

In the previous post I said there's a new version of the prosperity gospel spreading through the Church. Rather than money and physical stuff, this new version makes us greedy for social influence and culturally validated significance. So I dubbed this phenomenon the Social-Significance Prosperity Gospel (SSPG). You can read that post for a fuller description of the issue, but I'll offer a brief refresher. In short, we've been sold a multilayered lie concerning individual meaning and success. We've come to believe that anything truly meaningful will have a large positive impact in the world. Therefore, to have meaning is to be known for the positive influence we have. Influence = meaning, no influence = no meaning, more influence = more meaning. You get the idea. Thus, according to this paradigm if you want to have any meaning you need to be known for your influence and achievements. Personal value is measured in the number of likes, follows, shares, guest-speaker invitations, awards, book deals, and famously influential friends you have.

So, if this is a problem, what's the solution? A large part of addressing the financial prosperity gospel involves dealing with definitions; understanding that money is a narrow and insufficient definition of blessing. Similarly, a large part of the solution to the SSPG is a matter of definition. We have a bad working definition of success. For many of us success looks like achieving that recognition and influence. Reliability and consistency are held as virtues, but only because they increase the odds of being successful in attaining social significance. Here's the key statement of this post: **Faithfulness is not a means to success. Faithfulness is the success.** That's it. That's a starting point for solving the problem. We need to reorient our aim and redefine the goal.

Consider two passages from Paul that speak to this issue.

1 Thessalonians 4:9–12 Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, 10 for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, 11 **and to aspire to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, 12 so that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.**

It's true that the situation Paul is addressing isn't identical to ours. The Thessalonians were struggling not with questions of significance, but with questions surrounding the return of Christ (1 Thess. 4:10–12; 5:14; 2 Thess. 3:6–15). The passage quoted above is Paul's response to the fact that some of them were being lazy and living off the generosity of wealthier believers because "if Jesus is coming back any day, and you have enough for us both to live off of for

this short time, then there's no point to me working." The Thessalonians were not being faithful in the simple things of their daily lives. Paul corrects them (and us) by pointing out that the target is faithfulness and not freeloading (or fame). So even though the situation that prompted the statement is different, the application remains the same; aim at faithfulness and not something else.

Now the second passage.

*1 Timothy 2:1–3 First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, **that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.** 3 This is good, and it is pleasing in the sight of God our Savior,*

Notice that Paul did not instruct Timothy to hope and pray for civil order and societal peace so that Christians would be uninterrupted in their pursuit of acclaim. He didn't say to pray for those in high positions so that, in the resulting peace, you can focus all your attention on building up a larger audience. Rather, believers are to hope and pray this way "that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life..." In Paul's mind, it seems, the ideal scenario is one in which social rest facilitates not fame, but faithfulness.

To be sure, the gospel is the good news for the entire world. God doesn't want anyone to go without access to this incredible truth, and as his covenant people in the world we too should desire for as many people as possible to embrace the news of Jesus' Kingship over creation. God calls some to carry the gospel far from their home. God calls some to influential positions. God enables some to have a louder voice in society. These things are true. The problem is, we've been telling everyone they are all called to all of this.

For at least the last two generations preachers, teachers, and camp speakers have attempted to stir up zeal for evangelism and mission by saying they're looking at an entire room full of world-changers. I can appreciate what they were/are trying to do. Of course we all want more people to hear the gospel. But that method and the thinking behind it have produced more bad fruit than good. Good initiative, bad judgement. That message implies that God's will is for every person to become a dynamic public figure and/or achieve massively influential prominence in some field. Sadly, it also implies that an individual for which that doesn't happen has not fulfilled their God-given potential, that they are letting God down, and that the people they *should have* impacted will have to go on suffering.

When you're told the target is to change the world but then you end up living a relatively quiet life, it's hard to not feel like a failure. No matter how well you love your family, you've failed. No matter how much quality you add to another's day by working diligently and ethically, you've failed. No matter how faithfully you worship and serve God, you've failed.

What if we adjusted fire to a more correct target? What if leading a “peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way” was the goal rather than our names being known by as many people as possible? So much so that we were intentional about it. So much so that we actually aspired to live quietly, more focused on being faithful in our own affairs than on building an audience. What if we took Paul’s words seriously, as inspired and authoritative?

To be clear, aspiring to live a quiet life doesn’t require the rejection of influence or an anti-social monastic lifestyle. We are called to be salt and light in whatever situation we are in. Which means a stay at home mom can/should be salt and light to her kids and anyone she interacts with in the normal course of her day. A man can be salt and light to coworkers on the assembly line where he’s worked for 15 years. A woman can be salt and light to the handful of people she interacts with in the office everyday. A guy can be salt and light to the barista right in front of him having a rough day. It also doesn’t require denying dynamic qualities in individuals. But am I putting the same energy into being faithful to my God, my family, and my church as I am to landing that book deal or promoting that podcast?

Maybe part of the issue is that a lot of us in the evangelical church have lost touch with the sacredness of the imminent; the holiness of the mundane and simple. We think that the only things that matter are things that transcend our immediate surroundings and normal daily life. It has to touch the other side of the world, or at least be acknowledged by a few thousand people in order to be “significant” in any real way.

Meaning can be...should be...must be found in faithfulness. There is meaning in taking the garbage to the curb because I’m participating in humanity’s original calling to steward creation and because I’m serving my family. There is no glory in pushing a squeaky trash can with a broken wheel down the driveway. No glory but, oh, the meaning and beauty in being faithful to the most trivial and mundane tasks before us.

- Doing that load of laundry: sacred.
- Diligently checking the details on a report before filing it: holy.
- Welding consistently clean lines: spiritual.
- Being patient with the kid who acts out while you’re teaching: anointed.
- Preparing your kids to participate in society: hallowed.
- Loving your spouse consistently and sacrificially: divine.
- Checking on your neighbor who isn’t feeling well: righteous.
- Being on time even for casual appointments: worship.
- Lovingly and dependably pastoring the small church: miraculous.
- Returning the shopping cart to the corral: bear minimum, just do that one.

All of these things (and countless others) are meaningful because faithfulness isn’t the means to success. Faithfulness is the success. This whole discussion has me thinking about CS Lewis’ classic work, *The Great Divorce*.¹ If

you haven't read it, you should. In the fashion of retelling an odd dream, Lewis tells the story of a group of hell's inhabitants being taken by bus to visit the outskirts of heaven. In chapter 12 Lewis notes a stream of bright light, which he later realizes is a parade with each being in it emitting light. The beings sing and dance and throw flower petals on the ground for the one for whom the parade exists. When he realizes the parade is in honor of a woman he begins to wonder who such an incredible thing might be for. Maybe Mary, the mother of Jesus?! Lewis' guide, George, assures him its nobody he's ever heard of. A woman, from a particular neighborhood, named Sarah.

Lewis is perplexed. Why does this unheard of woman have a parade of giant spirits and other beings celebrating her every time she moves about? Because, George explains, she was faithful. She didn't pastor a mega-church. She didn't have books with pithy alliterated principles to make you more successful. She was never interviewed on radio or tv. She didn't sit on any advisory boards or councils. She wasn't a politician, evangelist, or actor. Her name wasn't on anything because she didn't have her own brand (some of those references didn't exist when Lewis wrote, but that's my lowbrow paraphrase of the point). She was just Sarah Smith from Golders Green, England.

But she was faithful to her husband who wasn't an easy man. She loved children who weren't her own. She was kind to neighbors and cared for animals. She prayed and loved Jesus. In her quiet and anonymous faithfulness God delighted and received much glory. And because of this, Sarah, an ordinary saint and regular citizen of heaven received eternal rewards. It's a beautiful image that reflects Jesus' teachings about priorities (Matthew 6:1-4, 16-21).

I want to be like Sarah Smith from Golders Green. I want to be faithful. But I also recognize that I'm not impervious to the allure of fame and influence. So (I hope this makes sense), I want to *want to* be faithful more than I want anything else. I want to keep myself humble before the Lord and let him decide how high to lift me up (James 4:10). I want to faithfully plant and water whatever He puts in front of me, but let him decide when and how fast it grows (1 Corinthians 3:6-8). And even though it's true that you have to be faithful in the small things before you can handle bigger things (Luke 16:10), I don't want to see the small things as trivial but necessary means to my greatness. I want to be faithful in the small things because Jesus was, and because he would be in my specific situation; because it's just good and right to be faithful in the little things!

So, I propose that we change our functional definition of success. Social significance is not success. Fame and fortune are not success. Likes, follows, and shares are not success. Having made a positive impact on others isn't even success. None of those things are inherently wrong either. Faithfulness isn't a hack to speed up attaining acclaim and achievement. Faithfulness isn't a means to success. Faithfulness is the success.

And that doesn't in anyway reduce my value or meaningfulness in creation. I'm known and loved by the King of heaven and earth. Somehow, for some reason, the everlasting God whose voice shakes the heavens, has made me His temple. Because Jesus knows my name, I'm not desperate for anyone else to know it. Oh God, help me to always find my identity and meaning in you, all the days of my life, until I finally hear you say, "Well done, my good and influential faithful servant."

Lewis, C. S. (2001). *The Great Divorce*. New York, HaperCollins.