

# Successful Christianity

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03/30/08 AM

Salem

Hebrews 12:1-13

## INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS:

- WELCOME!
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## INTRODUCTION:

This morning I would like for us to think about the definition of success and how does one go about achieving it?

Let's think for a moment about a couple of successful athletes:

Michael Jordan is considered by many to be the Best Basketball player who ever played the game. Michael has been extremely popular in the athletic world and has achieved more than most aspiring athletes could ever dream.

- Michael broke so many basketball records they are hard to count.
- He was part of the Olympics Basketball team known as the Dream Team.
- Unless this has happened again recently, he was one of two men in the history of basketball to score over 3000 points in one season.
- And was a major contributor to the NCAA Championships that the Chicago Bulls have won in the last 20 years.

And how about Tiger Woods, who is very well known as a professional Golfer.

- As soon as Tiger was old enough to stand, his dad had him practicing with a sawed off putter.
- Before the age of 3 he was able to shoot 9 holes of golf in the high 40's, which averages out to about 5 strokes per hole.(less than 3 years old)
- He was playing in professional tournaments by the age of 16 yrs.

What about someone successful in the business world:

Bill Gates is one of the most successful businessmen that ever lived.

- He is head of Microsoft and is one of the wealthiest men alive.
- He began programming software at age 13 and later dropped out of Harvard University to launch his software business with a high school buddy of his.

In the world of entertainment and politics, we have Arnold Schwarzenegger.

- He began his career as a bodybuilder and then moved to movies and now politics.
- I still can't believe that the "Terminator" is back... as the Governor of California.
- He has undoubtedly worked very hard to transition his career from the world of entertainment to the world of politics.

How did these famous people build their careers into positions that we would consider to be very successful?

- What common characteristics did they share that allowed them to achieve so much more than other people with similar goals?

Although I have never met any of these four men, I am confident that each of these men have been successful because of 4 characteristics that allowed them to build such legacies for themselves.

- I don't claim to have the ultimate formula for success, however these accomplishments had to have been achieved in part, because of the following four factors.
  1. Focus—Each of these men put their sights on one thing and set aside all encumbrances or distractions from their lives. They kept their sights on that one goal.
  2. Discipline—They committed their time and energy to be the best at that task. They practiced and put in a lot of long hours because of that one goal that they had set for themselves.

3. Sacrifice—Being disciplined is not easy and these men had to endure difficult times and give up other pleasures in their quest to be successful at accomplishing that goal.
4. The 4<sup>th</sup> factor is Reward—Each of these men were motivated to accomplish their goal because of some sort of reward.

When I think of these four factors; Focus, Discipline, Sacrifice, and Reward, I can't help but to think of one who participates in a bicycle race.

- A serious biker will remove any clothing that will cause even the slightest of wind resistance.
- They set their eyes on the finish line from the very start and never look back or get distracted.
- They put every ounce of strength into pedaling strong and consistent realizing that if they let up for a moment they could lose that competitive edge.
- They push forward and endure even when their legs begin to ache knowing that that sacrifice can lead to a reward when they cross the finish line.

I must confess that I did not come up with this formula for success.

- This morning, I would like for us all to take a look at this formula as it is found in **Hebrews 12**.
- Before we take a look at the text, I would like everyone here to stop and think about one question.
- **What is the most important thing in your life, that you want to be successful at?**
- When we stop for a moment and contemplate the important things in life and try prioritize what we want to strive to be successful at, we realize that we should all want to be the best followers of Christ that we can possibly be.

Before we read **Hebrews 12**, we need to first understand **Hebrews 11**, which is well known as the “Faith” chapter.

- This chapter contains the names of sixteen people who were faithful followers of God
- They were so successful in God's eyes, that He allowed their names to be listed for billions of people who have walked the earth after them.
- These men and women in **Hebrews 11** had their focus on serving God.
- They were disciplined enough to make great sacrifices and they were motivated to do these things because of the hope of reward that God had promised them

As we transition from chapter 11 into chapter 12, we see that 1<sup>st</sup> verse refers to a “*cloud of witnesses.*”

- We need to keep in mind that it is referring to the faithful men and women of Chapter 11.
- Also take notice how the formula for success is laid out in this passage.
- I will be reading from the New American Standard Bible. Please read with me, **Hebrews 12:1-3...**

*1 Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,*

*2 fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

*3 For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

*4 You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin;*

*5 and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, "MY SON, DO NOT REGARD LIGHTLY THE DISCIPLINE OF THE LORD, NOR FAINT WHEN YOU ARE REPROVED BY HIM;*

*6 FOR THOSE WHOM THE LORD LOVES HE DISCIPLINES, AND HE SCOURGES EVERY SON WHOM HE RECEIVES."*

*7 It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline?*

*8 But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons.*

*9 Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?*

*10 For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, so that we may share His holiness.*

*11 All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.*

*12 Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble,*

*13 and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.*

## I. Let's begin, by taking a look at FOCUS...

The 1<sup>st</sup> three verses in our text help us transition from talking about faith in the previous chapter, to a new focus on discipline.

- It is saying, look at these faithful people and the example that they set.

When we think about sin in the lives of Christians, we know that sin can be a major burden for us.

- There are a lot of people don't feel like they are good enough to be an active participant in the Lord's worship.
- People today picture the preacher in a different light and they act like the church leaders are almost incapable of sin.
- Yet, I know that the elders, deacons and I have committed sins that we would be too embarrassed to tell anyone about. All of us have sinned!
- It is this sin that can weigh us down and hinder our faith in God.

Sin is like a cockle burr.

- I used to have dogs on the farm and they were free to roam about the property.
- We lived by a small river and there were a lot of cockle burrs.
- It was not uncommon for our two dogs to get these nasty little things tangled in their fur.
- Have you ever noticed that the longer you allow the burr to be attached, the more it gets tangled and the harder it is to get rid of?!
- If they are not taken care of right away, they are very difficult to remove.

In like fashion, sin becomes more of a burden to us the longer it is allowed to stay.

- Like burrs, it may take a while, but those sins can be removed.
- **Verse 1** says *“let us also lay aside every encumbrance , and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.”*
- I cannot imagine a serious runner who would carry a backpack or a suitcase while competing to win.
- Instead of allowing our sins to be a burden to us, we need to press on.
- Stop looking at your past and set your mind on accomplishing your goal.

**Verse 2** speaks of... *“fixing our eyes on Jesus,”* who is *“the author and perfecter of faith.”*

- If you are struggling with sin, fix your eyes on Him and you will find that you will be able to remove that sin.
- Strong faith, comes from a constant focus on Him and the fact that He endured hostility and eventual death on our behalf.
- Because of His sacrifice, we are able to endure the struggles that we will undoubtedly have to face.

This entire passage does an excellent job of outlining how we can successfully endure these struggles and faithfully cross the finish line.

- There is no doubt, a great deal of effort that is put into a race.
- Our Christian race is not a sprint... It is a marathon that can be an overwhelming struggle.
- Some will grow weary and will lose heart; however, with the right focus, all of us can attain the goal.

In order for us to be successful Christians, we must first be focused on Christ.

## II. In verses 4-6, we begin to see the 2<sup>nd</sup> factor in our success formula... DISCIPLINE.

Discipline is also necessary for us to overcome sin and be successful Christians.

- The word “*discipline*” is used 9 times in these 13 verses, which demonstrates its importance.
- Other translations use the words, “*chastens*” or “*corrects*”.

Let us begin talking about why discipline is so important.

- The word used in the original Greek text means “**training**.”
- This training, chastening and correcting is practiced in order to encourage a certain kind of behavior.
- Webster’s Dictionary says discipline is a condition of order based on obedience to authority.

When a parent disciplines a child, it is for the purpose of correcting bad behavior and encouraging good behavior.

- Generally speaking, a teacher who uses good disciplinary tools in the classroom is able to keep the class running in an orderly fashion.

There is a program for teachers called “**Positive Discipline**.” Perhaps some of our teachers have heard of it...

- This program was used in a lower income Sacramento school over a four-year period, and during that time, the suspensions dropped from 64 annually to only 4 annually.
- And the vandalism decreased from 24 episodes per year to only 3.
- The teachers also reported that there was a great improvement in classroom atmosphere, behavior, attitudes and academic performance

Without discipline, life is chaotic.

- Anyone here who has ever tried teaching young children can relate to a class, which has gotten out of control.
- If you run a classroom without rules or discipline, you are probably going to learn something about chaos! 😊

Our Christian lives likewise can become chaotic if we do not regard discipline as important.

- When we choose to disregard God’s rules and standards and when we do not exercise self-control, the end result is turmoil and chaos.

**Philippians 4.9** Says, “*The things you have learned and received and heard, and seen in me, practice these things; and the God of peace shall be with you.*”

- Being disciplined by practicing the will of God, leads to a life of peace.
- Even if we are going through the most difficult struggles, we know that Christ is always there with us.
- In **Philippians 4:13**, Paul said, “*I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.*”

Coming back to **Hebrews 12**... **verse 5** says, “*do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord.*”

- There are two points from this verse that I think we need to understand.
- First of all, discipline is something that we should take very seriously.
- Secondly, we should consider the discipline of the Lord.
- Some have taken this to mean that God is continually punishing us for bad things that we do in life.
- Others believe that bad things simply happen to all people and God isn’t necessarily involved in it.

Either way, our text is saying that when bad things happen, we need to be able to keep on the right path.

- Don’t let the bumps in the road throw you in the ditch.
- When we are hit with one of life’s troubles, we need to know that we can grow stronger because of them.
- If Paul could endure all the beatings and struggles that he faced, it is also possible for us to endure our difficulties!
- In **2 Corinthians 11**, he wrote about his struggles and in **chapter 12:10**, he said, “*Therefore I am well content with the weaknesses, with insults, with distresses, with persecutions, with difficulties, for Christ’s sake; for when I am weak, then I am strong.*”
- These difficulties that he faced, helped to make him a better person.

While Paul was in prison he wrote to the Christians in Philippi who were concerned about him in prison.

- He wanted them to be able to see the Lord's hand at work so he wrote to them and said, "*Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.*" (Philippians 1.12-14)
- They were more trusting in the Lord and had far more courage because of his struggles.

Let's think about James for a moment...

- He had also seen many hard times and was able to recognize the Lord's hand at work in each of them.
- James wrote in **James 1.2-4** and said, "*Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.*"
- The NIV says these trials allowed them to be mature, complete and not lacking anything.
- Peter makes a similar statement in **1 Peter 1.6-7**, regarding how trials help one to develop greater faith.

All of these passages point out that the Lord's discipline, his training, can mold us into a stronger Christian.

- In the same way that a child may not fully understand why a parent is disciplining him; we some times don't understand why we are going through difficulties.

As we focus our attention back to **Hebrews 12:5-6**, we find that the writer is quoting from **Proverbs 3**.

- As we read **Proverbs 3:5-13** in a moment, we will see that it speaks to the one who doesn't understand why he is being faced with a struggle or tragedy in his life.
- It deals with God's knowledge far surpassing ours.
- It expresses the importance of remembering the things you have been taught and keeping to the truth and to God's commandments. Please read with me Proverbs 3:5-13...

*5 Trust in the LORD with all your heart And do not lean on your own understanding.*

*6 In all your ways acknowledge Him, And He will make your paths straight.*

*7 Do not be wise in your own eyes; Fear the LORD and turn away from evil.*

*8 It will be healing to your body And refreshment to your bones.*

*9 Honor the LORD from your wealth And from the first of all your produce;*

*10 So your barns will be filled with plenty And your vats will overflow with new wine.*

*11 My son, do not reject the discipline of the LORD Or loathe His reproof,*

*12 For whom the LORD loves He reproves, Even as a father corrects the son in whom he delights.*

*13 How blessed is the man who finds wisdom And the man who gains understanding.*

When we forget the sovereignty of Almighty God, then our struggles seem to be meaningless, pointless, and without purpose.

- We wonder, "**Why am I going through this?**"
- We focus on our struggle, our discomfort and we give no thought to the fact that God is at work.
- He is at work within us, when we face these tribulations and struggles.
- When we trust in Him and put our faith in Him, we receive many benefits from this.

**III. This brings us to the 3<sup>rd</sup> factor in the formula to be a successful Christian... SACRIFICE.**

Back in **Hebrews 12**, again, **verse 9** says, "*Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?*"

- What this tells us is that being disciplined requires us to be in subjection to authority.
- When one puts them selves in subjection to another, they are giving up their right to make their own decisions.
- They are putting themselves at the mercy of the one in authority.
- They disregard their own wants and desires, so that they can focus on serving him.

If anyone ever tells you that being a Christian does not require sacrifice, I would like to submit that that person does not know what being a faithful Christian is all about.

- We give our time to the church when we assemble three times a week
- We donate our money to the church instead of buying the latest gadgets and gizmos that will end up in a garbage heap within a few years.
- We offer ourselves to each other in order to encourage and edify one another.
- We reach out to our friends and families risking rejection, but knowing that they could be lost if we don't do something.
- We give up many of the earthly pleasures, knowing that we will have joy and treasures beyond our understanding when our life on earth is done.

It would be very easy to do a series of lessons just on this one idea of sacrificing for the church, but since we are nearly out of time, I would like to at least say this about it...

- Jesus sacrificed everything for us and we should be willing to sacrifice our time, money, and our very souls to serve Him.

#### **IV. There is a 4<sup>th</sup> factor of being a successful Christian and that is a knowledge of a REWARD.**

We would have no motivation to do any of these other things if it was not for the reward.

- We know that there is something better at the end of the tunnel.
- God has prepared for us a resting place that is beautiful beyond our imaginations.
- We can spend eternity in the bliss of heaven.

I can only consider myself to be successful, when I have faithfully lived my life in obedience to Him all the way up to the point of death.

- But there has to be a starting point.
- If you want to join a marathon, you have to take steps to sign up and you need to be at the starting line when the gun goes off.
- Listen to the words of Jesus, "*Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; be zealous therefore, and repent. Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears My voice and opens the door, I will come in to him, and will dine with him, and he with Me. He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne.*"

**(Revelation 3:19-21)**

Notice that Jesus asks for action. One must repent, must open the door, and must overcome sin's influence.

- Jesus also makes another statement in **Matthew 28**, "*Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you, and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart; and YOU SHALL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. For My yoke is easy, and My load is light.*"

#### **CONCLUSION & INVITATION:**

If you feel as though you have lost your focus on Christ and you have not been disciplined... you realize that you have lost sight of the reward and you are not sacrificing for Christ in the way you should, we would like to encourage you this morning.

If you would like to begin your journey as a follower of Christ, He has already knocked on the door and is waiting for you to take action.

- You need to repent of your sins and open the door, and have your sins washed away in the waters of baptism.
- If this is your desire, please come forward and have a seat on the front pew as we stand and sing.