

The Case of “Successful” Sam

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Michelle stood at the bay window, staring out into the neighborhood. With each passing set of headlights, she grew a little more impatient. She wasn't worried that something had happened to Sam – twelve-hour workdays had become the norm recently – she was just a bit lonely and eager to see her husband. After briefly returning her eyes to the television, she heard a car door close.

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“Hi there stranger!” Michelle greeted him with a cheery grin. “Want some dinner?”

Sam managed a warm but sagging smile, dropped his briefcase and loosened his tie. “Already ate,” he mumbled. “But thanks anyway. I missed the kids again, didn't I?”

“Well it *is* 9:30. Ryan colored this picture for you, though. I told him you'd hang it in your office.”

Admiring the multi-colored scribbles, Sam shook his head. This was the third day in a week he hadn't seen his preschooler at all. And his ten-month old daughter barely seemed to know who he was. He peeked into the nursery and then into Ryan's room. “He's getting so big,” Sam thought as he adjusted Ryan's blanket and kissed him on the head. “Where's the time going?”

“Can I at least fix you a snack?” offered Michelle as Sam returned.

“Thanks, but I'm completely wiped out,” he replied. “Besides, I've got to catch a plane at 7:00. I just need to turn in.”

On the plane the next day, Sam started to compare the life he was living with the life he really wanted. Indeed, a chasm separated those two things. But as usual, work thoughts quickly crowded out his personal reflections. Taking out his PDA, he outlined the day – the meetings, the objectives he'd like to accomplish, the remarks he'd make in addressing the Clients' Dinner that night. Sam was good at his job – very good – and at age 35, he was moving up the corporate ladder rapidly. So as usual, Sam spent the plane trip planning and prepping. He'd be sharp on this trip and he'd be successful.

As the flight attendant leaned over to serve Sam his drink, he caught himself casually looking down her blouse. Something similar happened in his interaction with the woman at the hotel's registration desk. Sam looked at other women a lot, and he knew he had to deal with this. A lackluster marriage sent him down this dubious path years ago, but he knew that was no excuse.

Neither was there an excuse for the way he interacted with his co-workers and subordinates. When it came to clients, Sam was smooth – gracious, considerate, patient – the model human being. But within his own firm, Sam had developed a reputation for being brusque with people, for being condescending, for belittling their ideas, and for being argumentative and arrogant. To his credit, Sam’s ideas tended to be superior to those of his colleagues, and top management recognized and rewarded his acumen, but Sam was a lousy team player and, increasingly, a heavy-handed boss, prone to steamrolling people to advance his own agenda. Sadly, his persona was not much different with Michelle.

Occasionally, Sam did reflect on such problems, as he had started to do on the plane. But his life was so incompatible with his Christian beliefs – with what he knew God wanted from him at work and at home – that this type of reflection was painful. The guilt and shame was just too much to deal with given his limited time, so he’d usually supplant the thoughts with a re-focus on work.

Two days later, Sam attended a Sunday church service, as he often did on business trips. As usual, though, his worship time was sidetracked by thoughts of work and by the shapely woman sitting in front of him. The trip was going well from a business perspective. Just one more deal to close in the afternoon and he could fly home late that night.

Then it happened. Perhaps it was pastor's eloquence regarding the value of family or his citation of divorce statistics. Maybe it was his anecdotes about difficult people masquerading as Christians or his passionate call to become “pure in heart.” Whatever the trigger, something in the sermon resonated with Sam. He knew that things had to change and change soon. He knew that despite all of his business success, he was not succeeding in God’s eyes. Not even close.

But what should he do? He had tried to change before, but each time he achieved only patchy, fleeting results. He genuinely wanted to be a great father, a great husband, salt and light in the workplace and everywhere else. He wanted to control his thoughts, his eyes, and his tongue, and to live a life pleasing to God. But even when he tried to pray for such things – he knew prayer to be the starting point – the words just weren’t there.

Sam wasn’t one to cry – not ever, in fact – but now, a lone tear fell into his NIV, somewhere in Romans. He found that ironic, given the one verse he remembered from the book – something about the wages of sin being death. Sam closed his Bible and left before the service ended.

Frustrated and overwhelmed, Sam sat in his car in the church parking lot, now shedding more than one tear.

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