

#45 “How to Measure Success”

by Brent Barnett

www.relevantbibleteaching.com

We live in a world where success is defined in innumerable ways, most of which are wrong. Sadly, even the professing church has been prone to increasingly err in its understanding of true, Biblical success. Whether the pressuring voices come from within the church or without, we must not give in to their distortions and perversions of what God says success really is.

Paul says this toward the very end of his life, writing to Timothy in 2 Timothy 4:6-8,

“For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.”

There is no mention of Paul applauding himself for having become wealthy, nor is there any mention of Paul patting himself on the back for having achieved great fame and notoriety. In fact, he had achieved great fame and power very early on in his life, outdistancing many of his contemporaries in terms of Bible knowledge and understanding (Galatians 1:14). He was mentored by the best Jewish teacher of all (Acts 22:3), and he was considered a man of high rank. But these things he counted as loss (Philippians 3:7). This was not because there was evil in leading, having status, or even in being wealthy, but it was that he had pursued these kinds of things at the expense of pursuing God. Thus, he chose to abandon the “success” which he had experienced in persecuting Christ in exchange for service to Christ, choosing rather to suffer with Him (Romans 8:17). Paul understood that success is not what we can achieve or gain in terms of worldly things. Sometimes he had much, and sometimes he had little (Philippians 4:12). But in all things he was content, and as he wrote to Timothy, “Godliness with contentment is great gain” (1 Timothy 6:6). Thus, Paul measured success by the state of his heart in relation to God. Godliness, faithfulness, and contentment were paramount in terms of how he wanted his life defined.

False measures of success are often derived from seeking the approval of men rather than that of God (John 12:43). If Paul evaluated his own success based upon what others thought of him, he would have been an utter failure. Of course, we can look back in retrospect and see that his life had an enormous impact in spreading the gospel, but his life was difficult, full of suffering, hardship, starvation, persecution, beatings, freezing in the cold, and being betrayed by many, many people (2 Corinthians 11:23-28, 1 Timothy 1:15). From the world’s perspective, he eventually died not as a victor, but as a victim when he was

beheaded for Christ's sake. Yet, for Paul, living was Christ, and dying was gain (Philippians 1:21). His view of success and gain was far different from the world's such that even death for Christ's name and glory was victory, progress, achievement, and honor.

From Paul's testimony, we could conclude that success contains the following elements: 1) live life as a living sacrifice, pouring out the love of God to others in service and ministry for the sake of Christ, 2) fight the good fight of faith, continuing to preach the gospel and contending for truth and sound doctrine without compromise even though it could mean persecution or even death (2 Timothy 3:14), 3) finish the course, persevering in godliness so as not to be disqualified from effective ministry due to a lack of discipline (1 Corinthians 9:27), and 4) keep the faith, continuing to serve Christ and abounding in the work of the Lord, never growing tired of loving Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:58). Because Paul was faithful in his testimony, faithful to His calling, faithful in preaching the gospel, faithful to the saints, and faithful to God, he could say with certainty that he would be crowned a victor by Christ in eternal glory. He knew that his life would result in praise, glory, and honor for the sake of Christ because he didn't compromise or pander to the changing desires of people, but he kept teaching the truth of God's Word. He knew what God had called him to do, and he was going to do it even if nobody listened. We can praise God along with Paul that many did respond in faith, and Paul took great joy in this. Yet even good responses were not the fundamental criteria by which he measured his own success. He knew if he was faithful to Christ and to His Word, proclaiming the gospel to the lost and loving them as Christ loved them, he would be deemed successful by Christ, Whose opinion alone matters.

We must not let ourselves get taken in by the pull of society to want to be loved by the world, chasing its misguided definitions of success. In the church, we must not change our teaching or theology in an effort to try to get better "results." All we are called to do is to plant seeds and water them as God provides the opportunities and strength; God alone gives the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6-7). True fruit is something that happens as we obey Christ and abide in Him. We cannot generate our own fruit or redefine what fruit is. If we are faithful to Christ and to His Word, keeping His commands, true spiritual work will be accomplished (Galatians 6:9), and we will be rewarded accordingly (2 Corinthians 5:10). There is no greater or higher measure of success than the praise of our Savior, saying, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:23). If we are faithful servants, we are also successful by Christ's standards because we will bear Him abundant spiritual fruit. May it be His glory alone which we seek as we faithfully strive to honor and obey Him no matter the cost or what people might think.