

We've been talking about passages in our lives, those significant events or stages most all of us experience, what they say about us, and what they say about God. The last time we were together, we talked about stress and pressure and the need for Sabbath and rest. Not wanting to be the kind of pastor who tells people to do something he isn't willing to do himself, I then took the next two Sundays off to rest.

Today, I want to talk about success and the effect of success on our character. I want to do that by highlighting two historic figures in the Hebrew Scriptures—King Saul, and his predecessor, King David, both of whom started out with great promise only to have their integrity compromised by their success.

Of young Saul it was written, "There was not a man among the people of Israel more handsome than he; from his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people." Did you catch that? *From his shoulders upward he was taller than any of the people.* The only thing above the shoulders is the head. Maybe the writer is saying Saul had a big head. At first, it went well. Saul ruled wisely, but then the power went to his head. Years later, when Saul would die, it was simply said, "The Lord repented that he had made Saul king over Israel."

But before that, Saul was demoted, and God sent Samuel, his aide-de-camp, in search of a new king. This time, God tried a different tack. He told Samuel, “When you’re looking for a new king, do not take into account his appearance or height.” God had tried tall, dark, and handsome, it had been a disaster, so now he was going with short, pasty, and homely. Samuel visits the house of a man named Jesse, who trots out his sons before Samuel, who rejects each one. They remind him of Saul. Samuel turns to Jesse and asks, “Do you have any more sons?”

Jesse says, “Well, there is David. He’s off tending the sheep in the back forty.”

Samuel says, “Call him up to the house.”

So Jesse sends one of his sons to fetch David, and David walks in the house, full of vitality, with movie-star looks. And God forgot all about short, pasty, and homely, and said, “That’s the one. Anoint him king.”

Saul is still alive, and very resentful and jealous. He chases David around the countryside trying to kill him. Not content to have just one enemy, Saul also attacks the Philistines, and is wounded in battle. Rather than fall into the hands of his enemy, he falls on his own sword and dies. The Philistines find his body, cut off his head, and send it around to each of their villages as part of a traveling road show. It tells all about it in the Bible. You can read it aloud to your children and grandchildren before you tuck them into bed and wish them sweet dreams.

As for David, his rise is meteoric. A shepherd boy one day, a king the next. He is the best of kings, and the worst of kings. Sometimes he is wise, cognizant of his power, and uses it wisely. Other times he is foolish, cognizant of his power, but abuses it. His relationship with his family is so strained that his son, Absalom, raises an army and goes to war against him. Another son, the offspring of his affair with Bathsheba, dies as a consequence of David's enormous sense of privilege and entitlement. Like many of us, David was at his best in his humility, at his worst in his pride. David embodied the truth of an old proverb, that there are two things that reveal the character of a person, the first one is failure, the second success.

What do our successes say about us?

My first publisher was a man named John, who was a very kind, down-to-earth man. Up to that point, I had never really enjoyed any vocational success, so was surprised by this new development in my life. John lived in Oregon, and flew into Indianapolis one day so we could meet in person. We went out to lunch and afterwards, while we were talking, he said something very interesting. He said, "Be very careful if this book sells well. A lot of writers, if their first book sells well, get a big head. Don't let that happen to you."

As it turns out, it was a not a problem. Joan bought a copy, and my parents bought a copy, and someone in Omaha bought a copy, but that turned out to be a mistake and they returned it to the store.

We have all known people who've enjoyed a measure of success who are unpleasant to be with because their achievements have given them an inflated view of themselves. They have come to believe their good fortune was due to their hard work or intelligence and nothing else. Then we meet people who get it right, whose success has made them wise and gracious. My book publisher friend John had been very successful, was well respected in publishing circles, but never took credit for that. He said his success would never have been possible if roads hadn't been built so he could transport books, if bookstores didn't sell his books, if writers didn't write books, if printers didn't produce books, if a monetary system hadn't been developed that allowed for the sale of goods. He said he was one person in a long chain of people who had made his success possible.

We are never successful alone. Never. We are never successful alone.

I knew a man and woman who'd built up a family business. They had this knack for hiring tremendous employees.

I asked them how they did it. How could they tell whether someone would be a successful employee or not?

The woman said, “When we started out, neither one of us had had any training in business, but we’d read in the *Reader’s Digest* that if you want to find out what someone is really like, take them out to eat and watch how they treat the waiter. Because that’s how they’ll treat you, and your customers, and their co-workers.”

She said, “That sounded like a good idea, so whenever we’d interview someone for a job, we’d take them out to lunch. If they weren’t kind to the waiter, we knew they wouldn’t be kind to the people they worked with. So we watched how they treated the waiter, and if they were kind, we hired them. And you know, they usually turned out to be very successful people.”

Successful people are invariably gracious people. They have succeeded, in large part, because the people around them want them to succeed and pitch in to make it happen.

How have your efforts to be successful effected you? Saul’s initial success turned him sour. David’s sense of entitlement cost his son his life.

Let me close with a query for our consideration: Have your efforts to be successful expanded your heart or hardened it?