

"WINNERS, ALL"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church  
106 East 86th Street  
New York, New York 10028  
August 12, 1990

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### INTRODUCTION

Some people like stories about winners. It gives them something to aspire to. Some of us prefer stories about losers. Losers help us to feel better about our own lives.

Like Mrs. Dora Wilson, an English housewife. On February 18th, 1981, Mrs. Wilson looked out her window in Harlow, Essex, and saw a group of men loading her neighbor's priceless collection of Persian carpets into a moving van.

She called to them, "What are you doing?" knowing that her neighbors were on holiday.

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Is there such a thing as a born loser? Only...if he or she thinks so.

### HOW WE SEE OURSELVES

How we see ourselves can have a devastating impact.

Once there was a young woman who grew up in Texas as a cute, chubby girl with delightful freckles. In high school, however, her chubbiness began to turn to fat and her face was covered with pimples. She was rejected and ridiculed by her friends. She became obsessed with what she saw as her ugliness. She tried to fit in and gain acceptance by being the buffoon, the brunt of the jokes of her peers. The harder she tried, the more her classmates criticized her and ridiculed her. They laughed at her and made fun of her. They called her all kinds of names: Oddball, Freak, Pig. She would always laugh back, just to get along, but it hurt and she'd end up crying at home later in the day.

After all the abuse and mocking she took in high school, she left Texas and drifted to San Francisco. She started to sing and eventually became a rock star. Still, on the inside, she couldn't see anything but rejection. She was drinking heavily and her drinking turned into smoking pot, and from there she went to LSD and finally to "the big H" - heroin.

She suffered greatly from self-hatred and insecurity. Her friends said that she couldn't spend a night without a partner. Finally, she burned out. To escape the futile cycle of pain, early one Sunday morning in October of 1970, Janis Joplin was found dead, at the age of 27. Loser? She didn't have to be. She was a star. Still, she saw herself as unlovely and unloveable.

Such images are difficult to dispel. They can even be passed down.

Suzanne Gibson of Alexandria, Virginia tells an interesting story about her mother. Two families came to this country about 1880 and settled next to each other. One was very wealthy and had five handsome sons. The other had sort of a drunken father that no one would talk about. The latter had a daughter. This daughter went to clean house, to be the maid for the rich family and eventually, she married one of the boys. These were Suzanne's great-grandparents.

Suzanne says her parents are now fairly well-off. Not really rich or anything, but they own an apartment building. They could afford to have someone come in and do the domestic work. But to this day, though, her mother insists on doing the scrubwork. Suzanne says that in their family they've talked about how it's perpetuated. Her mother sees herself as a scrub-woman even though she really is very comfortably well off.

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When he entered the seventh grade, the first day, he walked into the school and somebody said, "What class are you in, kid?" He said, "The 7th Grade." The other boy said, "Seven-one or seven-two or seven-three?" Kramer said he didn't know. His new friend told him that seven-one was for the smart kids, seven-two for the average kids and seven-three for the dumb kids. Kramer walked into seven-two. When his name wasn't on the blackboard, he said to himself, "You big dummy...you ought to know better" And he went to seven-three. When his name wasn't there, either, he finally went to seven-one, which was where he was supposed to go in the first place. He began to suspect that maybe he wasn't really that stupid, after all.

But the fear that big meant dumb never really left him, and a couple of years ago, it came home to him in a striking way. He was eating dinner with Willie Davis, another former Packer, in Los Angeles, and Wilt Chamberlain came into the restaurant and walked over to their table to say hello to Willie. As Kramer was introduced, he stared up at Chamberlain - this incredible physical specimen, seven foot one, and the thought shot through his mind: Boy...this guy must really be stupid!

He couldn't believe it. He saw his attitude for what it was - blind prejudice. And, he found out that Wilt Chamberlain is large, living proof that the prejudice was false. Wilt is a very intelligent, sensitive and witty man. And yet, Jerry Kramer still has those fears about big being dumb.

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The answer to this question may effect your health, your personal habits, your sense of morality, your aspirations, your ambitions, and your accomplishments. The extent of their impact cannot be overstated.

People who feel good about themselves are healthier, happier and more productive. They are less likely to fall into self-descriptive behaviors. They are less likely to commit irresponsible actions. They make better grades in school and earn more money on the job. They sleep better at night and have better relationships with their families and friends. They are winners in every sense of the word - not because life has dealt them a better hand but because somehow along the way they learned to accept and even appreciate themselves.

Such a person was Adam Clarke. Clarke was born in the 18th century in Ireland. When he was a schoolboy, his father told the teacher, "Adam won't do well." Such off-hand remarks have emotionally crippled some children.

Fortunately, Adam Clarke's teacher replied, "He looks bright!" And that statement changed Adam's life. He went on to become a great scholar, a great preacher, and an author commentaries - because he was fortunate enough to encounter a teacher who saw his potential.

To have someone believe in us can produce miracles. There's a familiar cliché: "You don't know what you can do until you try". Several years ago the popular psychologist and author Bonaro Overstreet gave that cliché a twist that is even more true. "You never try until you know what you can do".

There are at least a few people in this very room this morning who have a tape recorder playing in their brains that says something like this:

"You're no good. You've got two left feet. You're clumsy. You foul up everything you do. There's no use in trying to do that. You'll never succeed. You'll never do. You're a loser. Loser, loser, loser."

Anybody recognize themselves? You don't have to raise a hand. How sad it is, because belief is destiny. Whether you see yourself as a winner or a loser, you will likely be right. We learned about it in psychology - the self-fulfilling prophecy. We become what we think we can become.

#### THE GOSPLE MESSAGE

Now...hear the Gospel. You are a winner. I don't care ~~about~~ your family background, your physical features, your IQ, or the size of your bank account. I don't care what kind of a house you live in, how fashionable your clothes are, or whether you wear a Timex or a Rolex. You are a winner.

"The very Son of God has come into the world and said,

"I believe in you. I believe in what you can become.  
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The very Son of God has come into this world and to back up His claims about

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November, 1974 he had two more massive heart attacks - one on the operating table and one three blocks from a hospital. Again he survived. And again he thought to himself, "God surely has something for me to do".

But something happened in Judge Ziglar's life. In November of 1976 and December of 1976 he had two more serious operations. The doctors didn't know whether he'd live for die. He lived.

Sometime later he got hit head on by a drunk going 80 mph. He survived again. These last three traumatic events, however, did not find him saying to himself, "The Lord must have something for me to do".

Why not? Why the change? It happened in January of 1975. Judge Ziglar says he was sitting at his breakfast table in the early morning hours just appreciating the morning when God spoke to him. Here is what God said,

"Hey, boy....I'm God and it isn't necessary for me to have anything for you to do. I just love you. I love you."

Friends, that is the Gospel. I could give you an in depth synopsis of this morning's text from Romans, but there it is...all here in a nutshell. God is God. He doesn't have to have us do anything. Nothing at all. He just loves us. He loves us. The God of all the universe loves us and that makes us winners. All of us. Everyone of us. Amen!

ROMANS 5:12-31

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PRAYER

We believe that in these moments of worship the deepest things within each of us are being stirred up...that down below the surface of our lives, Your spirit is striving to bring forth the highest and best that we are meant to be.

Wrestle with us, O God, until we are conquered by Your love...and grant us such spiritual wealth that we will be made aware of eternal realities... that captured by a vision of the Christ-like life, we will be lifted up... ..May we hear your voice speaking to us, challenging us, reminding us, making us winners for You. This we pray in the name of the Good Shepherd who know His own and gently brings us Home to Himself. Amen.