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Success / Luke 12:16–21

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How do you know when you are successful? Is it when you reach a certain income level or earn that long-awaited promotion? Is it when your children turn out well, when you are finally able to retire comfortably, or when others admire you because of your accomplishments? Perhaps it is when you achieve a healthier weight and lifestyle. Most of us spend our lives pursuing success, yet very few of us ever stop to ask a more important question: *How should success actually be defined?* I remember how exciting—and intimidating—it was to attend university. I had moved to a strange town and joined hundreds of other students preparing for what would become the foundation of our future careers. I chose a double major in Finance and Economics because I hoped to work as either a banker or an accountant. While many students selected what were commonly called “bird courses”—classes known for lighter workloads and easier grades—I tended to choose courses that complemented my major and challenged me intellectually. One year I enrolled in a course called Queuing Theory because of its emphasis on statistics and its reputation for being exceptionally difficult. When the final exam arrived, I quickly discovered that the course had lived up to that reputation. As I worked through the questions, I realized this was far beyond anything I had anticipated. By the time I handed in the exam, I was relieved simply to be finished.

A few weeks later the professor returned the results. Before handing out the exams, he spent nearly an hour explaining how disappointed he was with the class's performance. With every passing minute our sense of dread increased. Then he distributed the exams. To our surprise, the grades were not nearly as bad as we expected. The professor could see the confusion on our faces—especially since every page of our exams was covered in red ink highlighting

mistakes. He then explained that the exam had proven to be far more difficult than intended and that nearly everyone had struggled. As a result, he applied a bell curve to adjust the grades to what would be considered normal results for a university course. The relief that swept through that classroom was unforgettable. Every student suddenly realized that what had appeared to be failure was not as disastrous as it first seemed.

The reality is that most of us have been living under a bell curve our entire lives. From childhood we are evaluated, compared, measured, ranked, and graded. In school we receive percentages and report cards. In sports we compare statistics and trophies. In the workplace we compare salaries, promotions, and accomplishments. Society constantly encourages us to move higher on the bell curve—to become smarter, wealthier, stronger, and more successful than those around us. The story of *The Little Engine That Could* tells us that with enough effort we can always improve our position and climb higher [1]. This is often one of the reasons parents encourage their children to participate in music lessons, sports teams, volunteer opportunities, and academic programs. The assumption is simple: the more skills we develop, the higher we will climb. Yet we all know that reality is more complicated. No matter how hard we work, not everyone succeeds at everything. There are winners and losers; if there is a front half of the bell curve, there must also be a back half [2]. This morning I want to challenge us to think about success from God's perspective. What if heaven does not use the same bell curve that the world uses? What if the people our culture considers successful are not necessarily the people God considers successful? As we turn to God's Word, we will discover that true success is not measured by wealth, popularity, influence, status, or achievement, but by knowing God, trusting God, and faithfully doing His will. We will also see that every good gift, every ability, every opportunity, and every measure of fruitfulness ultimately come from the gracious hand of God. In other words, the question is not whether we rank highly on the world's bell curve; the question is whether we are rich toward God ([Luke 12:21](#)).

# The World's Definition of Success Always Leaves Someone Empty

Too often people foolishly convince themselves that happiness and fulfillment can be found in the accumulation of money, fame, power, possessions, and even good health. How often do we look upon the lives of others and wish we could walk a mile in their shoes? At the very least, we seek what comedian Jerry Seinfeld called "little islands of relief in what's often a painful existence" [3]. Few people have pursued worldly success as thoroughly as King Solomon. If anyone had the resources, intelligence, and opportunity to discover whether success could satisfy the human heart, it was him. Solomon built the magnificent Temple of the Lord ([1 Kings 5-6](#)), a structure that stood as one of the wonders of the ancient world. Yet thirteen years later he completed a palace for himself that was even larger ([1 Kings 7:1](#)) [4]. He engineered extensive construction projects, including an elaborate irrigation system and a dam in the Urtas Valley, where reservoirs below could hold more than 45 million gallons of water [5].

He built houses, vineyards, orchards, parks, and gardens filled with every kind of fruit tree ([Ecclesiastes 2:4-6](#)). He accumulated vast herds and flocks, determined to possess more livestock than any king before him [6]. His royal table was so lavish that it fed nearly 30,000 people with the finest foods of the land on an almost daily basis [7]. His wealth enabled him to build entire cities ([2 Chronicles 8:1-6](#)), and silver became as common in Jerusalem as stones in the street ([2 Chronicles 9:27](#)). He pursued pleasure through wine and surrounded himself with seven hundred wives and three hundred concubines ([1 Kings 11](#); [Ecclesiastes 2:8](#)). In every category by which the world measures success—wealth, power, achievement, influence, pleasure, and prestige—Solomon stood at the very top of the bell curve. Yet after reaching heights that few people could even imagine, he arrived at a startling conclusion:

**Ecclesiastes 1:2-3 NIV**

“Meaningless! Meaningless!”

says the Teacher.

“Utterly meaningless!

Everything is meaningless.”

What do people gain from all their labors

at which they toil under the sun?

Solomon climbed higher than anyone else on the world's ladder of success, only to discover that the ladder had been leaning against the wrong wall. He pursued everything this world promises will satisfy the human heart, yet in the end he concluded that true fulfillment had still eluded him. The world's definition of success had made him famous, wealthy, powerful, and admired—but it could not make him whole.

People often dream of what it must be like to attain the success of the rich, famous, and powerful. Have you ever said to yourself, "If I only had \_\_\_\_\_, then I would be happy?" Solomon pursued happiness through earthly success only to discover that the pleasure gained from accumulation is temporary and quickly fades [8]. As one author observed, "You may get all you ever wanted, but you will not want it when you get it" [9]. Turning to pleasure, possessions, or achievement to find meaning in life is ultimately an exercise in futility because at best they provide only a temporary distraction from the deeper longing of the human heart. Furthermore, everything we acquire is temporary—here today and gone tomorrow.

In the Parable of the Rich Fool, Jesus tells of a farmer whose land produced such an abundant harvest that his existing barns could not contain it ([Luke 12:16-17](#)). His solution was to tear down his barns and build larger ones so that

he might store his surplus wealth ([Luke 12:18](#)). Confident that his future was secure, he looked forward to years of ease and self-indulgence. Yet God called him a fool because that very night his life would be required of him, and all that he had accumulated would belong to someone else ([Luke 12:20](#)). His pursuit of success was entirely self-centered and deeply rooted in greed [10]. The tragedy was not that he possessed wealth, but that his wealth possessed him. He spent his life storing up treasures on earth while neglecting the treasures that endure forever. This is why the world's definition of success ultimately fails. It is earth-centered, self-centered, and detached from the God who gives every good gift. True meaning and lasting joy are not found in wealth, fame, power, or achievement, but in being "rich toward God" ([Luke 12:21](#)). Success, therefore, is not measured by how much we accumulate for ourselves, but by how faithfully we use what God has entrusted to us for His glory. In the bell curve of heaven, the greatest success is not found in having more, but in belonging to Christ and faithfully serving Him.

## Much of What we Call Success is Actually a Gift

### **James 1:17 NIV**

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.

The world teaches us that success belongs to those who work the hardest, push the furthest, and refuse to quit. While Scripture certainly commends diligence, it repeatedly reminds us that success is never the result of human effort alone. Moses warned Israel not to say, "My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me" (Deut. 8:17), but to remember that it is God who gives the ability to produce wealth (Deut. 8:18). Likewise, the psalmist declares:

### **Psalms 75:6-7 NIV**

No one from the east or the west

or from the desert can exalt themselves.

It is God who judges:

He brings one down, he exalts another.

Success, therefore, is never merely a human accomplishment. Promotion, opportunity, influence, and ability ultimately come from the sovereign hand of God. This truth extends beyond finances. Paul asks, “What do you have that you did not receive?” ([1 Cor. 4:7](#)). Every ability, opportunity, and accomplishment comes from God. James reminds us that “every good and perfect gift is from above” ([James 1:17](#)), while Paul teaches that even our competence comes from God ([2 Cor. 3:5](#)). The wisdom to learn, the strength to work, the health to labor, and the opportunities we enjoy are all gifts of divine grace. As [Philippians 2:13](#) reminds us, God works within us both to will and to act according to His good purpose.

This does not make effort unimportant. Scripture never encourages laziness. Rather, it teaches that our labor bears fruit only because God blesses it. [Psalm 127](#) declares that unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labor in vain. Paul himself worked tirelessly, yet he refused to take credit for the results, declaring, “I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me” ([1 Cor. 15:10](#)). The biblical balance is clear: we work diligently while recognizing that every success is ultimately God's gift. This truth changes how we define success. If success is God's gift, then it cannot be measured merely by wealth, fame, influence, or achievement. Scripture consistently measures success by faithfulness. God is not looking for the most talented servant but the faithful servant [12]. To achieve spiritual success, a believer must surrender personal ambitions and embrace God's plan [13]. Abraham, Noah, Nehemiah, David, and Paul all demonstrated this principle. What made them successful was not worldly recognition but faithful obedience to God.

God's standards of success differ radically from the world's. Jesus declared, “What is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God” ([Luke 16:15](#) KJV) [14]. The world celebrates wealth, status, power, popularity, and achievement, but God looks for faithfulness. While people often measure success by what a person possesses or accomplishes, God measures success by how faithfully a person uses what has been entrusted to them. In the Parable of the Talents, the master's praise was not reserved for the most gifted servant, but for the faithful servant. Whether entrusted with five talents, two talents, or one talent, each servant was responsible to faithfully steward what had been placed in his care. This truth radically changes how we view success. Success is not determined by how many gifts, opportunities, resources, or abilities we possess, but by what we do with what God has given us. Some believers are entrusted with great influence, while others serve quietly behind the scenes. Some are called to lead large ministries, while others faithfully serve a handful of people. Yet God does not compare His servants to one another. He simply calls each one to be faithful. In the bell curve of heaven, success is not measured by prominence but by obedience, not by recognition but by faithfulness. One day every believer longs to hear the same words from the Master: “Well done, good and faithful servant” ([Matt. 25:21](#)).

## Some of God’s Greatest Servants Never Looked Successful

Though God often equips His people with spiritual gifts and enables them to accomplish great things in His name, they frequently appear unsuccessful by the standards of the world. Scripture presents a striking contrast between worldly achievement and spiritual faithfulness. The heroes celebrated in [Hebrews 11](#) were not honored because they accumulated wealth, power, or influence, but because they remained faithful to God regardless of the cost. Some endured torture, imprisonment, mocking, beatings, and even death. Others wandered

through deserts and mountains, living in caves and hiding from their enemies. Yet God commended them for their faith, even though many never witnessed the fulfillment of the promises they had received ([Heb. 11:35-40](#)).

Consider some of the most faithful servants in Scripture. After his great victory over the prophets of Baal, Elijah fled into the wilderness fearing for his life and prayed that God would let him die ([1 Kings 19:1-18](#)). Jeremiah faithfully proclaimed God's Word for decades, yet his reward was ridicule, imprisonment, rejection, and suffering ([Jer. 20](#); [37:11-38:13](#)). Joseph was betrayed by his own brothers, stripped of his robe, and sold into slavery for twenty pieces of silver ([Gen. 37:23-36](#)). David spent years fleeing from Saul, hiding in caves, and at one point even pretending to be insane to escape death ([1 Sam. 21:10-15](#)). In [Psalm 142](#), he lamented that no one cared for his life and that he had nowhere to turn for refuge. The New Testament presents the same pattern. Paul endured imprisonments, beatings, stoning, shipwrecks, hunger, thirst, sleepless nights, and constant danger for the sake of Christ ([2 Cor. 11:23-28](#)). Stephen faithfully proclaimed the gospel and was rewarded with a hail of stones ([Acts 7:54-60](#)). John the Baptist courageously confronted sin and was beheaded in prison ([Matt. 14:1-12](#)). Even our Lord Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, declared that He had nowhere to lay His head ([Matt. 8:20](#)) and ultimately died the death of a criminal upon a Roman cross.

If these men were evaluated by the world's standards, many would be considered failures. They were mocked instead of celebrated, persecuted instead of promoted, and imprisoned instead of honored. Yet heaven views them very differently. God does not measure success by comfort, popularity, wealth, or recognition. He measures success by faithfulness. The world saw suffering servants; God saw faithful saints. The world saw apparent defeat; God saw eternal victory. Though they often appeared unsuccessful on earth, crowns of righteousness awaited them in heaven. Their lives remind us that true success is not found in receiving the applause of people, but in pleasing the One for whom they lived. As Asaph declared, "Whom have I in heaven but You? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides You" ([Ps. 73:25](#)). These men

understood a truth the world could never comprehend: God Himself was their reward. They did not measure success by what they possessed, but by whom they possessed. Their treasure was not earthly comfort, worldly recognition, or material wealth—it was the Lord Himself. In the bell curve of heaven, the most successful people are not those who have the most, but those who faithfully follow God and can honestly say, "God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" ([Ps. 73:26](#)).

## True Success is Being Rich Towards God

### **Luke 12:21 NIV**

“This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God.”

Success in the kingdom of God is not measured by the accumulation of wealth, status, achievements, or personal trophies. Rather, it is measured by being rich in faith, devotion, obedience, and service to the Lord [15]. The rich fool was not condemned because he possessed wealth, but because he valued his wealth more than the God who had provided it. His barns were full, but his soul was empty. Instead of using his blessings to honor God and serve others, he hoarded them for himself and imagined that material abundance could secure his future (Luke 12:16-20). Yet in a single night everything he had worked for was taken from him. Jesus' warning is clear: a person may be rich in the eyes of the world and yet be spiritually bankrupt before God.

Apostle Paul provides a striking contrast. Before coming to Christ, Paul possessed an impressive spiritual résumé. He was circumcised on the eighth day, an Israelite of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, and as for legalistic righteousness, faultless ([Phil. 3:4-6](#)). If anyone could boast in human accomplishments, it was Paul. Yet after encountering Christ on the road to Damascus, his entire understanding of success changed. He later wrote:

### **Philippians 3:7-8 NIV**

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ

Paul discovered that all his religious achievements, status, and accomplishments could never compare to knowing Jesus Christ. The things he once considered assets, he now regarded as worthless when compared to the surpassing value of a relationship with his Savior. The road to Damascus taught Paul what true success looked like from God's perspective. To be rich toward God is to treasure Him above everything else. It is to value Christ more than possessions, status, accomplishments, or recognition. It is to find your identity not in what you have achieved, but in whom you belong to [18].

This inward transformation naturally produces outward fruit. Those who are rich toward God view their possessions, abilities, and opportunities as tools for advancing His kingdom rather than treasures to be hoarded for themselves. Their generosity becomes evidence that their hearts have been captured by something greater. As Jesus taught, where our treasure is, there our heart will be also ([Matthew 6:21](#)). The person who treasures God will naturally invest in the things that matter to God [19]. This is why Paul instructed the wealthy to be "rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life" ([1 Tim. 6:18-19](#)). True life is not found in accumulating more, but in knowing God more. The greatest success in life is knowing Christ, loving Christ, obeying Christ, worshipping Christ, and remaining faithful to Christ. The most successful person in heaven may very well be someone the world never noticed, but whose heart was rich toward God.

## Jesus is the Perfect Picture of True Success

Jesus Christ is the perfect picture of true success because He lived entirely for the glory of His Father. The Apostle John tells us, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" ([John 1:1](#)). Though He was the divine Creator and sustainer of all things ([Col. 1:16](#)), Christ did not cling to the privileges of heaven. Instead, He humbled Himself, took upon Himself the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death—even the death of the cross ([Phil. 2:5-11](#)). The One who deserved all glory willingly laid it aside in order to accomplish the Father's will and provide salvation for sinners. The world measures success by gaining power, wealth, recognition, and comfort. Jesus pursued none of these things. He owned no palace, accumulated no fortune, held no political office, and often had no place to lay His head. Yet no life has ever been more successful than His. In the Garden of Gethsemane, as He faced the horrors of the cross and His sweat became "as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground" ([Luke 22:44](#)), Jesus prayed, "Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done" ([Luke 22:42](#)). At that moment He revealed the true measure of success—not getting your will done but gladly submitting to God's will.

This is the lesson of the bell curve of heaven. Success is not measured by how much money we earn, how many possessions we accumulate, how many people admire us, or how highly we rank in the eyes of the world. Success is measured by faithfulness to God. It is found in seeking first His kingdom ([Matt. 6:33](#)), being rich toward Him ([Luke 12:21](#)), and joyfully saying, "Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven" ([Matt. 6:10](#)). The good news of the gospel is that our standing before God is not based upon our accomplishments, but upon Christ's accomplishment on the cross. He purchased our salvation with His own blood and calls us to follow Him. Therefore, let us not spend our lives chasing treasures that are here today and gone tomorrow. Instead, let us use every gift, opportunity, and blessing God has entrusted to us for His glory. For in the bell curve of heaven, the greatest success is not found in exalting ourselves, but in

bowing our knees before Christ and hearing one day, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant" ([Matt. 25:21](#)).

One day we will all stand before God. On that day, heaven's bell curve will not ask how much money we earned, how many promotions we received, or how many people admired us. It will reveal whether we were faithful with what God entrusted to us.

"Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

#### Footnotes

[1] Sam Chan, *Evangelism in a Skeptical World*, page 198.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] Quoted in Lavery, *Seinfeld*, page 158.

[4] Daniel L. Akin and Jonathan Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Ecclesiastes* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2016), [Ec 2:1-11](#).

[5] J. Stafford Wright, "Ecclesiastes," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 1156.

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] Daniel L. Akin and Jonathan Akin, *Exalting Jesus in Ecclesiastes* (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 2016), [Ec 2:1-11](#).

[8] *Ibid.*

[9] *Ibid.*

- [10] Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 344.
- [11] Andrew Wilson, “It’s All Gift: What If Success Doesn’t Come from Hard Work after All?,” *Christianity Today* (Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today International, 2014), 58:7:34.
- [12] Harold Spellman, “The Secret of Success ([Joshua 1:1–9](#); [1 Corinthians 4:1, 2](#)),” in *The Pentecostal Minister Sermon Resource Manual*, ed. Daniel Boling and Bill George (Pathway Press, 1999), 6:91–92.
- [13] Larry Burkett, *Using Your Money Wisely: Biblical Principles Under Scrutiny* (Chicago, IL: Moody Publishers, 1990).
- [14] Vernon C. Grounds, “Faith to Face Failure, or What’s so Great about Success?,” *Christianity Today* (Washington, D.C.; Carol Stream, IL: Christianity Today, 1977), 22:5:341.
- [15] John G. Butler, *Jesus Christ: His Parables*, Studies of the Savior (Clinton, IA: LBC Publications, 2002), 3:422.
- [16] John Piper, *Sermons from John Piper (2000–2014)* (Minneapolis, MN: Desiring God, 2014).
- [17] Homer A. Kent Jr., “Philippians,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary: Ephesians through Philemon*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, vol. 11 (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 140.
- [18] John G. Butler, *Jesus Christ: His Parables*, Studies of the Savior (Clinton, IA: LBC Publications, 2002), 3:422.
- [19] Cynthia Heald, *Dwelling in His Presence: 30 Days of Intimacy with God* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2009), 58.

