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## Can a Christian Thrive in a World that Rewards Evil?

**Luke 6:45:** (NASB) *The good man out of the good treasure of his heart brings forth what is good; and the evil man out of the evil treasure brings forth what is evil; for his mouth speaks from that which fills his heart.*



Oftentimes as we look around us we can really get discouraged, for we live in a world that embraces darkness and persecutes light. We are surrounded by political corruption, we are developed in a "me first" environment. We are shown that winning at all costs is acceptable. And instead of a "turn the other cheek" mentality, we are bombarded with a "smack him before he smacks you" approach. It is like living as a lamb among lions - and we all know how that works out. So, can we as Christians "thrive" in a world like this? Stay with us!

We recently received a letter from a young Christian man about 30 years old, living in a Middle Eastern country. He would like to remain anonymous, so we will call him "Timothy." Excerpts from Timothy's letter: "I'm...a firm believer in good ethics. I don't like to lie or cheat, especially when it comes to my job. Alas, and forgive me for saying this, but almost 99% of my country's people strongly believe that you need to do so at work to survive, which is what almost everybody is doing."

We all want to win in life. We all want what we each perceive to be success. Let's look at two diametrically opposed paths that both led to success...or did they?

### Tour de France Victories 1 and 2, report on Lance Armstrong

- It was hard to believe Lance Armstrong had been forced out of cycling for two years with cancer when he returned so mightily to the tour in 1999. That year he took...all three time trials to become, ten years after Greg LeMond, only the second American to win the Tour. The following year, the recipe for success was the same: He attacked on the hills and joined Marco Pantani out in front on his own. ...Armstrong sealed his second Tour victory.*

So, what is "winning" for a Christian? For the first hour of this program, we are going to focus on our own head and heart and notice certain principles to thrive in this evil world.

**Mark 10:17-23 Principle #1: Live in line with the laws of God.**

**Principle #2: Live in line with the spirit of selflessness, spurred on by the laws of God.**

### Success defined and Character/Reputation, John Wooden (former UCLA basketball coach), TedTalk

- Success according to John Wooden, speaking at 90 years old: Peace of mind is attained only through self-satisfaction and knowing you made the effort to do the best of which you're capable. I believe that's true. If you make the effort to do the best which you are capable; trying to improve the situation that exists for you, I think that's success and I don't think others can judge you. Your reputation is what you are perceived to be, and your character is what you really are. I think character is much more important than what you are perceived to be, and hope they would both be good, but they will not necessarily be the same.*

Personally defining success depends on what you are driven towards. True eternal success can only be achieved by driving towards those things of lasting value, significance and impact.

**What is our standard? What if, by holding to it, you can't get ahead?**

"My country is now well known for its lack of ethics and morality. You have to backstab to move ahead."

**MY HEAD + MY HEART = MY CHOICE** If you focus your head and then focus your heart, you can make a choice as to how you are going to deal with the things around you.

### Tour de France Victories 3 and 4, report on Lance Armstrong

- The following year, it was three times - not so much lucky, as heroic. Once again, Armstrong made his traditional breakaway on the climbs to take a mountain stage. With it, he took yellow and he held on until the line in Paris. In 2002, he became the unrivaled king of the Pyrenees with two successive victories on La Mongie and the Plateau de Beille. The icing on the cake that year was a victory in the Mâcon time trial the day before Paris - a four-stage victory to cap his fourth consecutive Tour triumph.*

**Romans 12:14 Principle #3: Focus your energy on the spreading of goodness**



))) Teach by example - poetic verse, *John Wooden (former UCLA basketball coach), TedTalk*

- *A poetic verse Wooden came across in the 1930's: "No written word, no spoken plea, can teach our youth what they should be. Nor all the books on all the shelves, it's what the teachers are themselves." That made an impression on me in the 1930's and I tried to use that, more or less, in my teaching, whether it be in sports or whether it be in a classroom.*

Romans 12:15 Principle #4: **Fear not entering into the lives of those around you.**  
We are to be sympathetic to those around us.

Romans 12:16 Principle #5: **Keep your head inside your head and keep your ego beneath it**  
Don't put yourself in a compromising position, which can happen when our ego gets out of control.

Romans 12:17 Principle #6: **Evil dies on arrival and righteousness is always respected**  
When evil comes into our lives, it should "die on arrival." There should be nothing in us to nourish evil.

Romans 12:18-19 Principle #7: **God's judgment in God's time rights all wrongs...God's way**

Romans 12:20: *...heap burning coals on his head* is actually a good thing! It is said that in biblical times, when one visited someone at night the host would give the guest embers to carry home so he could immediately stoke his own fire and warm his home. This was an expression of extending hospitality.

**Principle #8: Mercy and kindness have a home here, regardless of who is in need**  
That is difficult because we may *want* our enemy to be cold!

Romans 12:21 Principle #9: **Steel yourself towards the defeat of evil within your scope with that which is right**

**To sum up...1 Peter 3:8-12**

**How do we stay focused on that which is most important and not lose hope?**

"Dear Rick and Jonathan, your show is a constant inspiration, and I listen to the stuff I download as I walk. Alas, I'm in constant confusion. I listen to the show, and I get a push of hope, but hours later, I'm back to dark thinking. I think of revenge of those who refuse to pay for my services when they have millions and just didn't pay because they just could do so. I think of suicide because I don't feel like I fit among my friends who think I'm stupid for not sleeping with women who want to, or making a large margin of profit when I can."

Lance Armstrong admitted to Oprah Winfrey in a now famous interview that he cheated at all seven races! Eventually, whether in this age or the next, it will all come crumbling down. **We have to find a fruitful focus for our life:** Hebrews 12:1: *The great cloud of witnesses* refers to those who have gone before and are a blueprint of faith in action. These are partially listed in the prior chapter.  
See Hebrews 11.

))) **First rule, John Wooden (former UCLA basketball coach), TedTalk**

- *I had three rules, pretty much, that I stuck with practically all the time. I learned these prior to making UCLA and I decided they were very important. One was: Never be late. Never be late. ...Players, if we were leaving for somewhere, they had to be neat and clean. And I had one of my greatest players that you probably heard of, Bill Walton. He came to catch the bus because we were leaving for somewhere to play, and he wasn't clean and neat so I would let him go - he couldn't get on the bus. He had to go home and get cleaned up to get to the airport. So I was a stickler for that. I believe in time, very important.*

What a contrast to Lance Armstrong! We should send the message to those around us of simplicity, honesty and integrity.

))) **I would never do that, Lance previously denying, Wall Street Journal Live**

- *I came out of a life-threatening disease. I was almost on my deathbed. Do you think I'm gonna come back to a sport and say, "Okay, doctor. Give me everything you've got; I just want to go fast!" No way! I would never do that.*

**On the opposite end of the spectrum, we should focus on Jesus as the end result:**  
Hebrews 12:2



 **Second and third rules, John Wooden (former UCLA basketball coach), TedTalk**

- *Second Rule: Not one word of profanity. One word of profanity and you were out of here for the day. If I see it in a game, you're gonna come out and sit on the bench. Third Rule: Never criticize a teammate. I didn't want that. That was my job. I'm paid to do it. ...Those are three things that I stuck with pretty closely all the time. Those actually came from my dad. That's what he tried to teach to me and my brothers at the time.*

He was building a structure on how to thrive in a bad world.

**Fix the experience of Jesus in your mind: Hebrews 12:3:** Our friend Timothy is feeling overwhelmed by the lack of morality around him and he goes to dark thinking. This verse tells us to meditate on Jesus, because he experienced hostility like we never have. Jesus was able to overcome that hostility because he was focused on the will of God only. Don't give up on well-doing! We have a lot of ammunition to use in battling against this dark world.

**How do we encourage others to hold to a higher standard than is commonly acceptable?**

"Dear Rick and Jonathan, this is what I ask of you: I know everywhere around this world, there are people who get screwed by other people, just because they're nice, and they do not believe in vengeance, and give without thinking of taking back. I'm not a saint, and I'm not saying I'm one of those. But the more I learn how to deal with issues in Christianity, the more responsibilities I find I have, and the more complicated I feel things are."

Remember the two times Jesus fed the multitudes? Did he survey the crowd and dismiss those not worthy to be fed by a miracle, or did he bless all who were in his life at that moment? **We, too, have daily opportunities to feed the multitudes around us as a witness to the love of God through Christ!**

Matthew 5:11-12: Feed the crowd by truly rejoicing in ALL things...that's what Jesus did!

Matthew 5:13: Feeding the crowd by maintaining your values can be the preserving element in the midst of sinful decay. So feed the crowd by being different...that's what Jesus did!

Matthew 5:14-16: Feed the crowd by allowing your light to shine freely. It is important that your light shine in a way that it would encourage and not blind; beckon and not frighten. That's what Jesus did! Even if they don't respond, people should see something different, something higher, in the way we live our lives. 1 Peter 2:11-12: Feed the crowd by behaving in such a way that they see the unmistakable difference between you and the rest of the crowd...that's what Jesus did!

**How do we fight the idea that "evil is normal and nice is stupid?"**

"I find it all too hard to handle, and I could really use some help. I was the happiest person I knew when I was younger, and as soon I stepped into adulthood and it was time to face the world, I found myself getting depressed day in and day out. What I'm asking for, I guess, is for more inspiration. How should I think? I hate myself now because I look at people around me and all I could think of is how bad they treat me and others. I don't want that, but I really can't help it anymore. I am full of hatred, and I hate myself for it more. I don't want someone to lend me money to pay off my debts and then pay them back. I don't want to make a big deal out of this. I just want a show, if possible, where you guys could talk about how hard it is for a nice person to survive in a world where evil is normal and nice is stupid."

Evil is normal - it is after all, Satan's world. That being said, we arm ourselves against it.

2 Corinthians 10:3-5: ...*taking every thought captive* implies that there are some thoughts that do not want to be taken. Remember, **MY HEAD + MY HEART = MY CHOICE** Why is evil "normal?" Because it has a powerful voice!

 **Press conference, Lance Armstrong explaining why he did not give an interview to a certain reporter (This is Lance Armstrong after he was accused but before he admitted wrongdoing.)**

- *I might just clear up one thing, the reason you didn't get it (the interview), Paul. When I decided to come back for what I think is a very noble reason, you said, "Folks, the cancer has been in remission for four years, but our cancer has now returned," meaning me (for the sport of cycling). I am here to fight this disease. I'm here so that I don't have to deal with it, you don't have to deal with it, none of us have to deal with it, my children don't have to deal with it, but yet you said that I am the cancer and the cancer is out of remission. So I think it goes without saying, no, we are not going to sit down and do an interview.*



The attitude here displayed reminds us of another self-righteous group: Luke 18:9-14: Bringing our self-contradiction to God in prayer helps us to be cleansed. We begin to cope with our sins in a spiritual manner, armed with humility.

 **Old Fashioned Virtues, Tribute to Vince Lombardi, NFL Films**

- *Lombardi believed in the old fashioned virtues, which were stamped all over his team: Hard work, second effort, loyalty and love. His genius was that he was able to inspire so many of his players to grasp these ideals. Lombardi's influence extended not only to his own team, but during his short career as a coach, many hundreds of thousands of other young athletes warmed their own competitive spirit by the bright fire of this man who stood for everything that was solid and successful in American sports.*

We are looking at the world of sports as a way to identify things, but these principles apply to every aspect of our general living. When we apply hard work, effort, loyalty and love, we have a much better chance of succeeding in a Christian way.

 **Press conference, Lance Armstrong explaining why he did not give an interview to a certain reporter (This is Lance Armstrong after he was accused but before he admitted wrongdoing.)**

- *As a society, are we supposed to forgive and forget and let people get back to their job? Absolutely. I'm not sure I will ever forgive you for that statement. And I'm not sure that anybody around the world that has been affected by this disease will forgive you.*

Oftentimes we are judged by our own words.

### How do we re-establish the peace of God in our hearts when we get lost?

"I want to know how to face my problems that seem far from being solved anytime in the near future. I want to know how I can show support to nice people who get screwed.... My friends, my brothers in Christianity, my messengers of God, cutting a very long story short, I no longer have peace inside, I cannot pray with so much bottled up in me, and I need guidance. Forgive me when I say this, but I cannot find a single priest in Lebanon who I can go to with my problems. I'm confused and lost, and I need guidance. Help me restore my inner peace, I beg of you. Again and again, I am so sorry for such a very long message."

Our first point is, ironically, to reclaim peace you have to understand that life will continually try to chase it from you. 1 Peter 4:12-14: If we are going to walk in the footsteps of Christ, we may walk through fiery ordeals. We should not be surprised by this. We should acknowledge that this is normal for a servant of Christ. **A cure for anxiety: Matthew 6:31-34**: Our second point to reclaim peace in our lives is to claim the blessing of your trial, namely that it is a proving ground of the grace within you. We should pour out our issues before God and He will accept and strengthen us as a result of that. It feels good to tell God of our struggles and pain. Third, pray with thanksgiving - even if you don't feel thankful - God knows and wants you to pray anyway!

Philippians 4:4-7: We have to continually fight to regain peace and keep our head and heart in the right place. If you put in your best effort, you have won, regardless if you outscored the other team. That philosophy translates to our Christian life. For us to win, we have to put our best effort forward one step at a time. Whether we end up winning or losing according to the standards of the world, God sees the winner. That is what our Christianity is all about, and we can find great hope in that fact. We are judged by our intention. Even though our sin exists, it can be erased in the eyes of God if our efforts are to step forward. That gives us great hope.

So, fourth: Focus on focusing your focus! Philippians 4:8-9: What are we supposed to think about? Timothy, we are talking to you out in the Middle East where you are fighting essentially alone against a tidal wave of darkness. You can't overcome the tidal wave, but if you focus yourself on what is true and pure and honorable and lovely and of good repute, dwell on those things. In so doing, you can again find hope. Remember, Jesus "won" by being persecuted and crucified.

We need to focus on what we need to look at, and it is not the "stuff" of this world. A Christian's success is different than worldly success. Success is truly living up to the standards of Christ's likeness, righteousness, and integrity.

*Can a Christian thrive in a world that rewards evil?  
For Jonathan and Rick and Christian Questions,  
Think about it...!*