



## Idolatry of Excellence

Text: Ecclesiastes 2:9-11; Luke 7:36-50

Young Adults Pastor Adam McIntire

1. For a little fun, who was the last president of the United States? Who was president before that? Before that? Before that? Keep going as far back as you can. How far did you make it? Now, think about the fact that the President of the United States is one of the most powerful and famous people on the earth at the time they are in office. As fun as that little exercise might have been, what does this mean for you and me?
2. How would you define the words excellence and success?
  - a. If this is different than you what would have answered 5, 10, 20+ years ago, what has changed?
  - b. What influences have shaped your definition of a successful life, and how did they influence your concept of success? (I.e. parents, influential friends and/or mentors, "higher ups" at work, yourself, etc.)
  - c. Describe a time in your life when you failed to live up to your own standard. What sorts of thoughts and emotions went through your mind and heart in the aftermath of that season?
3. By worldly standards, King Solomon had it all: power, wealth, and access to anything that he wanted. After he had experienced virtually everything this world has to offer, he wrote the book of Ecclesiastes, which essentially amounts to a treatise on what does and does not matter in life. Read some of what Solomon has to say about the following subjects. Keep in mind that Solomon is not saying that these are bad things, but he is saying that these are not ultimate things.
  - a. The pursuit of wisdom – Ecclesiastes 1:17, 2:16
  - b. The pursuit of pleasure – Ecclesiastes 2:1
  - c. The pursuit of business success and material possessions – Ecclesiastes 2:4-11, what would this look like in our culture?
  - d. Workaholism – Ecclesiastes 3:18-19, 3:22-23
  - e. Keeping up with the Joneses – Ecclesiastes 4:4
  - f. The pursuit of wealth – Ecclesiastes 5:10
  - g. And the catch all ... - Ecclesiastes 1:14
  - h. Why is this all vanity? - Ecclesiastes 1:3-4, 1:11
  - i. Which of the above are you most tempted to run to? What have you sacrificed (time, health, relationships, etc.) in pursuit of these things?
  - j. What is the way out of this futile cycle? Ecclesiastes 3:14, 8:12, 12:13

4. Read Matthew 18:1-4, Mark 9:35-37, Luke 9:46-48, Philippians 3:4-21, and 2 Peter 1:3-11.

- a. What is it that makes one truly great?
- b. What sorts of activities would one's life be filled with and characterized by according to this definition greatness?

Challenge: How has your idea of success and excellence been challenged through this message and study? Spend some time confessing and repenting of ways you see that you pursue worldly success and excellence above a life of total surrender. What is one way you can begin to pursue godly greatness that we see in Scripture?

Prayer: Dear Lord I know that my ways are not Your ways and Your perspective on my life is different from my own, and Lord at times I long to be more successful in all that I do and all that I try to achieve, not only in my personal life but also in every areas of life—my home-life, my work life, my relationships, my recreational times and even my religious activities.

But Lord, the more I read through the Scriptures the more I come to understand that so much of what I yearn for in life, such as getting on and being successful in work and play, is not necessarily the best thing for me to desire—knowing that this could cause me to wander far from You; to leave my first-love and to become increasingly dependent on myself and less and less dependent upon You.

Help me Lord to get the right balance between wanting to be successful in all I do, so that my life glorifies my Father in heaven, which truly is the desires of my heart and becoming successful in the wrong way and for the wrong reason, for my own honor and glory.

May I become increasingly dependent on You so that whether I have much or a little, I may live my life successfully in Your eyes. Help me to set my heart on Your desires, Your will—Your kingdom. Help me to yearn more and more to be successful in my Christian work and my spiritual growth, rather than in seeking the empty success of the world and the empty prosperity that is from the world—even if it means having to diminish in my eyes and in the esteem of others—May I see You first and Your righteousness Lord and not chase after the things of this world—to Your praise and glory in Jesus name I pray.

Amen

## STUDY DEEPER

### **The Biblical Meaning of Success**

Two great lies have been promoted in our culture during the past 20 years.

1. "If you work hard enough, you can be anything you want to be."
2. "You can be the best in the world."

These lies have been accepted and promoted by many Christians as well as non-Christians. Success, defined as being the master of one's own destiny, has become an idol. Tim Keller in his book *Counterfeit Gods* describes the idol in these words:

More than other idols, personal success and achievement lead to a sense that we ourselves are God. . . . To be the very best at what you do, to be at the top of the heap, means no one is like you. You are supreme.

Thankfully, Scripture gives us a strong antidote to misguided ideas of success. Through Jesus' Parable of the Talents (Matthew 25:14-30) we learn that the kingdom of heaven is like a man going on a long journey. Before he leaves, he gives his three servants different amounts of money, denominated by talents. To the first servant, the man gives five talents; to the second, two talents; and to the last, one talent—each according to his ability.

Upon his return, the master asks what they did with the money. The first and second servants have doubled their investments and receive their master's praise. The third servant, however, has safeguarded the money but done nothing to increase it. As a result, he is condemned by the master for his inactivity.

The Parable of the Talents teaches us five important things about the biblical meaning of success.

First, this parable teaches us that success is a product of our work.

In the opening chapter of Genesis, we find the cultural mandate in which God commands Adam to work by stewarding and growing the resources he has been given. This mandate was meant not only for Adam and Eve, but also for us.

As Christians, we have a mission that our Lord expects us to accomplish right now. We are called to steward all we have been given while we wait for our Savior's return.

John Calvin defined the talents as gifts from God in the form of a person's calling and natural ability. Alister McGrath, in an article on the topic of calling, suggests that for Calvin:

The idea of a calling or vocation is first and foremost about being called by God, to serve him within his world. Work was thus seen as an activity by which Christians could deepen their faith. . . . To do anything for God, and to do it well, was the fundamental hallmark of authentic Christian faith.

The Parable of the Talents teaches that biblical success is working diligently here and now. The servant with five talents was industrious, for he “went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more” (Matthew 25:16). He used all the talents that his master gave him—without hesitation—to produce the expected return.

Second, the Parable of the Talents teaches that God gives us everything we need to do what he has called us to do.

The New Testament talent is likely a large sum of money, maybe even as much as a million dollars in today’s currency. We are tempted to feel sorry for the servant who received only one talent, but in reality, he received as much as a million dollars from the master and buried it in his backyard. Is it any wonder the master was so upset?

The master in the Parable of the Talents expected his servants to do more than passively preserve what had been entrusted to them, for he told the lazy servant, “You ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest” (Matthew 25:27). Similarly, God expects us to generate a return by using our talents toward productive ends. Like the servants in the parable, God has given us more than enough to accomplish this charge. It’s up to us to use the talents wisely.

Third, the Parable of the Talents teaches that we are not all created equal.

The most overlooked part of the story is the second half of verse 15: “each according to his ability.” The master understood that the one-talent servant was not capable of producing as much as the five-talent servant. We want to protest the unfairness. Yet we know this differing ability is true from experience. Diversity is woven into the fabric of creation.

But even though we’re not created equal in regard to talents, we still see equality in the Parable of the Talents and in God’s economy. It takes just as much work for the five-talent servant to produce five more talents as it does for the two-talent servant to produce two more talents. This is why the reward given to each by the master is the same. He tells each of his faithful servants the same thing: “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much” (Matthew 25:23). The master measures success by degree of effort, as should we.

Fourth, the Parable of the Talents teaches that we work for the master, not our own selfish purposes.

The money given to the servants does not belong to them. They do not keep the money they earn with the master’s capital. The servants only steward the master’s investment, and the master measures the quality of their stewardship.

We should maximize the use of our talents not for our own selfish purposes, but to honor God. He cares about our attitude, the motivation in our hearts.

Finally, the Parable of the Talents shows that we will be held accountable.

The Parable of the Talents is not about salvation or works-righteousness, but about how we use our work to fulfill our earthly calling.

The unfaithful steward in this parable didn't so much waste the master's money; he wasted an opportunity. As a result, he was judged wicked and lazy. One day we will be held responsible for what we do for God with what he has given us.

So how should we define the biblical meaning of success?

The answer is almost counterintuitive; when we work for God in everything we do, including our vocational callings, we truly find the purpose, fulfillment, and satisfaction that we all desperately seek.

We work at the pleasure of the Lord, driven by our love of God. Our only desire should be to hear him say, "Well done my good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of the Master."

<https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-biblical-meaning-of-success>