

**28<sup>th</sup> March 2021**  
**Jesus Redefines Success**  
**John 12:12-19**

If someone were to ask you to describe the scene in Jerusalem on that first Palm Sunday, what would you say? Would you say that it happened exactly like the Holy Spirit said it would through the prophet Zechariah?

Jesus had just left Bethany and entered Jerusalem on a donkey as was prophesied in Zechariah 9:9, *“Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion! Shout, Daughter Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and victorious, lowly and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey”*.

The crowds hailed Jesus waving palm branches crying out *“Hosannah! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the king of Israel!”* (John 12:13).

The people who called out “Save us” were expecting a warrior king who would free them from Roman oppression. Jesus came on a donkey, a sign of humility and peace, and He came with a very different kind of salvation in mind, the eternal salvation of all who would trust in Him as Lord and Saviour. Was Jesus’ entrance into Jerusalem a sign of success? It depends on your definition of success, right?

How do we measure success?

- The first is fairly obvious. In our culture, money makes the world go round. Everyone wants it and the more the better. Certainly, wealth is one way to measure success in this world?
- But just having money is not enough. Some people inherit, or make vast amounts of money, but live and die without accomplishing anything meaningful. So, it’s also necessary to have accomplished something – and be recognized for it.
- Success must be recognized or it’s meaningless – thus we post our lives and accomplishments on social media for all the world to see. If you have alienated your family and friends in accomplishing great things, that diminishes your success.
- 15 minutes of fame doesn’t count, you must be consistent and leave behind a lasting legacy.

So, we could go on and on. In this world success is marked by wealth, achievement, recognition, respect, consistency, legacy, and adoration from family and friends – if a person managed to do all that, you’d judge them to be pretty successful, wouldn’t you? Sure.

John gives us a snapshot of Jesus at the very end of his public ministry. His time on this earth is coming to an end. And now he rides into Jerusalem surrounded by crowds of adoring fans waving their palm branches and shouting their praises. All Glory, Laud, and Honour are given to him. It’s wonderful. But when we apply the world’s standards to Jesus’ life, has he been successful? He’s not rich. He’s not riding in a war chariot but on a donkey. A donkey he doesn’t even own – he had to borrow it. He doesn’t live in a mansion; in fact, he doesn’t have a place to call home at all. He doesn’t have a standing reservation at Jerusalem’s finest restaurants; rather, he eats whatever his disciples, and the women who followed him from Galilee can find and afford.

He is relatively famous – at least for the moment. Two crowds – one from Jerusalem, and one from Bethany – turn out to greet him because they heard that he had raised Lazarus from the dead. An impressive miracle to be sure; and this is probably what many of those people on his parade route were hoping!

The truth is that Jesus for 33 years he had been purposely holding back. Apart from this entry into Jerusalem, he generally avoided crowds and their praise. Sure, he achieved some fame among regular people – fishermen and sinners, but his peers (the Pharisees) didn't respect him. In fact, they hated him and wanted him dead and gone.

This morning I want to take us on a journey back through time nearly 2000 years to what some people call Holy Week, or Passion Week. The days between Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday, days packed with real historical events of meaning and power.

We are going to briefly consider what happened on Monday through to Thursday in Jesus' life and in the lives of His followers and those who betrayed Him. As we follow the journey of Jesus to the Cross, my prayer is that God will enable each of us to see our Saviour in a new light and draw closer to Him as we are reminded of His love for us and His willing sacrifice for our sins and our salvation.

**Monday:** On Monday, Jesus cleansed the temple. People from all over the known world travelled to Jerusalem. We studied this a couple weeks back. When they arrived, they needed to exchange their Greek or Roman money in preparation for Passover. Jesus saw the money changers within the temple courts, in the holy place.

The fact that the money changers were running their businesses inside God's house was bad enough, but they also took advantage of the poor and the widows. Jesus' heart was filled with love for the people who were being obstructed from worshipping God and for the people who needed to be healed.

Listen to Mark 11:17, Jesus entered the temple courts and drove out all who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves. *"It is written," He said to them, "My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations. But you have made it a den of robbers."* "The blind and the lame came to Him at the temple, and He healed them.

God wants us to fully worship Him, He is worthy of our total devotion. If we put a barrier between us and God, or if we make something more important than Him, that thing, or person, or activity, or addiction has become an idol, and Jesus wants to clear it out of the way so we can have freedom, healing, and wholeness in Him.

**Tuesday:** On Tuesday Jesus demonstrated the power of His words. Matthew 21:23-27, Jesus entered the temple courts, and, while He was teaching, the chief priests and the elders of the people came to Him. *"By what authority are you doing these things?" they asked. "And who gave you this authority?" Jesus replied, "I will also ask you one question. If you answer me, I will tell you by what authority I am doing these things. John's baptism—where did it come from? Was it from heaven, or of human origin?" They discussed it among themselves and said, "If we say, 'From heaven,' he will ask, 'Then why didn't you believe him?' But if we say, 'Of human origin'—we are afraid of the people, for they all hold that John was a prophet." So they answered Jesus, "We don't know."* Then He said, *"Neither will I tell you by what authority I am doing these things."*

The chief priests and elders wanted to know who Jesus thought He was. They questioned His authority to teach and to heal. Jesus did not waste His words; He chose to speak words that would honour God and help others.

If I had a dollar for every time I've spoken before considering my words, I would be a very wealthy man! Have you ever said something without thinking first? When you are in a challenging situation do you pause and ask God to help you to speak like Jesus?

**Wednesday:** Wednesday was a day of betrayal. Matthew 26:14-16, Then one of the Twelve—the one called Judas Iscariot—went to the chief priests and asked, *“What are you willing to give me if I deliver Him over to you?”* So, they counted out for him thirty pieces of silver. From then on Judas watched for an opportunity to hand him over. Judas Iscariot, at one point in his life he had made the decision to follow Jesus. Judas left his old life behind and followed Jesus for three years. Judas had walked the dusty roads with Jesus. Judas had heard every message and every parable with his own ears. Judas had seen miracles and healing with his own eyes. Judas had experienced the love of Jesus, yet on Wednesday Judas chose to betray Jesus. Instead of love, instead of friendship, instead of loyalty, Judas chose hatred and betrayal. Judas seems to have been filled with anger, resentment, maybe disappointment or disillusion. At this point, Judas seems to have a greater love for money than Jesus. Judas chose to turn his back on Jesus, to walk away!

Sadly, over the years, I have known people who have chosen to walk away from Jesus. To sell Him out, not for 30 pieces of silver, the price of a slave at that time, they have sold Him out for other things like their careers, or to live a sinful life. Some have pursued money, or a relationship, or fame, others walked away simply because God didn't do what they expected Him to do for them. Some have walked away because they were unwilling to submit to God's plans and purpose for them, to truly acknowledge Jesus as Saviour and as Lord. May God help each of us to keep on keeping on and to willingly follow God's will in every aspect of our lives.

**THURSDAY:** Every time we take communion together, we remember that Thursday. Matthew 26:26-28, *While they were eating, Jesus took bread, and when he had given thanks, He broke it and gave it to His disciples, saying, “Take and eat; this is my body.” Then He took a cup, and when He had given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, “Drink from it, all of you. This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.*

The disciples gathered together in the upper room. The table was set, the Passover meal was ready. The meal, we tend to think about the bread and wine but there would also have been lamb, bitter herbs, olives, stew and dates.

The irony of Thursday night is that the disciples were celebrating Passover with Jesus, the One we call the Lamb of God. Jesus was about to be sacrificed on the Cross for them and for all of us. His body broken and His blood shed for our sins. 1 John 3:16 says, This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. This is love. This is mercy. This is grace. God loves you so much He provided the way for you to be saved. Jesus was willing to sacrifice Himself for you, for me, for all who trust in Him as Lord and Saviour. Time does not allow us to fully explore Thursday, Jesus going to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane, His prayer to Father God, crying out to Him from His humanity knowing what He was about to endure. Then Judas betraying Jesus with a kiss, Jesus being arrested and Peters denial of Jesus.

By ignoring every single standard by which the world measures success, Jesus earned for himself (and for us) the never-ending glory of heaven. We are sincere when we call his entrance into Jerusalem “triumphant” because it shows his determination to suffer and die for our salvation. That's how God had defined success for his Son's life – and that is the mission Jesus was determined to complete.

Not only did Jesus flip the world's definition of success on its head by his life, he does it in ours too.

- We don't want to be like that crowd who gushed with praise one day then cried for crucifixion the next.
- We don't want to be like those disciples who abandoned Him in the moment of trial.
- We don't want to be like those Pharisees who resented his popularity and orchestrated his death. But that is what we do if we talk and sing about humility, service, and set our hearts and minds on heavenly things here in public worship, only to leave and go back to chasing after success as the world defines it in our daily lives.

The lasting success Jesus wants you and I to have doesn't come by accumulating wealth in this life, but in storing up treasures for the next. The lasting glory Jesus won for you doesn't come when this world praises you for your accomplishments, but rather when after a life of humble service, God lifts you up and says: Well done, good and faithful servant! Come and share your master's happiness! (Matthew 25:23) On Palm Sunday 2000 years ago, our King rode on a donkey to the death that earned eternal success for all people. This Palm Sunday, Jesus shows us that a successful life in God's eyes consists of quiet, humble service to God and to one another.

We started by talking about how our world measures success. Let's finish with a challenge. Following Jesus challenges, us to change our definition of success. Consider how much better God's way is than the world's – not to mention; far less stressful than getting caught up in the rat race of this world.

- If success isn't defined by how much you have but by how much you can give away, what does that free you to do with the blessings God has given you?
- If success isn't defined by how many people serve and obey you, but by how many people you can serve and help – what opportunities do you have at home or at work or right here to be very successful?
- If success is not defined by being recognized by other people but rather being recognized as one of God's children – then doesn't even the lowliest task have great meaning?
- If you recognize that your status before God doesn't depend on what you do, but on what Christ has done for you – how does that lift a burden off of your shoulders and simplify the way you prioritize your life?

Will following in Jesus' footsteps be glamorous? Unlikely. Will it result in a life and legacy that the world considers praiseworthy and successful? Probably not. Will it be easy? No. It will be a fight every step of the way. It means not only dying to the world but also crucifying our own sinful natures. So how can we possibly follow a path that's so countercultural, so uncomfortable, so hard? *“Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set out before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:2)*

Today, forget about the way the unbelieving world – the world that is racing at breakneck speed on the broad way– defines and strives for success. Rather, stand on the side of that road into Jerusalem and watch Jesus riding a donkey on his way to winning eternal glory for you and me and all people.

Be assured that because Jesus earned his Father's stamp of approval by dying on a cross, your sins are forgiven and you too have the Father's approval. And leave here with the goal of becoming genuinely successful according to God's holy standards of humility, service, and faith. And, even though this scene in Jerusalem doesn't look like much, always, always, keep your eyes fixed on Jesus – he is the very definition of success.

Let's pray.