

Session Six **Visioning: The American Dream/The Christian Dream**

What Does Success Look Like?

Part 1: A Young Girl's Vision

Among the saints of the early church is a young woman whose name we do not know, but whose story was told and has been handed down to us. She came from a wealthy family and was perplexed by the difference in the way her parents lived. Her mother was not a kind woman, and often tried to undermine others in order to get her own way. But because of her outward charm, she made her way smoothly through an easy life, died peacefully, and was buried with honor and dignity.



The girl's father, on the other hand, was a good man who cared for other people and often sacrificed his own comfort to help someone in need or distress. He and his daughter were very close, and it pained her to see that his life was full of hardship, and that death when it came was difficult and full of suffering.

The girl was torn: which example was she to follow in life? Was it worth trying to live as her father had? Her mother was the one who had prospered, after all.

This young woman was given a vision of her parents. Her father was in the Kingdom of God; her mother was in darkness and torment. From that day on, she resolved to live a life according to God's commandments no matter what opposition or misfortune she might have to endure. She lived as a Christian for the rest of her life, with absolute certainty that one day, by God's grace, she would be reunited with her beloved father in the Kingdom.

To think about:

1. If you were to re-title this story, which of the following would you choose?

"Things Aren't Always What They Seem" or "You Never Can Tell" or "Good and Evil, Here and Hereafter" or another you prefer (write it here):

2. Which people in this story would you say had successful lives? Why?

Part 2: A Parable

Read the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus in *Luke 16:19-31*. Answer these questions:

1. Why is the rich man condemned?

- Because of his wealth
- Because he is hard-hearted
- Because he illegally keeps dogs in a residential neighborhood



2. What kind of man is Lazarus?

- Poor but virtuous and humble
- Unworthy in God's eyes
- Lazy—get up from that rich man's gate and get a job!

3. What message do we get from *verses 28-31*?

- Be sure to get your hearing checked often
- God has given us time and warning to repent but some people just don't listen
- Wealthy people, like the five brothers of this rich man, are not welcome in heaven

4. Again, who in this story would you say led a successful life? Why?

Jesus and Success

Read the words of Jesus to his disciples in *Matthew 16:21-27*. Answer these questions:

1. Why did Peter react as he did to the Lord's words?

- a. He didn't like bad news
- b. He wanted to take charge of Jesus' future
- c. He was shocked; he didn't expect a suffering Messiah, but a conquering one
- d. He was embarrassed to be associated with somebody who might not be a winner after all



2. Why did Jesus get angry with Peter?

- a. He was always interrupting
- b. He was trying to interfere with God's plan
- c. He was obnoxious
- d. He was blocking Jesus' path on the road where they were walking

3. What is Jesus saying in *verse 25*?

- a. Follow me and take your chances
- b. A life lived for others is true life forever; a life centered on yourself becomes death
- c. People who want to follow Jesus should take life-threatening risks all the time

4. How might Jesus respond to our society's urging us that we can "have it all?"
- I want to give you more "all" than you ever dreamed of—will you let me?
 - You may "have it all", but you can't take it with you
 - The only ones who "have it all" are sinners who will never inherit the Kingdom of God
5. How would you summarize Jesus' teaching on what fulfillment is?
- Fulfillment is putting God's will where our desires used to be
 - Fulfillment comes from developing a plan and following through
 - Fulfillment comes from making sure our life is just the way we want it to be
 - Fulfillment is self-reliance and not needing anybody else
6. Do you find Jesus' words hard or easy to accept? Explain your answer:

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Key Concepts

1. The "American Dream" and its standards of success are not always compatible with the standards of Christianity.
2. "Self-fulfillment" is the key to the American Dream; "forgetfulness of self" is the key to living as a Christian.
3. As Americans, we are called to live as good citizens in society, while not compromising our Christian faith.

Objectives

Students will:

1. Name some factors that they feel make a person a success in life.
2. Describe what Jesus said about success.
3. Enumerate ways that they, as both Americans and Christians, can complete their lives as "successes."

The basic principle of Christian living is that we "forget" ourselves and put others first. American society on the other hand urges us constantly to put ourselves in the forefront of our thinking and effort—one magazine prominently displayed on newsstands is called SELF.

Yet this society is the one our students live in; it is their world. We do not want to make them feel completely alienated from it or disdainful of it, particularly because, as Christians, they have the duty and privilege to contribute to it rather than withdraw from it. They are also entitled to enjoy its benefits and the good things it does offer.

So this lesson will try to help students see that in some ways they will always be "apart" from the world because they are trying to live by a standard that is not the world's. But they are still called to be responsible members of this society which, after all, is filled with beloved children of God. Most of all they are called to bring God's light to this society as much as they can. This will be a large part of the measure of their success in life.

- Bibles
- pencils or pens

1. Open with a prayer. Tell the class that today, as you wrap up the unit of study, you are going to talk about what makes a human life successful. Together with the class, read the story of Dorcas (Tabitha in Hebrew) in *Acts 9:36-42*. Make sure the class understands that Peter's raising of Tabitha from the dead was a way of showing the power of God and of bringing people to believe. She would eventually die and go to the grave like any human being.

Note with the class that Dorcas is called a disciple (*verse 36*). This is the only place where a woman is explicitly called a disciple; in fact, it is the only place in the New Testament where the feminine form of the noun "disciple" appears.

Ask the class which verses tell us that Dorcas was loved by and valued by other people (*38 and 39*). Ask: "In God's eyes, Dorcas was a success. Do you know such people in your community? In the world? (e.g. Mother Teresa). (10 mins)

Background for Teacher

Materials Needed

Procedure

Procedure

2. Have the students do the exercise **What Does Success Look Like?** in the student text. For Part 1, there are no right or wrong answers. Let students discuss their ideas. For Part 2, the correct answers are 1-b, 2-a, 3-b. Emphasize as you talk about these that wealth, as we have said before, is not sinful in and of itself. The rich man here may be someone who pays his taxes on time and is an upstanding member of society, as we are all called to be. But he is also someone who refuses to share his wealth with the needy man who is literally at his doorstep. In fact, he apparently fails even to notice the beggar. That, not wealth, is his sin. And it may be the reason why Father Abraham tells him in *verse 31* that it would do no good to send warnings to his brothers—they would probably fail to notice those, too!
(10 mins)

3. Have students do **Jesus and Success** in the student text. Again, students can answer based on their opinions, but for questions 1 to 5 the answers might be 1-c, 2-b, 3-b, 4-a and 5-a. Let students share what they have written.
(15 mins)

4. To end the session and the mini-course, give students the following assignment. "It's fifty years from today. It's your retirement dinner. Your colleagues, your family, and your friends are honoring you for your long years of service. The keynote speaker is about to stand up and sing your praises. What would he or she say? Who are you and what have you done with your life? Write a brief speech (no more than two paragraphs) listing your accomplishments and outstanding character traits." After ten or fifteen minutes, ask for as many volunteers to share their introductions as time allows. Have someone else read the speech, not the student who wrote it.

Close the session with prayer (#4 from page 24 of the student text) for the rest of your students' lives as successful children of God!
(25 mins)