

**Success**  
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Well, I am here today to talk to you and lead a discussion all about success. I am glad that God has such a sense of humor as to use me to give this talk. But there is an old idiom: “Those who can, do; those who can’t, teach.” So it is in the spirit of this idiom that I am here before you today.

Now success is an elusive thing – if you ask your friends if they think you are successful, they will almost certainly say yes. But far fewer people would apply the word to themselves. It’s similar to how almost no teenage girl feels pretty or smart, despite what her friends and family tell her repeatedly.

By many worldly measures I am successful. I have a family – I am still married to my wonderful wife after 24 years of marriage – that is a success. I have four children that are each seeking the Lord – that is a success. I have a steady job that I mostly enjoy that pays more than what I need to provide for my family – that is a success. The job of professor still carries some prestige in the world – as does having a Ph.D. – that is a success. I have a nice home, although the roof decided to leak yesterday – but we called a roofer, so that is still a success. I have friends – that is a success.

But I would argue that there are large cracks in the foundation of my success. I continue to struggle in research, both in getting funding and in getting published. I am never satisfied with my teaching. I am significantly behind in the administrative responsibilities I have with my position. I feel like I never have enough time for my family, my friends, or my church. Although I work hard, I struggle with procrastination – choosing the urgent over the important because the urgent gives me an excuse to avoid struggling with the important.

There are some things that come easy for me – playing piano is one, preparing sermons is another – I serve as a volunteer pastor in my church – but most other things are hard. Years ago I learned about a dramatic difference in the way Mozart and Beethoven composed music. Mozart wrote everything nearly perfectly with his first draft. This is one reason he was amazingly prolific despite dying at the early age of 34. Beethoven, on the other hand, required *many* drafts, dozens, sometimes, to compose anything. Composing was not easy for Beethoven, yet he persisted in it. I identify with Beethoven in most things that I do. I am jealous of all the “Mozarts” around me, some of whom are probably seated at this very table.

We should probably try to define success. There are many worldly definitions – these in the past used to focus on accomplishments, and although that is still somewhat true today – now, be honest, how many of you engineering or science types would feel you had finally arrived to the pinnacle of success if you were invited to give a Ted Talk? – but among younger people, more and more the definition of success is really to be happy. The problem with happiness is that it is even more fickle than success. Get a cold and there goes your happiness; at least your worldly success is unaffected by your sneezes and coughs.

What I would argue for my own life is that focusing on success is a bad idea, because my definition of success is invariably obtained by comparing myself to others. Getting a “C” is not

successful, because that is just average. I need to be better than most everyone and get an “A”. Getting some publications is not successful, because many other people have many *more* publications than I do. Just look at our speaker for next month! My goodness! If you counted up all of our citations of everyone in this room, I strongly suspect he would beat us all *together* singlehandedly by a wide margin. This has been the story of my life, and I know it is the story of most people, because it *has* to be. The real world is not Lake Woebegone, where all of the children are above average. I used to enter a lot of piano competitions when I was a teenager. In the less rigorous ones, I would get 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> place; in the tough ones I wouldn’t place at all. I never got 1<sup>st</sup> place. I felt like such a failure!

Sometimes you hear the idea that we should be shining examples of worldly success because that in and of itself will draw others to Christ. I don’t think so. I think it just makes them think you are super smart, or driven, or whatever it is that you have done. I absolutely love the children’s books called *Frog and Toad*. One of my favorite stories is about a dream Frog has in which he shows off all his amazing skills for Toad. For example he plays the piano, quite excellently. With each performance, Toad applauds, but you notice something strange – he keeps shrinking. He gets smaller and smaller and his voice gets higher and quieter until, poof, he vanishes. “Oh, no,” cries Frog. “What have I done?” I find this children’s story quite profound.

But back to defining success: I wanted a definition that was consistent with how the world defines success, at least with regards to the practical outworking of it, but I wanted the definition to be grounded in a distinctly Christian worldview. Here is what I came up with: *Success is what you can achieve on your own without depending on God.*

I hope this definition makes you say “ouch” because that is the goal. I am not saying that it is a sin to be successful by the world’s standards, but I am saying that worldly success as a goal in and of itself, justly like aspiring to be rich as a goal in and of itself, is a problem. God simply has different priorities than this.

Here are some verses I think about:

<sup>16</sup> And he told them this parable: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. <sup>17</sup> He thought to himself, ‘What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.’ <sup>18</sup> “Then he said, ‘This is what I’ll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. <sup>19</sup> And I’ll say to myself, “You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.”’ <sup>20</sup> “But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?’ <sup>21</sup> “This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.” – Luke 12:16-21

Perhaps even more poignant is this:

<sup>23</sup> Then he said to them all: “Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. <sup>24</sup> For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. <sup>25</sup> What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit their very self? – Luke 9:23-25 (Also in Mark 8 and Matthew 16)

Losing my life sounds very different than a typical worldly definition of success!

The truth is that we live in a uniquely isolated nation, isolated from many of the worst tragedies that have been part in the story of the world, and we live in a unique time of peace and prosperity. Most of the rest of the world still remembers war and true hardship, and many parts of the world still experience this now. My father, who is Jewish, was born in Germany before WWII and remembers what it was like in the early days of Hitler. (He came to America in 1937. But much of our extended family perished in Europe during the following 8 years.) At a church picnic this past Sunday I spent some time speaking with a woman from China about the age of my father. She remembers what it was like to live under the Japanese occupation of China. She doesn't even know her exact age because her parents (and all the parents in her village or city at that time) lied about the ages of their daughters, proclaiming them to be younger than reality, for reasons I suspect you can figure out. Although she was not bitter towards the Japanese, she still thought it odd that the younger generations would now choose to go to Japan on vacation. This "bubble" we live in deeply distorts our understanding of many things including blowing into giant proportions the importance of "success". Generations before us would see all this as vanity, and largely I think they are right.

Living in hardship produces its own temptations, its own siren song that can pull us away from God – don't misunderstand me. I am not wishing we lived in the "good old horrible days." But I think it is important that we understand that the times and culture in which we live affects all of us strongly, more deeply and more broadly than we might ever think.

The Bible does give us some pictures of non-worldly success. Here are some that I have thought about:

1. What we do (our actions) should be driven by our faith in God, not in selfish motives. A great example of this is Abraham, who by faith left behind all that he knew and followed God to who-knows-where. He gave up his worldly success for God. He also was willing to sacrifice Isaac. Hebrews 11 speaks of this, as does James 2: *Was not our father Abraham considered righteous for what he did when he offered his son Isaac on the altar?* <sup>22</sup> *You see that his faith and his actions were working together, and his faith was made complete by what he did.* <sup>23</sup> *And the scripture was fulfilled that says, "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness," and he was called God's friend.* We are not successes, biblically speaking, if we are simply living in the world's system, doing well, keeping our mouths shut about spiritual things, so much so that people around us don't even know we are Christian. Our faith should be accompanied by actions. I'm not saying we all need to quit our jobs and move to Mozambique, but I am saying that if God begins to whisper to us that we should be doing something else, we shouldn't shut Him out but instead follow Him wherever He leads, even if He doesn't tell us where we are going. And if it seems like He wants us to be right here, we should be seeking to understand how He wants us to live out our faith, to have actions that come out of our faith in every sphere of life, including here at work.
2. A second example for me is Joseph. His life demonstrates so clearly that worldly measures of success or failure are often entirely outside our control. Betrayed by his brothers and sold to traders, he ended up a slave in Egypt. Later, after rising up because of his character and faith, he was falsely accused of attempted rape, and he was sent to prison and largely forgotten. Does this sound like success? But God eventually raised him up to a position of incredible power, second in command, and in success he continued to

be a person of character and who lived by faith. I remind you that everything he did was seen as crazy to many – he was betting *everything* on a dream from God, building unprecedented places for storing food in preparation for a future calamitous famine that had no signs of coming. Much like Noah building his ark, his vision of the future was given by God to him alone.

3. A third example is Daniel. Like us older faculty, he lived through many “changes of administration” all of which were more or less hostile to his faith. As a prophet, time and time again God led him to say “this is wrong” to leaders who did not want to hear it. Multiple times he or his friends were punished severely and only God’s miracles saved him and them from death. He was also largely alone through his life in an utterly secular “university.” I see no signs that he had a “Faculty Commons” to keep him encouraged. He prayed, alone, three times a day. He had no friends among his secular counterparts, who early on tried to get him killed. Would our world call this a successful life? Yet he was where God wanted him to be, and he was a man of impeccable godly character who persisted in his hard job, year after year, decade after decade, with minimal praise from anyone.
4. Moving to the New Testament, another example I think of is Stephen. Acts 6:5 describes him as “a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit.” Elsewhere in Scripture we are told that being filled with the Spirit is not something that just “happens” to us; it is also something we can choose to do; in fact, it is something we are commanded to do. We do this by maintaining daily a personal relationship with God, by seeking what God wants, by serving Him as He shows us, by being utterly open to Him in prayer, by spending time in His Word, and so on. Stephen was such a “success” and by that I mean that his character was so clearly that of someone who really sought to live all-out for God, that he was “raised up” to be a servant of the disciples, to do the mundane task of distributing food to widows, to sorting out genuine claims versus bogus ones, to dealing with families grumbling about “unfair” food distribution, and so on. It’s not exactly a glorious job. He also spoke boldly about God, and this got him in trouble to the point that he became a martyr for God. What do you think Stephen would think about our obsessive focus on personal success? Stephen could have been more “politically correct” when talking to the Jews about their history and about Christ, and quite possibly (probably, in my opinion), he could have avoided martyrdom. Sounds like an epic failure to me. God sees him as an epic success.
5. My final example is Paul, the Apostle formerly known as Saul. I could spend hours talking about Paul. Like many of us, he was an academic sort of person, very smart, trained by the best in his field. I personally identify with Paul because I spent years as an atheist, generally disliking Christians, thinking them stupid. I even teamed up with a roommate in college and ridiculed the faith of our other roommate, actually overwhelming him with fancy-sounding arguments that really shook his faith to the core. The evangelistic group Jews for Jesus regularly visited my campus, and I hated them most of all. But God intervened in Paul’s life, and He intervened in mine. Paul really didn’t have anything much to keep of his former life, although his great logical and Scriptural and legal training made him uniquely qualified to write the letters of the Bible that he wrote from prison and other places. He was inspired by God to write them, but God also used Paul and Paul’s mind to put them down. I think of Paul in prison, and much like Stephen, I think of how if he had just made more politically correct choices, he

could have avoided that outcome that ultimately led to his death. He should have gone on to be a great rabbi, I am sure many people said. His “publications” weren’t peer-reviewed by the other rabbis, and they surely would have utterly rejected his works anyway. He died a fool, people would say. But in God’s economy, using God’s definitions, apart from Jesus Himself I cannot think of a greater success.

I just want to wrap up with a few brief quotes I have come across while studying and thinking about success. My hope is that these ideas spark discussion together in our remaining time. These are paraphrases, and I don’t have the sources written down, but they came from the various videos on success at the Veritas Forum website. I especially like the thoughts and ideas of Charles Lee, Professor of Management at Stanford – I could listen to him all day. Most of these nuggets come from him.

1. Our generation thinks it gets to individually define success. Who really gets to define success? You or God? Is it OK to aspire to be a successful terrorist?
2. Our generation and especially the younger generation now often hungers to do good in the world, to change this world for the better. Although this sounds good, it is a predictable reaction to the emptiness and vanity of our culture and it is fatally flawed because it assumes we are good in and of ourselves and that we can be powerful in our own strength. Apart from Christ, as our young people grow up they will become disappointed and cynical.
3. What you do changes who you are. This can be both good and bad. Living secular lives will eventually make us into secular people. More important than your purpose is the question of what you are becoming.
4. There are no secular activities. Teaching and research are sacred activities, as is every other activity. Changing diapers is every bit as sacred. Everything we do has eternal significance. Everything we do we can do for self or we can do for God.
5. There is a huge difference between life enhancement and life transformation. Life enhancement is something that maybe we can do, but life transformation cannot come from within us.
6. Our most common approach to becoming successful is to tell ourselves to work harder, be better, etc. But we are often the sources of our deepest problems. If we are the source of the problem, how can we be the source of the solution? We need to look outside ourselves – and Christ is the only one who is not just like us.
7. Even good works can be severely tainted according to God. Signs of trouble: wanting validation for your good things, and wrapping your identity into your good things.

And so now I invite you to continue this discussion, to carry it forward. To quote the flyer, “What is true success? Why are happiness and success elusive? What drives you? What *should* drive you?”