



1 Defining Success

As the owner of a heating and air-conditioning company, I receive at least one invitation each week to attend a seminar that will teach me how to grow my company. For the past few years, consolidators have been buying smaller companies and rolling them into larger ones. Utility companies have also entered the heating and air-conditioning business. Small companies such as mine often struggle to compete with these large competitors. Many have decided to close shop.

As the pastor of a church, I receive numerous invitations to attend conferences that will teach me how to grow my church. Recently I received a magazine for Christian leaders that had advertisements for 10 such conferences in it. Pastors often lead these conferences, teaching others the principles they used to grow their churches. They assure us that we will never grow our churches without “seeker-sensitive” services, video projectors, target audiences, cell groups, multiple worship services, and praise teams. They warn that people will abandon us in favor of the growing megachurches, which will offer all these things and even more to their congregations.

It’s no wonder that many bivocational pastors in their smaller churches are discouraged. Both worlds in which they live send the same message—bigger is better, and success is often determined by size. They see the wonderful things God is doing in other churches and wonder what went wrong in their own ministries.

Unfortunately, too many of us have accepted some common myths about successful ministries:

- To be successful, my ministry must be big.
- To be significant, my ministry must be in a big place.
- One measure of the significance of my ministry is how much recognition I receive for it.
- Career advances are signs of a significant ministry.¹

If these are the measures of success, most bivocational ministers will never be considered successful. Too many of us believe we are inadequate and are failing in the ministry because we measure ourselves by the above standards. The problem is that we have allowed other people to establish faulty standards by which we judge our success or failure. Steve Bierly is correct when he writes, “The Lord doesn’t want our identity and self-worth as pastors to be bound up in results.”² We need to determine true, biblical standards of successful ministry and compare ourselves to those standards.

Definitions of Success

Robert Schuller defines success as “discovering and developing your potential as well as seeing the new opportunities born all around you every new day!”³ John Maxwell’s definition of success is “knowing God and his desires for me; growing to my maximum potential; and sowing seeds that benefit others.”⁴ Charles Stanley writes, “Success is the continuing achievement of becoming the person God wants you to be and accomplishing the goals God has helped you set.”⁵ Edward Dayton asks,

How, then, should we define success? The first question of the Westminster Shorter Catechism asks, “What is the chief end of man?” The answer given is “The chief end of man is to give glory to God and enjoy him forever.” That defines our primary purpose in life and shows us where we find success.⁶

Notice that none of these definitions of success say anything about the size of our churches, recognition by our peers, or career advancements. They do speak of our relationship to God and our respon-

sibility to develop the potential God has placed within us. Let's take a brief look at each of these and see how they relate to success.

Our Relationship with God

In Josh. 1 we find Joshua preparing to lead the Israelites into the Promised Land. God promises to be with him as He was with Moses and assures him that he will prosper if he will observe the laws of God (v. 7). God then gives Joshua, and us, the secret of genuine success: "This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good *success*" (v. 8, italics added).

God called us to be something before He called us to do something. As recipients of the grace of God, we're to grow and develop as Christians. Leith Anderson is correct when he writes, "The call of a Christian is first and foremost to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Any call to leadership or to a specific type of place of ministry is secondary at best. Our call is to be what Jesus wants us to be and to do what Jesus wants us to do."⁷

Joshua's success as a leader was dependent upon his relationship with God. As he and the Israelites followed the laws of God, they enjoyed success. Disobedience to God resulted in failure and tragedy.

True success for the Christian, whether a pastor or layperson, is found in applying God's Word to his or her life. I have a Christian friend who owns a small business. He and a customer, who is also a Christian, disagreed over a bill the business owner sent his client. It appeared the bill would not be paid. The business owner's employees believed the matter should be settled in court, but the owner refused. He believed, based upon 1 Cor. 6:1-8, that it was better for him to take the loss than to sue a fellow Christian. It was more important for my friend to obey the teachings of scripture than to receive the disputed money. Obedience to God sometimes carries a price but will always lead to personal spiritual growth. That growth leads to true success in life.

Developing to Our Potential

“The only true measure of success is the ratio between what we might have been and what we have become. In other words, success comes as the result of growing to our potential.”⁸

In Matt. 25 Jesus tells a parable of a man preparing to take a long trip. He called his servants and divided his money between them according to their abilities. One servant was entrusted with five talents; one received two talents, while the third servant was given only one talent. When the man returned from his trip, he asked for an accounting from his servants. The first two servants were able to return to the master twice the talents given to them. Each of them received the same commendation from the master: “Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord” (vv. 21, 23). However, the third servant had buried his one talent, and that was all he was able to return to his master. That servant was rebuked and cast out of the presence of the master. Why? Because this servant refused to use the talent he had been given.

Recently I attended a pastor’s prayer luncheon in the largest church in our area. The choir loft in the church seats three times what the sanctuary of my church, Hebron, holds. Sixteen thousand people attend services in this church every weekend.

It would have been so easy to leave this church feeling intimidated and questioning my value to the kingdom of God, but I didn’t. I left there amazed at what God was doing through the life of that pastor and his staff. He and I have different gifts and a different calling on our lives. Frankly, I don’t believe I would have the organizational gifts to lead that church. God called that pastor to lead a very large church in his city. God called me to lead a small bivocational church in our community. Each calling is equally valid and important.

On Judgment Day God won’t compare me to this other pastor. He won’t compare you to another minister. He won’t question why we didn’t use gifts He had not given us. He *will* question how each of us used the

ones He *did* give us. In other words, did we live up to our potential? If we grew and developed to our potential, we, too, will hear the words of the Lord, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” At that time we’ll know we achieved true success.

Seeking Success

Is it right for a minister to seek success? There are some who would argue that we are called only to be faithful. Certainly there are times when success is simply remaining faithful to the ministry and vision God has given us despite any outward signs that our ministry is having a significant impact on the lives of people.

During my pastorate at Hebron we enjoyed seasons of God’s blessings on our ministry, but we also saw times when God seemed to be doing little in our church. These dry times often tempt the pastor to give up, dust off the résumé, and begin looking for another church. Personally, I believe that pastors who do that often miss out on tremendous blessings that are about to be enjoyed. Dry times may be times of preparation as God is getting us ready for His next move in our lives. Moses spent 40 years in Midian while God was preparing him to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. Joseph spent years as a slave in Egypt, often mistreated and forgotten, before God elevated him to a position where he could save the world from the coming famine. After his Damascus road experience, the apostle Paul spent three years in Arabia and Damascus (Gal. 1:17-18) before beginning his incredible ministry.

As important as faithfulness is, it’s not unchristian to seek success in ministry. Leith Anderson encourages us to “seek success. . . . there is nothing proud or inappropriate in determining what success should look like and how to achieve it.”⁹ As a minister, you want your life and ministry to count. You want your ministry to touch the lives of people in a significant way. In other words, you want to enjoy a successful and fruitful ministry. Develop a vision of what success in your ministry will look like, and then determine how you can best achieve it. If you refuse to do that, it’s unlikely you’ll experience the success you would like.

That, I believe, is poor stewardship of the gifts and responsibilities God gave us.

The Success Journey

For Charles Stanley, “Success is an *ongoing pursuit*. . . . No person ever truly achieves success.”¹⁰ Similarly, to John Maxwell, “Success is a journey rather than a destination.”¹¹ Both of these men certainly have known success. Each has grown large churches, written numerous books, and is in great demand for speaking engagements. By every definition of the word, they are successful Christian leaders. Yet their comments above reveal that neither believes he has achieved success. Their lives and ministries model for us the truth that success is not something to be achieved but a process to be lived.

The life and ministry of the apostle Paul teaches us the same truth. In Phil. 3:12-14 he wrote,

Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me. Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

What does the success journey look like? It starts when you decide you want to succeed in what you do.¹² I see too many ministers who merely seek to survive. They are quick to discuss the difficulties of their ministries—the long hours, the conflicts that exist in their churches, time spent away from families, and the other problems associated with ministry. While they sincerely believe they have been called to the ministry, too often they fall into a survival mode instead of seeking to be successful in the ministry God has given them. We need to determine that we want to be successful in our ministries.

Rick Pitino has been a successful basketball coach at Providence College, the University of Kentucky, and at the professional level. One

of the reasons for his success is that he teaches his teams that if they want to be winners, they must deserve to win:

You want to succeed? Okay, then succeed. Deserve it. How? Outwork everybody in sight. Sweat the small stuff. Sweat the big stuff. Go the extra mile. But whatever it takes, put your heart and soul into everything you do. Leave it all out on the court. . . . Success is not a lucky break. It is not a divine right. It is not an accident of birth. Success is a choice.¹³

We need to make the same type of commitment to our ministries. Anyone who thinks ministry is easy should never become a minister. It is hard, challenging work that demands our best effort. Successful ministry requires even more of us. This is especially true of bivocational ministry, in which there are opportunities to grow in faith, visionary leadership, relationship building, dedication, and passion or to settle for mere survival and risk succumbing to discouragement, low self-esteem, and halfhearted devotion. How we choose to approach our ministry is up to us. We will probably not enjoy a successful ministry unless we decide to move out of the survival mode and pursue success.

The remaining chapters of this book will examine different qualities you must have in your life and ministry if you want to be successful in bivocational ministry. Each of these can be learned and developed, but remember that this is a lifelong pursuit of success. Don't try to shortchange the process, and please don't take a detour around any of these qualities. A person who violates his or her integrity for a short-term goal will not enjoy long-lasting success. Rather, he or she should seek long-term success that will come as "the result of the small victories we accumulate every day."¹⁴ Commit yourself to applying these qualities to your life daily.

I enjoy hearing Zig Ziglar speak at seminars. He begins his lectures by asking two questions:

1. How many of you believe that regardless of how bad your personal, family, and business lives are at this moment there are still some things you could do that would make them even worse?

2. How many of you believe that regardless of how good your personal, family, and business lives are, there are still some things you could do to improve them?¹⁵

Ziglar asks these questions to help people understand that they need to take responsibility for their futures. Regardless of how successful your ministry is today, it can be even better. If you are currently struggling in your ministry, you can take hope that it can improve. But you have to make it happen. You have to decide that you want a successful ministry that will make a significant impact on the lives of those God has given you to lead. If you've made that decision, then let's begin our success journey.

Reflections

- What is your definition of success?
- Do you consider your present ministry to be successful?
- Since beginning your ministry, do you believe you have grown in your relationship with God, or has that relationship been harmed because of the demands of ministry?
- Do you see success as a journey or a destination?
- Do you believe you should seek success in your ministry?