

Seven Keys to True Success

For many years, I have been fascinated by biographies.

When our children were young, we chose not to watch television in our home, except for Bronco games. Instead, we often gathered in our bedroom at night and read together. Many of the books we chose were biographies—the stories of missionaries, leaders, and people from the past whose lives had made a difference.

I loved learning what people had faced, how they made decisions, and what allowed them to keep going when life became difficult. That interest remained with me long after our children were grown.

As I continued reading, I began to notice certain patterns. Reading was only part of the learning. Over the years, I also watched and talked with hundreds of people in the marketplace, in churches, in families, and throughout community life. I paid attention to the choices that helped them live well and the choices that did not. Their circumstances were different, yet many who built lives of substance seemed to live by similar principles.

That study eventually became a talk I gave for many years to every new employee at Colorado Springs Utilities. I began the presentation with a simple question:

What is success?

Most people have an answer, even if they have never put it into words. Success may mean financial security, professional accomplishment, influence, a strong family, or the freedom to live as we choose. None of those desires is necessarily wrong. The difficulty comes when one of them becomes the whole measure of a life.

I also asked people to look farther down the road. At the end of your life, how will you know whether you succeeded? Will the answer be

found primarily in what you accumulated and the positions you held? Or will it have more to do with the people you loved, the work you completed, and the difference your life made?

Those questions have become more important to me with the passing of time.

This resource is a companion to *A Better Measure of Success*. That earlier resource examines how Scripture defines success. After looking across the biblical story, I stated the definition this way:

Success is becoming the person God is calling us to be while faithfully carrying what He places in our hands.

This definition makes room for accomplishment, but it does not allow accomplishment to stand alone. It asks what kind of person we are becoming and whether the work was genuinely ours to do. It also considers how we treated people while doing it.

If *A Better Measure of Success* answers the question, “What is success?” this resource addresses the question that naturally follows:

How do we live that way?

The seven principles that follow are not shortcuts. They do not guarantee an easy life or a particular outcome. They are principles I have repeatedly observed in people who have lived faithfully and carried their responsibilities well.

Key One: Take Charge of Your Life

It is easy to explain our lives by pointing to what has happened to us.

I am this way because of the home in which I grew up. I cannot move forward because of what someone did to me. I am like this because of the parent I had, the boss I work for, or the opportunity I was never given.

Sometimes those explanations contain a great deal of truth. Parents shape us. Wounds leave marks. Unjust people can cause lasting harm.

Circumstances can limit our choices in ways that should never be minimized.

But an explanation can slowly become a surrender.

If I decide that everything I am today has been determined by someone else, I have also given that person authority over what I become tomorrow.

The people I have studied and known tend to think differently. They acknowledge what has happened, but they do not allow it to become the final word. They believe they still have a responsibility for the direction of their lives.

Viktor Frankl understood this under circumstances few of us can imagine. He was imprisoned in four Nazi concentration camps and lost nearly everything that could be taken from a person. Yet Frankl wrote that there remained “the last of the human freedoms - to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances.”

That idea is often summarized as a space between what happens to us and the response we choose. Although that familiar wording cannot be found in Frankl’s published work, it points toward the freedom he described. At times the space may feel very small, but it is where responsibility begins.

Scripture does not minimize the wrong done to us, but it repeatedly calls us to choose faithfulness within circumstances we did not choose.

Taking charge of our lives does not mean denying what happened or excusing the person who caused harm. Neither does it mean we can control every outcome. It means we stop allowing yesterday to make every decision about tomorrow.

This is the principle I call ownership in *Lighthouse Leadership*. Ownership is not blame or the need to control everything. It is the willingness to ask:

What is mine to own here?

I may not be responsible for what someone said to me, but I am responsible for what I do with it. I may not have chosen my circumstances, but I can choose how I meet them. I may not be able to change another person, but I can decide who I am becoming in my dealings with that person.

Ownership begins when we stop saying, "This is simply who I am," and begin asking, "Who is God calling me to become?"

Key Two: Determine What Is Really Important

It seems that nearly every company has a statement of values somewhere. The words may be framed on a wall, printed in an annual report, or displayed on a website. They usually include admirable ideas such as integrity, respect, service, and excellence.

In the presentation, I used Enron as a warning. Its published values included some very good words. What happened within the company revealed how little those words governed its actual conduct.

A statement on a wall does not tell you what an organization truly values. The way people are treated tells you. What leaders do when something important is at stake tells you. So does what the organization rewards or quietly tolerates.

The same is true in our personal lives.

Values are the core convictions we do not want to bargain away when pressure rises. They guide our decisions and establish the boundaries within which we intend to live.

Purpose, vision, mission, and values each answer a different question. Purpose tells us why we exist. Vision gives us a picture of where we are going. Mission describes the work before us. Values guide how we will live and work along the way.

That last distinction matters. We can pursue a worthwhile destination in a way that diminishes people. We can speak about love while

treating people as interruptions. We can claim to value relationships while sacrificing them whenever they become inconvenient.

A stated value remains an aspiration until it becomes a practiced value.

One of the phrases I have always enjoyed is “Walk the talk.” If we say that people should be seen and valued, our leadership should make that experience possible. If we claim to value trust, what we say and what we do must agree. If honor matters, it should affect the way we speak when the person is not in the room.

Our actual values can usually be found by examining our repeated choices. Our calendar reveals something. So does our spending. The way we behave under pressure may tell us more than the words we use when everything is going well.

In the talk, I encouraged people to imagine their own funeral. What would you hope the people who know you best would say about your life? That question has a way of separating what matters deeply from what merely feels urgent today.

We can also look back at the times when we felt most fulfilled. What were we doing? Who was being helped? Why did the experience matter so much? Trusted friends and family members may see patterns in us that we have missed.

Jesus said that where our treasure is, our heart will be also. What we truly value eventually becomes visible.

This is one reason success must be defined to include our values before it is pursued. If we have not decided what matters, we may spend years climbing a ladder only to discover that it was leaning against the wrong wall.

The question is not merely what values we claim. It is what our repeated choices reveal.

Key Three: Discover Your Purpose and Craft Your Destination

Once we take responsibility for our lives and determine what matters, another question emerges:

Where am I going?

Many people equate purpose with a job. When the job changes or ends, they feel as though their purpose has disappeared.

But a job is a role, and roles are temporary. Purpose is larger.

We share a primary purpose. Jesus said that we are to love God and love our neighbor. We are to live in a way that makes His goodness visible.

Within that larger calling, each of us also has a particular contribution to make. God has given us abilities and experiences. Certain needs move us deeply. Some kinds of work bring a sense of life, while others continually drain us. Even difficulties we would never have chosen may eventually become places from which we serve.

In the talk, I used a picture of Michelangelo's unfinished sculptures in Florence. The figures appear to be emerging from the stone, almost as though the artist were releasing something that had been hidden within the marble.

That image has stayed with me. Discovering purpose is not primarily about inventing an impressive life. It is about recognizing what God has already been forming within us and allowing it to become more fully expressed.

In *Discovering Your Life Purpose*, I explore four related questions. Who am I? Why am I here? What may God be asking me to do next? Who am I becoming as I keep responding to Him?

Purpose is often uncovered progressively. Very few people receive a complete map of their future. More often, the picture becomes clearer as we remain faithful to what is already in front of us.

David did not begin in a palace. He began by tending sheep. Esther did not understand the full meaning of her position until a moment arrived when courage was required. Purpose often becomes visible

through ordinary obedience long before it is expressed through a title.

Several questions can help us notice what may already be taking shape. What do you naturally do well? What needs consistently get your attention? What have you dreamed about doing for many years? What contribution might you make if fear were not deciding for you?

The answers may offer clues, but purpose requires more than knowing what interests us. Our abilities have been entrusted to us so they can be placed in service to God and others.

Discovering purpose is only part of the work. We must also craft a destination—a picture of the kind of life we hope to build if we remain faithful. That picture helps us recognize which opportunities fit and which ones may only distract us.

We hold the destination with humility. Proverbs tells us that we make our plans, but God directs our steps. We need enough direction to take the next step without pretending that we control the whole journey.

Key Four: Recognize That Relationships Are Part of Success

In the original presentation, I described relationships as the foundation for accomplishment. I still believe that, but today I would say something more:

Relationships are not merely the foundation beneath a successful life. They are part of the success itself.

When our son Jonathan left for college, I urged him to pay as much attention to learning how to build and repair relationships as he did to his formal education. The longer I live, the more important that education seems.

Many people treat relationships as a means to an end. They build connections because those connections may someday prove useful.

They pay attention to people who can open a door and overlook those who cannot.

But people are not stepping-stones.

Biblical success cannot be separated from love. Jesus did not say that the world would recognize His disciples by their accomplishments. He said they would be known by their love for one another.

Healthy relationships require us to keep our word and listen before forming a conclusion. When conflict comes, we address it rather than allowing resentment to grow quietly beneath the surface. We also learn to receive correction without immediately becoming defensive.

Not every relationship can or should be restored to what it once was. As I explore more fully in *When Relationships Are Wounded*, forgiveness and reconciliation are related, but they are not the same. Forgiveness may begin within one heart. Reconciliation requires truth and a willingness from both people to participate. Trust then needs time before it can grow again.

Paul's counsel in Romans 12 is wonderfully practical: as far as it depends on us, we are to live at peace with everyone. We are responsible for our hearts, our words, and the steps of obedience that belong to us. We are not able to control another person's response.

We cannot measure our lives only by what we accomplished. We must also consider how we treated people along the way. Did the people closest to us feel known and loved? Could they trust our word? Were we willing to apologize and repair what we had damaged?

A version of success that uses people or leaves a trail of wounded relationships is not true success.

Key Five: Change the Way You Think

All of us are bombarded with thoughts. Whether the number is hundreds or thousands in a day, it does not take long to recognize how many of them are negative.

I am too thin. I am too heavy. My hair is too curly. My hair is too straight. I am not as capable as that person. I will probably fail. Nobody really values what I have to offer.

Many of these thoughts arrive without being invited. They may come from comparison, disappointment, or something said to us many years ago.

But the presence of a thought does not make it true.

One of the differences I have observed in successful people is that they learn to examine their thoughts. They do not allow every thought that passes through their minds to determine the direction of their lives.

Our values and purpose become part of the filter. Is this thought true? If I continue rehearsing it, where will it take me?

This is part of what Paul describes in Romans 12:2 when he writes about being transformed by the renewing of the mind. Transformation does not usually happen because we had one encouraging thought one morning. It happens as we learn to recognize old ways of thinking and replace them with what is true.

An old saying expresses the progression:

Sow a thought, and reap an action. Sow an action, and reap a habit. Sow a habit, and reap a character. Sow a character, and reap a destiny.

The movement begins with a thought. Thoughts influence actions. Repeated actions become habits, and our habits begin shaping the person we are becoming.

Changing the way we think requires some heavy lifting. We have to notice a thought, put it into honest words, and examine where it is taking us. When it is false or destructive, we replace it with something more truthful and then act on that truth.

“I will never change” can become, “Change may take time, but I can take the next faithful step.”

“I need a title in order to matter” can become, “My value does not come from a position. I am loved by God, and I can faithfully use what He has given me.”

“I failed, therefore I am a failure” can become, “I failed at something, and I can learn from it.”

I also encouraged people in the talk to speak truth to themselves, practice gratitude, and take small steps they could measure. A new way of thinking grows stronger when we begin living from it.

This is not pretending that everything is wonderful or covering reality with pleasant words. It is bringing our thoughts under the authority of truth.

We build a way of thinking one thought at a time. We also change it one thought at a time.

Key Six: Work with the Law of the Farm

A wise farmer understands something many of us are tempted to forget.

If he plants a kernel of corn, he does not expect a crop of wheat. He expects corn. He knows that the kind of seed he plants determines what may eventually grow.

He also does not return the next morning, stare at the ground, and conclude that planting did not work. He understands that there is a period of time between planting and harvest.

During that time, the farmer still has work to do. He prepares the soil and makes sure the crop receives adequate water. He watches for weeds that could crowd out the young plants. But he cannot force the seed to grow.

He works intentionally while remaining dependent upon something beyond his control. Paul described that distinction when he wrote that one person plants and another waters, but God gives the growth.

That is the law of the farm.

We reap in keeping with what we sow, but we seldom reap immediately. A seed is planted long before the harvest becomes visible.

This principle applies throughout life. Trust grows from keeping promises over time. Wisdom grows as we apply what we have learned. A healthy organizational culture develops through repeated choices about what leaders model and what they allow. Strong relationships are built through small acts of attention that may not seem especially important at the time.

The law of the farm does not mean that life will always be fair or that every seed will survive. Storms come. The choices of other people affect us. Scripture never promises that careful living will remove every hardship.

The principle is simply that outcomes are not disconnected from patterns.

If we continually plant resentment, we should not be surprised when bitterness grows. If we sow dishonesty, trust will eventually become scarce. If we keep our word and treat people with care, something different is being cultivated, even if we cannot yet see the full result.

Successful people respect the time between planting and harvest. They do not confuse delay with failure, nor do they expect a healthy harvest from neglected ground.

Intentionality means choosing the right seed and faithfully tending what has been planted. It is worth asking from time to time: What am I planting today?

Key Seven: Stay the Course

The presentation concluded with stories of people who continued through enormous difficulty. Their circumstances differed, but their lives illustrated the same principle: important work usually takes longer and costs more than we first expect.

Some of the clearest examples in my life are people who have remained faithful over many years. I tell two of those stories more fully in *Finishing Well: Faithful to the Very End*. Their lives remind me that finishing well does not mean finishing famously. It means continuing to love God, care for people, and carry what has been entrusted to us.

Staying the course does not mean clinging stubbornly to a plan that is no longer wise. Stubbornness refuses to listen even when the road is leading somewhere it should not. Perseverance remains committed to the deeper purpose while being willing to change the route.

One of the greatest tests of endurance is not intensity but duration.

Many people can give an extraordinary effort for a short period. Fewer learn how to remain faithful over years. Results take longer than expected. The work becomes less exciting. Disappointment arrives, and other opportunities begin competing for our attention.

Staying the course requires us to remember why we began. It also requires a life with God that is deeper than the work we are doing for Him.

Endurance is often nothing more glamorous than sustained faithfulness over time. We continue showing up. When we fall, we receive grace, get up, and take the next step.

The question is not merely whether we are moving quickly. It is whether we are still moving faithfully in the right direction.

Taking the Next Faithful Step

These seven keys are not a formula for obtaining everything we want. They do not place God under obligation or give us control over the future.

Taken together, these principles ask us to live with intention and remain faithful over time. Success is not one great achievement. It is formed slowly through the ordinary choices of a life.

We do not need to master all seven principles today. We can begin by asking which one deserves our attention now and then take the next faithful step.

Success is becoming the person God is calling us to be while faithfully carrying what He places in our hands.

At the end of our lives, the most important question may not be whether the world considered us successful. It may simply be this:

Did I become the person God was calling me to be, and did I faithfully complete the work He gave me to do?

Questions for Reflection

These questions are not a scorecard. Take them slowly. Write what comes to mind beneath each one, and return later to any question that continues to stay with you.

1. Where have I allowed my past or another person's choices to determine too much of my future, and what is mine to own now?
2. What do my repeated choices reveal about what I truly value?
3. What themes in the way God has shaped me may point toward the contribution He is asking me to make?
4. Are the people closest to me being strengthened by the way I pursue success, or are they quietly paying for it?
5. What recurring thought is taking me in the wrong direction, and what would be more truthful?

6. What am I planting today, and am I giving it enough time and care to grow?
7. Where am I being invited to remain faithful even though the journey has become long?

Companion Resources

[*A Better Measure of Success*](#) considers the deeper question beneath these seven keys and offers a biblical definition of a successful life.

[*Discovering Your Life Purpose*](#) explores how identity, gifts, experiences, and calling may come together in the contribution God has given us to make.

[*Finishing Well: Faithful to the Very End*](#) reflects on the faithfulness and endurance needed to stay the course through the final season of life.

[Watch *Seven Keys to True Success*](#) to hear the full presentation from which this resource grew.

Source Note

The Viktor Frankl quotation is from Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, revised and updated edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 66.

My use of the “law of the farm” was influenced by Stephen R. Covey’s discussion of the farm and the law of the harvest in *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*.

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