

Handling success

By Elise L. Moore, C.S.

Sometimes it's tough to succeed. You win one game; people expect you to win the next. You win a tournament, you're expected to win the championship. When you win one year, doesn't everyone think you're favored to win the next?

It's the same with grades in school. Get a D for the six weeks and no one expects much from you. Work hard to get an A and parents think you should be doing it all the time.

Sometimes it seems easier to slide by. If you never excel, no one expects much. Life just drifts on.

Then there is the envy factor. You do well but your friend doesn't. He starts harassing you, making fun, or gets moody. You make the team and instead of being happy for you, those who didn't make it are jealous. Being a winner does not equal being popular.

The temptation is to stop trying to succeed. If friends make life unpleasant, parents start pushing for more and you feel pressured all the time, doesn't it make sense to just quit?

No. Part of succeeding is learning how to handle success. Not letting it go to your head or make you nervous or cause you to drop out. Learning how to handle success well and not crumble at failure is true maturity.

When I was in high school, I was in competitive speaking, part of the debate team. As a sophomore, our school sponsored a tournament for individual events, excluding debate. So our coach had the debate team members enter the extemporaneous speech category, probably to keep us busy while he was running the tournament.

We prepared for a couple of weeks. Practiced a little. But this was not our main event, so there was no expectation that we would perform well. No pressure. To make a short story shorter, I won girl's extemporaneous. I was

so shocked, when my coach announced my name, I sat frozen in my seat. Another member of our team had to physically pick me up and put me in the aisle before I could start making that eternally long walk to accept the trophy.

I was in tears. Not tears of joy. The captain of the entire speech team, a senior, and the nicest girl I knew was in girl's extemp. She won every tournament she entered. This was her last tournament at home. In fact she was standing beside the coach handing out awards with him. I was mortified that I had won "her" trophy. That was all I could think about. As my coach handed me the award, through my tears I apologized to her. Success for me, in this case translated in my mind that someone I admired had lost. She was so gracious. Smiling warmly, she congratulated me.

How can one pray to overcome feeling guilty about success? The answer is to think less about yourself and more about God. Instead of the purpose being to glorify yourself, it helps to have our purpose be to express God's gifts and talents to the best of ability and thus glorify God. We stop identifying ourselves merely as winners or losers. Instead we start thinking of ourselves as "glorifiers", doing our best to glorify God. God doesn't grade his children and put one ahead of another. He expects each one to express the talents He's given and develop them fully.

The story of the Prodigal Son is helpful. Perhaps the younger son took his inheritance and left because he just felt he couldn't compete with his older brother, or didn't want to. So he avoided confrontation, avoided success and left. But we have to act up to our highest potential or we are not going true to ourselves as the child of God.

So the younger son had to return. And his father wouldn't take him back as a servant (another way of avoiding competing with older brother). His father insisted that he retake his status as his son. Sure enough the older brother was jealous. The parable doesn't tell us how the brothers worked out their relationship. But the message I take from the story, is that one can't avoid working it out. One can't run from success, run from a problem. One has to face it. And with God's help, one can learn to accept success as a natural way to glorify God rather than as merely a personal achievement.

So the next time you are on the road to success, don't take the first detour. God has given you this ability and expects you to use it well. Glorify God and forget self. That will help you both to excel and handle your success.

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