

"Success equals faithfulness" **1 Corinthians 4:1-8**

Ours is a success-oriented society. We reward the successful whether they be businessmen, executives, pastors, athletes, teachers, students, politicians, businessmen, or parents. Of course, how the Christian measures success is not at all the same way as the world measures success. The world says success is an extraordinary achievement, an additional accomplishment or clever investment. Without these, says the world, our lives counted for nothing.

Yet we know, of course, that God does not measure success by profit, by prosperity, or by prestige. God measures success by faithfulness. This the core message today: "Success Equals Faithfulness."

(1 Cor 4:2) Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

I Servants and Stewards

I hope nobody ever has the experience with a congregation that Paul had with the congregation of Corinth. Although some thought highly of him, by others he was criticized, misjudged, and ignored. Paul admits some say about him, *(2 Cor 10:10) His letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.*

Further on he admits he is not "a trained speaker" (2 Cor 11:6). Paul must admit he is timid when face to face, but bold when away (2 Cor 10:1). Judged by the standards of popularity and persuasive power, Paul's ministry at Corinth was unsuccessful.

But listen to what Paul says about the judgment passed on him by those people of Corinth: *(1 Cor 4:3-4) I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.*

"My success," says Paul, "is not to be measured in terms of what people think of me, but in terms of what God thinks of me." "My judge," says Paul, "is not man or even myself, but God." "People ought to regard us," he says, "as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the secret things of God."

Paul used two important words here. The first word is "servant" and the second word is "those entrusted."

Paul is a servant and steward or manager. Being both servant and manager do not represent our culture, but the people of Corinth immediately understood what Paul was saying. A steward was a reliable servant to whom the master entrusted his affairs. He was a director of the master's household, but still a servant of the master. He was an administrator in the master's business, but still a servant of the master. A steward had great responsibility, but always and in everything he was accountable to the master. Both he and his work belonged to the master.

Paul was a servant and steward of God. Entrusted to him was "the secret things of God." These secret things of God, these mysteries that have been entrusted to Paul, the servant and steward of God **is the Gospel, the message of salvation in Jesus Christ.**

We are called as both servants and stewards of God. We have been called by the Lord. We work for him. We are accountable to him. God entrusted us with the Gospel, the message of salvation in Jesus Christ. By the Lord we have been made keepers of the Good News. By him we have been given orders to preach the Gospel, administer the sacraments and relieve the needs of the poor and suffering.

II Faithful Servants and Stewards

The one quality we would look for in a servant or steward can be described by concepts such as being reliable, trustworthy, with integrity and loyalty. God directed Paul to use the word faithful to describe the successful servant and manager in 1 Cor 4:2: Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.

The one quality that God looks for in elders, ministers, and members of the church, is faithfulness. The one quality that God, the Master, looks for in us, his stewards, is faithfulness.

Notice what Paul says about faithfulness. He says, "**it is required.**" Faithfulness "is required" of those who follow Jesus.

And God is looking for faithfulness. He looks us over carefully for the faithfulness he requires of us. God goes over our lives with a fine-tooth comb looking for faithfulness.

Our Lord measures our success or failure in terms of faithfulness. ***He gives or withholds his blessing on our efforts based on our faithfulness – and not our results in the first place.***

Faithfulness is the key word in the covenant relationship between God and us. **The Bible tells us that God is faithful to his covenant with us.** Listen to just a sampling:

(Deut 7:9) Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands. And in 2 Tim 2:13 we read that if we are faithless, he will remain faithful, for he cannot disown himself.

In God's covenant with us, faithfulness is about being trustworthy. God is utterly dependable. He will keep covenant with us, and he will do so forever. He will keep covenant with us, and he did, even though it demanded that he nailed his own eternal Son to a Roman cross. In describing God's covenant relationship with us we use phrases such as abiding faithfulness, undying love, sacrificial loyalty.

Great – so great – is God's faithfulness to us.

This kind of faithfulness is what God looks for in us. Just as God binds the whole of himself to us in his faithful covenant, he wants us to bind the whole of ourselves to him in faithfulness. The Master, who entrusted his business to us, now wants to find us, his servants, and stewards, to be utterly faithful.

Our Lord wants to find us faithful in each day, each relationship, each word spoken and heard, each meeting attended, each visit made, and each Rand counted. He wants to find us faithful to him and to his Word and to his Work. He wants to find us faithful to the calling to which he has called us and to the Kingdom which he commands us to seek. He wants to find us faithful to the church which is his body. He wants to find us faithful to the gospel that is the power of God to conquer sin and redeem sinners.

As great as his faithfulness is to us, so great must our faithfulness be to him.

God calls us to be faithful – faithful to him, to the Gospel, to the church of Jesus Christ, to his Word and to the Creeds and Confessions of his Church.

III Faithful Servants and Stewards are considered Successful.

Faithfulness. That is how Paul spells success. Faithfulness.

This definition of success would surprise business and other results driven executives. But the Bible has a way of turning the standards of the world upside down and inside out.

It is helpful to look through the Bible and see the people it identifies as successful.
(Heb 11:36-37) Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. (37) They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted, and mistreated.

According to the world's standards, all of them were absolute failures! Yet, reports Hebrews 11:38, *"the world was not worthy of them."*

Perhaps nowhere is this point stated more clearly than in one of the words of Jesus. In pronouncing his blessing upon his servants what did the master say? Did he say, "Well done, good and successful servants"? Of course not! Rather, he said, "Well done, good and faithful servants."

God calls you and me to faithfulness. And this, quite simply, demands that we do our absolute best in his work. It demands that we raise rather than lower our standards. It demands total rather than partial commitment. We are servants and stewards of the Master in heaven. We have been entrusted with the gospel of grace.

God requires faithfulness of all his children.

This is success according to God' standards for our lives.

Let's be faithful together, that God can say to all of us, "Well done, my good and faithful servant."

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