

**I** still receive the alumni magazine from my college, even after more than 20 years since I graduated. The faces and the stories change each time, but there is one thing that never does: the magazine's theme never wavers from exploiting the commercial success the grads have achieved. So-and-so became a CEO of a cutting edge tech company. So-and-so ascended to the head of an international bank. So-and-so has started a wildly successful startup.

It is understandable, because stories such as those justify the arrival of the envelope that asks for donations, and affirm the readers that their school is still producing the enviable leaders of the society, long after they had graduated. After all, the commercial success is *the* desired end of the higher education for their children, for which many parents fork over the serious chunk of their income.

**T**hings change rapidly for the students from the time of

admission. The schools might have asked for the individual background, including the community services and the humanitarian outreach, besides the academic achievement. But once admitted, the schools curriculum reflects rarely anything that is related to such well-balanced criteria the admission office imposed upon the students. The alumni magazine's tone seems to be forgetful of such criteria which the admission office so endeavored in the first place.

But that is understandable, because the absolute majority of the students who enter the institutions of the higher education do not seek to be the moral and ethical beacons of the world: they just want to get the education and skills, so that they can become the well-compensated human resources.

One might observe that one may become commercially and politically successful person through the higher education, but the higher education seldom

produces morally or ethically mature person.

**F**or the Christian disciple, things are different: the purpose of everything he or she does aims for the goal that goes beyond the commercial success. The secular persons are held captive by the selfish need to include their own personal success in any scheme of the greater common good. For example, the Miss America pageant contestants almost always parrot as the greatest of their life goals the world peace. Few of us are convinced that they would pretend to pursue such a lofty goal, if they were not going to be crowned. Their own personal ambition is the inalienable part of any benefit they may contribute to the common good of the world.

Once a secular person encounters the Holy Spirit, and continues in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, however, his or her personal goals begin to develop a dimension that lies beyond the commercial success. For the person who goes through the

spiritual transformation in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, something happens to the goal of the person: the personal success usually abdicates the throne of the life goal, and becomes the means to yet another purpose.

**F**or example, a doctor may start out with the strong desire to become a successful surgeon. He would build his practice into a wildly popular and respected medicine. Once he encounters the Holy Spirit, and continues to grow in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, however, he may begin to question the previous purpose and aspirations of his life.

The Holy Spirit enables the man to see the new vision God has prepared for him. He may begin to develop the fresh perspective in the meanings of life—not just his own, but in the meanings of the lives of countless others which he could affect. He may begin to regard his success and expertise merely as the tools to be utilized, in order for him to

become the instrument of God's mission.

The ultimate purpose of medical skills and knowledge may shift from the personal and monetary gain to being the instrument of God's Agape compassion and the personification of God's healing power. Leaving a name for one's self, or becoming one of the great commercial success stories, has lost its attraction. The Christian disciple, who grows in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, uses his or her profession or success as the means to yet another purpose of his or her lives.

In other words, it is natural for the secular person to let one's profession or success define self. The Christian disciple, instead, let his or her service to God define who he or she is. The secular person glorifies his or her own name and achievement. The Christian disciple glorifies God's name through his or her service to God. The Christian disciple knows that God is not glorified

by how famous and rich one has become.

The reality of life, however, is quite different from the lives which the alumni magazines try to depict. The magazines would tell only one sided story of success: wealth is always good for you. In actuality, wealth can do only one thing in two ways: wealth can amplify one's success or amplify one's failure.

A regular guy can become successful, because he gathered wealth. A regular guy can also be a total failure, because he became wealthy. A sudden influx of money may make your life wonderful, but it could also ruin your life, ruin your relationships, alienate your friends, and bring lasting unhappiness. Wealth as the goal of success is not always a successful thing.

Alumni magazines would have you believe that it is what one owns that makes one successful—the property, wealth, the holdings, etc. In truth, it is

what is in the mind that makes one successful.

**T**he cold reality is that there are so many people who fail. People fail in the schools. People fail in businesses. People fail in relationships. People fail in marriages. People fail as parents, as spouses, and as children. No alumni magazine will tell their stories, and no one would want to read about them in the magazine. But the Bible tells plenty stories of failure.

One of the stories of great failures in the Bible is the story told by Jesus, what we dub as the Prodigal Son. He failed in many ways: he asked his father for the portion of the inheritance, while his father was still alive and kicking (that was considered a great insult to the father, and a sensational piece of gossip for the town); then he squandered all his fortune; then he was reduced to a swineherd. The prodigal did not have in mind what makes one wealthy.

**F**or the Jews, coming in contact with swine was an offense to their ritual cleanliness. But the story goes that the prodigal was not just taking care of the pigs, but he stole the feed from the pigs, just to survive. There was no greater failure that the Jewish mind could imagine than this.

And it did not hit the prodigal son how badly he was doing, until one day he realized that he would die of the starvation amongst the swine. Sometimes, a kick in the pant seat serves a good purpose.

That abject despair caused the prodigal son to remember: he remembered how good he had it going in his father's house. He told himself that he would return to his father's house, not as his son, but as one of his slaves. For the life of a slave in his father's house was far, far better than what he was leading now.

We know the story: the father was waiting for him day by day at the outskirts of the town. Even from far away, his father

recognized his son, and ran to him and embraced him.

**T**here is more to the reality of life for God's children than what the secular children may see. Once we make the covenant to become God's children, we are always God's children, even when we walked away from God.

Once God called us to be God's children, and we entered into the covenant, God remains faithful, even when we go astray. The grace of God is always there to welcome us back to the household of God as God's children, and restore us to the abundant life.

God patiently waits for the children to return to God's household. When we fail spectacularly in this world, no one gives much thought to who we were and what we used to do. The alumni magazines will not publish the stories of your failures. People do not want to know your failures. They will forget you as fast as they can. But God cannot forget one of

God's children, just because he or she failed. Failure bruises our egos. It may disillusion some. It may shatter all hope. But it cannot change our covenant with God.

**P**rophet Isaiah shares with the readers the profound despair that he felt at the moment he encountered God. Isaiah saw the Lord in his trance, and then he realized that he was in a *big* trouble: he was of the unclean nature. He knew he was unworthy of God's plan. But an angel came to him, and touched his lips with a burning coal, and declared that his guilt has departed and sin was blotted out. He was made clean. Then Isaiah heard God's voice calling. And he answered: "Here am I; send me."

As children of God, we need to remember only one thing: when God calls us, God does not call us without first equipping us or preparing us for the job.

**I**n this world, success is the theme of the story. It promotes

this secular mentality: I do not share my success with others; it is my private property, and it serves me alone. The secular world despises failure, and it does not wait for those who have failed. Only the fittest deserve to live. With God, however, it is quite different.

When we encounter the Holy Spirit, God binds Godself into the covenant with these promises: 1) God will remain faithful to us, even when we fail, once God declares us as God's children; 2) God does not call us, unless God prepares us and equips us for the calling.

When we sense that God is calling, therefore, we do not need to waste time doubting or wondering, if we could handle that calling. If we have heard the calling, God has already done God's part for us!

**T**oday, we celebrate a rite of passage: graduation. Our young people will move onto the higher education, or other aspects of life. We recognize their endeavor and

wish them well. We make the distinction, however, from what everyone else does in the secular world: we recognize the fact that one does not need to belong to a religion, in order to be ambitious, or to achieve success. Any secular institution will advise us well in that regard.

What sets the Christians disciples apart from others is that they keenly understand that God has called each one of them to serve God. They are confident that God has already equipped each one for the calling. They know that God will use their success as a means to a greater common good, to make a difference in the lives of many others, and to give glory to God's name through their services.

I hope that when we hear God's calling, we will be courageous and step forward, and say, "Here am I; send me!" If you heard it, the Holy Spirit has already equipped you and empowered you. May the Holy Spirit guide you this day and ever.