

Are You Successful or Do You Just Have Money?

Acts 1: 1-11

Bill was a writer, a really good writer. In fact, the whole country knew his name although they did not know him as "**Bill**". Editors competed to get Bill's stories. He was not one of those struggling young writers who couldn't get a break. In fact, editors paid top dollar competing for Bill's work. Bill seemed to have it made. He had money, he had fame, and he was superb at what he did.

One more thing. Bill's stories usually had a bit of mystery about them. He was famous for the little twist at the end that gave his stories a surprise ending. In that way Bill's stories were like their author; there was a bit of mystery about his life.

Bill refused to give out biographical information. He wandered the back alleys and bars of New York. At times, he wrote furiously. Then he would pass out drunk and exhausted. He died broke at age 47 of cirrhosis of the liver.

His readers would one day understand some of his drinking and unhappiness. His mother had died when he was three. His father, a doctor, seemed broken by her death and ceased his medical practice. Bill's first child, a son, died right after birth. Not too many years later, his wife died as well. These things explain only part of Bill's sadness; they don't touch upon his one great dark secret. You see, Bill had once embezzled \$1000 as a bank teller! He was hiding in Central America when his wife became deathly ill. His return to care for her couldn't save her, but it did earn him a number of years in prison. And from that prison cell, he began to write and achieve literary success. He wrote, however, not under his own name of William Sydney Porter. He wrote under a pen name, a disguise, to keep anyone from knowing that it was a convicted felon who wrote the intriguing short stories with the surprise endings that made him famous. His famous pen name? Many of you already know **O. Henry**.

One of the lessons that life teaches us is to be careful whom we call a success and whom we call a failure. Was O. Henry a success? On one level he was brilliantly so. On another level, he was a

tragic failure.

How do we know when we look at a person's life if that person is a success or a failure? Sometimes it is difficult to predict.

There was a ditsy redhead on television years ago. Many of us grew up watching her antics. Her name? Lucille Ball. Lucy had been only a minor movie star but the new medium of television was a perfect showcase for her talents. And so, at the age of forty, Lucille Ball became a major star. Thirty-five million Americans each week tuned in to watch this delightful featherhead botch up situation after situation. Off-screen, however, Lucille Ball was a clever businesswoman. With the help of her husband, Desi Arnez, she turned her TV career into an empire. They recorded each episode on film in order to preserve it for future sales. It was a smart move. In America, I LOVE LUCY reruns have been going on seemingly forever. Lucy became so powerful she bought a movie studio, RKO. Some of you can remember when a major share of TV programs was Desilu productions. No movie star had power like Lucille Ball had.

By the way, when Lucille Ball began studying to be an actress in 1927, she showed very little potential. She was told by the head instructor of the John Murray Anderson Drama School, **"Try any other profession. Any other."** Sometimes you just can't tell who will succeed and who will fail.

This is the day in the Christian year when we celebrate the Ascension of Jesus Christ. Luke tells us in the first chapter of Acts that after giving his final charge to his disciples, Jesus was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight. In Ephesians 1 St. Paul takes the matter one step farther. He tells us that God raised Christ from the dead

"...and set him on a throne in deep heaven, in charge of running the universe, everything from galaxies to governments, no name and no power exempt from his rule. And not just for the time being, but forever. He is in charge of it all, has the final word on everything". (Ephesians, The Message Eugene Peterson)

Who could have predicted it a humble carpenter from Nazareth, a backwater village in Judea, ascended to sit at the right hand of God?

Don't you wish that you could go back two thousand years and whisper into Herod's ear, and

Pontius Pilate's ear, and even Augustus Caesar's ear, "**Listen! Long after you have become only a footnote to history, this simple itinerant preacher will have the allegiance of hundreds of millions of followers. He will be seated at the right hand of God. His name will be above every name.**" They wouldn't listen, of course. But wouldn't it be fun to let them know that this teacher whom they rejected is now King of Kings and Lord of Lords? Who is a success? Who is a failure? Two thousand years ago, you would have said, based on the world's standard of judgment, Herod was the success, Pilate was the success, and Caesar was the success. And Jesus? **NOT!** He was a wretched failure that died on a cross between two thieves. It's difficult to predict who will really be successful by the world's standards.

Are you a success? That is the question for the morning. There are some of you who would rate your lives as singularly undistinguished. Nevertheless, I have the authority to tell you, you are a success. Your life is richer than you realize. One day you will see just how successful you are. There are many other people whom the world counts as successful who are living an illusion.

Let me share with you a couple of principles by which you can judge whether your life is a success. These principles quite obviously have nothing to do with wealth or power. Wealth and power are transitory. Donald Trump, Bill Gates and Bill Clinton WILL some day occupy the same size coffin as you and I. All of their wealth and power will be left behind. Will their lives be successful? That's not for us to judge. But let me give you these two principles by which we can judge our own lives.

PRINCIPLE ONE: WILL THE WORLD BE A BETTER PLACE BECAUSE WE HAVE BEEN HERE?

For most people, life is a draw. They leave the world pretty much as they found it. They live, they work, and then they die. And the world is no better or no worse for their having been here. They are nice people, perhaps. It's just that they made no lasting impression - no lasting contribution. They survived but no more. How refreshing when somebody comes along who is not satisfied with just getting by.

Making the world a better place requires a commitment of the will - a commitment to live a life of

integrity and love. It means standing for those things that are good and right and reaching out in love and generosity to people who need your help and support. In short, it means living like Jesus lived. It means a willingness to sacrifice for the greater good a willingness to share your time and your resources with others. That's principle number one. Will the world be a better place because you have been here?

Here's **PRINCIPLE NUMBER TWO: WHEN YOU LEAVE THIS WORLD, WILL YOU LEAVE BEHIND A LEGACY OF LOVE?** There are some people who leave this world and nobody misses them. Why? Because their main concern in life was themselves - their needs, their opportunities, and their burdens. Only a few persons learn to get outside themselves and live for others.

Michael B. Brown in his book titled **Be All That You Can Be** tells about such a person. Brown was serving as a guest preacher at a large suburban church. After the second service, he was approached by a member of that church whom he had spotted earlier. The man had been sitting on the very front pew. A large man, he left hardly any room for other persons on the short pew near the chancel. He was not poorly dressed but did present a generally disheveled look, as if appearance were at the bottom of his list of personal priorities. All smiles, the man approached Brown with a hug and a greeting: **"Hey brother!"** the man said, **"All morning long people have been congratulating me on what a great sermon I preached at the 9:00 service. You and I must be twins."** Brown says there were few things he wished to hear less.

For months, he had been involved in a rigorous program of exercise and had taken off 20 pounds. He tried to dress appropriately for morning worship. Now to be mistaken for this fellow . . . he was not complimented. Later in the day, he mentioned the incident to his host pastor. The pastor answered: **"Yes, that's Willie. We call him Mr. Love' around here. He's all smiles. He knows everyone. He loves everyone, and it is certainly reciprocal. Willie is like a ray of sunshine to our church. He always greets newcomers in the halls. He escorts older persons to their cars after dark or in bad weather. He plays ball with our church kids. He regularly inquires about your homebound parents or sick aunt. He listens to people, prays with people, laughs and even**

cries with people. He hugs everybody (at that point Brown recalled how Willie had greeted him that morning with a bear hug). **Yes sir, that's Willie our Mr. Love."** Suddenly Brown found himself thinking: **"If only my life could be that beautiful! If only I were worthy to be called HIS twin."**

We know nothing about Willie's accomplishments in the workplace or how large his bank account was, but I believe we would have to rate Willie's life a stunning success. He was leaving behind a legacy of love.

You may remember that one of Stephen Covey's **Seven Habits of Highly Successful People** is, "Begin with the end in mind". Visualize yourself, Covey says, at your own funeral and listen in your imagination to what people say about you. It matters little what your net worth was. It matters little how many times your name was in the headlines. These things will not last. Only two will: Is the world a better place because you've been here? Did you leave behind a legacy of love?

Herod and Pilate and Augustus Caesar were legends in their own minds, but they were not the ones who ascended to sit at God's right hand. It was a simple carpenter who left the world a better place because he had been here and who left behind a legacy of love. We should learn from his example. Most of us can never be great writers like O. Henry, but we can excel where it matters most – in leaving the world a better place than we found it for the next generation and in living a life of love as our legacy for future Christians.

THAT IS A REAL SUCCESS! BECAUSE GOD IS GOOD – ALL THE TIME AND ALL THE TIME –
GOD IS GOOD!

Pastor Larry Smith

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