

THE REAL JESUS
A Series on the Book of Mark
“The Definition of Success”
Mark 6:6b-29
New City Church of LA
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I. Vision of New City

Welcome to New City. We're a multi-ethnic, multi-socioeconomic come-as-you-are church in downtown LA. We're a church where everyone is welcomed.

Vision statement: Focus on serving the city and the outreach projects we have.

We're in the middle of a series called THE REAL JESUS. We've been going through the Book of Mark a passage at a time.

II. Introduction

It's a tough time right now. Some of us have lost our jobs and many of us are uncertain about our future. Some of us have searched and searched for a job, but without success. You're getting discouraged.

Others of you are trying to get ahead in your jobs.

Whether we are struggling or thriving, we all want to be successful. We want respect. We want others to recognize us. It doesn't matter what the arena of success is for you, we all want it.

If you go to a book store, there are so many books on success:

Success Principle, Success is Not an Accident, Quantum Success, Seven Spiritual Laws of Success, The Science of Success, Law of Success, How I Raise Myself from Failure to Success by Selling

I remember how much I wanted success in my career. I was so driven. I was willing to do what it took to find success. If you asked me then how I would define success, I think I would have said: making partner in a large law firm. I remember not being able to sleep at nights because my adrenaline was pumping so much. It wasn't just the money. It was recognition and this sense that: I've made it, I broke the glass ceiling. That I was somebody. This drove me for many years.

III. The question I want to consider today is the definition of success. What is the Kingdom of God's definition of success?

Let's read Mark 6b-29.

This passage tells us (1) what success is not and (2) what success is.

IV. First, I want to talk about what success is not.

This whole area was conquered by the Romans and they installed regional rulers to keep peace, usually someone from that region that the Romans can trust. That's who Herod is, one of the regional rulers. His full name is Herod Antipas. He's one of the sons of the Herod the Great, the King who tried to kill Jesus when he was born. When Herod the Great died, the kingdom was split and parceled out to his surviving sons. When the kingdom was divided-up, Emperor August specifically refused to give Herod his father's title. Even though Mark calls him King, his official designation from Rome was Tetrarch, not King. Mark was using his colloquial title, not his official title. Josephus, the Jewish historian (who is not a Christian) tells us a lot of details about the Herod's family (and even how Herod executed John the Baptist). Herodias was Herod's brother's daughter; so she is his niece (that's why John the Baptist was speaking out against his relationship as incestuous), and another brother's wife. While he was married, he fell in love with Herodias, who was also married. She saw marrying Herod as a move up the social ladder. And of course, John the Baptist was speaking out against their relationship. She was intent on moving up the ladder and he was not going to let anyone get in the way.

Herod wanted the title king really badly. When his nephew (Herod Agrippa) was given the title King, he and Herodias were extremely jealous. She nagged him to approach the emperor for the title; but when he did, he was dismissed by the emperor and exiled.

Herod was a man who wanted success in life. He wanted to move up in the world. He decided to do whatever he can to move up the ladder of success.

For Herod, the definition of success was moving up in the pecking order.

The world's definition of success is moving up, and we've all bought into this definition of success.

- There're some of you already thinking, come-on Kevin, don't be ridiculous! That's what success is all about it. It's about making it. It's about winning. It's about recognition. It's about being on top.
- Well, that's exactly my point. We have all bought into this as the reality we live in.
- And sometimes, when we have this definition of success, our relationship with God is reduced to a vehicle for success. I was watching a poker tournament, and two guys were going head to head. One guy had gone all in and the other guy called. They both started to pray. Lord, give me success!
- Success is about winning! Success is about being the top dog. Success is about the end result, the bottom line.

I want to make three observations about this definition of success.

(1) The first observation is that the framework or the presupposition behind this definition is that everyone is a part of a pecking order.

Do you know what I mean by a pecking order?

Chickens always create a pecking order. You put 10 chickens in a coop, and they invariably create a pecking order. We define success in terms of where we are on the pecking order. We see the world in terms of a pecking order, a hierarchy, and if we are high in the pecking order, we are successful and if we are low on the pecking order, we are not successful. We have been taught to strive, study, endure, so that we can be high on the pecking order. We've been doing this since we were kids. We measure people and even ourselves based on where we are on the pecking order:

- Growing up: Some of our parents constantly compared us with our brothers or sisters or other kids. Your sister is skinnier. Your bother is smarter. Why can't you be more like her? It was painful, and thought us that we are a part of the pecking order and if we want to survive we better hustle.
- As a teenager: we get our self-value from who we hung out with, who our friends were. It was painful when he or she didn't want us to be a part of the circle of friends. If we got a hot date, we thought we're hot stuff; if we can't

get a date, we sort of thought we're a loser, or turn nerdy and get your self-respect from your grades.

- Now: we still measure ourselves by how much money we make, what kind of car we drive, where we live, how attractive we are, who we know, where we eat.
- Even if you're more substantive and not so shallow, you're still stuck in this pecking order: the criteria are different but you view it the same: how good you are, how well you do something, how acknowledged you are in your field.

The point is that we've been indoctrinated all our lives into the existence of this pecking order.

(2) The second observation is that we buy into this pecking order world view because we all have a need for approval and validation outside of ourselves and the pecking order tells us whether we have it or not.

It's very hard to say to yourself: I don't care about what anyone else thinks. Do you remember the regular skit on Saturday Night Live called Daily Affirmation with Stuart Smalley by Al Franken a few years back: He used to say: "*I'm Good Enough, I'm Smart Enough, and Doggone It, People Like Me!*" The problem with the self-affirmation approach is that you don't believe it. Maybe you're not good enough, you're not smart enough, and maybe people don't like you that much.

You need something outside of you that tells you that you're approved or not. And the pecking order is what tells us whether we have it or not. We look at the pecking order to determine our identity, our value, and our worth. Sometimes this pecking order is external; sometime, it's internal. Whether you think about it or not, you get your self-worth by comparing with others. Being at the top of the pecking order means we are approved by others and by ourselves. So, in some sense, we are constantly looking for something that will get us that. It's feeling like we are worth something. Proving our worth. In other words, we are built with something insider of us that seeks approval and validation outside of ourselves.

(3) The third observation is that the pecking order is a trap no matter where we are:

- If we are at the top of the pecking order, we might feel like a winner. We feel like we are better than most other people. And we get trapped in pride. We base our identity on where we think we are on the pecking order. “What does he think he is? I am the boss here!” This pecking order based identity drives us. We feel superior and look down on other “immoral” people, those who don’t live up to our standards. Because we are getting our identity from being on top, we can’t handle changes in our lives that might change that. You have a hard time handling a loss. You have a tendency to work long hours, ignoring your family. Moving up the ladder becomes your idol because you get your identity from where you are on the pecking order.

- If we are at the bottom of the pecking order, we feel like a loser. We get discouraged, depressed. We covet, envy. We are tempted to disparage.
 - Sometimes, we superficially rebel against the pecking order by saying we don’t care anymore. But, deep inside, it’s just a defense mechanism to protect ourselves because we can’t handle the fact that we are at the bottom of the order.
 - So many of us have been hurt by the pecking order.
 - It was painful when that school or job rejected you.
 - It was painful when you lost that job or didn’t get that promotion.
 - It was painful when someone rejected you because he or she thought you weren’t attractive enough or smart enough.
 - It was painful when someone looked at you with contempt and judgment and treated you like you were morally inferior.
 - It was painful when you feel like you’re not approved by your spouse anymore.
 - It’s painful when you failed. Some of you have decided to drown yourself in alcohol and drugs, you got caught in a vicious cycle.

- If we're somewhere in between on the pecking order, we are just insecure about ourselves. There is a combination of pride and depression.

Isn't this a problem that we all face? How do we free ourselves from the coop?

The gospel of Jesus Christ not only saves us, but also frees us from the trap of the pecking order.

- The gospel of Jesus Christ is that we are messed up—we are sinful—we are way low in the pecking order, but Jesus, who is at the high end of the pecking order, came and lived a perfect life and traded place with us. God saved us not based on what we have done, but through grace, which means a gift.
- Have you ever wondered why we are saved by grace, and not by works? If you are saved by your work, what is your attitude towards the pecking order? Are you free from the pecking order? No, you are a friend of the system. You like it. You are the winner. You are on top. You are intertwined with the pecking order system and you will not give it up. And what happens? You end up in pride. You naturally boast!
- But, Bible says in Romans 3 that, if you are saved by grace (and not by observing the law or by work), there is no boasting. You see, boasting is an act of someone who lives in the pecking order system. There is no boasting! You are freed from the pecking order all together.
- Bible says: Look, you didn't get God's righteousness/approval through your works. You got his righteousness/approval by trading places with Jesus; by mercy of Jesus, by the cross!
- This fact, the gospel fact, not only saves us, but changes us because we have no basis for pride. We have no basis for boasting. We have no basis for thinking that we are better than other people, because we are not! We can't actually go back to the pecking order view of the world. It doesn't fit anymore. When we look at ourselves honestly, we deserve to be on the bottom of the pecking order, so that gives us the reason to be humble. The gospel actually keeps us humble. But, we are accepted and approved by God. We have the righteousness of God. We are considered as beautiful, holy, righteous, and perfect as Jesus. This gives us confidence. We can

actually be humble and confident at the same time, and this without pride. And so, the gospel actually frees us from the pecking order rat race.

- We don't have to get the biggest house or the fastest car to feel like we are somebody. We are somebody because of what Christ has done and given to us.
- We don't have to be the most beautiful, tallest, the skinniest to feel like we are somebody. We are somebody because of what Christ has done for us and given to us.
- We don't have to have graduated from that school or get that job or get that promotion to feel like we are somebody. We are somebody because of what Christ has done and given to us.
- We don't have to live up to what our parents expected of us, to feel like we are accepted and approved. We are accepted and approved because of what Christ has done and given to us.
- We don't have to prove anything. We don't have to make it to the top of the ladder to be somebody. We are somebody because of what Christ has done and given to us.

The gospel actually empowers us to walk away from the definition of success based on the pecking order view of life.

V. If success is not moving up in the food chain, pecking order, what is success?

What is the biblical definition of success?

- **The biblical definition of success is this: figure out what God wants us to do, and do them.**

Look at the passage. What was John the Baptist's definition of success? Was it moving up the pecking order? John was the only person who had the guts to confront Herod's sins. He believed that God gave him a mission to call people into repentance and prepare the way of the Lord. He did this whether or not it was a way to move up. Even in jail, he preached to Herod. He was not afraid of Herod. John was a man who was completely free of the pecking order bondage of life.

Look at the disciples as well. So far, Jesus preached the kingdom of God, cast out evil spirits, and healed the sick. Then, Jesus sent his disciples out two by two and told them to do what he did: preach the kingdom of God, heal the sick, and cast out evil spirits. And Jesus gave them instruction—take nothing with them—no bread, no bag, no money, no extra clothes. They should not pick and choose between the best places to stay. They should just stay in the first place they are offered hospitality. Then, the disciples went and did exactly that.

In the same way, God has a mission for us to do as well. Our job is to figure out what he wants us to do and do them. That's God's definition of success. It's not about getting ahead or moving up the ladder; we are already there because of Jesus. We now just try to figure out what God wants us to do and do them, and walk in the work that he wants us to do. That's the definition of success.

That's exactly what Paul did: for example, during one of his mission trips, in Acts 16:6-10:

6And they went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia. 7And when they had come up to Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but the Spirit of Jesus did not allow them. 8So, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. 9And a vision appeared to Paul in the night: a man of Macedonia was standing there, urging him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us." 10And when Paul had seen the vision, immediately we sought to go on into Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Once he figured out what God wanted him to do, he went forward and did it, no matter what. If you read on, he had limited "success" in terms of how things turned out. He ended up getting jailed, beaten naked, and getting kicked out. But, he wasn't fazed. Why? Apostle Paul's definition of success was not moving up in the ladder, not even what the number of people who are saved, how big the church they started were, or even how well received they were, it was merely doing what God wanted them to do.

A few years ago, I came to the realization that the definition of success from God's point of view is not being a "successful" lawyer; it was not making a lot of money; it was not getting famous; it was not even being the best this or that. It was figuring out what God wants me to do with my life, and obeying it.

- Although, we are called to do our best at work, **our success is not defined by the result. It is defined by our obedience.**

After God had called us to plant a church in downtown Los Angeles, there was a point when Grace and I were worried about a lot of things. Would it work? Would we be able to reach the residents in and near downtown? Why would they come to our church?

- Then, as we were thinking about who we are targeting, I thought it was just too hard to target both the skid row people and the new residents (the loft dwellers) of downtown. I can see intentional creation of multi-ethnic church because I've seen that, but to seek to build a multi-socioeconomic church where we bring the skid row people together with the loft dwellers, I just didn't think that it would work.
- Then, God spoke to Grace and me one morning. We were on a date at Starbucks. I was sharing with her about what I heard a few days ago about the biblical definition of success: figure out what God wants you to do, and doing it. I said to Grace: I sense that God wants us to seek to build a multi-ethnic and multi-socioeconomic church reaching out to both the skid row residents and the new residents of downtown. I don't know whether this will work or not, but I don't think whether something will work should decide whether we should do what God wants us to do. Even if it does not work, I think that's up to God. Our job is to just discern his will and obey.

Then, Grace said: it's interesting that you say that. I was surfing the web and Googled Ralph Winter. (he's the founder of US Center for World Mission and William Carey University and one of the most influential mission thinkers alive right, and Grace used to work for him as a book publisher and editor). She was wondering how he was doing. And she happened to find his autobiography on the web, and one section of that autobiography really struck her:

He said: "after we made the decision to leave Fuller we did not at any point in the next thirteen years, during which we paid off the campus, feel that God had

promised us success. We only felt that the value of the goal was sufficient justification to go all out, sink or swim. I coined the phrase, “You do not evaluate a risk by the probability of success but by the worthiness of the goal.” We were willing to fail because the goal we sensed was so urgent and strategic.

That phrase spoke to the soul of Grace and me: “You don’t evaluate a risk by the probability of success but by the worthiness of the goal.” When we heard each other, we started to cry because we knew that God had been speaking to us the same message. The definition of success is not what happens, the result, it is looking into the heart of God, the worthiness of the goal, and finding his will, and doing it.

- After this, I spent a few hours just pouring through the book of Acts and discerning from the Word of God what the Spirit of God wanted us to do.
- It became clear as I was studying the passages that he wanted us to bring diverse people together by the power of the gospel, exactly what happened to the church in the beginning.
- So, Grace and I thanked God for guiding us, and decided to go forward with the multi-ethnic multi-socioeconomic model.

One note: I am not saying that you should not calculate the probability of success when discerning God’s will. But, sometimes, there comes a time when God is calling you to do something and you know that pretty clearly. We are called to obey and do it.

VI. Conclusion

I want to close with a challenge to each of you.

I think the only way you are going to live by God’s definition of success is if you are free from the pecking order. If you are not, how are you going to obey God’s command to go down and serve, to give up something in your life, things in your life from which you get your righteousness, your approval, your identity. It is only if you are getting your validation, identity, approval, your righteousness from Jesus by faith through grace, you can stop boasting, you can stop striving, you can stop working to move up, but to just obey God.