

Like a comet, Jesus appeared in the Galilee area, and wowed everyone with his teachings with authority, and with miraculous healings. He was in much demand, for people piled up to see him. Apparently, Jesus was not the Hollywood type, and did not savor the attention of the crowds, for when he disappeared to have a quiet time of prayer, even his disciples did not know where he went. They searched and found him, saying, "Everyone is searching for you."

Indeed, when you have something others do not have, you are in great demand; and especially so, when no one else can duplicate what you have. Imagine what it would have been like, if Jesus did not die so young, but lived to see his middle age. Would he be preaching to the admiring crowd of 50,000 in the converted sports stadium? Would he be dogged by the media for the interviews? Would he have written books that detailed his teachings with authority? Would he have made many expensive books and DVD

study sets that seem to sell themselves?

Such is the inevitable end of the popular and influential religious teachers nowadays, and no one goes astray from that road, no matter how enlightened or spiritual one's teaching may be. Personal aggrandizement and accumulation of wealth became the ultimate end for just about every one of them.

One might counter that that is God's blessing that goes with success. If one is success-oriented, then, such a success would look rather like the sign that affirms what one is doing is on the right track.

One must note, however, that there is no such a word as "success" in the New Testaments. Success is not the value that early Christians advocated as part of the gospel of Jesus. We must understand that success is a secular value, as it is favored today. For those who are success-oriented, it is almost impossible to grasp those values

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such as faithfulness, dedication, and sacrifice, without linking them to the ultimate value, success. For them, faithfulness, dedication, and sacrifice are nothing more than the means to the ultimate goal. They do not see much reason to waste time and effort to remain faithful, dedicated, or sacrificial, unless these efforts lead to the ultimate goal: success.

We must realize and accept that the modern Christianity has aligned itself with the secular values as its goal, besides those traditional values such as salvation and blessing. We must stop and ask: Would Jesus have quit, if he realized that he was not going to see his 34th birthday, that he was not going to get any lucrative book deals, or that he was not going to be rich or successful?

Would he have quit, if he realized that it would be his disciples of the later generations who would get the book deals and become rich and successful, instead, while he was left

hanging high and dry on the cross?

Judged by the secular values, Jesus is the quintessential example of the one who failed. He failed to ride the wave of the popular demand to success, but willingly walked into the death trap. How foolish was that?

There must have been something in Jesus that drove him to walk the road that he chose, despite the many chances to success which his modern disciples would not have missed. There were so many wealthy and influential people who would have been willing to pay good money to have their diseases cured, and with whom he could have established powerful alliances. But something kept him on the road which he walked, and he did not go astray to pursue what the modern disciples would have eventually identified as “success and perk.” What was it that kept him occupied on the road to the cross?

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Jesus answered the question in one verse:

1:38 He answered, "Let us go on to the neighboring towns, so that I may proclaim the message there also; for that is what I came out to do."

That was it. That was what he came out to do—to proclaim the message. To that he remained faithful, dedicated, and sacrificial. Indeed, for Jesus, his faithfulness to the calling, his dedication to the kingdom of God, and his obedient sacrifice on the cross were integral to his end purpose. Proclamation of the message was his ultimate goal, and for this ultimate goal, everything else had been relegated to the status of being the means. For the one who seeks to discern one's calling, it is essential to know what constitutes the means to the ultimate end, and tell the difference between the two.

When I was a high school student in Korea, the whole country was under the dictatorial regime of President Park who

was eventually assassinated by one of his own Secret Service agents. In order to justify the legitimacy of his regime, the communist threat was hyped, and any dissident to the government policy was labeled as communist. They mysteriously disappeared for many months, and when they reappeared they were found to be physically handicapped or rendered invalid.

As part of keeping the population ready for the imminent and ever-present communist threat, the dictatorship introduced the basic military training into the high school curriculum. The retired army soldiers were hired for the purpose. The class was often spent on retelling the war stories in Viet Nam. Our instructor, who retired as a captain, was fighting the Viet Cong in joint operation with the U.S. Army, and he related to us what he witnessed in the battle field.

Our instructor's unit was pinned down by the mortar fire. He and U.S. Army radioman were together, when a mortar round

landed in the close vicinity. When he came to his senses, he realized that the shell landed right next to the radioman. His body shielded him from the direct blast. The blast severed both legs of the U.S. soldier. This was what really impressed him: the U.S. soldier called in the headquarters, and communicated a vital piece of information, before he breathed his last.

Our instructor was so impressed by the extreme sense of duty that the radioman demonstrated, that he told the story in every class he taught. The radioman showed the superhuman will power by calling in and relaying the battle situation. He fulfilled what he was trained to do even in that physical condition, and that was his last act, before he gave up his life.

For that moment of life, the ultimate goal of the radioman was calling in the vital information. Who knows how many lives he might have saved that day with his last transmission. What Jesus had

decided to go through was not so different in the form and the content. Jesus realized what his calling was, and he adhered to it, even if it meant the painful death on the cross.

Can you imagine Martin Luther King Jr. living to his ripe age of 80`s, and having written many bestsellers, and living in a posh mansion, and presiding as the supreme senior pastor of a mega church, as other televangelists often turn out to be? If King lived like that, do you think there would have been a black president today?

When has the gospel of Jesus Christ become the gospel for the success hunters and the wealth seekers? When has the gospel of Jesus Christ turned into the means to success? Those preachers of the gospel of success can never change anything. They can only continue what has been for ages: the rich stay rich, while the poor yearn to be rich.

Every one of us has been put into this world with a special purpose to fulfill. I believe that that is God's plan. Many want to believe (and do follow their dreams) that success is what defines their identity. What follows logically is that if you fail, you are nobody. That is a secular way of defining one's identity and worth. What I believe is that that is not how one should define one's own identity.

If we follow the secular way of defining a person and the person's worth, this is what happens, when the basis of definition no longer exists: When they lose the sense of self-worth, when they believe they have failed, they tend to lose the reason to go on, to persevere and to excel. These people take or harm their own lives, and/or others' lives, when they lose their jobs, houses, and investments.

Their ultimate goal and their ultimate sense of self worth are inseparably linked to the sense of success. They have based their lives on what is perishable and

material. When the perishable perish, so do their lives.

How shall the faithful, then, define who they are? We know from the gospel according to John that we have been given the identity as the children of God. But is there any other way that could help us understand, in terms of what we *do*, instead of who we *are*?

The faithful one should define one's own identity by God's calling each one discerns. I believe that that is the most authentic way of understanding one's own self-worth. When I fulfill my specific calling to which God called, that is the moment I am most worthy. This will not depend on how much wealth I accumulate or not, or how successful I am or not.

We must accept the fact that God does not choose a person, because one has a better prospect of being a success. If that is the case, only the wealthy, the smart, and the good-looking will enter the kingdom of God.

For certain teachers, that makes up the core of their teaching. If you are successful, smart, and good-looking, that is the sign, they say, that you are called to be the leaders of the world. Isn't it a sweet thing to hear, especially if you happened to be successful, smart, or good-looking? There is no wonder why such teachings attract the crowd of followers.

I also believe that defining one's identity according to God's calling is the most direct way of determining the purpose of one's reason for being, to grow up and fulfill the one piece in the mosaic of God's infinite plan. But there is one problem: How does one authentically discern one's own calling? How does one discern for what purpose he or she is born?

How does one not fall into the false assurance that one is doing God's will and not one's own bidding? I think it is not that difficult to find out. All we need to ask is this question: “What is

the ultimate purpose of what I am doing?”

If the answer to that question always comes to roost in the selfish convenience and happiness, then, chances are that that is not the authentic calling. The authentic calling always enlightens and affirms, but it often brings sorrows—even death, as the Bible testifies. The authentic calling is always perceived in the context of a community. God calls one to serve and benefit the greater community, be it as small as a family of two or three, or as big as a whole society.

May God bless and strengthen each one of you, as you struggle to discern God's calling.