

"THE ULTIMATE SUCCESS FORMULA"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
March 8, 1998

"THE FORMULA FOR SUCCESS"

INTRODUCTION

I want to suggest to you this morning that the ultimate formula for worldly success is found in a portion of the Scriptures that Dan read to us a few moments ago. It's there in Chapter Eight of Mark's Gospel. Verse 34. Please....listen carefully. Jesus said,

"If anyone would come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me."

It's a good text for any Sunday in Lent as we reflect upon our spiritual life, and also one that in a secular sense would guarantee any person's success in the wonderful world of art or business or sports or whatever career one may choose to pursue.

After all, what does it mean to deny yourself and take up a cross? I think we all know what it does not mean. It does not mean in time of adversity saying in a whiny voice, "Well....I guess this is just my cross to bear". No, denying ourselves and taking up a cross has to do with discipline and with hard work. It has to do with unselfishness and committing ourselves to the highest and the finest and the best of which we are capable. Yes, it has to do, too, with forgetting ourselves and focussing on the needs of others. It has to do with a commitment to excellence in all things.

In short, in these few well-spoken words, Jesus has pretty well summed up all the most helpful advice of all the "self-help" books ever penned and published.

PEOPLE WHO SUCCEED IN LIFE DENY THEMSELVES

People who succeed in life deny themselves and take up a cross.

It's true. You don't get to the top by staying in your comfort zone. You do it 'til you sweat blood. You sit at your typewriter or your designing board or your blueprints or your lesson plan or whatever it is that you sit at or stand at....long after everybody else has gone for the day. That, my friend, is what it means in a secular sense to deny yourself and take up a cross. And it works. Who was it who said:

"Winning isn't everything...but wanting to win IS!"

No, it wasn't Vince Lombardi....half of it was his. Sounds a bit like Pat Riley, but actually it's a person by the name of Anonymous. And in order to win, sometimes you have to do all that's expected, PLUS a little more.

The University of Chicago did a five year study of leading artists, athletes and scholars. Conducted by a Dr. Benjamin Bloom, this research was based on interviews with the top twenty performers in various fields. These people included concert pianists, tennis players, sculptors, mathematicians, Olympic swimmers and skaters, neurologists, and singers. Bloom and his team of researchers from the University probed for clues as to how these achievers developed and for an even more complete picture, they interviewed families and teachers. The report stated conclusively that drive and determination, not great talent, led to the extraordinary success of these individuals. Bloom noted,

"We expected to find tales of great natural gifts. We didn't find that at all. Their mothers often said it was another child who had the greater talents"

They heard of the pianist who practiced several hours a day for seventeen years and the swimmer who rolled out of bed every morning at five-thirty to do laps for two hours before heading off to school. That's how they got to the top. You give "your all". And in another study when the nation's top achievers were asked to rate the factors they considered most important in contributing to their own success, hard work emerges as the highest-rated factor. Not talent or luck - but hard work.

Even in an area in which we would suppose talent would be a "critical" factor...such as playing the violin...hard work still wins out. A recent study of elite student violinists showed that the number of hours spent practicing was the only thing that separated music superstars from others who were good, but not of top caliber. Careers of violinists studying at the Music Academy of West Berlin were tracked and followed by psychologists. By the time they were 18, the Academy's best students had already spent about 2,000 more hours in practice, on average, than had their fellow-students. Now that is denying yourself and taking up a cross.

At times you and I are amazed at the success of recent immigrants to our land from such countries as Japan and Korea who barely speak our language, but are achieving "something" of the American dream.

In 1986, a group of researchers published a study of Japanese mothers and mothers in Minneapolis. The mothers were asked to rank the most important things that a child needs to succeed academically. The answers tell a lot about the difference in our two cultures. Mothers in Minneapolis chose "ability" as most important. Mothers in Japan said, "effort". Again - deny yourself and take up a cross. The secret is not only in working hard, but working hard at the right thing.

I think our Jewish friends have often understood the importance of this principle. Leo Buscaglia, a sociology professor with an Italian heritage, remarked about his early years of growing up....

"When I would start off to school in the morning,
my mother would push the screen door open and call
out, 'Leo....do you have your lunch pail?'"

Like all good Italian mothers, his mother made sure he never went hungry.

He said that the Jewish boy who lived a few doors down the street when opening the door and pushing out to school would hear his mother call out to him, "Isaac....do you have your books?" Effort. Hard work. Discipline.

Business Guru Tom Peters recalls a wonderful story of a musician...it may have been Pablo Casals...who died at almost one hundred years of age. The morning he died he was downstairs...practicing his notes at six o'clock. And that said Peters...."That's just lovely...." and it is if being the very best at what you do is important to you.

In other words, it is self-defeating to sit around and say, "Oh...if I had his talent, I'd make it", or, "If I got the same breaks she did, I'd be there today". Sure, talent is important and some people do get lucky, but most studies show that those factors are of minor importance. Sweat plus sacrifice equals success. And remember, if you chase two rabbits, both will escape.

THERE IT IS

So, there it is....the ultimate success formula. And let me say this to any young people who may be present, that denying oneself and taking up a cross at your stage of life can mean staying in school and learning as much as you can. To me, it's always been sad to see a capable young person fall short of his or her dreams because he or she wasn't willing to stick it out to the end. Sometimes school can get to be discouraging and tiring. Some of you perhaps can sympathize with the fellow who said,

"I didn't hate school....I just hated the principle of the thing....." However, in today's world, a good education is vital. Don't limit yourself just because you're feeling bogged down. Stay with it. Take up that cross....

MATERIAL SUCCESS IS NOT THAT SATISFYING

But before you go out into the world to do "your thing", let me add one very important thought to all that has been said.

Some of you will find as so many others have found that material success is not really all that satisfying. I've known a lot of lonely and disgruntled people across the years who have driven Cadillacs and Mercedes and lived in homes and apartments with marble floors and crystal chandeliers. Some of those folks have found out too late that upward mobility is not necessarily the formula for a peaceful heart or a loving home. There's much truth in that line, that "A life of content is a life with content!"

Maybe we need to reexamine for a moment those words of Jesus that I put before you as our text. Mind you, He said....

"If anyone would come after Me...let him deny himself....and take up his cross and follow Me....."

He's not talking about Rolex watches at all, is He? He's talking here about forgetting ourselves for the sake of others. Isn't that what He did? And isn't that what the cross is really all about? He's not talking here about real "go-getters", but rather about real "go-givers". He's not talking about stocks and bonds, but rather about soup kitchens and bread lines. He's not talking about winning the "rat race", but rather about serving the human race. That's the kind of self-denial and cross-bearing about which He is concerned. Are we?

Remember Grandma Moses? Some of you do. Remember how she achieved a bit of worldly success late on in life. By the time she died, her name was something of a household word and yet when Grandma Moses was asked at the age of 93 what she was proudest of, remember what she said....and how she replied,

"I've helped some people....."

And remember the motion picture actress, Audrey Hepburn...that gentle and lovely spirit, a star for many years. Once asked what she considered to be her "most important work", she surprised the media by referring to her travels throughout the world as a "Goodwill Ambassador" for UNICEF. She said,

"If my fame as an artist helps me to get people to listen....I want to tell them that if a family gets a

shovel, which UNICEF provides in its programs. they should use it to dig a well or cultivate the land and not to dig the graves of their children.

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"Immediately after the war an organization was formed that gave us food, medicine and clothing. That organization became the United Nations Children's Fund - UNICEF."

For some time, Audrey Hepburn was repaying a debt.

BRINGING IT ALL TOGETHER

What I am saying to you here this morning is simply this. Jesus did give us the formula for success - ultimate success. And the "upward mobility" He offers is truly out of this world. But that formula He offers goes beyond the superficial values of today's materialistic culture. It goes beyond looking out for NO. 1. It's found in forgetting ourselves and in losing ourselves in service to others. And the wonderful thing is this. IT WORKS. IT WORKS. Yes, indeed.

About twenty years ago, George Gallup, the pollster preached here. Do any of you remember that Sunday? A friend of Bill Proctor's, he came to us with a powerful message. I remember something he shared that went like this. He said that according to his figures, 12% of Americans are "highly spiritually committed". He said they are those who have come to terms with these words of Jesus and understand what He meant when He said,

"Deny yourself...take up a cross and follow Me".

In his opinion, Mr. Gallup said that the members of this 12% group are, "A breed apart from the rest of the populace in at least four ways". He said,

1. They are happier.
2. Their families are stronger.
3. They are tolerant of people of different races and religions.
4. They are community - minded...involved in service to others.

That's "cross - bearing" that really makes a difference. I see a choice coming through in all of this...emerging, if you will. We can heed part of the word of Jesus - deny yourself and take up a cross - and have all the success this world has to offer. And there's nothing wrong with that. I believe that Jesus would have us be the very best of whatever we choose to be, as long as it does not cost us our souls.

However, there is a better way. Use Him as your guide. Deny yourself by giving yourself for others in His name. That's where real happiness lies. We are now in that season of Lent - that time of the year when we draw a Holy Comma in our lives...our crushed and busy lives. Think on these words as you draw a Holy Comma in your busy life in this season of soul refreshment.

PRAYER

Make us sensitive to Your presence and to Your nearness in these quiet moments that come now at the end of this service. Wrestle with us in the deep corners of our hearts where lack of commitment to You and lack of discipline and determination in our lives have taken hold. Remind us that "with You" all things are possible....and that more things are wrought by prayer than this world has ever dreamed. Now, send us forth in Your spirit and in Your Name. In the spirit of Christ in whom we have found life's highest hope as well as its deepest meaning, we pray. Amen.

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PRAYER

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PASTORAL PRAYER: March 8, 1998

LORD, we are a people who like to celebrate -

YOU have made us to sing, to laugh and to dance.

WE have our rituals, our anniversaries, our
birthdays and our festivals.

WE like to remember YOU, LORD, as the one who came among us,
and one day long ago in Cana of Galilee turned the water
into wine. Bring new richness and deep joy into our
worship this day as we celebrate another birthday as a
Church.

GUIDE US in finding ways to celebrate our past, and
to rejoice in Your hope,
to be glad in Your presence.

SOMETIMES, O GOD, we tend to forget about those who have lived before
us...and helped to blaze a trail.

SOMETIMES, Lord, we forget about the many good works of those who have
come here to worship...and offered up prayers in these very
pews...who have sung hymns of great faith before some of us
were born...before some of us made our way to this city.

It's so easy for us to commit that sin of assuming that everything began
with us...that everything depends on us.

We drink from wells we did not dig, and
We eat food from farmlands which we did not cultivate.
We worship in churches that we did not build.
We enjoy freedoms we did not earn.

Make us grateful for the rich heritage of faith that is ours
and help us to feel our oneness with those of other days who
have worshipped here and found meaning for their lives and
friendships that nurture and support.

O GOD AND FATHER OF US ALL, we look ahead with joy and enthusiasm to the
celebration of Easter...of the Spring season edging closer to
us...to the adventures and tasks of Kingdom building in this
church.

BLESS us in that which we attempt to do in YOUR name. Renew
that right spirit with us. Let these days of Lent help to
deepen our commitment to Christ. Lengthen our reach and
broaden our sympathies. And help us, even as Jesus loved
Jerusalem, to love this city that so many of us have come to call home.

In His strong name we now pray.

ANNOUNCEMENTS: Sunday, March 8, 1998

PARISH CONCERNS

- A. Parish concerns are "lifted up" for you in your bulletin. Please review those concerns and meetings....especially noting the Tuesday evening Lenten opportunity for a review and study of the book, THE RESURRECTION REPORT by former member and Lay Leader, William Proctor. The "Hounds" have been resurrected by George Leopold and new friends as well as old friends are invited to come....and about 10 of you did last Tuesday...
- B. Today's coffee hour - to which you're invited - will have joyous "overtones" of a bit of a birthday bash....anniversary celebration. And here to highlight its significance for you and an opportunity to share in it is our President of the Church's Board of Trustees, Michael Schaffield.
- C. Thank you, Michael....the Endowment Fund is a "bridge" to the future and we thank you for your generous support of it! I add my word of thanks for those gifts already received!
- D. Our Annual Meeting is usually held on our Anniversary Sunday and we invite you to stay for it....gets underway downstairs around one o'clock and if the speeches are short and all behave, we should be on our way "out of here" by 2:15. One of the HIGHLIGHTS will be Carl Condra's "State of the Church" report. Several other reports will be received and a booklet of committee reports will be available for the first "50" of you who ask for one.
- E. Yes...there will be salad and sandwiches for those who stay....to be available at the end of the coffee hour, around 12:45...

GREETING / VISITORS / OFFERING

- A. A warm welcome to the visitors....delighted....we hope we'll have opportunity to greet you in personally....be free in the sharing... COME, WORSHIP....COME, WORK WITH US.....fill out or sign....
- B. We've been doing the LORD'S WORK....since 1837...a beacon of light and love to thousands of New Yorkers....across these 161 years! We minister in the name of Christ, and it is in His loving spirit.
- C. Name tags. Greet a child. Greet a former member....with us today...
- D. Jesus said:
"It is more blessed to give
than it is to receive"....
In this spirit, let us worship
God...