

MAKING YOUR DREAMS COME TRUE

(Pursuing Success and Handling Failure)

PURPOSE: BY THE END OF THIS SERIES, MY STUDENTS SHOULD UNDERSTAND SUCCESS AND FAILURE FROM A BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVE AND KNOW WHAT IT TAKES TO REACH THEIR GOD-GIVEN DREAMS.

INTRODUCTION

How many of you have set as a goal to be a complete failure by the time you are 30 years old? Of course not. We dream of one day having strong lasting relationships, a successful family, a successful career. But many forty and fifty year olds look back on their lives as grand disappointments. Half of the marriages break up. Business go bankrupt. Somehow, somewhere along the way, their dreams turned into nightmares.

I'm entitling this series, "Making Your Dreams Come True." We'll talk about success... and failure. And you may be surprised to learn that when some people think they have failed, they have actually succeeded, and when some think they have succeeded, they have actually failed. God has a way of putting a new twist on things, and you may be surprised by His perspective. Some of you feel like you'll amount to nothing, and that you're outclassed by everyone around you. But I'm praying that we'll all come out of this series charged up to find and pursue the dreams God has for us.

PRAY

I. DREAM BIG DREAMS

You can't read the Bible without sensing that God wants us to dream big. Just look at the Great Commission that Jesus left us with before He left the earth. Someone read that for us in Mt. 28:18-20. *"Therefore go and make disciples of all nations...and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."* Notice the "all" and the "everything." What an incredible challenge! But by observing the way most Christians live, you'd think He said, "I'm leaving now. Be nice and keep you're noses clean while I'm gone. Don't do anything I wouldn't do." But Jesus didn't beg us to hold down the fort. He challenged us to storm the heights!

Written by Steve Miller. Copyright September, 1997 by Reach Out Ministries. Do not copy except within your own local church. Not for resale.

Scripture taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission.

Someone else look up Col. 1:28,29. The apostle Paul took Jesus seriously. Instead of saying, “If I just bring one person closer to Christ during my life, it’ll all be worth it,” he said, “*We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.*” (Col. 1:28,29) “To present everyone perfect in Christ?!!” You’ve got to be kidding! Paul was dreaming pretty big.

Col. 1:28,29 – The Greek word translated “labor” was “used especially of the labour undergone by the athlete in his training.” (Lightfoot) “Toil, strain like an athlete.” (Lenski)

So what do I learn from all this? Simply this, “Dream Big Dreams.” Many people simply drift through life, with apparently no purpose or direction. But if you want to leave your mark on this earth, start with big dreams.

A. Specific Dreams

ILLUSTRATION: Someone told me, “If you aim at nothing, you’ll hit it every time.”

What are you aiming for in life? Have you ever put it in writing?

ILLUSTRATION: One study of Harvard grads found that the ones who had specific, written goals, outperformed their classmates who never put their goals in writing.

B. Big Dreams

ILLUSTRATION: One pastor used to say, “It’s better to shoot for a star and hit a mountain peak, than to aim for a mud puddle and hit it every time.”

I like that! Don’t just dream of a decent marriage. Dream of a great marriage. The apostle Paul didn’t set his sights on a mud puddle. He set them on the stars. And what an incredible impact this guy made!

Let's stop listening for a minute, and start dreaming. Turn over your student hand out and write down a few specific goals. You'll have to complete it later, but I at least want you to get started. First, do you have some *physical goals*, such as getting in shape within the next year. Think of *relational goals*, like learning the art of relating to people over the next few years. Jot down a *vocational goal*, like to master a trade or get a college degree within the next 6 years. Do you, like the apostle Paul, have *spiritual goals*, like to read the entire Bible within the next two years, or to reach a certain portion of the world for Christ? Find some time alone this week to break your long-range goals into short-range goals. Like, "To read the entire Bible in the next two years, I'll start reading a chapter a day in the New Testament."

"But," you might object, "is it really possible to do *anything* I set my mind to? And what about those people who shoot for the wrong dreams?" That brings us to our next point. Not only do we need to dream big dreams. We must also:

II. DREAM THE *RIGHT* DREAMS

HINT: If you've never had a dream like this, you could say, "Some people have dreams like..." Better, tell some embarrassing dream you've had (within limits, of course!).

ILLUSTRATION: Do you ever have really stupid dreams at night? You know, the kind where you wake up in a cold sweat, crying out, "Thank goodness that really didn't happen!" I used to dream where I was sitting in my desk at school, only to glance down, and to my horror, realize that I looked like an underwear model straight out of the JC Penney catalog! I would rack my brain to figure out how I was going to get out of class without anyone noticing! Don't laugh too loud, or I might ask you to share your stupid dreams!

Some people dream the wrong dreams in real life. If you're headed the wrong direction, it doesn't matter how hard you try or how fast you climb. You're not going to like where you end up.

ILLUSTRATION: Someone told the story of a pilot who got temporarily lost. "Where are we?" asked one of the passengers. "I don't know," responded the pilot, "but we've got a tailwind and are making great time!"

Making great time, but headed the wrong direction. That describes many people today.

ILLUSTRATION: *In an interview with a leading financial magazine, one of the ten most successful executives in the country said this: “Reaching the level of business success that I have requires total commitment. If your family is too demanding, GET A NEW FAMILY. That’s what I did....”*

His dream was to be a top executive. But at the expense of his family? He shot for the wrong star. And one day, when he comes before God, he’ll probably feel much like I did after my underwear dream.

So just any dream won’t do. You’ve got to dream the *right* dreams.

A. Understand the World’s Value System

Let’s look at the dreams that seem to absorb most of your classmate’s attention, and evaluate them from an eternal perspective.

- **BEAUTY:** *If only I were as beautiful as _____, then I would have arrived..* And we spend loads of time and money trying to fulfill this elusive dream. Now hear me out, there’s nothing wrong with trying to look good. But does your appearance control your life? Do you really expect to impress God on judgment day with a picture showing how beautiful you were in your prime? For God’s viewpoint on beauty, turn to Prov. 31:30.

Prov. 31:30 – Could be translated either “is worthy of praise” or “let her be praised. Keil opts for the latter. “Fleeting” (NIV) could also be translated “vain” (NASB). Keil says beauty is vain because of its transitoriness.

Mt. 6:19,20 – “Rust” could mean either corrosion, such as rust on metals (so Alexander) or the devouring of mice and other vermin of belongings stored in barns (so McNeile and Tasker).

- **WEALTH:** *“If only I had the latest sports car, a gold Visa...”* There’s nothing wrong with working hard to support your family and trying to succeed at business. And sometimes God blesses people with wealth. But don’t set your heart on riches.

ILLUSTRATION: *Multi-millionaire Malcomb Forbes once said, “He who dies with the most toys wins.” But I’m afraid he’ll be in for a rude awakening when He comes before God, and God asks, “Malcomb, what did you do with your life?” And he answers, “I died with a very large toy collection.”*

Find out how God evaluates this dream in Mt. 6:19,20.

- **TALENT:** *“If only I could play football like _____, then I’d be happy.”* Imagine that your dream is to make it in professional athletics. After competing and training your heart out on the high school and college level,

you finally realize your dream and make it into the pros. Now, are you finally happy? Let's look at one guy who made it.

***ILLUSTRATION:** Deion Sanders, also known as 'Prime Time,' seems to have it all. While most athletes dream of competing professionally at a sport, Sanders successfully competes at two, playing major league baseball with the Cincinnati Reds and as all-pro football cornerback with the Dallas Cowboys. He's one of the fastest men in either sport, leading baseball's National League with 56 stolen bases. And at 30 years old, his deals include a \$35 million contract with the Cowboys plus \$8 million-\$12 million a year in endorsements. Let's just say he made it.*

But according to Sanders, something was missing. In his own words, "All my life, thinking football, baseball, finances, women, personal accomplishments could bring peace in your life. ...It didn't." "It never would. Be a part of two Super Bowl-winning teams. Be in a World Series. You'd think that this man has peace. But I never had it until now. I wake up every morning, rejoicing." What happened? In the Summer of 1997, he met Jesus and asked Him, "...just take me. Come and get me." (USA Today, Aug. 29,1997, by Jarrett Bell, pp. C1-2)

Now hear me out. There's nothing wrong with developing your talents. In fact, if God wants you to, you should put your heart in it. But without a higher goal, even the most talented will remain unfulfilled. God's evaluation? See Psalm 147:10,11.

Ps. 147:10,11 – "God has no pleasure in the warrior's horse and in athletic strength." (Keil)

- **POPULARITY:** *"If only I were the most popular guy on campus...."* But often popularity comes with a pretty hefty price tag. Many compromise their standards to get into a party, or snub their real friends in order to fit in with some high brow losers. Face it. If you follow Jesus, some people won't like you. And anyway, popularity doesn't guarantee your happiness. Look at what Jesus said about Popularity in Lk. 22:23,26.

Lk. 6:22,23,26 – "He who leads a truly holy life will come into collision with the sins of the ungodly and so fall into disfavour with them." (Geldenhuys)

B. Flush the World's Value System

At some point, you've got to decide whom you're going to serve, God or the world. To sum up, here are three reasons the world's dreams come up empty. Even when you succeed in the world...

- 1) **...the success won't last (Mt. 6:19,20)**

Illustration: *Winning within the world's value system is kind of like winning a prune-eating contest during school lunch: a moment of glory followed by lots of regrets.*

Illustration: *As C.S. Lewis once wrote, "Whatever is not of eternal use is eternally useless."*

In the light of eternity, most people's dreams are much like my underwear dream. One day they'll wake up in a cold sweat, realizing that all their life they lived for dreams that didn't really matter.

2) ...you won't necessarily be happy.

Illustration: *Sting, of the successful rock group "The Police", was asked "What's the most widely held misconception of success?" He responded, "That it brings you happiness. It doesn't...."*

3) ...you won't win the approval of God.

Jeremiah gives us a great summary to this section:

*"Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom
or the strong man boast of his strength
or the rich man boast of his riches,
but let him who boasts boast about this:
that he understands and knows me,
that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and
righteousness on earth,
for in these I delight," declares the LORD.*

Tip: This would be an appropriate time to explain the gospel if you think non-Christians are present.

Knowing God is infinitely more valuable than any of these earthly dreams. I think this is what Deion Sanders found out. But what about you? Do you know God?

So your first step toward dreaming the right dreams is to flush the world's value system. If you want to go for the gold, you must give up your small ambitions. But what do you replace all those lesser dreams with?

C. Buy into God's value system.

Let's assume that you're already a Christian (mentioned above), and you want to make something out of your life. If we don't shoot for the world's goals, what *do* we shoot for?

SUCCESS OR FAILURE? To get us thinking about this, let me paint you a few pictures of people's lives, and let you discuss 1) whether you think each was a success or failure, and 2) what additional information would you need in order to answer the first question.

1 - "Ralph aspired to success in business. Now he's in the highest paid executive in the country."

2 - "Doug aspired to play professional soccer and became the best in the league."

3 - "Through great sacrifice and drive, Rev. Bob grew a church from scratch to over 5000 people meeting weekly."

4 - "Rev. Pete's ministry doesn't seem to go anywhere number wise, and even those that do hear his messages don't get anything out of it."

5 - "Ruth became a medical missionary to West Africa, starting a hospital before being killed for her faith at 30 years of age."

Stay in your small groups, and we'll go to God's Word to discover what God values. If we don't shoot for fame and fortune, what *do* we shoot for? How can we tell a success from a failure? And we'll come back to Pete, Ruth, and friends a little later.

Christians define greatness, not in terms of how the world honors greatness, but how God honors greatness. After all, what's 70 years of honor when compared with rewards that pay off for millions of years?

Tip: Don't have carpet where you are teaching? Use specks in the ceiling, blades of grass, planks of wood, or whatever is within sight.

ILLUSTRATION: Look at a small tuft in the carpet or throw rug you are sitting on. Go ahead, pick one out and touch it. Now, imagine that that tuft represents 70 years. Now look at other nearby tufts. Each of these

also represent 70 years each. Now look at the entire carpet. This represents eternity. Most people live for things that matter only during that one tuft. Doesn't it make infinitely more sense to live for things that last for eternity?

So what really matters from God's perspective? Are some Christians greater than others? Let's look to the Scriptures.

1. Dreams That Result In True Greatness.

A. The Greatest Man on Earth.

In God's economy, not all Christians are the same. There are spiritual giants, and spiritual wimps. And the distinguishing factor is not how many tests you can ace or how many balls you can kick into a goal.

The first hint that God's value system differs from ours is in what people He calls "great." At the time of Christ, who do you think was the greatest man, besides Jesus? (Let them guess.) Look up Luke 7:28 to find out. How many of you were born of a woman? That includes most everybody except that person in *Globe Magazine* that hatched from an alien egg. (just kidding) But remarkably, this man lacked most of the things this world recognized as part of greatness.

Mt. 3:1,4 – "Desert of Judea" = "does not necessarily signify a sandy desert, nor even an unbroken forest, but merely the uncultivated land as distinguished from that under tillage..." (Alexander)

"Camel's hair" = "Probably rough sackcloth woven from camel's hair." (McNeile) "It seems to have been used as a proverbial designation of the cheapest and coarsest kind of dress. Thus, Josephus says that Herod used to threaten the ladies of the court, when they offended him, that he would force them to wear hair-cloth." (Alexander) "Locusts" – "were eaten by the poor." (Bible Knowledge Commentary)

First, his clothes would elicit a fashion citation from any preppy who saw him in the Mall. Look at Mark 1:6. A camel's hair outfit? Get real. Then, there's that diet (Mt. 3:4). Anyone who pulled that meal out of his sack during school lunch break might get beat up. Next, his office (Mt. 3:1). People had to go out to the desert to meet him. He wasn't just on the wrong side of the tracks. He was way out in the sticks. And finally, his status in society. (Mt. 14:10,11) His life climaxed, not with a Nobel Prize, but with imprisonment. The only time we find him served on a platter was when literally *he* was served on a platter. Do you get the picture? This is *not* the guy that Time Magazine would put on its cover for "Man of the Year." But you see, man looks at the outward appearance. But God looks at the heart (I Sam. 16:7).

God's evaluation of John the Baptist shows us two things. First, some people are truly greater than others (cr. Mt. 5:19). Second, whatever God thinks of greatness is radically different from this world's evaluation. In fact, many of the world's first will be last in heaven, and many last here will be first there. (Mk. 10:31)

Mk. 10:31 – "The first" are "those highly regarded by men in general." (Hendricksen)

b. The road to greatness.

In your small groups, appoint a reader to read the following passages to your group, as a secretary records the qualities and actions that lead to greatness. At the end, we'll let the secretaries read the results back to the entire group. (Leader, let one group read one finding, then let the other groups share a finding.)

Lk. 9:46-48; Mt. 18:1-5; Mt. 23:11,12; Mk. 9:33-37

Following are some of the items they should come up with:

- * Be a servant.**
- * Be humble.**
- * Welcome the lowly.**

True success involves achieving true greatness. No one dreams of becoming totally worthless by the time he retires. Fortunately, Jesus mapped out a road to greatness.

2. Dreams With A Long Term Payoff.

***ILLUSTRATION:** If I'm into short term payoffs, I do things like eat whatever I want, in whatever amount I want, any time I want. Cream-filled donuts and Coke for breakfast. Supplement my diet with a mid morning Twinkie. A pound of BBQ pork for lunch. A large bag of Skittles for a mid-afternoon snack. Well, you get the idea. It would be fun, right? But the reward would be short term – lots of fun during mealtime, while ruining my health and happiness in the long-run.*

Jesus recommends that we shoot for long-term rewards, I mean, super- long term. I mean, where the rewards never end.

Turn to Mt. 6:19,20 and keep your Bible turned there. We'll be back. This world rewards beauty, brains, bucks, and talent. But we won't always be here. So what makes the difference between efforts that pay for eternity and those that pay off short term?

a. Not from The Wrong Motives

The passage we just read ends a long passage where Jesus has been talking about rewards. Some people do many good deeds, but they do them from the wrong motives. Look at Matthew 6:1, for instance. This person looks holy to everyone. Goes to church, doesn't cheat, keeps his nose clean. But do you know *why* he lives so spotlessly? Look at the text. "...to be seen by them..." Apparently he hangs around a religious crowd that looks up to stuff like that. He's just trying to impress people. But once he gets his plaque or citizenship reward, that's all he gets. No reward in heaven for this guy.

Now let's check our own motives. When you do something spiritual, or work hard for the church, are you hurt if you don't get recognized? If so, then who are you really doing your work for?

So, the wrong motive can steal our reward for even a major effort. What's the right motive we should be shooting for?

b. From the right motive.

Turn to I Cor. 13, and read verses 1-3. So what is the right motive? (Let them respond.) Love. And according to these three verses, even if you memorize the whole Bible, sell all your possessions, and die a martyr's death while ministering to a desert tribe, if you don't do it out of love, you are nothing (vs. 2) and you get no reward (vs. 3).

PULLING IT ALL TOGETHER

So let's try to sum up what we have found in the Bible. God turns the world's value system on its head. Don't claw your way up that corporate ladder, because the first will be last. Many people will sweat their way to the

Lk. 9:46-48 – A child was “the least significant person in Jewish as well as Greco-Roman society which idealizes the mature adult. (BKC, ref. to TDNT) “To accept, and thus serve and help for the Lord's sake that which is insignificant but in reality great with God, this is what God in His mercy values highly, and this is what makes us great.” (Geldenhuis quoting Greydanus)

Mt. 18:1-5 – “I tell you the truth” = Could be transliterated “Amen” from the Greek. “By introducing his words with amen Jesus labeled them as certain and reliable. He stood by them and made them binding on himself and his hearers. They are an expression of his majesty and authority.” (Dict. of NT Theology, Vol. 1) Thus, I gather that Jesus is underlining the importance of this statement, confirming and strengthening it. In other words, “Pay special attention to this!”

As children were generally treated as insignificant in the ancient world, we too must humble ourselves, being willing to be seen as insignificant. (Tasker)

“Welcomes” = “He must treat the weakest as a person to be respected, not as a thing to be manipulated.” (NBC)

top of a ladder promising success, only to realize when they get to the top that it was propped against the wrong wall.

In God's view, the way up is down. We don't ascend into greatness, we descend into greatness. Let's take a shot at pulling all this together into a definition.

We achieve success by humbly serving God and people, especially the lowliest of people, from the motive of love.

Now, in your small groups, let's look one more time at Pete, Ruth, etc. and evaluate their success by this definition. (They ought to say, for example, "If Ralph was faithful to God as a businessman, using his position and finances to serve the lowly, then he was successful. If Ruth did all her hospital work simply to get written up in *The Humanitarian Times*, rather than from a motive of love, then she was a failure.")

Following I have mentioned the advantages of God's value system.

1 – Some of our "failures" are actually successes in disguise.

If we humbly serve, from a motive of love, then we can *leave the results with God*. You win, no matter what the results are. And God promises to turn all together for the good. (Rom. 8:28)

ILLUSTRATION: I heard of one fellow who tried to witness to a fellow passenger on a bus, giving him a gospel tract. The recipient got mad, and in his disgust threw the tract out his window. (Looks like a failure so far. Right?) But someone was walking along the road who picked up the booklet, read it, received Jesus, and went on to teach at a Bible College!

So, serve faithfully, and leave the results with God.

2 – We all start at the same place.

The world's system favors the handsome and naturally talented. It's like a foot race where everyone starts off at a different starting line. I could never make it in basketball. I am short and can't jump. My IQ was such that I had to work hard for grades that some could get with ease. But God's not as concerned with my IQ as He is my MQ, my Motivation Quotient. Anyone, no matter how pretty or plain, how brilliant or retarded, can win!

I suppose we could say that true greatness is not measured by what we accomplished, but by the amount we accomplished subtracted from the amount

we could have accomplished had we served more fervently, more humbly, and more lovingly. (Cr. I Cor. 1:26-29)

3 – We keep our priorities in perspective.

Remember they guy who left his family in order to be a top executive? His priorities got all out of order. Had he understood true greatness, he could have realized that holding his family together was more important than reaching the top of his field.

4 – It keeps us from thinking that our work is trivial compared to the more spectacular work or gifts of others.

The minister who preaches the Word is not necessarily more faithful than the student who helps slower students, or the business man who does his work as unto the Lord. All three can be humble, faithful servants in their assigned fields.

So aspire to be a doctor, not to become rich and famous, but to serve. If God leads you to be lawyer, use your vocation to defend those who can't defend themselves.

Individual Activity: go back and look at the dreams you wrote down at the beginning of this study. Are they all centered around *you*? It's not bad to work toward a more healthy body or to be super skilled at a trade. But is your motive to be achieve fame and fortune, or to use it for God's glory? Will your dreams look silly in the light of eternity? If so, revise, or add some dreams that make sense in the light of God's value system.

Behold God's Value System!

Isn't it amazing who people idolize these days? What did Madonna ever do for anyone? Yet some people put up her posters and follow in her footsteps. I won't even ask about the posters in *your* bedroom. Are their dreams really the ones you want to pursue? Most of today's heroes don't have big enough dreams for me. Let me tell you about my hero.

He was born in an obscure village.

He worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty. He then became an itinerant preacher.

He never held and office.

*He never had a family
or owned a house.*

*He didn't go to college.
 He had no credentials but himself...
 Nineteen centuries have come and gone,
 and today he is the central figure of the human race.
 All the armies that ever marched,
 and all the navies that ever sailed,
 all the parliaments that ever sat,
 and all the kings that ever reigned
 have not affected the life of man
 on this earth as much as that...*

ONE SOLITARY LIFE

As a totally faithful servant, He poured out His life for you and me.

Jesus Christ. My hero. He died for me. I'll live for Him.

To review, are you dreaming big dreams? Are you dreaming the right dreams? Then it's time to move on to a third step.

III. Pursue Your Dreams

A. Find your niche. (I Cor. 12:4-6)

God has equipped you to function at your best in certain areas.

ILLUSTRATION: If you pursue dreams meant for someone else, you will be as frustrated as a Porche trying to go four wheeling, or a Jeep in a stock car race. The Porche is in its element on the open road, but frustrated elsewhere.

Pray for God to show you where you are gifted to serve the body of Christ. Ask Him to let you know where you fit in vocationally. Then, get wise counsel from others and get involved using your gifts and abilities. (See more detail on finding your gift(s) in the Spiritual Gifts series.

B. Surround yourself with...

1. The right people (Prov. 13:20)

ILLUSTRATION: Steven Spielberg is one of today's top movie producers. What movies can you name that he produced? (Schindler's List, Jurassic Park, E.T., Jaws, An American Tail, Indiana Jones trilogy, etc.) But he couldn't have won a contract with Universal Studios at age 21 without some extensive

involvement in producing movies. He filmed his scouting events shortly after his fifth grade year. By the time he was 12, he was already dreaming of a career at filmmaking. But I doubt he could have kept motivated had he been a lone ranger. I think it was significant that three other kids in his neighborhood (within 10 houses of one another) were avid filmmakers, and they stimulated one another. One of them said, “When other kids were doing whatever – sports, chasing girls, playing with cars – we were...making films.” (pp. 76,77, Steven Spielberg, A Biography, by Joseph McBride)

The principle here is clear. If you want to make films, hang around people who make eat, breathe and talk films. If you want to make an impact for God, seek out those with a passion for God. You will become like those you hang around. Who are you hanging out with?

2. The right input (Prov. 15:22)

***ILLUSTRATION:** Go into a gym where serious weight-lifters workout, and you will find pictures of body builders, magazines for weight-lifters, and conversation about weight-lifting. Why? Because serious trainers want to keep their athletes motivated. And they know that Florist’s Weekly and Good Housekeeping won’t provide that motivation. What kind of atmosphere and counsel do you surround yourself with?*

***ILLUSTRATION:** Spielberg not only got input from his filmmaking friends. He spent a high school summer vacation working as an unpaid clerical assistant at Universal. He would continue there during college, watching productions, hanging out with professional filmmakers, and asking every question under the sun.*

Where do you get wise counsel? Who could you go to learn more about the areas you dream about?

C. Pursue God's dreams, in God's way. (Ps. 1:1-3 and Josh. 1:8)

Some people get so hung up on success that they'll compromise, take short cuts, cheat, or do anything to succeed. Here's an example.

ILLUSTRATION: She was a top student at Ohio State University. In fact, she and a fellow student were neck and neck for the top of their class. But was she a success in God's eyes? Hardly. She dated her competitor for the sole purpose of keeping him out late so that he could not adequately study for tests. Her school and fellow students probably saw her as a great success, an example for less motivated students. But eternity saw the greed, the willingness to step on others in order to reach the top.

Psalm 1:1-3 – “Planted” = “Transplanted”; Blessed = “happiness, blessedness” (BDB). Delight = “concern or preoccupation” (Anderson). Meditate = “Keep pondering it” (Leupold). Law = Torah or all God's instruction. Uses a plural of intensity: “O how very happy is the man!” (Leupold). Prosper can also be “succeed, be profitable (TWOT).

God want's us to pursue success without compromising the principles of his Word. Don't look for short cuts.

D. Bounce back from your failures.

I suppose that our only real failures are moral failures. You know, when we let God down by our laziness, selfishness, or falling into some other sin. We feel bad when we fail God, but we all do it from time to time. How can we recover?

1) Confess (I Jn 1:7,9)

Some people, after they've let God down, don't want to face Him again, or else will try to justify themselves. But God wants us to come clean by confessing our sin to Him and experiencing His forgiveness.

2) Learn from and bounce back.(Jms. 1:2,3)

Peter and Judas both failed Jesus. Peter denied Him. Judas betrayed Him. But their response was entirely different. Judas apparently got discouraged and threw in the towel. More specifically, he went out and hung himself. But Peter bounced back and not long afterwards saw incredible success: 3,000 people saved in one day!

Illustration: Some years ago a promising IBM junior executive lost the company several million dollars in a risky venture. Thomas J. Watson, Sr., IBM's founder, called the executive into his office, and the young man blurted out, "I guess you want my resignation?" Watson replied, "You can't be serious. We've just spent millions of dollars educating you!" (Reader's Digest, Don't Even Think About Failing! pp. 207,208, condensed from "Leaders: The Strategies of Taking Charge," Harper and Row, By Warren Bennis and Burt Nanus.)

Jms. 1:2,3 – "Consider it" = "to consider, to deem as, to reckon as." (Key) "...look at it from the bright side, as capable of being turned to our highest good." (Mayor)

"Pure joy" = possibly "entire, unmixed joy." (Mayor) as opposed to "some joy coupled with much grief. (BKC)

"Trials of many kinds" has been taken to mean only external trials (so Mayor and BKC) or both inward and outward (so Adamson).

So, dream big dreams. Dream the right dreams. Pursue your dreams. But finally, you've got to...

IV. HANG ONTO YOUR DREAMS

In the very first lesson, we read how Paul was shooting for a star -- to present every person complete in Christ. Let's turn again to that passage (Col. 1:28,29). His dream was big. His dream was right. And we know by his life that he pursued it.

Look at verse 29 — "*To this end I labor, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me.*"

Dreaming is easy. All you have to do is fall asleep! But making dreams come true? It takes some effort, as well as some trust. Let me warn you. If you take this "shooting for a star" thing seriously, it won't be an easy road. It's the road less traveled, and for good reason. There are lots of hurdles.

Look at one other passage. Again, Paul is writing. "*Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*" (I Cor. 15:58) Let's take apart this verse and see how Paul urged us to hang on to our dreams.

A. Dig in your heels.

“...stand firm. Let nothing move you....” (I Cor. 15:58; cr. II Cor 6:4 and Dan. 3:14-18).

“Stand firm” has also been translated “be steadfast” and “hold your ground.” “Let nothing move you” has been translated “immovable, incapable of being moved.” Do you get the point?

ILLUSTRATION: *Have you ever done a “Tug of War” at the beach? One of the most important things you can do is to dig your feet deep into the sand. Because no matter how strong you are, no matter how talented, if your team’s feet are not solidly planted, you could easily lose to a gathering of Pee Wee Herman clones.*

ILLUSTRATION: *It takes that kind of stubbornness to succeed in business. Lee Riley once told his son Pat, “Every now an then, somewhere, some place, sometime, you are going to have to plant your feet, stand firm, and make a point about who you are and what you believe in. When that time comes, Pat, you simply have to do it.” (last page, Pat Riley, The Winner Within, 1993, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, NY) Pat Riley picked up on that and became arguably the greatest basketball coach of all time.*

ILLUSTRATION: *Do you get the picture? Picture yourself drawing a circle in the dirt and standing there. You tell your friends, “I’m standing here. I like it here. I’m not going to move. Go ahead, ridicule me from the side lines. Call me old-fashioned. Offer me a beer. But I’m not going to move. Bring on the floods. If the water gets too deep, I may drown. If a tornado comes I may be killed by flying debris. But let it be known that I’m not moving from this spot.”*

Today we desperately need some spiritually stubborn Christians, Christians who are immovable, who can discern God’s course for them and stubbornly hang onto it no matter what.

Large Group Discussion: What are the things that move people, keeping them from holding to their standards and their dreams? (After they have a chance to respond, mention some of these.)

Parents.

Close friends.

Ridicule from peers.

Authorities.

Failure. This is a biggie for many. I want to camp here for a minute.

To illustrate this point, I want to give you a test. Look at the back of your student sheet. As I read the statements about each person (these are all real people), I want you to decide whether you think the person was a success or failure in his field. (We're not accounting for proper motives here.) Put either the letter "F" for failure, or "S" for success before each one.

SUCCESS OR FAILURE?

___ **Politician:** Ran for political office seven times and was defeated each time.

___ **Cartoonist:** All he wanted to do was to sketch cartoons. He applied with a Kansas City newspaper. The editor said, "It's easy to see from these sketches that you have no talent." No studio would give him a job. He ended up doing publicity work for a church in an old, dilapidated garage.

___ **Writer:** His first children's book was rejected by 23 publishers.

___ **Inventor:** In the first year of marketing his new soft drink, he sold only 400 bottles.

___ **Actor:** He went to Hollywood as an 18 year old, and after a couple of parts was unemployed for two years. As he ran out of money, he sold off his sectional couch, one section at a time, and lived on macaroni. He had no phone. His office was a phone booth at Pioneer Chicken.

___ **Athlete:** As a baseball player, he struck out more than any player in the history of baseball: 1,330 times.

___ **Athlete:** As a pudgy twelve year old his sister could outrun him. His track coach encouraged him to do push ups, sit ups, and sprints. But it took him three years before he finally beat his sister.

___ **Politician:** Flunked the sixth grade. As a sixteen year old in Paris, a teacher had written on his report card, "Shows a conspicuous lack of success." He wished to become a military leader, or a great statesman. As a student, he failed three times in his exams to enter the British Military Academy.

Let's look at these people, one by one.

*Would you have given up if you had been defeated 7 times in your run for political office? I'm glad that **Abraham Lincoln** didn't. He was defeated for legislature, defeated for speaker, defeated for nomination to Congress, defeated for Senate, defeated for nomination to Vice Presidency, defeated again for*

Senate. Yet he hung in there and succeeded in becoming the 16th president of the United States.

*And what about the cartoonist whom no one would hire? The one who was told that he had no talent? The old garage he worked in had mice. One day, he sketched one of those mice. The mouse one day became famous as “Mickey Mouse.” The artist, of course, was **Walt Disney**.*

*The writer whose children’s book was rejected by 23 publishers? Take a wild guess.... **Dr. Seuss**. By the way, the 24th publisher sold six million copies.*

*The soft drink that sold only 400 bottles its first year? **Coca Cola**.*

*The 18 year old actor who couldn’t land a part for two years and lived off macaroni? He finally got a part with a popular, long-running show called “Family Ties.” I’m glad he didn’t give up. Can you imagine “Back to the Future” without **Michael J. Fox**?*

*The baseball player who held the strike-out record? He also held, for many years, the home run record. His name is **Babe Ruth**.*

*The pudgy 12 year old who couldn’t outrun his sister? It took him three years before he finally beat her, and given a few more years became a world class sprinter. But he is better known as the running back who won the coveted Heisman Trophy his Junior year at the University of Georgia, **Hershell Walker**. Other players called him a train, a serious train. Often, instead of running around a defender, he would run him over or jump over him. But his first hurdle was to outrun his sister.*

*The man who showed a “conspicuous lack of success” on his report card? Who failed three times to enter the British Military Academy? Many of us would have given up after one rejection. But **Winston Churchill** stubbornly refused to accept defeat and became arguably one of the greatest men of the 20th Century. Though he was rejected many times by the voters of Great Britain, he finally became the Prime Minister, standing between Hitler and the free world. One day he was invited back to his old school to give the commencement address. He said simply this, “Never give up. Never give up. Never, never, never give up.” And then he sat down.*

Now these guys were not necessarily all Christians, but they each exhibited the “...stand firm. Let nothing move you” quality that it takes to see our dreams come true. I hope this little exercise dispels the popular myth that successful people simply have extraordinary talent and move quickly from success to success until they arrive at the top of their field. It is true neither of world’s heroes, nor of heaven’s heroes. Just think of all the setbacks faced by Moses, Joseph, David, Peter, and Paul.

For many of the super achievers of this world, the road to success was paved with failures. But what often sets these apart from others is how they handle their failures. Rather than give up, they learned from their failures and bounced back.

Successes are often those who are willing to endure what others are not willing to endure, in order to reach their dreams. But you've got to do more than dig in your heels and endure. You've got to...

B. GIVE IT ALL YOU'VE GOT

I Cor. 15:58 – “Labor” =
“wearisome toil” (ICC)

Paul goes on to say, “*always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord.*” This has also been translated, “be outstanding,” “always abounding” and “excel.” “Labor” could be translated “toil.” Do you get the picture? In other words, you don't fulfill dreams by frittering away your time in front of the tube and going about tasks half-heartedly.

And this attitude doesn't just apply to Christian ministry. Look at Colossians 3:23,24. Paul is telling slaves to work heartily for their masters, since ultimately it is Jesus they are serving. Wouldn't this apply equally to the student/teacher relationship and the employer/employee relationship?

Too often we think people succeed just because they are multi-gifted, super talented people. But I'm finding that most achieve because they are willing to sweat more than others. Let me give you some examples of the work that some people put into their tasks to achieve this world's success.

Col. 3:23,24 – “you are serving” takes the phrase as indicative. Lightfoot agrees. Lenski takes as imperative – “...keep serving....” Grammatically, it could go either way. Which do you think the context suggests? “Here is the secret for all who work for other men, whether they are slaves or free employees: ‘Throw you soul into the work as if your one employer were the Lord!’” (Lenski)

ILLUSTRATION: Earnest Hemmingway, Nobel Prize and Pulitzer Prize winning author, worked with excruciating perfectionism. You would think that a gifted writer would be pouring out thoughts so quickly that his typewriter could hardly keep pace. But sometimes he would spend an entire morning on one paragraph. In his book, Farewell to Arms, he rewrote the final chapter 39 times! And we get discouraged when an English teacher tells us to rewrite a paper once!

ILLUSTRATION: As George Lucas began to conceive “Star Wars,” he didn't just happen upon a lucky story line. He read all the epic tales, searching

for the characteristics that make stories pass the test of time. To make his war scenes realistic, he studied all the footage of actual air to air combat that he could find. He wanted that tilt of the wings at just the right moment, those little touches that make air battle look realistic. And Lucas' painstaking attention to detail paid off when "Star Wars" became a runaway hit.

Do you "give yourselves fully" to the tasks God has given you? Successes are often those who are willing to do what most people are not willing to do in order to accomplish a task. What are some specific ways you can put yourselves more fully into making your dreams happen?

C. KEEP MOTIVATED. (I Cor. 15:58)

There are many motivations for pursuing excellence. Some want riches. Others crave people's attention and admiration. But Paul's eyes were on a different reward. Look at the end of the verse: "...because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain." "In vain" can also mean "no result" or "no profit." We don't have to get discouraged when outward success eludes us, because our greatest reward isn't given here on earth.

Sure, there are many rewards here for the Christian. But sometimes we get discouraged when we study our hearts out for a test, and then someone outdoes us because she cheated. Or we miss that opportunity to go to the university because we failed to pay the expected bribe. Don't worry! It's still not in vain to serve Jesus!

What is Paul talking about here in I Cor. 15:58? Look back at the first word of this verse. What is it? That's right. "Therefore." And whenever you see a "therefore," in the Bible, you need to find out what it is "there for." Does anybody know what Paul has been writing about in I Cor. 15?

Some were saying that there was no resurrection from the dead (15:12). So Paul argues that if there is no life ever after, then all the hardships he suffers here are in vain (19,30-32). But if we will be resurrected one day, then it makes sense to endure.

Paul says that if this life were all there is, then his life would be pretty miserable (15:19). Think about it. He worked as hard as Bill Gates, but never got rich. In fact, he was often so destitute as to be hungry (II Cor. 6:3-10). He was as single minded as Spielberg or Lucas, but never became universally loved and respected. In fact, after pouring his life into ministry in a city, the citizens usually didn't throw a party and plan a parade in his honor. More likely, people showed their appreciation by pelting him with

rocks as he left town, one time even leaving him for dead. (Cr. I Cor. 15:30,31; II Cor. 4:16-18)

But Paul knew that our ultimate reward for our work will not come during this life. It will come in another life. In his next letter to the Corinthians, he will say, *“Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”* (II Cor 4:16,17)

Do you believe this? If you don’t, you’ll get discouraged when you see the world out achieving you, getting the credit for things you deserved credit for, and succeeding where you are outwardly failing.

D. Lean on God. (Col. 1:29)

Paul labored hard, but it wasn’t all from his own strength. Look at verse 29 – *“struggling with all the energy he so powerfully works in me.”*

ILLUSTRATION: Steve was small for his age when he entered high school, a perfect target for bullies. But he had a secret weapon. Not karate. Not an awesome knife. He had a big brother in the same school who was a senior. Steve couldn’t handle the bullies in his own strength, so he relied on his brother’s size and strength to pull him through.

Feel inadequate for the tasks God has for you? Join the crowd! But fortunately, God is more than adequate to pull you through. Pray for His strength and trust Him to come through.

PRAY

SHARPENING YOUR AX TEACHING WITH INTEGRITY

II Cor. 4:16,17 – The context indicates that we are talking about not just any afflictions, but those endured for Jesus’ sake. *“...only such sufferings which are either endured for Christ’s sake, or which imposed for the trial of our faith are sustained with a Christian spirit.”*

(Hodge)

“Light ... troubles” – Not so light from a human perspective. (See I Cor. 4:9-13 and II Cor. 11:23-29).

“The eternal glory exceeds all limits,” indicating exceeding exceedingly.” (Hodge) *“...an eternal weight of glory, heavy with the treasures of heaven, and interminable as heaven itself; in which every sorrow borne for Christ will be found to have made us capable of some special gift of bliss and power...”*

(Moule)

In this lesson, I quoted a disgusting executive who sold out his family to a worldly dream. But before you judge him too harshly, take a close look at your own dreams. Is your dream to be faithful to God in your teaching, or to impress your students and grow your group, no matter what the cost? Some youth ministers compromise their commitment to family on the altar of “success” in ministry. But I want to home in on another compromise common to teachers: compromising the truth on the altar of effective communication. Here’s how we do it:

- **Preaching other’s sermons as our own.**

I heard of one preacher who had developed a sermon, so powerful, that he preached the same sermon once a year to his congregation. Imagine the response of the congregation when a visiting preacher came to the church and preached that exact same sermon, as if it were his own!

There’s nothing wrong with getting ideas and direction from other people’s study. As Spurgeon once said, *“It seems odd that certain men who talk so much of what the Holy Spirit reveals to themselves, should think so little of what He has revealed to others.”* (C.H. Spurgeon, Commenting and Commentaries, reprint ed., London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1969, p. 1) We need to learn from others and draw from their materials! It’s fine for a small group leader to lead from a curriculum that he has personalized for his group. It’s just as fine for a youth minister to speak from a curriculum that he has personalized for his group, even if he uses 90% of the curriculum. Just be up front by letting your group know that you are using a curriculum.

- **Sharing other’s life experiences as if they happened to us.**

I heard of one youth minister who told his youth group about an incident that happened between he and his wife. Only the incident actually happened to another youth speaker, who just happened to soon speak at his church, and just happened to use the same illustration. The youth were no idiots. They knew that one or the other had lied. So the thoroughly humbled youth minister had to confess before the church that he had presented the illustration as if it had happened to him, in order to achieve a more powerful effect. Are you willing to compromise truth, risking your reputation for the sake of effect?

- **Not giving credit where credit is due.**

One day I listened to a Christian radio program where a music professor shared with his audience the results of his vast research into the Contemporary Christian Music issue. The only problem was, everything he shared came straight out of the book I had written on the subject! I’m not saying we have to footnote our sermons like a research paper. People

understand that we draw from other sources for our messages. But don't claim that someone else's research as your own.

- **Watering down the truth.**

Some issues aren't popular in our culture. Some of us are so scared of running people off that we only share the "happy truths." Their blood may be on our hands. Jesus was willing to speak the truth, whether the crowds wanted to come back for more or wanted to come back with rocks.

- **Over-stating your case.**

One pastor told me that he was always dogmatic because people want a sure word. Perhaps, but the men and women of integrity don't make their decisions solely on the taste of their audience. If God has chosen to leave an issue fuzzy, I dare not speak it with confidence.

Certain OT prophets were condemned by God for saying, "Thus saith the LORD," when He had not spoken. (See Jer. 23:28-36) But do we not do the same thing when we declare with confidence, "These are God's three steps to a happy marriage?" when God never said there were only three? Some desperate couple may try these three steps as a last ditch effort to save their marriage. But if their need was a fourth principle that you never thought to mention, they may see the failure of your sermon to deliver as a failure of God's Word. Did God *really* say that these were *the three steps*? By putting words in God's mouth, am I any better than the first century Pharisees, of whom Jesus said, "...*their teachings are but rules taught by man.*"

Some might say, "The entertainment industry is *the single greatest* threat to biblical values." Maybe so, but God never made that statement. And what about the influence of the devil and his demons, the breakdown of the home, etc., etc. Just say it is *a major threat*. State a point with only the amount of dogmatism its weight of evidence warrants.

Are you a little unsure about your source for an illustration? Say, "I heard it said that..." rather than stating it as fact.

- **Exaggerating.**

Some excuse it as "a comedian's genre." You know, like the writings of Dave Barry or Lewis Grizzard. I'm sure that either many of the events they write about never happened, or by the time their creative pens developed the incidents, they only vaguely resemble the original event. But that's okay for professional comedians and humor writers. We understand what they are doing. But unless a pastor has an understanding with his congregation ("When I tell some of these stories, please understand that I sometimes juice them up a bit to make my point") you can lose your integrity with your congregation. If

they begin to doubt the accuracy of your far-fetched stories, they may begin to question your authority on other matters as well.

- **Fancy outlining and alliteration.**

I often see this in expository messages, where a preacher takes a single text and develops his sermon from it. Sometimes Paul's letters don't fit into shapely outlines, so we help Paul out a bit. "In Philippians chapter 1 Paul wants to tell us the four steps you need to find joy." But are you sure that this is what Paul is doing with chapter one, or is this just a convenient device for keeping your congregation with you? Did Paul really give four "steps," or just several principles? Does the Bible really say that these are "the" four steps to joy?

"Do not add to his words, or he will rebuke you and prove you a liar."
(Prov. 30:6; cr. I Cor. 4:6)

"Not many of you should act as teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly." (Jms. 3:1)