

3 Studies on Success

Study 1, Success, Matt 25:14-30

Getting started

1. In our society what do people usually think it means if someone is described as successful?



2. What does it mean if a particular church is described as successful?

3. What does it mean if a church program for evangelism is described as successful?

4. What is success?

5. What is failure?

Bible

6. What do you think it means to be successful, biblically speaking?

The measurement of success is simply the ratio of talents used to talents received. What you are doing with what you've got, plus who you are becoming. Are you a growing, maturing Christian? Whether you work in business, or in Christian work, or as a day labourer, professional, or academic, if you are a maturing Christian, using a large percentage of your talents, you are successful. Be glad. The person doing the most with what he's got is truly successful.

From "How should a Christian view success?" in Christianity Today www.christianitytoday.com by Fred Smith.

This sounds a lot like it comes from the **Parable of the Talents** (Matt 25:14-30). This is where "Well done, good and faithful servant" comes from (Matt 25:23). So if God says to you "Well done, good and faithful servant" then you are successful, right? Maybe, maybe not. Let's look at the parable and see what it is about.

7. Read Matt 25:14-30.

Context: Much of Jesus' life is described through miracles, confrontations, discussions and teaching. In ch 23 Jesus criticises the Pharisees and teachers of the law. In ch 24 he teaches about the end times. In ch 25 Jesus continues his teaching with more parables. Here, near his time of death, Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God.

The **talent**, of which the parable speaks, was not a coin but a measure or weight of money, which was sometimes paid in minted coins and sometimes in bars of gold or bullion. The weight of a talent was 59kgs which, in

gold in today's values, would be worth about \$2.2million. In the ancient world capital was not readily available so with the amounts mentioned in this parable it would be easy to make more money with it.

From the Tyndale Commentary Matthew by R.V.G. Tasker p 235 and a sermon by Mike Paget, St Barnabas, Broadway 21/8/2011.

From Matt 25:14-30.

- (a) What do you think the "it" refers to in Matt 25:14?
- (b) In the parable who does the master (v14 and v19) represent?
- (c) Who do the servants represent?
- (d) Who is successful and who is not successful?
- (e) What happens to the one talent person? Does this create a problem? Why/why not?
- (f) Considering the context who do you think would have been Jesus' target audience in this parable?
- (g) What would the talents have meant for this audience?
- (h) Who might have been represented by the one talent servant (see Matt 23:1-4, 21:12-13)? Why?



The normal way of taking it is to suggest that Jesus is preparing the disciples for quite a long period during which he will not be present, and will have left them tasks to be getting on with. On his return they will be judged according to how they have performed. That, of course, can easily collapse into the 'examination-system' understanding of Christianity once more. It doesn't have to, but it easily could.

But the real problem with it is that a story about a master and slaves, in which the master goes away leaving the slaves tasks to perform and then comes back at last, would certainly be understood, in the Judaism of Jesus' day, as a story about God and Israel. This is certainly how Luke intends us to understand the very similar story in his gospel (19:11-27). And if, as I've suggested all along, both the Sermon on the Mount and this final great discourse in Matthew's gospel are to be seen first and foremost as Jesus' challenge to his own day and the days immediately following, perhaps we should take this parable in the same way.

It then belongs closely with Matthew 23, where Jesus denounces the scribes and Pharisees. They, we may suggest, are represented by the wicked servant who hid his master's money. (A 'talent', by the way, was a unit of money, worth roughly what a labourer could earn in 15 years. Our modern word 'talent', in the sense of the gifts or

skills that an individual possesses, is derived from this, precisely because of this parable.) In what sense had they been given something that corresponds to the gift of the talent?

The scribes and Pharisees had been given the law of Moses. They had been given the Temple, the sign of God's presence among them. They had been given wonderful promises about how God would bless not only Israel but, through Israel, the whole world. And they had buried them in the ground. They had turned the command to be the light of the world into an encouragement to keep the light for themselves ([Matt] 5:14-16). They had been worthless slaves. And now, when their master was at last coming back, he was going to call them to account. The threatened destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple was to be seen as the master's punishment on the servant who had not done his will.

The emphasis of the parable falls, again and again, on this third slave, the one whose folly fails to respond to the master's generosity. Who then are the other two, those who respond appropriately to the master's trust?

They are, it seems, those who hear the call of Jesus and, on that basis, develop what Israel has already been given so that it now becomes something new. They are like the mustard seed in [Matt] 13:31-32, which starts small and then grows large. They are the signs that God's kingdom is starting to bud and blossom. And now, when Jesus has come to Jerusalem to force the final confrontation between God's kingdom and the system that had resisted and opposed it — then those who are loyal to him will be like those who have made wise use of the money that had been entrusted to them.

From Matthew for Everyone part 2 chapters 16-28 by Tom Wright pp 137-138.

To finish

8. (a) Is the Parable of the Talents about success? Why/why not?

(b) What is this parable about?

(c) Do you think “the measurement of success is simply the ratio of talents used to talents received”?

Why/why not?

Study 2, Success, Rom 8:31-39

Getting started

1. To assess success or failure we need to make a comparison with some standard or level of performance or with other people's performance.

(a) Do you think God is interested in comparisons like these? Why/why not?



(b) What is God interested in?

Bible

2. Jesus' teaching involved a number of things that his disciples were to do. If we do those things can we count ourselves as successful? Look at some of these below:

Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven (Matt 5:16).

Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you (Matt 5:44).

Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness (Matt 6:33).

Do not judge so that you will not be judged (Matt 7:1).

If your brother sins against you go and show him his fault in private. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over (Matt 18:15).

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (John 13:34-35).

Have you perfectly obeyed all these? Are you a success or a failure?

Video

The Nooma video, #10, Lump, by Rob Bell is one of 24 made between 2002 and 2009. In each video Rob Bell takes an aspect of Christian life and expresses it in an interesting and challenging way.

3. What are your first impressions of this video?



4. Why did the boy hide under the bed covers?

5. How does the father handle the situation?

6. In the video Rob Bell says “there’s a moment when our junk catches up with us, when our sins catch up with us and sometimes it’s easier to run upstairs than face the truth.”

(a) What does he mean by that?

(b) How does God’s love for us help in that situation?

7. How does this video relate to the question of our security once we become a Christian?

8. Rob Bell repeats this phrase a number of times: “Nothing we can ever do could make God love us less.”
Read Rom 8:31-39.

Context: Paul explains the gospel in the first 7 chapters. In chs 5-8 he writes about freedom from the wrath of God, freedom from the power of sin, freedom from the law and freedom from death. Paul begins to write about the Holy Spirit in chapter 8 and how he helps us live in between being saved and finally being glorified.

Considering Rob Bell’s repeated phrase “Nothing you could ever do would make God love you less” . . .

(a) how does this relate to whether we succeed or fail?

(b) does it matter whether we succeed or fail?

(c) what matters to God?

To finish

9. (a) Where does our success sit amongst your priorities?

(b) Why did you put it there?

Study 3, Success, 2 Cor 11:16-12:10

Getting started

1. How do you feel when you succeed?



2. How do you feel when you fail?



Bible

3. Read 2 Cor 11:16-12:6.
Context: Paul has defended himself against criticisms of ill conduct, not being reliable, not allowing payment for his services, not having letters of commendation, incompetence, inferior preaching, weakness, not boasting and his timidity in person but boldness by letter. He has appealed to the Corinthians to be generous in their giving to other churches. He has given wise counsel on church discipline, the ministry of the Spirit, associations with other gods, repentance, encouragement, warnings about the “super apostles” and, through all this, Paul stresses the importance and relevance of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

(a) Why is Paul boasting?

(b) Do we boast of our successes or our failures? Why/why not?

(c) Which is Paul boasting about – his successes or failures? Why?

Though **boasting** about yourself is most un-Australian and the slightest whiff we get of someone big-noting themselves causes us to cringe or accuse the boastful one as big-headed, it was not uncommon in the ancient world. In the culture of Paul's day, it was customary to boast of your achievements, whether they be military, political or otherwise - done without even a hint of embarrassment. People would try to outdo one another and great long lists of achievements were depicted in household murals or written about in epic detail. It is with this in mind that we need to come to Paul's discussion of boasting. If he is to be judged by the criteria of his opponents, he is left with no alternative but to boast a little himself (2 Cor 11:18) Since those in the Corinthian church are being swayed by the boasting of others, Paul presents his own 'achievements' to his readers, though we will see that his boasting is markedly different.

From 2 Corinthians Paul Drops A Line by Sarah Jones p 30.

[Paul] is listing his achievements; he is boasting; he is celebrating all his triumphs; and this one [2 Cor 11:32-33] is the last and greatest of them all. Only (and this is the point of the whole passage) *he is boasting of all the wrong things*. And his escape from Damascus was the climax of the list.

From Paul for Everyone 2 Corinthians by Tom Wright pp 126-127.

4. Read 2 Cor 12:7-10.

(a) Why does Paul “delight in weaknesses” (2 Cor 12:10)?

(b) Why are weaknesses good for us?

(c) Should we admit to our weaknesses? Why/why not?

Paul is speaking of the extraordinary and lavish spiritual experiences he has had, but in the same breath he speaks of his ‘thorn in the flesh’. He couldn’t simply enjoy living on a higher plane than everyone else; that might easily have made him too exalted. He might have become proud. He might have thought he could boast . . .

. . . Which is of course the point. This is the climax of his own ‘boasting’ list, which he has carefully constructed in such a way as to pull the rug out from under the ‘boasting’ which the rival teachers have been indulging in at Corinth. Not content with the teasing parody of standard social boasting in chapter 11, Paul now comes to the heart of the matter. The other teachers have placed great emphasis on spiritual experiences, on the wonderful things they have seen in visions and revelations, on the divine or angelic words they have heard. ‘Ordinary’ Christians would be in awe of them. Surely they must be super-spiritual, to have that kind of experience! Surely (they will have thought) such people must have been lifted beyond the condition of folk like ourselves! And so Paul takes it upon himself to show how even the most exalted spiritual experiences are to be understood within the framework of the gospel. . . .

Now at last Paul is allowed, it seems, to reveal a direct word that he has received from God, but it isn’t a word that will let him or anyone else become puffed up in their own self-importance. Instead, it is one of the most comforting, reassuring, healing and steadying ‘words of the Lord’ ever recorded: ‘My grace is enough for you; my power comes to perfection in weakness.’ This is, after all, the same lesson he was trying to teach the Corinthians at the beginning of the first letter. In a sense, it is the underlying lesson he has been trying to teach them all through. ‘When I am weak, then I am strong.’ God’s power and human power are not only not the same thing; often the second has to be knocked out of the way altogether for the first to shine through as God desires and intends.

From Paul for Everyone 2 Corinthians by Tom Wright pp 130-133.

(d) Usually in our society the strong are successful and the weak are failures.

Is this idea contradicted by Paul? Why/why not?

(e) Does knowing Jesus have any bearing on facing up to our weaknesses and failures? How?

(f) Where does this leave us with the idea of “success”?

5. Is God concerned about what we achieve (i.e. our success) or who we are and how we do things?
Read the following passages before answering.

Read Micah 6:6-8.

Context: Micah's message is for Samaria and Jerusalem, the capital cities of Israel and Judah. He comes down hard on idolatry, the oppression of the poor and bad leadership. Amidst the Assyrian siege, Micah has a vision for the future where all nations will flock to a new Jerusalem and a deliverer will come from Bethlehem. Back home the people cannot appease God with their many sacrifices, instead, Micah tells them what God requires.

With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly^[a] with your God.

Read Matt 5:14-16.

Context: Soon after gathering his first disciples Jesus gives the Sermon on the Mount (Matt chs 5-7). Rather than teaching a new set of rules, Jesus tells his people who they are and how they are to live.

You are the light of the world. A town built on a hill cannot be hidden. Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl. Instead they put it on its stand, and it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.

Read 2 Cor 5:16-17

Context: Paul writes to the Corinthians to answer a number of objections and give advice on how to behave. They are no longer living the Greco-Roman lifestyle but they are a new creation.

So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!

Read Eph 1:3-8

Context: Paul begins his letter to the Ephesians by describing what God has given them and made them.

Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ. For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us for adoption to sonship through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will to the praise of his glorious grace which he has freely given us in the One he loves. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, in accordance with the riches of God's grace that he lavished on us.

Is God concerned about what we achieve (i.e. our success) or who we are and how we do things?
Give reasons for your answer.

To finish

6. Considering these 3 studies, what is the place of success in the life of a Christian?