

A Better Measure of Success

One of my earliest experiences with success came in eighth grade, when I decided to run for president of the Spanish Club. My campaign strategy was not particularly sophisticated. I made promises, offered incentives that probably involved candy, and did whatever seemed necessary to gather votes.

To my great satisfaction, it worked. When the election was over, I was president, and I remember feeling enormously proud. I had wanted the title, and now I had it.

There was only one problem. I had given almost no thought to what a president was supposed to do.

My attention had been fixed on winning the election. I did not have any particular hopes for the club or a sense of where we might go together. As far as I can remember, we accomplished very little during my year as president. I had learned how to win the position, but I had not thought about what the position was for.

Looking back, I can laugh at that young boy. It would be convenient to say I left that way of thinking behind in eighth grade, but I did not. As I grew older, the positions became more important and the ways of pursuing them became more respectable. Yet some of the desire beneath them remained familiar.

For much of my life, I associated success with position and recognition. I paid attention to the money I had in the bank, whether people knew who I was, and how I was received when I entered a room. Even something as small as being given a better seat at an event could make me feel that I mattered.

None of those things is necessarily wrong. A title may represent a responsibility someone has worked hard to carry. Financial provision is a gift, and respect can be earned through years of dependable

service. The difficulty comes when we begin asking accomplishment to tell us what we are worth.

Somewhere along the way, I had allowed position and recognition to become too closely connected to my sense of value. Beneath my desire to succeed was a more personal question: If I accomplish enough, will I finally know that I matter?

What a Title Could Not Give Me

This became more evident when I became a CEO. Suddenly, people who had never shown much interest in me wanted an audience. I received invitations I had not received before. At banquets and public events, someone often made sure I had a good seat.

I would like to say those things had no effect on me, but they did. There was something gratifying about being noticed and treated as important. The attention touched a place within me that had not yet learned to rest fully in the value God had already given me.

The position itself was meaningful. Leading a utility carried serious responsibilities. Good intentions did not keep the lights on or the water flowing. The decisions we made affected employees, their families, and an entire community. We had to prepare well, develop capable people, make difficult decisions, and follow through.

I remain grateful for the opportunity, and I believe God cares about the quality of our work. But I also began to see how easily a position can become more than an assignment. Without realizing it, we may begin treating it as evidence of our importance.

During those years, I continued meeting with my mentor, Paul Stanley. Paul invested in my life for approximately twenty years, and some of the most important lessons he gave me came through ordinary conversations.

At one point, Paul had been serving as an elder in a very large church. Later, he stepped away from that role. I remember wondering why he would relinquish such an honor. At that stage of my life, the title

seemed significant. Being an elder in a church of that size appeared to be a position worth holding.

When I asked him about it, Paul said something I have never forgotten:

“Jerry, I don’t need the title. I need the influence. And because I have the influence, I don’t need the title.”

His words stayed with me because they revealed how differently we were thinking. I saw the title as confirmation that a person mattered. Paul understood that his ability to help people did not depend on a position. His influence had grown through years of faithfulness and the trust people placed in him.

He was not dismissing the importance of church leadership, nor was he treating influence as another form of status. He was talking about the quiet opportunity to contribute to someone’s life because trust had been formed. He did not need a title to give him permission to serve.

That conversation caused me to look more honestly at my own motives. Why did certain positions appeal to me so strongly? Was I being drawn to the responsibility, or to what the title seemed to say about me? If the opportunity to serve remained but the recognition disappeared, would I still want to do the work?

Where Worth Begins

Over time, I began to see that no title could settle the deeper question within me. The answer had to come from somewhere else.

I have often thought about the words the Father spoke at the baptism of Jesus: “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). Those words came before Jesus’ public ministry had begun. Before the crowds gathered and before his work was completed, the Father identified him as his beloved Son.

Jesus did not enter his ministry hoping that public accomplishment would secure the Father’s approval. He began with the certainty of his

relationship with the Father. Later, on the Mount of Transfiguration, the Father spoke similar words again.

Jesus' relationship with the Father was unique, but his life reveals something important about the way we are meant to live. Our work should flow from knowing whose we are. We do not work our way into value. We receive our life from God and then offer it back to him.

This does not make accomplishment unimportant. The Father who affirmed Jesus also sent him into the world with work to do. Near the end of his earthly life, Jesus could say that he had glorified the Father by completing the work he had been given (John 17:4).

His identity did not replace obedience. It allowed him to obey without depending on the approval of the crowd to tell him who he was.

That distinction has become increasingly important to me. We were never meant to ask accomplishment to give us what can only be received from God.

Scripture's Different Measure

One of the Bible's clearest references to success comes as Joshua prepares to lead Israel into the Promised Land. Moses is gone, the people are looking to Joshua, and the responsibility before him is enormous. God tells him to keep the Book of the Law near, to meditate on it, and to live according to it. Then Joshua's way would prosper, and he would have good success (Joshua 1:8).

This passage is sometimes treated as a formula for achieving whatever we desire. But God was not showing Joshua how to get everything he wanted. He was showing him how to carry the assignment God had already given him. Joshua's success could not be separated from God's purpose or from the way God instructed him to lead.

Joseph gives us an even more unexpected picture. Genesis describes him as successful while he is a slave in Potiphar's household. Later, after a false accusation sends him to prison, Scripture again says that

the Lord was with him and gave success to what he did (Genesis 39:2 - 3, 21 - 23).

If success means freedom, position, or favorable circumstances, Joseph could hardly have been called successful. Yet he had not lost the presence of God, and he had not abandoned the responsibility to live faithfully where he was.

Long before Joseph was elevated in Egypt, something important had already been formed within him. Success could be seen in the way he served, resisted temptation, and handled what had been placed in his care. His later promotion did not create his character. It gave that character a larger place to serve.

The life of Jesus brings the meaning into still clearer focus. By ordinary public measures, the end of his ministry looked like failure. Opposition had grown, his closest followers scattered, and the cross appeared to be a final defeat. Yet Jesus knew what the Father had given him to do. He did not measure his life by the changing response of the crowd.

These accounts have led me to a different definition from the one I carried into that Spanish Club election:

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

The work may be public or largely unseen. What matters is whether it is ours to do and whether we are carrying it in a way that honors the One who gave it.

Faithfulness Still Has Work to Do

There is a danger in moving away from the world's measures of success. We may begin speaking as though results do not matter at all. Christians sometimes say, "God only asks us to be faithful," and there is important truth in that statement. We cannot control every outcome. Faithful people sometimes experience rejection or results they never wanted.

Still, faithfulness should never become an excuse for careless work.

In Jesus' parable of the talents, the servants received different amounts and produced different returns. The master did not compare the size of their assignments, but he expected each of them to use what had been entrusted to him. The two who did so heard the same words: "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matthew 25:21 - 23).

If we have accepted a responsibility, we should carry it well. People should be helped by what we do, and our abilities should be put to use rather than buried beneath fear or passivity.

Paul helps us understand where our responsibility ends. He planted, Apollos watered, and God gave the growth (1 Corinthians 3:6). Paul did not confuse his labor with God's part, but neither did he stop planting.

That distinction served me well as a leader. I was responsible for preparing, listening to wise counsel, making the best decisions I could, and following through. I could not guarantee that every decision would produce the outcome I wanted or that every person would respond as I hoped.

We can do the work that belongs to us. We cannot force the growth.

Holding Success with Open Hands

Success can enlarge our ability to serve, but it can also tell us things that are not true. It can persuade us that a good result proves every decision was wise or that recognition means we no longer need correction. If we are not careful, what began as an opportunity to serve can quietly become something we depend upon for our identity.

Jesus told of a wealthy man whose land produced abundantly. The man built larger barns and prepared to enjoy many years of ease. Jesus did not call him a fool because his farm had been productive. He called him a fool because he had mistaken stored wealth for a secure soul (Luke 12:16 - 21).

That is why Jesus' question remains so searching: What does it profit someone to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? (Mark 8:36).

There are ways of succeeding that can slowly make us less willing to listen or less attentive to the people closest to us. A leader can reach an organizational goal while leaving damaged people behind. Someone can gain public respect while becoming increasingly absent at home. If reaching a goal requires us to become someone we would once have grieved to be, the price is too high.

Years after my conversation with Paul, I was invited to become an elder in a fairly large church. At an earlier point in my life, the invitation might have felt like confirmation that I had reached another level of importance. This time, Paul's words returned to me.

I already had opportunities to contribute to people's lives. I also recognized that accepting the position might touch an old appetite within me that I no longer wanted to feed, so I declined the role.

Later, I was offered the opportunity to become a pastor, and I made a similar decision. I did not decline either position because the titles were unworthy. The work of an elder or pastor is honorable, and those whom God calls to it should carry it with humility and care. My decision was personal. I sensed that I did not need either title to do the work God had already placed before me.

In some ways, being able to say no showed me how much my understanding of success had changed. Earlier in my life, I had wanted a title because I believed it would make me significant. I was beginning to understand that significance comes from knowing whose I am and faithfully serving the people God places before me.

The same lesson became clear when I retired. The CEO title ended, as every title eventually does. Yet the opportunities to invest in people did not disappear. My position had changed, but the work God was giving me had not.

A position may give our calling a particular setting for a season, but it is never the source of the calling.

Questions I Have Learned to Ask

I still care about doing good work. Goals are important, and leaders must be willing to ask whether their efforts are actually helping. But visible results can tell us only part of the truth.

Over time, I have learned to ask a few additional questions:

Is this work genuinely mine to do, or am I pursuing it because I need the recognition it may bring?

Can I pursue this goal without becoming someone I do not want to be?

Are people being served by the way I am carrying this responsibility?

Are those closest to me sharing in the good of this work, or quietly paying for it?

If the title disappeared tomorrow, would I still know who I am?

These questions do not provide a formula for success. They simply help reveal which measure is governing my life.

The Measure at the Finish

For many years, 2 Timothy 4:7 - 8 has been a life passage for me. Near the end of his life, Paul could say that he had fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith. He did not claim that everyone had understood him or that every effort had produced the outcome he wanted. He had experienced rejection and imprisonment, yet he knew he had remained with the work Christ gave him.

That may be the clearest measure of success we are given.

Success may include promotion, financial provision, or the satisfaction of seeing years of labor bear fruit. When those things come, we can receive them with gratitude. At other times, success may look like serving faithfully where few people notice, caring for someone who cannot repay us, or keeping a promise no one else remembers.

The size of the assignment never determines the worth of obedience.

As an eighth grader, I thought success meant winning the title of president. Later, I became a CEO and discovered both the opportunity and the danger that can accompany a significant position. With time, I began to understand that no title could answer the deepest question of my worth. The Father had already answered it.

I am his son. My life has been received from him, and whatever he places in my hands is an opportunity to serve. The titles may come, and one day they will go. The success I now desire is to carry my part faithfully and, at the finish, to hear him say, "Well done."

Scripture quotations marked NIV are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.