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Spirituality #7: Results Don't Matter
Proverbs 21:30-31

I have lived with an assumption that if I do all the right things, if I keep my spiritual disciplines going reasonably consistent, prayer, daily devotions, if I keep myself close to God and my thoughts pure, if I use my gifts of leadership, preaching, discipleship, encouragement, coupled with hard work and dedication, and a teachable and humble attitude that treats people kindly with fairness...then God will bless me and I will be successful in whatever I am attempting to accomplish. I live with the assumption that if I do all the right things then God will bless me with success and victory. That is often been the case...but it is not always the case.

One year ago our leaders felt God calling us to start a Saturday night service. One year ago we were having mid 300's in our two weekend services. We had purchased new land for a building. 50 people had come to Christ. We baptized 40 people on Easter weekend. It sure looked like God was blessing our prayer and efforts. It sure looked like blessing and success. But was it? Then spring and summer hit. Several key families moved on. Our worship leaders were getting hammered. Fall came and the numbers fell. Participation in LIFE groups was sparse. We closed down our Saturday service. Now our attendance is in the mid to low 200's. It looks like failure. But was it?

It is easy to get overly depressed when things appear to be going poorly and overly impressed when things succeed. I think the same thought patterns drive both of those. Whether I'm impressed or depressed about the results reveals something about my character that's hard to swallow. It also reveals my lack of understanding about how God moves and works.

I have preached sermons that I thought were homeruns, sure to inspire people to change, and I hear zero feedback that next week of God at work. Then I preach a sermon I would count as an embarrassing dud...and that following week I hear from several different people how God is using the truths to motivate them to change. God uses sermons that bomb? What's with that? It doesn't fit my assumption that if I work hard and do a good job then I will see successful results. I don't mind working hard, but when I work hard and the results do not come...it is very discouraging. It almost seems at times that results don't matter. It almost seem like results have little or no bearing on the efforts put in. That is a disturbing and comforting thought all wrapped up together. But could there be some truth in that?

Does it disturb you when results don't seem to match up with the actions, efforts put in? Perhaps you're like me that its frustrating when you work hard, do things right, it doesn't always result in our expected outcome. Perhaps some of you have been single for a very long time. You have kept yourself pure, you have done the right things, you have avoided temptation and for years trusted God to provide a mate for you that you desperately long for and yet...nothing. No match. Nobody. It's lonely. It's frustrating when you see friends of yours you didn't do it right get a partner while you are stuck at home on Friday nights watching old movies. Perhaps you have been trying to lose weight to take care of the body God gave you as a temple of the Holy Spirit. You have worked out hard six days a week for two months, keeping your calorie intake under 1400 per day... and yet not only does the scale not go down, it goes up? What is with that?

Perhaps you are a businessman that is committed to honor the Lord with your business. Unlike some of your competitors, you are honest in what you tell your customers. You work hard. You help people who are hurting. You honor the Lord with your money. As best you can you are doing the right things and yet the results are not what you

expected. Its hard at times. People refuse to pay. People are not grateful. Personal finances are really tight. You don't mind working hard...but you like to see results.

Perhaps you are a parent. You haven't been perfect but you have tried to do the right things. You have taught your kids God's truth and tried to model it and admitted when you have blown it. Some are thrilled at how well your kids have turned you and others are very discouraged. Its pretty tempting to become overly impressed or depressed with our parenting when the results are great or the results appear to be poor. From marriage to finances to health to employment to friends we assume that if we do all the right things we will be blessed and successful, thinner, more content, money in the bank, and our relationships relatively conflict free. Its often the anticipated results that motivate us to do the right things. So how are we supposed to respond when the results don't turn out the way we expect? What do we do when it looks like results don't matter? Perhaps we need to change the way we look at results and how that relates to our spirituality.

In Psalm 73, a man named Asaph struggled with this question. His assumption was just like mine. V.1 "Surely...surely... God is good to Israel, to those who are pure in heart." If you are pure in heart, do the right things God will be good and bless you. Then Asaph is very transparent with us in v.2,3 "I almost stumbled...my feet slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant as I saw the prosperity of the wicked." V.11 They say "How does God know?...the wicked are always at ease they have increased in wealth. Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure." Asaph looks at the wicked and cries out. "Lord its not fair!" They mock your name. They are wicked and evil and yet...they become wealthy and enjoy a comfortable life and I'm getting slammed and hammered on. Lord I have kept myself pure, but it was in vain. Lord it was a waste to do the right thing. Look where it got me. Nowhere. Why do the God-fearing people get blasted and the evil people get blessed? V.16 Asaph has been

doing some thinking on this. “when I pondered to understand this, It was troublesome in my sight until I came into the sanctuary of God, then I perceived their end.”

A subtle myth we believe is that obedience always results in immediate blessing and success. It doesn't always. Life on this earth is not fair. Its only when we take into account eternity that we see God being the great and fair equalizer. Asaph eyes were opened to the end, the eternal destiny, of evil people. Asaphs eyes were opened to the strength and confidence of living in the presence of God, doing the right thing regardless of the immediate outcome. Look at v.25 “Whom have I in heaven but Thee? And besides Thee, I desire nothing on earth. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. V.28 “As for me... the nearness of God is my good.”

Obedience matters....results don't. That takes faith. Because faith is obedience even when it appears ridiculous to do so. Faith is doing the right thing even when it may not seem like a good deal for you short term. Faith is the belief that God is good and just and we will leave the results up to Him. Obedience, staying close to God, doing what's right matters, results do not.

If we look around at only results, its easy to be deceived. Whether I succeed or whether I fail may not have a whole lot to do with whether or not I'm on the right path. You might look at one point in the life of Samson and say, “Wow, he has got it made. Big, strong. Successful in victory. One might look at Job and say. What is wrong with him? Financial ruin. Family destroyed. His wife and friends all turn against him. What is with that? Sure Job got double back all that he lost, but at what price? Would anyone here be willing to follow that investment plan? If you looked only at results, at a certain point in Job's life and Samson's life you might never guess that God was displeased with Samson but Job was the most favored man on earth. Obedience matters...results do not.

We tend to assume that success equals spiritual strength and being on good terms with God. The disciples assumed that. They were shocked when Jesus said it was really hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. “Who can possibly get in then they asked?” They assumed riches were always a product of God’s favor. It is a mistake to assume that just because we observe success in a life it always springs from God’s favor. It is also a mistake to assume that if we see failure then there must always be something wrong spiritually with that person and God is not pleased.

Are the biggest churches always the most spiritual? Some are very spiritual. Some simply have the best show in town, a mile wide and an inch deep. Are the smaller churches then the most spiritual in town? Some are, some are not. Some are small because they are ingrown and fighting and cranky...not spiritual. Some are small but they are also spiritual, full of life and exactly where God wants them. Healthy things will usually grow, but not always. Size and success is not always an indication of God’s blessing. It is easy to be seduced by success. Obedience matters...results do not.

Uzziah was a very successful king. Turn to II Chronicles chapter 26. He became king at age 16 with a great start. V.4 “he did right in the sight of the Lord.” V.5 “continued to seek God.” V.8 his fame extended to the border of Egypt, for he became very strong.” V.15 “His fame spread afar, for he was marvelously helped until he was strong.” Uzziah followed the Lord and became amazingly successful almost to the same height as Solomon. But then it went to his head. He got the idea that he was God’s special leader and the rules for kings just didn’t apply to him. He didn’t want to go through the red tape of the priests to worship God. He wanted to worship God as a king and a priest. That position however had been reserved by God for the Messiah alone. God was not pleased. Read v.16—19. Uzziah walks into the temple to worship and when the priests try to stop him he gets enraged. How dare they! I’m blessed. I’m God’s favored

king. I can do what I want. Wrong. God hits him with leprosy and never recovers. He was a leper until he died. V.23 on his tombstone instead of saying what a great successful leader Uzziah was it said, "he was a leper". Its easy to get seduced by success. Obedience is what matters, results do not.

Not only is it easy to become seduced by success, it is also easy to become fooled by failure. When things fall apart we assume there must be some reason. We start looking for a lesson God is trying to teach us or some sin that needs to be dealt with. If we can't find anything there we assume that someday we will discover that this really bad thing was really a good thing and a necessary part of our spiritual growth or future success. When we can't see any possible connection to personal sin or lesson learned or future growth or success, we tend to question God's goodness and faithfulness, because our deeply engrained assumption is that failure must mean something is spiritually wrong. It's really hard for us to believe that even if we fail, we might still be doing just fine spiritually. That of course is the message of Job. Job was God's golden boy on the earth. God delighted in Job so much he used him as an example to point out to Satan the accuser. Satan told God the only reason Job lives righteously is because you have blessed him with all this wealth and family and position...who wouldn't? Let me take all that away and watch how fast your main man Job will curse your name. Job hung in there by reminding himself, "The Lord gives, the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord." Job had no idea there was this cosmic wager going on. He had no idea to the unseen realm that he could never know or understand. He had no idea to the unseen but very real spiritual conflict that takes place. And neither do we. Sometimes we will experience failure and not know all the answers as to why. In the midst of a trial or failure, unless we see some direct connection to a sin or lesson to be learned...we may not know what it means. It is our obedience that matter, results may not mean that much.

Moses certainly could have been fooled by failure. At one point in his life he seemed quite successful as the prince of Egypt; wealthy and powerful. After he murdered the Egyptian and ran away to the desert he might have thought all that was a waste of the prime of his life. Called back by God to lead the people of Israel out of Egypt at one point he might be judged as a terrible loser with overextended vision. Pharaoh wouldn't listen to him. The miracles Moses did to provide evidence that God was behind him were easily duplicated by Egyptian magicians. When Pharaoh tightened the screws down on the Hebrews, they threatened to rebel against Moses and wanted him kicked out of office. The results, the trials you are experiencing right now may not be an indication of how you are doing spiritually. It wasn't David's sin that caused him to be chased around the countryside by King Saul. Certainly it wasn't sin that caused Jesus to be betrayed, rejected and hung on a cross on a Friday afternoon in apparent failure. You may yourself be in a Friday afternoon trial right now. Friday is here...but Sunday is coming. It may be in this life or the life to come, but Sunday is coming. Our failures and our success do not determine our spiritual condition. Obedience matters...results do not.

So if results don't always matter. If results can't be trusted as an accurate measure of my relationship with God, does that mean results can't tell me anything about how well I'm doing my job? What does God hold me responsible for? Since results don't matter does that mean I can just sit back and go through the motions and see what happens. Just throw up my hands and sing, "Jesus take the wheel! Or am I responsible to work hard and be prepared for victory, set up my neck of God's kingdom for success as best I can...then leave the results to God?"

Look with me at Proverbs 21:30-31 "...no plan can succeed against the Lord. The horse is made ready for the day of battle, but victory rests with the Lord." I have had this verse on my frontal lobe for the last month. It sure helps me put things into perspective as to results but it

also motivates and challenges me to be faithful to do what I have been called to do. This verse reminds me that the ultimate results are up to God. Whether I succeed or fail...the victory belongs to the Lord. He decides. My job is to prepare my horse for battle. God is going to hold me responsible for one thing. Did I prepare my horse for battle. Did I prepare well for my sermon on Sunday? Did I disciple the men? Did I make the phone calls and pray and study and share my faith and walk in truth. Did I encourage people? Was I faithful to teaching His Word. Did I love my wife well. Did I prepare my kids for life? Have I listened for God's heart? Did I walk in obedience. That is preparing my horse for battle. Obedience matters....results do not. Results belong to the Lord.

Practically what that means for us is that we need to begin asking ourselves different questions. Instead of asking, "how are things going?" we need to be asking ourselves "am I doing the right things?" "Am I being faithful to what God has called me to do?"

Obedience matters and results don't. If we apply that truth it will bring a steadiness to our life. If we more focused on doing the right things rather than how things are turning out, it brings our ship on an even keel when the storms of life threatened to rock our little boat. If we put the results both successes and failures into perspective, my defeats will not become so devastating and my victories will not become so seductive. The storms of life may rock my world, but my spiritual life can stand on a solid rock as remain being faithful to what God has called me to be. And I will not become so depressed over my failures nor will I become overly impressed at my successes. I will accept the unseen realm of spiritual conflict that I will never know and may never understand. Its not that I will never evaluate and ask how I could do better. Absolutely, a life unevaluated is random and pointless. There are lessons to be learned. There are sins that sabotage. God does set us up for future blessing...but at the end of the day, I must accept I will not always know

the answer to why I succeeded or failed. Obedience is what matters, results we leave up to God.

If you never fully get this truth, then you will forever be angry with God when those times when the apparent unfairness of God comes down on you. You will be angry because you did it all right and yet you did not get blessed as you expected. You will forever compare yourself to others who look like they are succeeding just fine with little effort. When you succeed you will take too much credit and when you fail you will take on too much blame. Obedience is what matters...results do not.

Can you also see how getting a hold of this one little truth might revolutionize your spiritual walk. Do you see how less prone we would be to being jerked back and forth as a plaything of circumstance? Do you see how faith bolstering this would be as we turn our eyes to focus more on the hope of heaven and look at life with eternity's perspective? Do you see the humility that will grow when we admit neither our successes or failures are "all about us?" Do you see how it motivates us to work hard to set the table for God's success wanting to be a part of what God is doing and to see Him at work. This next week when you are talking with your friends, instead of asking them the question, "how are you doing." Ask this question, "So...are you doing the right things?"

(This sermon was inspired by chapters 16 and 17 of Larry Osborne's book *Contrarians Guide to Spirituality*)