you can, I know you won't believe me in saying that, but it's, there is a truth to it that I want you to get hold of.

It doesn't ultimately matter. What ultimately matters is how in success success or failure subject to the temptation of pride or despair, you recognize that the ultimate reality is God's purpose revealed in Christ and that you, you are going to be judged not on the basis of success or failure, but on the

basis of your response to the kingdom, whether it's yes or whether it's no.

And that kingdom confronts us not as an abstract political theory or a spiritual idea. That kingdom confronts us in the person of Jesus Christ who is designated by God to be our judge and also to be Lord of Lords and King of Kings.

[26 : 15] and that though he may be the one who is neither known nor honored, though he may be by our success oriented society despised and rejected, he nevertheless is the one to whom ultimately you answer yes or no.

And that's, and that answer on the basis of the whole of your life is what your life is all about.

That's, I mean, that's why this passage goes on to say, you know, it's, it's the kingdom. Success or failure can be very deceiving, but the ultimate goal you should keep clearly in mind and that you have to live with that perspective on, on a continuing basis.

I think probably the, the biblical equivalent to success because success just doesn't appear in scripture except in one place that I could find.

The biblical equivalent is blessedness. Success tends to be something we achieve, blessedness is something which is conferred on us by God. So may you be utter failures but very much blessed.

[27 : 40] blessed. Thank you. Let me say a prayer. Our God, that we may indeed seek your kingdom, that we may know freedom from the pride of success or the despair of failure and steadfast purpose in the obedience of Jesus Christ.

We ask this in his name. Amen.