

MONDAY MANNA

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SUCCESS AND SELF-CONTROL

By Robert J. Tamasy

"At no time is self-control more difficult than in times of success." I do not know the originator of this unattributed quote, but it seems to carry a lot of wisdom. Success has an annoying habit of feeding egos, puffing up those who succeed with pride and overconfidence.

We can see this every day in the news – entertainers, professional athletes and other celebrities strutting about proudly, basking in the adulation they receive and revelling in media spotlight that shines on them. Few things have the effect of bloating one's self-image more than success.

This phenomenon manifests itself in the marketplace as well. Sales executives closing important sales in rapid succession and then finding great difficulty containing their egos. A person receives a promotion, and suddenly becomes tempted to regard himself as more important than he was before. Someone else receives a prestigious award and before long she proceeds to "lord it over" her peers and colleagues.

This is hardly new; it is a problem that has spanned the ages. More than 150 years ago, then U.S. President Abraham Lincoln observed, "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power." In his view, strength of character is revealed not in the brutish exercise of authority, but in one's ability to retain a sense of humility in the wake of success.

Many centuries earlier, the apostle Paul wrote about this to Christians in ancient Rome, admonishing, "*Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment*" (Romans 12:3). In other words, we should strive to keep our successes and personal victories in proper perspective.

Even before Paul made that observation, Jesus Christ taught about the virtues of genuine humility. He said, "*For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*" (Matthew 23:12).

And thousands of years before Abraham Lincoln offered his thoughts about how power and status can test character, the writer in the Old Testament book of Proverbs made a similar observation. "*The crucible for silver and the furnace for gold, but man is tested by the praise he receives*" (Proverbs 27:21). As Lincoln noted, while we tend to perceive adversity and hardship as severe tests, how we respond when things are going very well can be just as revealing.

How then should we respond when success comes our way, whatever that endeavour might be? We all want to succeed in our work, as well as in our personal lives. But that does not warrant practically breaking our arms patting ourselves on the back. If we refuse to let success go to our heads, we may well find commendation coming from other sources: "*Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; someone else, and not your own lips*" (Proverbs 27:2).

Another passage instructs that focusing on God, who provides us with the opportunities, talents and resources to succeed, is the best approach: "*Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful*" (Joshua 1:8).

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree with the assertion that self-control can be very difficult when experiencing times of success? Why or why not?
2. Can you think of an example, whether it is a famous person or someone you know personally, whose behaviour demonstrated that they could not manage to keep success in proper perspective? If so, how was that exhibited?
3. Why do you think the way people handle success, power, and other forms of prosperity can become as much a test of character as how they respond to adversity?
4. What steps can we take to ensure that we maintain a sense of genuine humility – even in advance of achieving success – whether in our work, our businesses, or personal pursuits?

NOTE:

If you have a Bible and would like to read more about this subject, consider the following passages:

- Proverbs 11:2, 15:33, 16:18-19, 22:4;
- Philippians 2:3-11;
- Colossians 3:12;
- 1 Peter 5:5-6