

How do you define success? What are you trying to achieve in life that when you reach that pinnacle you will say to yourself, "I have succeeded."

For some of us, that sign of success is a home or a certain size home. I will achieve success when I am able to buy my own home. Maybe you have never owned your own home and you are striving for that day when one day you will be able to purchase your own home and you will be successful. Or maybe you own your own home and you have in mind a certain dream home in a certain location and you are driven by the goal of one day building your dream home wherever that dream home is to be built.

Or maybe success for you is a certain car. You notice every time that certain car drives past you and you are looking forward to the day that you can be behind the wheel of that dream car. Or maybe success for you is reaching a certain educational level. Once I get a high school or a college degree or a Masters or a Doctorate then I will be a success.

Or maybe success if defined by athletic accomplishment. If I am able to make this team or win this tournament then I will be a success. Or maybe success for you lies in being hired into a certain job. Once you are able to quit work at whatever dead end job you are doing then you can get the job you want and you will be a success. Once you reach a certain income level then you will be a success.

Or maybe success if defined by relationships. If I just get married or if I just get married to someone with a lot of money or influence then I will be a success.

I learned an interesting psychological term last week. It is called "relative deprivation." Relative deprivation means that many of us compare our own lifestyle and possessions to those of a select group of people we respect and want to be like and we never have as much as that group that we compare ourselves to.

Today we do not compare ourselves to people in our own income level or educational level. We are most likely to compare ourselves to groups of people who make 3, 4, or 5 times more than what we make. We don't compare ourselves to the family that lives next door to us. Relative deprivation means that we compare ourselves to a certain group of people who have larger incomes and live in a different neighborhood than us.

In terms of homes, if you rent somewhere, you compare yourself to folks who own homes. If you own a small home, you compare yourself to those who own bigger homes. If you have a bigger home, you compare yourself to those who have the biggest homes. Relative deprivation means that we never feel as though we have enough and that we have achieved success because we are constantly comparing ourselves to people we consider the next step up economically or educationally or whatever benchmark we use.

In the United States, over half of us who live in the richest country in the world believe that we don't make enough money to afford to buy the things that we need. We teach our young people in school to compare themselves to others who have more and then we continue this attitude throughout adulthood.

I hear this attitude expressed by church folks all of the time. If we could just be like such and such church down the road and have their building or their numbers of worship attendees or their minister or their band or their whatever then we would be successful just like them.

These are the values we as a society teach our young people and we live out as adults. But Jesus teaches a very different set of values. According to Jesus in what we read here in Mark and in lots of other places, success doesn't come by achievement. Success comes from service.

I don't know who else caught the story in the Herald newspaper this week about the photo clerk at the Walgreens on Celanese Highway in Rock Hill. Ed Pierce was a former stockbroker who sold his business to move to this area to be near his adult daughter. He purchased his own home and three other homes that he planned to rent out for income.

But Ed began to fall behind on his mortgage payments on his home because two of the renters lost their jobs. They could no longer afford the rent because they became unemployed. In the values set up by our society, Ed would have every right to evict these two families and seek people who could afford to pay the rent so that he could get the income and he could continue to live his chosen lifestyle.

But Ed didn't do that. Rather than listening to what society says to do, Ed instead decided to listen to what Jesus says to do. Ed sold his larger home, moved into the smaller home he had which did not have a tenant, took a job making \$8.50 an hour in Walgreens, and has refused to evict the two families in his other homes who cannot make the rent. In addition to that, Ed no longer has short hair but a pony tail that gets cut in order to donate to a charity that provides hair for cancer patients who have lost their own hair.

In the standards that many of us have set up for success, Ed Pierce has not achieved success. He lives in a small home that he can barely afford the mortgage for. He works in a photo lab for slightly more than minimum wage. He has a pony tail. By the standards of our society, Ed Pierce is not a success.

But what about through the eyes of Jesus? Do you think he has achieved a life that Jesus finds successful?

I bet every one of us has been guilty of practicing relative depravity. Maybe we are very much overcome by it now. Practicing a belief system that there is some type of achievement we can get to that will give us a sense of success. That we have made it.

The problem is that if we are driven by this, then once we have achieved what we think is success, then we will compare ourselves to the next group that have more. And in these comparisons, we will always come up short of success.

The Scriptures we have read today make something very clear to us. Success in the eyes of Jesus does not come from academic achievement, success does not come from economic achievement, success does not come from vocational achievement.

Don't get me wrong. All of those things are not bad in themselves. But how are we using these things that we define as signs of success?

Are you using your nice income in such a way that others benefit? Are you using your vocational achievement in some way that cares for others? Are you using your educational advancement in ways that serve other people?

We don't have to compare ourselves to anyone to have value. For some of us, our sense of personal failure is rooted very deep in our souls. Maybe somewhere in our childhood we were taught by parents who felt inadequate themselves that we need to achieve something that they didn't achieve in order to be seen as successful. And maybe there are some of us who are driven by this need of pleasing them that has led us to try to achieve some level of success that we just can't ever seem to achieve.

Well hear this. If we listen to Jesus, success does not come from achieving something that someone else has. According to Jesus, our value in the eyes of God comes from the way we serve others. AMEN.

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-Opening content derived from Shorr, Juliet, *The Overspent American*, Harper Perennial, 1998.

-“He works so others are not homeless,” *Rock Hill Herald*, Thursday, Sept. 24

-Text: Mark 9: 38-50

-Given: September 27, 2009 in Allison Creek Presbyterian (York, SC)