

"THE SECRET INGREDIENT OF SUCCESS"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
March 26, 1995

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INTRODUCTION

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"Here are my qualifications for you to overlook." (OK, I will...)

"Hope to hear from you shortly. Sincerely..." (Takes one to know one.)

Most of us know by this time what it takes to "make it" in this life. It takes hard work, discipline, patience and perseverance and a few other things. It takes doing it right the first time. As someone has said, you don't get a second chance to make a good first impression. People sometimes talk about working smarter and not harder, but that can be deceptive. People who make a difference in this world do both. They usually have a passion, a vision, a burning desire to be the very best they can be.

DEVELOPMENT

Remember baseball....what use to be our great American pasttime. Some of you remember it and some of you may even recall the name of Brett Butler. According to an article in Youth magazine Brett Butler was a tiny kid whom all the rest of the guys picked on. Butler did not have a fun time as a youth. He once said in an article,

"Every day for two years the other kids in Junior High School would chase me around the playground and try to pull my underwear up above my pants. I would run and run and finally just run home. Every day it happened."

For Brett Butler, the perils of being small didn't end at the age of 12. When he played football in highschool, they had to run over to the Junior High and find some pads for him because he was so small. He played quarterback and had to roll out just to see over the offensive line. And his voice was so high it squeaked and cracked when he called the signals. The opposition would laugh. But you know his father told him something he would never forget, something that motivated him to do and to give his very best. It was,

"If you don't believe in yourself, nobody else will!"

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Today Brett Butler is with the LA Dodgers and is recognized as one of the best players pound for pound and inch for inch in the game. An All Star in 1991 and one of the top hitters in 1992, he is a manager's dream for a lead-off hitter. He seldom hits into a double play. Did Brett Butler make it to the big leagues on the basis of pure "athletic ability?" I think not. Of course not. Here is the secret truth we need to tell every young person in this land. The very best work harder. It's true in sports, in business, in music...in every endeavor in life. The secret of success in life is passion, and determination and desire. "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" You practice, you practice, and you practice.

Jesus told a parable long ago about a man who owned a vineyard. And in that vineyard was a fig tree - a fig tree that had no fruit on it. The owner one day said to the vinedresser:

"Cut it down. For three years I have been looking for fruit on this tree and have found none. Cut it down. Why should it use up ground?"

Time and time again Jesus showed a bit of impatience with people who do not take the advantages of the opportunities that God has given them. They are nice people but they are not producing fruit. And then Christ comes before us and asks:

"What is it that you are passionate about? What is it that you are giving your life to accomplish? What fruit are you bearing?"

FIG TREES AND BANANAS

Several things to note here. First of all, note that Jesus isn't asking the fig tree to produce bananas or apples. He isn't asking anything extraordinary out of this fig tree. He isn't asking the fig tree to become an oak or a redwood. Jesus is asking only that it accomplish what fig trees ought to accomplish and that is to bear figs. Let's think about this in terms of our lives...

You and I have differing gifts. Some of us have been given great singing voices. Some have graceful bodies. Some have high IQ's. Some are artists, painters, sculptors. Some are good with numbers; others are good with people. Some know just how to teach others. All have some natural ability. My ability will be different from yours. Each of us has some natural ability. The secret is to find our natural abilities and then give them "all we've got". That's what genius is. When we say that someone is a GENIUS, all we're saying is that they gave maximum effort in that area of their lives where they have some natural ability. That's it.

That's the secret ingredient of success. Find what you're naturally good at and then give it your very best. A person who can't carry a tune will never sing with the Met no matter how hard they work, but on the other hand, there are many performers who as young people had quite ordinary voices, but through hard work...through thousands and thousands of hours of practice...have become accomplished singers. It was not that they had extraordinary talent to begin with. It was that they took what they had and used it to the utmost of their ability. Who was it....Enrico Caruso....who was once told by one of his music teachers, "You can't sing...you have no voice at all!" And he went on to become one of the best-loved singers of all times.

And Beethoven's music teacher once said of him, "As a composer he is helpless!" An editor told Louisa May Alcott that she was incapable of writing anything that would have popular appeal. That, of course, was before Little Women. Walt Disney was fired by a newspaper Editor because he was thought to have "no good ideas". Imagine that? Tell that to the millions of people thrilled by a Disney movie. And when F. W. Woolworth was 21 he got a job in a store, but was not permitted to wait on customers because he "didn't have enough good common sense".

Each of these famous people proved to have a touch of genius, but was it "innate" or did it grow out of their dedication to developing what they had been given? In his autobiography, Summing Up, Somerset Maugham, writes:

"I knew that I had no lyrical quality, a small vocabulary, and little gift of metaphor. The original and striking simile never occurred to me. Poetic flights were beyond my powers. On the other hand, I had an acute power of observation, and it seemed to me that I could see a great many things that other people missed. I could put down in clear terms what I saw....I knew that I should never write as well as I could wish, but I thought, with pains, that I could arrive at writing as well as my natural defects allowed."

And therein, Somerset Maugham discovered the secret of genius. And the point is this that life does not ask us to become what we are not. That fig tree was being asked only to produce some figs. No more. You and I are asked only to accomplish what our natural gifts allow.

BUT: WE ARE ASKED TO ACCOMPLISH THAT!

fail at that very point.

But, dear friend, we are asked to accomplish that. And many, I fear,

A man was walking through the countryside when he noticed a young fellow standing at attention in a field. Later in the day, the walker came back along the same path and noticed that this man was still there. Somewhat curious, he approached the young man and asked him what he was doing. He replied, "I'm practicing, sir, for the Nobel Prize". "What was that...how's that..." asked the curious visitor. Said the young man,

"Well, sir...one of the criteria for the Prize is to be 'outstanding' in your chosen field."

It may take a while to reach the back of the room..."out...standing...in a chosen field". If you and I are going to be "outstanding" in our chosen field, then we're going to have to do more than stand around...and sit around....

For example, how's your memory? Did you know that most of us do not have really poor memories? What we have are untrained memories. Remember Jerry Lucas who use to play for the Knicks...20 years ago. They say he trained himself to memories pages and pages of telephone numbers of the Manhattan directory. Don't ask me why. That feat took him hours of practice. And we'd probably say of him, "hey...what a memory!" But, no. What dedication. Success is taking what we have and giving it our very best. You can develop your memory if that is your desire. Or a vocabulary. We can develop vocational skills. All we have to have is the desire. The passion. The drive. The determination.

AN AREA WHERE WE ARE ALL EQUALLY GIFTED

Of course, there is one area of life where all of us are equally gifted. And that is in following Jesus and bearing some spiritual fruit for Him. The question that comes into play, of course, is: IS IT THAT IMPORTANT TO US? Are we willing to give it our best? To Jim Mertz, a member of one of our "main-line" protestant denominations in this country the question is phrased like this:

"DO WE REALLY LOVE JESUS THAT MUCH?"

He tells us that one day he was watching a television movie...in which he saw a Muslim fall on his knees in the dust and heat of the day...five times a day this Muslim stopped, faced the holy city of Mecca and worshipped Allah. Jim found himself wondering if he'd do the same for Jesus, only he put it this way: do I really love Jesus like that?

Some time later on Jim read of a young mother who was seen throwing her precious, new-born infant child into the Ganges River. She told someone that her child was a sacrifice, a love offering to her God. She said,

"You see...we always offer our very best in sacrifice to our God."

Again, Jim found himself asking the question: "Do I really love Jesus that much?" "What have I sacrificed for Him. Have I truly given my best to Him?"

Jim once lay in a hospital for ten days recuperating from a bout with pneumonia. It was a Saturday morning in the wintry days of January. He glanced out the window...looking at the cold, gray skies and watched the blowing sleet that kept coming down all day. How thankful he was to be inside. Then he happened to see at a busy intersection of the city, below his hospital window, a young lady...perhaps a teenager....standing on the street corner selling flowers. She never stopped smiling all day in that cold, miserable weather, in the midst of the congested traffic, in spite of jeers and sneers of those who occasionally came close to running her down. She stood there all day selling flowers for her cult leader, the Reverend Sun Yung Moon. Again, Jim asked himself that same question: do I really love Jesus that much?

Early one Saturday morning Jim's doorbell rang. He hastened to the door and was met there by two lovely, enthusiastic young people from Utah who were anxious to talk to him about the doctrines of their religious sect. They were smiling and friendly. They were not doctrines that Jim felt he could accept and yet, these two young people were so sincere....so dedicated to their cause that Jim couldn't help but feel impressed. As Jim closed the door, he peered

out his living room window and watched them as they slowly walked away. He looked down at the literature they had put into his hands and once again he found himself wondering: Do I really love Jesus? Would I go out and knock on doors and talk to others about Him? Is there something in me that tends to make me uncomfortable or ashamed of telling others about Him?

For us, it's not a matter of opportunity, is it? And certainly, it's not for want of ability, is it? Or, is it a matter of time? Some will hide behind that, but let's face it....we find time for those things that are important to us, don't we? The "bottom line" has something to do with passion and with desire and feeling, and of giving one's best to the work of the Master.

CLOSING

Of that barren fig tree, the owner of the vineyard said to his vinedresser:

"Lo, these three years I have come seeking fruit on this fig tree and I find none. Cut it down. Why should it use up the ground?"

And he answered him, "Let it alone, sir, this year also... until I dig around it and put on some fertilizer...and if it bears fruit next year, well and good! But if not, you can cut it down."

It comes across to us as a bit harsh. God is the "owner" and Jesus, I sense, is the "vinedresser". Perhaps we need to hear a sharper word as we approach the events of Holy Week and stand before the Cross. There's still some time, friend, and some present may need to hear that. But for all of us this is a good time and place for us to stop and ask ourselves whether we're bearing sufficient fruit in His name - in our jobs, in our homes, in our communities, in our church....in serving Him. He's not asking us to be something we are not, but He is asking us to be the very best we can be. And therein is the secret ingredient of success. The time is now. The place is here. Go forth and bear good fruit in His name.

PRAYER

Confirm within each of us, O God, the feelings and intentions, the decisions and resolutions at work here in these moments. We remember how Jesus said that to whom much is given, of him...of her will much be required. Help us to be faithful and ever awake to ways to be better disciples....to be ready when He comes and to bear good fruit as a faithful follower...for

"Lord, we are able. Our spirits are thine. Remold them, make us, like thee, divine. "

In the spirit of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

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