

Chapter Twenty-four

The Success of His Preaching

The earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth lay between the cattle-trough of a crowded inn and the shadows of an unjust crucifixion. Neither scene would suggest a successful career. Was Jesus a success as a Preacher?

I. The Standard of Success

1. The Preacher's ideal.—The standard of success has too often been erected by unsympathetic critics, whether the subject be the ministry of Jesus or that of others. The preacher's ideal of his ministry constitutes an element of judgment regarding his success. This ideal must be considered from two angles of vision—the quality of the ideal, and the relation between the ideal and the actual ministry. The preacher's own experience must be allowed to testify as to his ambitions and their course. What have been his dreams, and how have they come true? Has his endowment of talents gathered the intended interest? Has he been dominated by possibilities? Has his ideal been sufficiently noble and has he been loyal thereto? These are questions that enter to form the basis for the standard of success.

The ideal of Jesus gave direction to his ministry and should measure his success. He intended his preaching to be brief in time, spiritual in contents, initiative for his kingdom of heaven, and preparatory for the Christian pulpit. He came to announce an evangel so simple that the uncultured might receive it, and yet so profound that the scholar might accept its worth, and to preach so fully that the results might be formative of the subsequent religious belief and life. He did not come to scepter Israel, limited to Judaism or amalgamated with the Gentiles, the kingdom assuming the limits of a world power. His preaching was designed for spiritual aims, thereby giving it permanency and universality. Jesus' ideal carried him to self-sacrifice that he might attest and empower his evangel. The Cross was his intended goal. The varied characteristics of his homiletics should partly determine one's judgment of his success, for Jesus had his ideal of the preaching that was needed.

2. The Preacher's effort.—The success should also be measured according to the preacher's efforts. The ministry of Jesus was intensely active in care for the distressed, in healing the sick, in preaching the glad tidings to all classes, in raising the dead, in casting out demons, and in training his disciples. Weary and worn with constant efforts, Jesus was sought by all kinds of people, his welcome and help being cordial and free. Jesus was always busy. He packed into his brief public life many deeds. His effort reached out to embody his ideal. Hope and act were correlated. He incarnated his ambitions. His success must be judged by this element.

3. The Preacher's results.—A third element of the standard of success is results. This is usually the more prominent, but it should be properly related and

subordinated to the other two. The results of his ministry attest the success of Jesus.

II. The Success of Numbers

1. Crowds.—The ministry of Jesus was to the crowds. He did not foist upon a credulous public novel schemes by which to attract the immense crowds. He and his work were the only advertisements that he offered. His journeys were attended by vast multitudes who never seemed to tire of his presence and personal benefits. The record of Luke is representative of the general custom: "In the mean time, when the many thousands of the multitude were gathered together, insomuch that they trod one upon another, he began to say unto his disciples." The two miracles of feeding four and five thousand men also indicate this success of numbers. The rumor of his presence brought crowds that often filled the house.

Jesus did not attempt to arouse these large gatherings; they were the spontaneous testimony to his attraction. He sometimes forbade recital of his cures, lest the multitudes should become too large. It would be easy for such numbers to have their zeal misdirected, and Jesus desired to escape this. He created a sensation and knew how to manage it. The ordinary preacher rejoices rightly in the privilege to preach to two or three thousand people at once, but the success of numbers was so great with Jesus that he was often forced to slip from the crowds in order to secure rest and food. The history of profane and sacred oratory does not show a greater success of numbers.

2. Fame.—The success of numbers passed beyond the immediate company of those who had personal touch with Jesus. His fame surpassed the limits of his actual ministry. "And the report of him went forth into all Syria." The four centuries of silence of the prophetic office had been broken by the Nazarene, whose claims, attested and approved by God, were greater than any former prophet had advanced. His reputation flew upon eagle wings. His miracles, his strange gentleness and calmness amid the storms of rabbinical hatred and opposition, his unrestricted fellowship with the poor and the sinful, and his wonderful discourses sent afar the news of his power and goodness.

In the hearts of many thousands must have glowed the ambition to see and hear Jesus. The coming of the Greeks, inspired by curiosity or an aroused conscience, must have been typical of the common desire. With imaginations stirred by reports of his deeds and with eagerness of hope many people must have yearned for his coming to their community. Stories were told of his wonders, as his beneficiaries and their friends might return to their homes. "The common people therefore of the Jews learned that he was there: and they came, not for Jesus' sake only, but that they might see Lazarus also, whom he had raised from the dead." Fame may not be a test of enduring success, but Jesus had its full benefit.

3. Friends.—The immense crowds were not assembled mainly through the influence of the spiritual purpose and message of Jesus. But he was not deceived by their presence; he knew their motives. He accused the recently fed multitudes of seeking him again because of the loaves and fishes. But Jesus gathered to himself a few faithful and trusted friends whose sense of spiritual verities could be so

cultivated as to enable them to undertake the evangelization of the world in obedience to their Master's command and plan.

The exact number of these friends cannot be estimated, but one must not let a small estimate cause a lack of appreciation of Jesus' success. We know of the Twelve, the ministering women, the Seventy, the five hundred brethren to whom he appeared after his resurrection, and the one hundred and twenty who had assembled at Pentecost. A just estimate would fix his immediate followers at least at six hundred, allowing for duplicates in the above lists. For such a short ministry this would indicate great success. To this number might be added some less courageous and open believers.

III. The Success for the Apostolate

1. Selection.—The purpose of Jesus called for a transferred ministry. He was not to remain until he should personally evangelize the world. This task should fall to his followers. Jesus' method of instituting this work was unique. He selected the Twelve to form the apostolate, from whom should proceed the forces and truths that should be required for this world mission. To them should come the duty of impressing men with the worth of the Nazarene and his religion. Only the prophetic vision could have uncovered the coming years in which this apostolate should measure up to this unparalleled undertaking.

These men were rough in manners, unlettered in the sciences of men, circumscribed by their own religious communion, and with no suggestions toward evangelism. But the wisdom and success of Jesus in his choice have been fully demonstrated in the success that attended the work of these apostles. They were able to increase the following of Jesus through their witness to the primary data about his life and teachings. In this common band, committed to the common task, were united varieties of temperament and gifts. If they had failed, the nascent Christian community would have been seriously hindered in its growth. However, they succeeded beyond their hopes. Jesus had made a wise selection. He knew human character.

2. Training.—It was not sufficient to select the apostolate. Selection must lead to training. He matriculated them in the school of personal contact with himself. This method of instruction was most vitalizing and intimate. His ministry had only begun when he chose them to be with him in his public life. For two or more years he kept them in reach of himself, giving them private teaching as well as public. It is not a marvel that these simple-hearted, teachable men of toil should have been transformed into evangelists of unconquered bravery.

Their personal contact with their Master made them a factor in the new religious life. They saw his methods, caught his spirit, and learned to appreciate his point of view. Jesus succeeded in impressing himself and his ideals upon the Twelve. This personal contact element in education has found form in the famous definition of a university as being "Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a boy on the other." This method does not lend itself to tangible methods in estimating results, but it is the most directive. Jesus put his life into his men daily. (Editor's note: regarding

“Mark Hopkins”: U.S. President Garfield regarded Mark Hopkins as a college provost who made himself eminently available to students for learning.)

The apostles received the further lesson of miracles. Jesus permitted them to behold this secondary proof of his divinity. Having believed in him and left all for his service, the apostles could have their confidence in him confirmed by these miracles. The lesson of miracles was even more intimate. Jesus used the miracle to attest his ability to help them in their later work and needs. He granted them power to work miracles, and yet so restricted their privileges as to compel them to recognize that they must constantly look to him. Their failure to cure the demoniac boy at the foot of the mountain of Jesus’ transfiguration accented this dependence. Jesus gave them preliminary training in the use of dynamics.

The apostles were to begin their ministry under new conditions. They had no textbooks of their new faith, yet they were expected to preach a definite evangel. Jesus prepared them by giving them new interpretations of the old truths, new revelations, a new outlook on life, and new incentives. He displaced the current opinions. His teachings were made clearer to them after his resurrection and by the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. He promised to complete their education for their duty by the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Apostolic history reveals his success in the apostolate.

IV. The Success of Saviorhood

1. The pulpit preparatory to the Cross.—The preaching of Jesus was preparatory to his Saviorhood. His primary purpose was not to preach but to save the lost. His ministry of truth was incidental to his death. Estimates of him as the Preacher should consider this fact. Calvary was the end, the pulpit the method of approach. His homiletics must be viewed in the light of his redemption. His success has been so marked that men look to his Cross as the symbol of their salvation. His word of truth turned men toward the hill of sacrifice.

2. The vitality of the Cross.—The Preacher did not err in his view of life. He redeemed his promises. Jesus was not a failure, for his wonderful homiletics did not end with the Cross. By the dynamics of the Cross Jesus has been able to energize all believers in all ages. The Savior confirmed the Preacher.

V. The Success of the Ages

1. The thornless crown.—Jesus once wore the crown of thorns; throughout the ages he has worn the crown of worship. Other teachers and preachers have had their contemporary sway and have passed into neglect. The Nazarene holds chief place through all the ages. The list of immortal authors and thinkers is very small; dust and forgetfulness have come to most men. Jesus is still fresh and interesting. Time’s chaplet of honor abides imperishable for him.

2. Back to Christ.—A modern cry of “Back to Christ” has arisen. Its advocates have been stirred with dissatisfaction with the interpretation of him given by the apostles. This impulse to question these interpreters may not be approved. Yet it must be acknowledge that Jesus is the primary source of Christianity, and in studying him and his homiletics the student deals in fundamentals and sources.

Through the ages the glory of Jesus has run. *Back to Christ* for the primary truth and inspiration for duty will lead to *Forward to Christ* for service and world-conquest.

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