

Sunday, September 27, 2026

Sermon "Success Is Not a Ladder"

Philippians 2:1-13 NRSV/UE

Where we're heading in today's message: That dirty, mundane job may just make you happier.

If you are an internet user - and who isn't? - you have surely seen the videos online. Somebody is walking with great determination back and forth across a stage, a little microphone dangling from their ear. They have a remote control in one hand to change the images on a huge projection screen behind them. They smile a lot, showing off their perfect, gleaming-white teeth.

The person is talking about success, how to plan for it and how to achieve it. It doesn't matter what form of success it is. It could be patenting your invention, losing weight, selling real estate or getting along with your spouse. The format is much the same.

You know what this is all about. You have heard the spiel. Maybe you even shelled out a few bucks to find out what one of these "life coaches" has to offer.

Success, it would seem, is a growth industry. There is only one problem: these people don't know what they're talking about.

If those easy, surefire paths to success were truly easy or surefire, then a much higher percentage of their fans wouldn't have to buy tickets to their pep rallies. They would have already made it to the pinnacle of the American dream. But they haven't.

But fans keep ordering the books, downloading the podcasts and buying those stadium tickets. They may not do much for their own success, but they sure do make the top-drawer motivational speakers even wealthier. The simple truth is this: success sells!

But it is all a mirage. Here is how we know: Way back in the book of Genesis, God creates the first humans. The Scriptures tell us that Adam and Eve were created "in the image of God." Let that sink in. From the very first day of our lives, we lie helplessly in the bassinet. We do little more than cry, eat and produce the inevitable outcome of eating, yet we are already in the image of God. And we are not accomplishing a thing! The Lord said of our ancestors back then —

and says of each of us now — “It is good! You are good. You are created in my image.” Your net worth, therefore, is already infinite!

But how many of our parents taught us that detail of the Bible lesson when we were young? How many of us who are parents today make sure we teach it to our own kids? The answer is, “Not many.” Most of us are more likely to take our kids aside and teach them a different narrative that says they are born unworthy. They remain so until they grow up, get out into the world and complete the long, slow climb up the ladder of success.

There is a problem with that narrative. We start climbing our individual ladders to success, always looking side-to-side to compare ourselves with other people ascending their own success ladders. Then we look up, hoping to glimpse the top of our ladder to gauge how far we have to go. But the ladder just goes higher and higher until it vanishes in the mist above our heads.

There is a lot about our obsession with success that is deeply selfish. One of the more important correctives the Bible offers is a verse from Philippians 2. “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (v. 4).

We often speak of “business interests.” That typically means money-making opportunities. If investors say, “I have an interest in that company,” they have put money into it. They have taken a small portion of their net worth, converted it into a liquid form - cash - and used it to buy a stake in that business. If the business succeeds, their net worth climbs a little higher. If it falls on hard times, their net worth takes a hit.

The definition of a successful person for much of our society is to become really good at looking out for your own interests. Young people pick up on this early. A few years ago, a survey of U.S. college freshmen polled over 200,000 students at 279 colleges and universities. The pollsters asked about their most important life goals, and 77% checked the box that said, “being very well off financially.” No matter how optimistic they may feel, it is unlikely that they will all achieve that life goal.

So what is Paul talking about when he advises the Philippians to “look ... to the interests of others” (v. 4)? Clearly, the MBA degree

awarded by the University of Christ is very different from other business schools!

As usual, it helps to look at the biblical context. Paul deeply loves that Philippian church, but even he knows they have room to grow and improve. The advice he gives them is to complete his joy by “being of the same mind” (v. 2).

It is a deeply anti-individualist message. For many of us, our minds are our personal fortress of solitude, a private retreat where no one else is welcome. We may offer others “a piece of our mind” once in a while, but even then, we keep the rest closely guarded. Our minds are, in many ways, synonymous with our selves - our essential individual personhood.

Yet, Paul is encouraging us to let down our guard and allow others to get to know us deeply. We are used to the idea of marriage partners doing that. Many golden-anniversary couples seem to intuitively know what the other is thinking. Sometimes they even complete each other's sentences. But Paul isn't talking about long-term marriages. He is talking about everyday life in the church. Paul yearns for the members of that Philippian church - brothers and sisters in Christ - to attain that same sort of deep unity. He is saying be as close to one another as you are to yourselves.

His next piece of advice is, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves” (v. 3). Not just the same as, but better! A keystone of our American democracy is that all men (and women) are created equal. Yet, Paul is arguing for a sort of voluntary inequality, to step back and give up a little of your own personal privilege, putting others first.

The only way to do this, he points out, is through the practice of humility. In humility, regard others as better than yourself. That is radical!

It is important to note that humility is not some abandonment of self-esteem. It isn't a means of beating ourselves up inside. It isn't a deep dive into guilt and shame. The word “humility” is related to the word humus - that rich, fertile soil from which all vegetation springs. A truly humble person is of the earth, someone who is literally grounded.

It is an insight in tune with the creation story in Genesis. In the first few chapters, God molds the first man and woman from a handful of wet clay from the riverside. That is earth, humus. We can say, therefore, that to be truly humble is to be truly human, to know the essential stuff from which we all spring.

Mike Rowe hosted a popular Discovery Channel TV series called "Dirty Jobs." The premise is simple: Rowe goes out with a camera crew and interviews people who have really dirty jobs. Literally. He puts on a pair of overalls and works alongside the person for a day to find out what the loathsome labor is all about. He is curious about how those people came to do an unpleasant, nauseating job for a living - and even more, why they stick with it.

Rowe has been on some of the dirtiest, most disgusting job sites you could imagine. He has followed a person who picks up roadkill; a miner of bat dung, or guano; a man who harvests and sells giant bloodworms for fishing bait; and various species of garbage collectors and trash pickers - "recyclers," as they prefer to call themselves.

Mike told a TED Talk audience he came to a surprising conclusion. He is convinced that the people who do the dirtiest jobs in our society and stick with them over time are among the happiest, most satisfied people he has ever encountered.

It doesn't hurt that people who do jobs like these are typically paid well. But it is more than just the money. In taking on such a job, most of them have intentionally stepped off the ladder of success, at least as society commonly defines it. What parents, after all, raise their children to become garbage sorters or roadkill collectors? For whatever reason, Rowe says, the people who make careers of dirty jobs have taken careful notice of where all the other people are headed, and they have intentionally decided to go in a different direction.

What advice do so many speakers offer to the graduating class? "Follow your passion." But not everyone has that luxury. And not everyone's passion can be readily converted into a paying job.

Sadly, some of those starry-eyed graduates will spend their entire working lives struggling to climb a very crowded ladder, and at the

end of their careers, they may feel like failures. Better for some of them to step off the ladder altogether, take a dirty job, and perform it with good humor and even zest - knowing it isn't the job that defines them, but they who define the job.

There is one other element of dirty jobs Mike Rowe didn't identify in his TED Talk, but that seems abundantly clear from the biblical standpoint. There is no question that the dirty jobs on his reality show are essential jobs. Society has a deep need for people to stand chest-deep in sewage sludge, or remove deer carcasses from the roadside, or pick through all the bottles and cans we toss into our single-stream recycling bins. Without conscientious workers like those, we would all be in a very bad way.

Such workers, whether they are conscious of it or not, are fulfilling Paul's advice from Philippians 2: "Look to the interests of others" (v. 4).

There is a good chance many of them are aware of it, because knowing we are in positions to be useful to others can be a source of honest pride. It may be that their unpleasant work even makes them happy.

So what does make people happy? Can money buy happiness?

Some research studies suggest it can, but only up to a point.

Desperately poor people - those who struggle just to obtain food or a safe place to live - are often unhappy. When they earn enough money to cover basic needs, they understandably feel happier.

But researchers have discovered the effect doesn't continue as people climb higher up the ladder of success. They have learned there is a big difference in happiness between a person earning \$10,000 a year and one earning \$50,000. But when you climb higher up the income scale, there is no longer such a stark difference. People earning \$50,000 a year report being about as happy, on the average, as those earning \$100,000. As for millionaires, they don't do any better - regardless of all the fancy toys their money can buy.

Here is the really fascinating insight from research studies: you would do better in the happiness department if you bought a modest car for reliable transportation and donated the difference to a church or charity that is making other people's lives demonstrably better. Or use that car to drive to a place where you can volunteer,

doing that same kind of work. "Look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." Who knew Paul's advice was not only a solemn command, but a recipe for happiness as well?

Friends, the witness of our faith is this: success is not a ladder. Success comes not from advancing ourselves ever higher, in income or social position, but rather from making ourselves truly useful to others.

That is the key. It is what our faith teaches. It is what God desires of us. Alleluia, Amen.