

Edward F. Garesché, S.J.

The Catholic Book
of Character and Success

For Young Persons Seeking
Lasting Happiness and Spiritual Wealth

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*The Catholic Book
of Character and Success*

Chapter One



*Recognize daily
opportunities for success*

As you stand on the threshold of the future, what is before you? You are an unknown quantity even to yourself. Your coming days are like a blank check in which you must fill the significant figures. They are like an empty page on which you must write the record of nobleness or ignominy or mere dull mediocrity. You have within you the stuff of heroes, and you have also within you instincts and tendencies that, yielded to, will make you a degraded criminal. You feel the pull of opposite tendencies: now you dream of great things; now you are tugged downward by impulses of which you are ashamed.

But you are the captain of your own soul; you are the arbiter of your own destiny. God and man both give you a fair chance, a noble opportunity. God has endowed you with a free will, the divine prerogative of choosing between good and evil. He has given you a body and a soul, both excellent and beneficial, the climax of His visible creation. He has brought you into being, without a past, but with a splendid future, if you will seize it by your free and virtuous effort.

At the same time, you cannot be really free without having the choice between good and evil, and if you deliberately

choose what is evil and base, you may have it and, with it, the dark consequence of a ruined life, lost opportunities, and dismal failure. You have everything that you need from God to become a noble person, upright, God-fearing, respected, and successful, in the right meaning of success.

In what land on earth do you have brighter opportunities, greater rewards of service, a finer field of manly effort, than in our country today? You are the heir of all the centuries in literature, in art, in science, in commerce, and in every avenue of achievement. True, the world is full of temptations and opportunities for evil, as it always was, but it is full of far greater opportunities, far more multiplied chances, for good. If you choose to invest your life as you should, you have a field of sublime excellence for that investment.

Your feet are set at the entrance to a great battlefield where the victors are all heroes. With courage, confidence, hopefulness, and steadfastness, you are sure to win, because you have nothing to fear but your own weakness, your own cowardice.

It is with a great desire to help you, to cheer you, and to influence you for good that these pages are written. They are intended to give you the advantage of the experience of the past and the observation of many people concerning the true principles of success in life. And as all people are, in a way, continually beginning, making a new start each morning and each new year, these thoughts will be useful for anyone, we trust, who takes up this book. "While there is life, there is hope," as an old writer has said. "Men are made of clay, and clay, though it is easily broken, is likewise easily mended."

Even those who have lost the opportunities of youth and have hitherto made failures of their lives, may, at any moment,

begin to struggle upward. They may recapture, by courage and resolve, the first glow of youthful virtue, and we trust that the thoughts contained in these pages will give them courage, light, and strength.

Success in life rests on definite principles and depends on each man's free choice. According to those principles, it can be surely gained or surely lost, according to the workings of the great laws of human nature. Choose rightly, and you will make a success of life.

Chapter Two



Strive for lasting success

Before we speak of the means to achieve success, we should form a clear idea for ourselves as to what success means, in what it consists, for we cannot discuss the way sensibly unless we know where we are going. Everyone who is not a fool desires success in life, but many fail to achieve it, even with their utmost effort, because they have not rightly conceived what really constitutes success.

A successful life is a life that achieves its purpose. Such a life is a happy one, even though its way may pass through suffering and difficulty, because happiness is one thing and pleasure another, and a person may have great pleasure and still be very unhappy, just as he may lack pleasure almost entirely and still be very happy.

What is the purpose of life? The chorus of all generations of mankind, the general conclusion of history, is that the purpose of life is to do one's duty to God and man, to make the most of one's opportunities of service, to live virtuously, and thus enjoy the happiness here and hereafter that comes from such performance of duty. I say this is the final conclusion of mankind. It is true that there are many individuals who put success in various forms of achievement.

Some people look on success as the acquirement of great sums of money, and the reason they judge thus is that money means power; it means the acquirement of property and influence and the enjoyment of good things of this world. Hence, when men put success in business achievement, they confess that the good things of this world seem to them the way to happiness.

But is this so? A little reflection will show that it is not.

Money is a means to an end, and very often a necessary means, because a man must live decently and must support his family, if he has one. But some of the greatest failures in history have been those who have accumulated huge sums of money, but who have lacked moral principle and have been false to their duty; wherefore, they made gigantic failures. The greatest persons of history have often been poor in material things, but they have always been rich in principle, in devotion to duty; otherwise they would have been not truly great.

There are others who have put success in the acquirement of honor or reputation, and here again they were wrong, because honor in itself is not so much in the person himself as in the thoughts of others. Honor does not bring a person lasting happiness. Many a one has achieved immense reputation and then left, in his own writings, the record of his disillusionment and disappointment. It is not those who have achieved renown who are truly fortunate and happy, but those who have deserved honor by their virtue.

What has been said of honor may be said, too, of power and influence. These are not the real rewards of life. Here, again, many a man has succeeded in rising to great heights and yet made a failure of his life. Remember the great Napoleon at St.

Helena. He had climbed and fought to the peak of human greatness, and he left behind a name that will endure for many generations. Yet his career recalls at its end the saying of Solomon: "Vanity of vanities, and all is vanity."¹

Rather, it is the leading of a virtuous and upright life, the performance of one's duties to God and man, the making the most of every opportunity for service, and the harmonious development of every faculty that make for real success in life and that lead to happiness here and a greater happiness hereafter. You have only a few years in which to realize in your own person this end of dutiful service. To realize it, you may have to "scorn delights, and live laborious days";² you may be obliged to forget friendships, amusements, and even success, when these are against your conscience and your duty. But in this way, and in this way alone, lie true success and happiness.

¹ Eccles. 1:2. The biblical quotations in these pages are based on the Douay-Rheims edition of the Old and New Testaments. — ED.

² John Milton, "Lycidas," line 64.

Chapter Three



*Choose what will
improve your character*

By what a man is, he influences others, sways them, helps them, and impresses them. Knowledge is a great possession and a necessary one for success in life, but character and principle are far more needful. Many men of great knowledge have gone down into contempt or oblivion because of their wretched character, their mean personality, whereas very simple folk, with little education, have become heroes, leaders of men, because of their noble character and personality. You yourself are immensely impressed and moved by the personality, the character, of those with whom you come in contact. In like manner, all your life long, your own character will have its inevitable effect upon others, for better or worse, according as your character is noble, kindly, and steadfast, or the opposite.

Your character is made up of various elements. First of all, there are the natural tendencies in you, the inherited characteristics you possess. Then there are the habits you have acquired by your own repeated actions, which form a second nature and can change, round out, or tone down your inherited characteristics. Finally, there is the environment in which you find yourself, or put yourself, and this also has a powerful

effect on your personality. The sum of these three things results in what we call your character.

Thus, for example, you may have been born with a lively, active disposition, or you may have been born with a tendency to be slow and quiet. But, over and above your natural disposition, you have a whole series of habits, which you acquired by the repetition of actions. Every time you got angry, the habit of anger increased, but every time you subdued and controlled your anger, the habit of self-control grew greater within you. Every time you yielded to selfishness, you became just a little more selfish, but each time you performed an act of generosity, you grew a little more generous. Thus, to your dying day, action increases the habit or tendency from which it springs, much as a muscle grows stronger and stronger by use and weaker and weaker by disuse. Now, you can change, improve, or degrade your character to a marvelous degree by voluntary and repeated actions, either of good or of evil. So every deed you do brings its own reward or punishment, in that it strengthens the proneness to good in you, if it is good, or increases the tendency to evil in you, if it is evil.

One who constantly and systematically does what is right can change a vicious, warped, disagreeable natural character into one of great kindness and virtue; whereas one who is born with a very good and genial disposition can spoil it by yielding to unkindness and other forms of evil. It is immensely important for you to grasp this principle and act on it. If there is anything in you that you judge to be bad, dangerous, or an impediment to true success, begin now and, day after day, act against that bad tendency. Little by little, it will grow weaker the more you oppose it, and the contrary habit of goodness

will increase. After long effort, you will become as strong as you were once weak and as dependable and constant as you were once changeable and unreliable.

True, it requires a very strong will to go against our natural inclinations. But no one is perfect by nature. Noble and great characters are all made so by the constant repetition of virtuous actions. "To thine own self be true, and it will follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man!"³

The third element influencing our character and personality is environment. The people we associate with, the work we do, the amusements we seek, and the books we read all have a continual and powerful influence on our character. When you form friendships, when you read books, when you engage in amusements, it may seem to you that it makes very little difference how you choose, provided you suit yourself. But every one of these things has a tremendous and lasting influence on your personality. If you seek people who are refined, upright, high principled, noble, and humane, you yourself tend to become like them. If you choose friends who are rough, coarse, vicious, and unprincipled, you will assimilate yourself to them.

So, too, the amusements you select tend to mold your mind and feelings to their likeness. Any entertainment that is degraded, coarse, or cheap cheapens or coarsens your imagination and your disposition. Any amusement that is elevated and noble elevates and ennobles you. This is eminently true of books, in which you associate with people of other times and encounter other people's thoughts. If you take up a trashy, especially a vile, book and allow its trashy and vile thoughts to pass

³ William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Act 1, scene 3.

through your mind, their imprint will be left permanently on your character. The memory really never forgets anything; the imagination never loses anything that is thrown into its vast receptacle.

You will have to exercise real self-discipline, sometimes hard self-denial, to curb the lower part of your nature and follow your higher impulses in choosing friends, amusements, and books. But the sacrifice and the effort are as worthwhile as a noble life is worthwhile.

Now, everyone has it within his own power to choose his friends, to choose his recreations, and to choose his reading, just as he has it within his own power to resist evil habits and thus to diminish them in his character, and to follow good lines of action and thus to cultivate virtues. There is no other way to have a fine character, a worthwhile personality, except by this continual effort, self-discipline, and self-sacrifice.

Read the autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, and you will learn how steadfastly he set about cultivating his character. He studied his own disposition and noted what good qualities and what bad tendencies he possessed. He drew up a regular plan for rooting out faults and cultivating virtues. At the beginning of the week, he would set himself to the task of lessening the number of faults of, let us say, undue self-assertiveness, and whenever he found himself to have been proud, opinionated, or disputatious, he would mark down the fault in a book, so as to notice how the record increased or decreased from the beginning to the end of the week.

In this way, he grappled with, and overcame one by one, the outstanding defects of his disposition. At the same time, he deliberately associated with those who were considered

wise and virtuous, and he read books that gave him solid information and help. Thus, his singular success in life and the immense influence he exercised on his own and succeeding generations were the results of tireless industry in the formation of his character, by cultivating good habits and securing for himself a favorable environment. His achievements were a notable proof of how a man can mold and better his own character.

Those who really succeed in life can find no other way but the way of self-discipline and self-control, which is also the way to the greatest happiness possible on earth.