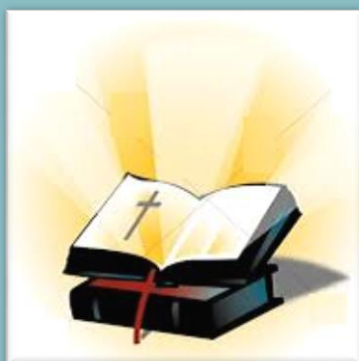


Leadership and success



"The first shall be last and the last shall be first."

Matthew 19:29-30, 20:15-16

How is success measured?

The desire to succeed is universal. People the world over have a strong desire to achieve success. But how is it measured?

If you are a fisherman, you might choose the size of your catch or the profit from your sales. If you are an athlete, you will probably choose your finishing time or number of wins. If you are a football team manager, you might look at the final score or your position in the league. If you are a teacher, you might consider the exam results of your students. In all of these examples, success is measured in numbers. In the world of management people talk about key performance indicators (KPIs), things that can be measured and compared with targets.

But life is not always so simple. Was the painter Van Gough successful? Certainly not in his own lifetime. He suffered from mental illness, depression and poverty. He produced over 900 paintings yet sold hardly any. He would trade his paintings with

other artists for food. In the end he committed suicide. And yet, today his paintings sell for many millions of pounds and he is considered to be one of the most influential figures in modern art. His is certainly an extreme example, and not one we would wish to imitate, but he does teach us that when asking the big question about a "successful life," the *legacy* we leave must be part of the answer.

So how should a pastor or Christian leader evaluate his or her success? Popular culture places a high premium on numbers, and it is very easy to allow this type of thinking to colour our approach to success in ministry. So, the number of people attending Sunday services, the number of programmes, the number of conversions to the faith, the income from offerings could be taken as measures of success. Would that be correct?

To answer this question, we need to turn to our Bibles. How does God view success? How did Jesus view success? How did Paul view success?

We know that God often views things very differently from us.

*"For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,"
declares the Lord.*

*"As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts."*

Isaiah 55:8-9

It's a sobering thought, that Jesus, who did experience the "success" of having large crowds following him and performing mighty deeds, made strenuous efforts to avoid popular acclaim, and was in the end despised, rejected and crucified. For him success (or greatness) was something very different.

***“...whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,
and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—
just as the Son of Man did not come to be served,
but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”***

Matthew 20:26-28

Speaking of his own life and ministry, Jesus knew that the whole point of his life was to give his life as a ransom for many. His crowning successful achievement was to allow himself to be crucified for many, indeed the world. This is a very different kind of success to that proclaimed by glamour of wealth and popular acclaim. And it is very different from the “big car”, “big house”, “big bank balance” so prevalent in the “prosperous” developed nations and aspired to elsewhere. Many of the parables spoken by Jesus, envisage a great future reversal.

“The first shall be last and the last shall be first.”

Matthew 19:29-30, 20:15-16

For Paul, as for Jesus, to be successful was to accomplish the will of God. In that sense it is a personal thing. To be successful we need to know what the will of God is for our lives.

***“For we are God's handiwork,
created in Christ Jesus to do good works,
which God prepared in advance for us to do.”***

Ephesians 2:10

According to Paul, each of us is a “work in progress”. God is doing something in us and through us. He has prepared things for us to do. He describes them as “good works”. Our part is to discover what they are and then with His help – do them. We do these things, not to earn God’s approval or favour but because God has prepared a “to-do-list”, tailor made to fit our particular abilities and opportunities. Whether these things are big or small, visible or invisible, appreciated or unappreciated, effective or ineffective, received or rejected, if they have been prepared by God, we should do them.

Paul taught that our works will be tested. Those things that God planned for us to do and were done, will be rewarded. He refers to these as gold, silver and precious stones. Those things that God had not prepared, no matter how splendid and magnificent they seemed at the time will simply be exposed as worthless. He refers to these as wood, hay and straw.

***“By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as a wise builder,
and someone else is building on it.
But each one should build with care.***

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

***If anyone builds on this foundation using
gold, silver, costly stones,
wood, hay or straw,***

their work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light.

It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each person’s work.

If what has been built survives, the builder will receive a reward.

***If it is burned up, the builder will suffer loss
but yet will be saved—even though only as one escaping through the flames.”***

1 Corinthians 3: 10-15

In this illustration, Paul is thinking specifically about church planting and church building. He is very aware that his own contribution is to lay a foundation on which others will build. Different people will make their contribution but ultimately it is God who gives the increase. So, success if we think of it as those things that will stand the test of fire and be rewarded by God, only comes when we do those things that are given us to do by God. Good ideas, however good they may seem at the time, are not the same as God ideas. Heeding this truth should influence us to proceed cautiously and prayerfully with our plans, especially if they involve other people and resources.

If this scripture provides us with a sobering truth, it also provides us with an encouraging one. If we are moving forward with something that God has given us to do and we are meeting opposition, resistance or challenges then there is great incentive to keep going and not to give up because God is taking note and he will reward us. There is a great deal in the Bible about patience and perseverance. As the writer to the Hebrews reminds us, speaking in the context of public insult, persecution and deprivation:

***“So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.
You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God,
you will receive what he has promised.”***

Hebrews 10:35-36

Do we have to wait until that day when our works will be tested by fire in order to be confident that we are on the right lines? Certainly, that will be the ultimate vindication. But we can have grounds for confidence in the here and now. Paul teaches in Ephesians, again relating to leadership and ministry in the church.

***“And it was He who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets,
some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers,
to equip the saints for works of service
and to build up the body of Christ,
until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God,
as we mature to the full measure of the stature of Christ.”***

Ephesians 4:11-12

Here the outworking of success, (the KPIs to use the modern terminology), is that God’s people are

- equipped for works of service,
- progressing towards unity
- maturing in Christ-like character

If you, as a leader, are passing on your knowledge and understanding to enable people to serve God themselves, perhaps involving less of your input; if as a result of your influence there is less conflict and more working together; if you can see the people you are teaching maturing in Godly character, then you can be confident that you are on track for “silver, gold and precious stones.”

Paul was especially mindful of these things towards the end of his life. Death was not something he feared. He had a profound sense that he had completed the task that God had set him:

“... and the time for my departure is near.

I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness,

which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day

—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing.”

1 Timothy 4:6-8

Using the images of a “good fight” and a “race” he testified that he had come to the end. He had kept the faith and shared it with others. Job done! And yet there was more. He could not possibly have known that future generations would collect the letters he had written on his travels and from prison, and that millions in all parts of the world would read them and receive benefit.

In the same way, those of us who follow in his footsteps, have no way of knowing in the here and now, what our legacy will be either. Perhaps there are some amongst us who will be like Van Gogh or Paul, having a far greater impact after we have died, through the people we have influenced?

A final point. There is one group of people who are especially successful according to the book of Revelation – the martyrs. Judged according to the wisdom of this world, they may be seen to have “failed”. Not so, they are the “overcomers”. They remind us that more important than *staying alive*, is accomplishing the will of God for our lives which is the heart of true success.

May God grant you success!

Chris Moffett, Trust Director