

“WHAT IS SUCCESS?”

1st in Series: Searching For Success

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INTRODUCTION:

What determines one's success in life?

Rudyard Kipling once wrote: *“Treat human success for what it is. Fleeting and deceitful.”*

We greatly limit and even deceive ourselves when we define success in human terms rather than according to God Almighty. Success that is humanly defined is flawed. How? It is subject to the relative values of different people. It is finite and fleeting. It often leads to greater temptations, worries, burdens and trouble. Human success in one area of life rarely carries over to other, let alone all, areas.

Illustration: Consider the Cross. Foolishness to the world, eternal victory for the believer!

In 2002, Barna Research conducted a study on how US adults define a successful life. The responses were all over the place and “revealed that different faith groups had significantly divergent views of success.” Family and personal accomplishments topped the people's list. In his report, George Barna concludes: *“Most people do not come to church to develop a worldview, most churches are not focused on providing one, and most individuals draw their worldview from cultural sources without even realizing that they are being impacted in such a foundational way. Given that, it's no wonder that only 7% say success is related to our relationship with God and how we use the talents He gave us to experience and affect the world.”* By contrast:

George MacDonald wrote: *“In whatever a man does without God, he must fail miserably or succeed more miserably.”*

Abraham Lincoln proclaimed: *“Without God I cannot succeed. With God I cannot fail.”*

General MacArthur explained: *“The most important lesson I learned at West Point is that preparation is one key to victory.”* Applied to godly success, I'd suggest this means that it is better to be over-preached, over-read, over-prayed, or over-serving than under-preached, under-prayed, or under-serving!
How can I be a success for God, others, and myself?

SCRIPTURE: PROVERBS 3:1-12

PRAYER

TRUE SUCCESS REQUIRES:

1.) GODLY OBEDIENCE (vv. 1-2)

- The expressed objective is “well-being” or “prosperity” depending on the English translation. The Hebrew word is one you've probably heard countless times, but perhaps never had defined: *“Shalom.”* *Shalom* is a word that carries a breadth and fullness of meaning for which

there is no truly comparable word in English. It refers to a *wholeness* or *completeness* in all facets. As such, it can refer to the *entirety* of something, a *safety, soundness, security, welfare, prosperity, peace, contentment, or friendship* that is created by and through this wholesomeness. In a more open and general context such as that here in Proverbs 3, it is frequently used to mean ALL of these things. When Jewish people use it as a greeting or parting, it is supposed to be a spoken blessing to that person to have this in their life. **In other words, *Shalom* is the ultimate expression of success in every area of one's life and being: personal, relational, physical, emotional, psychological, intellectual and spiritual wholeness, peace, contentment and security!**

- Note, however, it says and implies nothing about popularity, fame, material excess, or territory.
- **How, then, can this elusive *Shalom* be attained?**
- **The short answer is Godly obedience. The more specific answer is by knowing, remembering, being ever-conscious of and living according to God's complete Word!** Not just in intent or thought, but also in action. Not just in form and appearance, but in the depths of one's heart – that is, the center of our will and emotions.

2.) **GODLY FAITHFULNESS** (vv. 3-4)

- The references here to “*neck*” and “*heart*” are a classical allusion to one's innermost being or character.
- What in the translation I read from appears as “*high regard*” appears in others as “*a good name*.” The more literal “*a good name*” is an expression referring to one receiving recognition from others for their demonstrated competence, intelligence and wisdom.
- What, according to Scripture, earns one “*a good name*,” “*high regard*,” or “praise and respect” from God and others? Loyalty and faithfulness that never wavers or fails. Particularly, loyalty and faithfulness to God and His Word.

3.) **COMPLETE TRUST** (vv. 5-7a)

- This is not just a simple, general or ordinary trust. It is an absolute and complete trust “*from the top of your head to the tip of your toes*.”
- It is not only displayed on the outside, but felt on the inside. It is an action and a conviction.
- But of utmost importance is the OBJECT of trust! The genuinely successful person trusts completely in **the LORD**, even more so and as opposed to one's trust in one's self, or in one's understanding based on reason, feelings, intuition, and/or worldly teachings.
- It is acknowledging, as the LORD spoke through the prophet **Jeremiah (17:9)**: “*The heart is more deceitful than anything else and desperately sick [wicked] – who can understand it?*”
- And, as through **Isaiah (55:8-9)**: “*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, and your ways are not My ways. For as heaven is higher than earth, so My ways are higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.*”
- For all of us, even our own private understandings and convictions of right and wrong must ultimately be submitted to God and His Word!
- We can accomplish and live with this level of trust in the LORD only when we measure and test all of our “ways” (thinking, attitude, perspective, preferences, actions) to Him and willfully align our ways in precise accordance with His ways.
- To do this, we must give up any idea or illusion of our own inherent wisdom apart from His Word.
- This is what Jesus meant when He proclaimed: “*Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child – this one is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven*” (**Matthew 18:4**).

- It is to cry out like the father of the demon-possessed boy: *“I do believe! Help my unbelief.”*
- What are we willing to trust Him for? How long does our trust endure?
- **Illustration:** Before James Garfield was President of the US, he was the principal of Hiram College in Ohio. The story is told of a time a student's father asked Principal Garfield if he could simplify his son's studies so that he could get through school more quickly. *“Certainly,”* Garfield replied. *“But it all depends on what you want to make of your boy. When God wants to make an oak tree, He takes a hundred years. When He wants to make a squash He requires only two months.”*

4.) **RIGHTEOUS FEAR (vv. 7b-8)**

- This is NOT a fear of the unknown, but rather precisely because of what IS known. **It is a fear that is the result of a recognition and respect for a genuine possibility of failure and/or deserved consequences.**
- What's the difference? I fear the dark because I never know what might be there without my knowing it. But, I fear my next job evaluation because then my weaknesses could be exposed. I fear the future because I don't know what will really happen. But, I fear my wife's reaction when she comes home and discovers I didn't do what I promised I would, because I know she'll give me what I deserve. In both of these examples, it is that latter type of fear that is meant in this passage.
- **What or who, then, are we to fear if we are to be “successful”?**

a.) **Of The LORD**

- We are to fear disappointing, failing, ignoring, disrespecting, disobeying or abandoning God.
- Because, to do any of those things, is to deserve His Just rebuke, discipline and even punishment rather than His love, mercy and blessing.

b.) **Of Evil**

- It has the power to tempt and trick us into disappointing, failing, ignoring, disrespecting, disobeying or abandoning God.
- **How do we find healing and strength in our lives? When we “fear the LORD and turn from evil.”**

5.) **GOD-HONORING STEWARDSHIP (vv. 9-10)**

- In any endeavor, most if not all people understand that to be successful is to fully and appropriately fulfill one's appointed responsibilities, charge and mission. A job completed and well done.
- From Creation to the present, Scripture is clear that the charge and mission of all humanity is to be God's earthly stewards. That is, He has given us the responsibility and job of properly representing Him on this earth and, in the process, bringing Him glory! To this end, He has given us dominion over all the earth and blessed us with abilities, opportunities and possessions.
- True success, then, is fruitful or prosperous management and growth of what God has given us for His Glory!
- As Corrie Ten Boom wrote and often stated: *“It is not my ability, but my response to God's ability that counts.”*

6.) ACCEPTING DISCIPLINE (vv. 11-12)

- All of these other things (Godly obedience, faithfulness, complete trust, righteous fear and God-honoring stewardship) can only be kept and maintained through time and the trials and deceptions of life if one openly and willingly accepts, respects and even embraces the LORD's discipline that keeps us aligned with His Word.

SUCCESSFUL LIVING:

God saved you for a reason, He has a mission for your life. Will you successfully carry forth and complete His mission?

Will I seek to do this in absolute obedience to His Word, even when it is different from 'my own understanding'?

Will I remain loyal and faithful at ALL times, even when it is difficult or seems hopeless?

**Can God trust me? Does He trust me? Have I proven to be a trustworthy person in all things?
Can He give me what He wants, knowing that I am a trustworthy person?**

Do I look toward and approach God with righteous fear or a sense of entitlement and privilege?

Would I hire or appoint someone like me to be steward of all that is most important to me?

Do I run to or from God's instruction, correction and discipline?

Can I say with Paul:

Philippians 4:12-13 *I know both how to have a little, and I know how to have a lot. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being content--whether well-fed or hungry, whether in abundance or in need. I am able to do all things through Him who strengthens me.*