

# Success and failure

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## Success

Success is a very elusive thing, because it is so difficult to define. In trying to explain how society defines it, Denis Haack, writing in his book *The Success Factor*, says 'Success means attaining some some measure of money, fame, self-fulfilment and power – and looking the part'.

It is so easy for us to adopt society's definition of success and to work towards it. Another thing that seems to be 'the done thing' is to worship the process, sometimes leading up to a ridiculous situation. Here is an example that you may have heard about, which Rob Parsons quotes in *The Heart of Success*:

*A US businessman was at the pier of a small coastal Mexican fishing village, when a small boat with just one fisherman docked. Inside the boat were several large yellow-fin tuna. The American complimented the Mexican on the quality of his fish and asked how long it took to catch them.*

*The Mexican replied, 'Only a little while, señor.' The American asked why he didn't stay out longer and catch more fish. The Mexican said that he had enough to supply his family's immediate needs.*

*The American then asked, 'But what do you do with the rest of your time?'*

*The fisherman said, 'I play with my children, take siesta with my wife Maria, stroll into the village each evening where I sip wine and play guitar with my amigos. I have a full and busy life, señor.'*

*The American smiled, 'I am a Harvard MBA - that's a degree in business studies – I could help you. You should spend more time fishing and with the proceeds buy a bigger boat, with the proceeds from the bigger boat you could buy several boats, eventually you would have a fleet. Then instead of selling your catch to a middleman you would sell directly to the processor eventually opening your own cannery. You would control the product, processing and distribution.*

*'You would, of course, need to leave this small coastal fishing village and move to Mexico City, then Los Angeles, and eventually New York City where you would run your expanding enterprise.'*

*The Mexican fisherman asked, 'But, señor, how long will all this take?'*

*The American replied, 'Fifteen to twenty years.'*

*'But what then, señor?'*

*The American laughed, 'That's the best part. When the time is right you sell your stock to the public and become very rich. You would make millions.'*

*'Millions, señor? But then what?'*

*'Then you would retire, move to small coastal fishing village, where you could sleep late, fish a little, play with your kids, take siesta with your wife Maria, and stroll to the village in the evenings, where you could sip wine and play your guitar with your amigos.'*

*With just a hint of a twinkle in his eye, the fisherman said, 'Señor – are these business degrees hard to get?'*

Sometimes, things really do get ridiculous if you do not think through your processes and definitions.

So, in this situation, what about Christians?

## **'Christian' views of success**

There are three sort of prevalent views of success among Christians too.

Firstly, there are those who follow the principles of Prosperity theology. This says that the Bible specifically mentions success, for e.g.:

Joshua 1: 7.8:

*Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. [8] Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.*

3 John 2:

*Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well*

Psalm 1: 1-3

*Blessed is the man*

*who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked  
or stand in the way of sinners  
or sit in the seat of mockers.*

*[2] But his delight is in the law of the LORD,  
and on his law he meditates day and night.*

*[3] He is like a tree planted by streams of water,  
which yields its fruit in season*

*and whose leaf does not wither.  
Whatever he does prospers..*

Therefore, the assumption is that if you do something, you will be prosperous. However, this is a little difficult to mesh with Christians who suffer loss or problems, and so, often, the person concerned is blamed for the situation – either they did not have enough faith, or did not do something they should have done (prayed / claim promises / memorise verses).

The next group is from the other extreme, and they are those who proclaim, the gospel of Simple Living. They too, depend on selected Bible verses – especially the ones which describe God as the God of the poor, and they will create guilt in us if we are enjoying life. The assumption here is that we cannot enjoy life, as long as there is one person in need in the world, i.e. we can never enjoy anything good in life. Now a lot of what they say is true, but there is a lot of false guilt attached to those who embrace this view of success without comment.

These are the main groups, and they most often do not accept each other's positions at all. They often don't even recognise that they share each other's Christian faith! While I think there are elements of truth in each position, they are both wrong, because they tend to treat the measures of success – presence of absence – as measures of persons and their spirituality.

The third group is the group which claims that there are few things we should do as Christians – be upright, work hard, and be spiritual – and then, all that follows will be prosperity – because God will bless us. These are those who proclaim Success by Default. This is unsatisfactory, because it gives us an inadequate position for life – it is unclear, and no one is sure when, for instance 'work hard' will begin to mean 'join the rat race'.

## Christ's view of success

We need to think more in terms of our world view, and the way we think of God, when we think of success. God expects us to be faithful to him, even to the point of death. To the Christians in Ephesus he gives as part of his message, the following:

Revelation 2:10:

*Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life*

That seems to be a funny kind of measure of success, especially when placed side-by-side with the standards of the world. But we worship and follow a God who does things a little differently to the world. God wants us, to be faithful to the really important things. And they will be in keeping with his commands

## Failure

So much for success – if so, what about failure?

What types of failure do we face?

- Studies
- Relationships
- Work
- Fulfillment
- Even, in church

All of these are failures in the eyes of the world – and we all want to avoid them, if we can. We have, at the back of our minds, a feeling that good Christians do not fail. This is reinforced by the use of the phrase ‘victorious Christian living’ – somehow, we seem to think that victory is our only legitimate experience.

Let me ask you, ‘What do you fear most?’. It seems to me that the fear of failure is why students follow multiple courses, want to study at the expense of all the other experiences that university life offers, and generally, want to make it in life. In most Christian communities, an inquiry about someone, or their children would bring what is considered to be the ‘proper’ response – ‘Oh he/she is doing very well’, which, translated, means, ‘He/she is very rich, has great reputation, has a paying job’ etc.

But, what do we do with failure. I have a history of a train wreck of a career in medical school, but my failure in the repeat exam of my finals was really the worst experience – all my batchmates were doctors, and going on into internship, and I was still a student for another year. During the time of depression that followed, I was supported by members of the Medical Students’ Christian Fellowship (MSCF), and by my friend Priyan Dias, who wrote to me from London where he was studying for his PhD. In his letter, he reminded me that people have short memories and that whatever I felt now, would in rapidly increasing numbers be forgotten by my acquaintances and friends. That is absolutely true – failure is mostly temporary in the eyes of the world, and that is very important if you are a failure.

The second thing that we need to remember is that, if we look at the Bible, for people who were failures – almost everyone we meet is an abysmal failure – even the ones who are reputed to be the greatest biblical characters.

## Biblical failures

- Adam and Eve
- Cain
- Noah
- Abraham
- Isaac
- Jacob
- Joseph
- Moses
- David
- Elijah
- Jonah
- Matthew
- Peter
- Paul

The list is endless...

So our second lesson is that God is a specialist with restoring failed people! And God can do that with us.

So, let me remind you of the picture of Christ's ministry, found in Philippians 2:

*Philippians 2: 5-8*

*[5] Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:*

*[6] Who, being in very nature God,  
did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,*

*[7] but made himself nothing,  
taking the very nature of a servant,  
being made in human likeness.*

*[8] And being found in appearance as a man,  
he humbled himself  
and became obedient to death--  
even death on a cross!*

*[9] Therefore God exalted him to the highest place  
and gave him the name that is above every name,*

*[10] that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

*[11] and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.*

This picture of success seems to be rather strange and totally out of sync with what the world teaches. It is actually a classic picture of a failed person. But, we know that Jesus, the world's most successful person, had a message, and a method that raised ridicule among people living around him. So, we need to think again about belief systems and methods that seem very acceptable to the world, but are not to God.

We need to choose to be what we were made to be – that is what success is about: to be more human. That is what Jesus was, and I hope we will choose that too, otherwise, in the pursuit of a false sense of success, we might lose the real important things.

## Practicalities

So, the practical outworkings could be in two areas:

### Types of failure

- A. The first thing to do would be to identify the types of failure that we are experiencing. My feeling is that we experience two types of failure:

- 1. Due to our laziness, carelessness and stupidity.***

The only way to tackle this is to deal with our laziness, carelessness and stupidity. But our attitude should remind us that failure is not permanent, and that we can get up and go, with a big hand from God.

- 2. Due to 'persecution' or other reasons, not directly due to bad decisions, etc.***

In this case, we must look to the example of Christ, and know that what is important is commitment, and obedience to him. Our crown is in the future.

- B. The next thing that I would like to bring to your attention is the fact that we live in a society filled with failures, and Christians should be the ones who give them support.

Do we look out for those who are ostracized because of failure. Sometimes we just have to 'walk across the room' to reach out to them, and our Christian communities in the campuses and in offices should be the ones who help these people whom others reject.

Will we make a difference?