

Remarks to the combined classes of the Jesse Helms School of Government at Liberty University, February 21, 2006. These remarks were later mailed to all Leadership Institute graduates.

Problems of Success

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Because education tends to lead to success in life, you are here at Liberty University to get an education -- or at least that's what your family and Dr. Falwell believe.

What you really learn and how much you really learn are largely up to you, of course.

It helps a lot if you already have a thirst for knowledge. Some people seem born to learn and happy to learn.

Others want to learn no more than is absolutely necessary just to get by in the world. For them, all study is boring, and study is even aggravating, because to study amounts to an admission of ignorance. And how many people do you know who are naturally happy to admit their lack of knowledge?

Even a poor teacher can do well with students who already have a thirst for knowledge. But the best teachers are those who somehow can inspire in students that thirst for knowledge which will lead their students to success for the rest of their lives.

Education involves learning facts, of course. But it also includes learning how to study, how to think, and how to make things happen.

Someone once said there are three types of people in the world: Those who make things happen; those who watch what happens; and those who never know what happened.

I hope that you are among the many at this large and growing university who already have or soon will develop that thirst for knowledge which will enable you to become

one of those people who will make things happen.

Liberty University has right now, in this hall, a great many people who will be future leaders of our country.

Graduates of Liberty are likely to be better leaders than students now at most other colleges because, in addition to academic learning, your college experience reinforces your moral foundation for a God-centered life.

Let us presume for a moment that you, personally, have become well-educated, that your thirst for knowledge has enabled you to learn how to make things happen, that you have already achieved a number of remarkable successes, that many people recognize you as a rising leader.

Are you home free? Are your problems over?

Not hardly.

You see, success brings its own, unique set of problems. The Bible often gives examples of how pride goeth before a fall. A run of success, like power, tends to corrupt.

That is not to suggest that you shouldn't strive to be successful. Far from it. You have an obligation to put your God-given talents to their best use.

In college, you should strive to be the type of student your professors find it a thrill to teach. In business, you should become someone with whom it is a pleasure to work. In politics, you should act effectively for your deeply held principles.

Back in 1982, I asked Dr. Falwell to comment on a saying I was teaching to young conservatives. It goes like this: "Pray as if it all depended on God. Work as if it all depended on you."

Dr. Falwell immediately replied that the saying is theologically sound. To that same question, several other prominent religious leaders gave me the same answer.

So there's no question that intelligent, moral people should strive for success. And striving prudently for success quite often actually does bring success.

But when you strive for success, as you should, you should always keep in your mind that success brings with it its own, new set of problems. Be prepared in advance

to deal with the problems of success.

Foremost among the problems of success is the temptation, once you're really successful, to believe that you are so special that the rules no longer apply to you, that you're so important you can do as you please, without regard to the standards, ethics, and morality which contributed to your success.

For a year now, the news media have heavily covered the troubles of a prominent national lobbyist named Jack Abramoff. You've probably heard a lot about him, almost all of it bad, very bad.

Jack Abramoff made tens of millions of dollars. On the other hand, he has pled guilty to numerous felonies and is almost certainly going to jail for a number of years. The scandals surrounding him may destroy the careers of a number of politicians and could have a major effect in next November's elections.

You probably have heard nothing good at all about Jack Abramoff. But I'm here to tell you the whole story, which is not to be found in the headlines. His entire story should be highly educational to you and to any other young conservative who strives for success.

Jack Abramoff had a sterling reputation. Yes, a sterling reputation.

I met and trained Jack Abramoff during the 1980 Youth For Reagan effort, which I oversaw as a volunteer. My faculty and I trained young men and women in five Reagan Youth Staff Schools that year and hired 30 of the best for campus organizing in the 1980 fall campaign.

Jack Abramoff, then a student at Brandeis University and College Republican state chairman of Massachusetts, was clearly one of the most outstanding of the 300 graduates of those two-day training schools.

I personally offered Jack one of our 30 field staff jobs.

Jack graciously declined and told me, "I'm going back to Massachusetts and organize enough students there to carry Massachusetts for Reagan."

I laughed and replied, "Jack, if you carry Massachusetts for Reagan, we'll win in a national landslide."

He did, and we did. Governor Reagan beat President Jimmy Carter in Massachusetts by 2,421 votes. Jack's campus effort garnered many more than that number of student absentee ballots for Reagan there.

The next year, partly on the strength of his remarkable success in winning Massachusetts for Reagan, Jack was elected chairman of the College Republican National Committee. There again he succeeded spectacularly.

In 1980, the number of College Republican (CR) clubs on the nation's campuses had grown from 250 to 1,002. In 1981, Jack's campus organizing efforts increased the number of CR clubs to 1,100 -- a new record which remained unsurpassed until very recent years.

While a national CR officer, Jack widened his network of friends among conservative Republicans, impressing everyone. Jack was courageously conservative on all the issues: limited government, free enterprise, strong national defence, and traditional moral values.

Moreover, Jack obviously took his Orthodox Jewish faith seriously. He kept kosher. He would not travel on the sabbath. He deplored profanity and vulgarity.

Jack dropped out of politics for some years to make movies, including at least one which had some worldwide success, an anti-Communist action drama titled "Red Scorpion."

Then he returned to political activity and explained he had found that, without major financial resources, he couldn't control his movies' content because the industry inserted into them, against his will, gratuitous profanity and vulgarity.

Back in the political arena, Jack benefited greatly from the magnificent reputation he had earned. He had proved himself highly intelligent, highly principled, and highly competent. Clearly he was a hard worker and a talented leader.

He joined one of the best known and most successful legal and lobbying firms in the Washington, D.C., area. Because Jack had built a very wide circle of friends in the political process, those of us who had known him since the early 1980s expected him to be successful as a lobbyist.

He started up an Orthodox Jewish school and spent a lot of his own time and money on it. His reputation

continued as clean as a hound's tooth.

Fast forward to today. His reputation lies in tatters. The wealth he reportedly gained as a lobbyist may be eaten up entirely as a result of his legal problems. He'll soon be broke -- and in jail.

Many who relied on the sterling reputation Jack built from his youth stand now accused as guilty of consorting with this sleazy character, Jack Abramoff.

That's a bum rap against some conservatives who relied on his good reputation. He may have betrayed and damaged them, but they should not be dragged down by the guilt-by-association method.

Fortunately for me, I never had any business relations with him or any contact with his lobbying activities. But before allegations regarding his business and lobbying activities arose, I and everyone I know who knew Jack since he was a college student 26 years ago would have given him a highly favorable recommendation.

Those who knowingly consort with sleazy people are culpable. Those who associate with people whom they know have good reputations are not. That does not, however, prevent the unfair use of the guilt-by-association technique by the opponents of even the most scrupulous people.

Political activists and leaders have no secure defense against the possibility that some associate who has a fine reputation will somehow succumb to disgraceful temptations.

Politicians and news media usually hostile to everything conservative revel in the disasters which now surround Jack Abramoff. Clearly, the left intends to use Abramoff to damage or destroy as many effective conservatives as they can, most notably former House Majority Leader Tom Delay.

No surprise in that. Piranhas reveal themselves through their feeding frenzies.

When the newspapers began to publish and re-publish excerpts from Jack's emails regarding his lobbying business, I could not believe he had written them. Surely, I thought, someone has made up those emails to smear Jack.

Sadly, over time it has become clear that he has behaved in ways highly disappointing to those, like me, who

knew and admired him from his youth.

A principled person does not discuss his clients with contempt. A careful person does not send out personally damning emails into the immortal cyberworld. A moral person does not support opposing sides in order to profit from each. An ethical person does not defraud his associates in business. A loyal person does not set up his friends for embarrassment.

Jack Abramoff's fall from grace is not unique. Sadly, I know too many examples of people who built good reputations and extensive political networks who changed dramatically and for the worse when they decided to earn their livings through lobbying or political consulting.

A great many people can't resist temptations to increase their income. They hire themselves out to people or causes they would have spurned in the days when they built their reputations by consistent adherence to well-defined political and moral principles. Some sink mighty low.

Jack has proven again the wisdom often taught me by my mother and my grandmother, "A good reputation is the hardest thing to build and the easiest thing to destroy."

In political activity, when one abandons long-held principles and starts measuring success only by revenue, one should have the decency not to drag down one's formerly trusting friends.

Those whose trust is betrayed are the victims. The victims deserve our sympathy and understanding, not condemnation.

In his statement after pleading guilty, Jack Abramoff said that his greatest regret was the damage he had done to those who trusted him. Right. But when he was raking in those millions of dollars, while privately showering his clients with contempt, he didn't give much thought to the consequences.

Blinded by his own success, Jack succumbed to some very human and very common temptations -- temptations which should be fought and resisted by any highly successful person.

Think about this. What if Jack Abramoff had resisted all the temptations spread before him? What if he had decided to work only for clients and causes in accord with his previously long-held conservative principles?

Would he have made as much money as rapidly? Probably not.

On the other hand, had Jack stuck to his principles, he would certainly have achieved some financial success. He would have kept his sterling reputation. He would not now be headed to jail. And he would not have brought scandal to his friends or disaster to his family.

I know of only three ways to learn the lessons of life.

1) You can carefully study the experience of others. You can't observe everything, but you can, by wide reading and formal education, learn from the experiences of your contemporaries as well as those who lived ages ago. You can learn from them all.

2) By observation, by paying attention to what goes on around you, you can learn from the experience of others. Careful observation benefits anyone in any field, from sports to science to politics.

Lessons from the lives of Jack Abramoff and many others are unfolding before your eyes. Keep those eyes open, and you can learn useful lessons of life every day.

3) Finally, you can learn through your personal experience. That's learning by trial and error, better known as the school of hard knocks.

Personal trial and error is usually the hardest way to learn anything, though I can't deny that that school teaches its lessons well. Its drawback, however, is that by the time you graduate from the school of hard knocks you may be too old to go to work.

No matter how diligent a student you are of the school of hard knocks, you cannot learn by first-hand experience everything you should know.

So if you leave this thriving Liberty University and have the success which your family, Dr. Falwell, your professors, and I all hope you will have, please keep in mind that you will then have to face a new set of problems, the problems of success.