

What is success?

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Date: 29 August 2021

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- [0 : 0 0] It's Philippians 2 verses 19 to 30 and that's page 1180 if you've got a church Bible. I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you so that I too may be cheered by news of you.
- For I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. They all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel.
- I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also. I've thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, your messenger and minister to my need.
- For he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. Indeed he was ill near to death. But God had mercy on him and not only on him but on me also.
- Lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. I am the more eager to send him therefore that you may rejoice at seeing him again and that I may be less anxious. So receive him in the Lord with all joy and honour such men for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.
- [1 : 3 7] Thank you. Well good morning. Thanks very much for reading. Our time together this morning kicked off a little mini-series on success in the Christian life.
- Now I know what you're probably thinking. Benji, you've literally only just arrived. Do you not think it's a bit presumptuous to talk to us about success? Maybe develop a bit of a track record first.
- But I hope this really will be useful for us to think about as we come out of lockdown church and begin a new year of church life and ministry together. And whilst this series is somewhat thematic, we're going to be limiting ourselves this week and next to two books, Philippians and 2 Timothy respectively, to see what those letters have to say to us about success in the Christian life.
- This will include, I'm sorry to say, some flicking to different verses. So make sure to have your thumbs ready and warmed up. Why don't I pray as we begin.
- Dear Lord, the Lord Jesus reigns. He has sat down and his work is complete. Thank you that he is king over all. Please, Father, would you help us to love him and know him more through this time together.
- [2 : 5 6] Amen. The question I want us to be thinking about this morning is this. What does success for a Christian look like?
- And in a room like this, not to flatter you too much, I'm sure though that many of you are no strangers to success. Whether that's going to be academic, financial, on the school pitch, or family related.
- However, I want us this morning to think specifically about what it means to be successful as a Christian. And I actually think to define Christian success is a little bit more complicated than you might initially think.

Do we determine our Christian success by the size of our church? The faith of our children? Our perceived success at fighting that particular vice or sin we struggle with?

Or the number of people that attend our Christian union at school? What are the categories by which the Lord will judge our lives on the final day? What will result in him saying, well done, good and faithful servant?

[4 : 0 0] And this question I think has become even more significant within our circles. In light of the abuse carried out by the likes of Fletcher, Smythe, and others. Some of you might have seen it in the newspaper over the last six months or so.

Someone like Fletcher, who was a leader in the Church of England, seemed to epitomize success in the Christian walk. They were a powerful personality, in many ways a brilliant exegete of the Bible.

They could boast many converts, many one-to-ones with men discipled, including coincidentally my father. And they doubled or tripled their congregations during their ministry life.

And they seemed to care, I think it's fair to say, about all the right things. All the things that we care about here as well. Commitment to the truth about what the Bible is teaching as the word of God.

And yet they went so terribly wrong.

[5 : 0 1] And I think the reason such men were able to thrive was because they and we, and by we I mean wider circles, have a warped view of success in the Christian life.

And I hope this mini-series will go some way in helping us value the right things. And to illustrate this, I think this question of what is success in the Christian life is one that all of us, whatever we're involved in, will implicitly think about all the time.

When you're in small group or youth group, what is it that you determine when you finish makes it successful? Or when you lead a study, how do you determine what it is that made it good or not?

Or a success or a failure? Or when you talk about your Christian leaders, and please refrain from putting me into that camp, what categories do you use to determine whether or not they are successful?

Do you talk about their exegesis or the power of their personality? Or indeed, when you're listening to a sermon, what makes it a success? Is it the power of its exegesis, the eloquence and lexicon of the preacher?

[6 : 0 5] I looked up the word lexicon this morning. Or the number of non-believers who heard it? And as you look back on the last year of your walk with the Lord, and you think about the ways in which you've tried to honour and serve him, how do you determine if you've been successful in doing so?

What actually would it even look like to have had a successful year in regards to your walk with the Lord? There are two common categories, I think, as I was thinking about this, that we often use and fall into to determine our success as a Christian, and they are numbers and faithfulness.

Now, these can both take many forms. If we judge success by numbers, it might be the size of our church or the size of our small group, the number of people we're reading with or the number of people we've invited to our non-Christian event at our Christian union at school.

However, I think this thinking can seep into a much more personal level as well. How many times have I prayed this week? How many times have I read my Bible this week?

How many times have I given in to that particular sin this week? How much have I tithed? And I think that can be the true in reverse, right? How many times have I forgotten to pray this week? How many times have I forgotten to read my Bible this week?

[7 : 18] The tendency to judge success by numbers is everywhere. Faithfulness, too, as a barometer can have many guises. Now, up until recently, this was how I determined success, and in many ways, I want to reassure you, this is a far better way to determine success than numbers.

We often hear that all the preacher or small group leader has to do is be faithful, and God will do the rest. And this is based on some very good theological principles.

Namely, we believe, all of us, that God does the work of salvation and growth, not us. He does it through his word, and we are simply faithful carriers of that word. All true. But I think both definitions, when you take a closer look of success, fall flat.

Numbers, I hope, obviously, is a poor barometer of success when the gospel is determined by grace. Have a look with me at Philippians 4, verse 14 to 15.

This is Paul. Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble, and you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving except you only.

[8 : 31] If Paul had determined success by numbers, he would have given up long before writing this letter. And faithfulness, at least in the way it is often characterized in our circles, does not help us go far enough, I think, in terms of what Paul is driving at in terms of success in Philippians.

I think often, and I am certainly guilty of this, we think and encourage others that as long as we teach the purpose statement of the passage in our small group, or rattle off two ways to live in an evangelistic training evening, or tick the right boxes in terms of attendance, that somehow we are being faithful and therefore successful.

Now don't hear me wrong, those are all wonderful things, but they're not the thing that defines success. So how do we define success if numbers and faithfulness won't suffice?

Well, I think the book of Philippians gives us a wonderful answer, and that brings me on to my first point. And the goal of God is the exaltation of Christ. The goal of God is the exaltation of Christ.

Now the letter to the Philippians is essentially a thank you letter. And if any church in the New Testament could claim to be a successful one, it would be the Philippian church. Have a look with me at chapter one, verses three to five.

[9 : 49] I promised there would be flicking, so let's keep the thumbs warm. Chapter one, verses three to five. I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine, for you all making my prayer with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

The Philippians have been gospel partners from day one, and Paul adores them. Verse eight, for God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

And so Philippians in many ways is Paul's love letter to them in gratitude, urging them to keep going. A wonderful place for us to be thinking about success from. And the theological heart or the kind of center of the book is where we've derived our theme from, is Philippians two, verse five to 11.

And I'm gonna read that for us now. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

[11 : 31] Now, I know many of these verses are gonna be common to us, but it bears reflecting on again. The whole of human history is moving on one particular course.

It is not blind. It is not moving towards ultimate chaos. No, all of human history is moving to one and only one focal point, the universal exaltation of Christ.

And just so we're clear, what I mean by exaltation here is Christ being crowned king. Every knee will bow, every tongue will confess, from Dawkins to Darwin, your nan to your teacher, every single one of their tongues will one day profess, Jesus is Lord.

And do you see who's making sure this exaltation of Christ happens? Chapter 2, verse 9, have a look with me again. Therefore, God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name.

It's God. The primary goal of God, and therefore the entire goal of humanity, is to see Christ crowned as king. This is the fuel of the entire book for Paul.

[12 : 43] At the center of history, or to put it another way, the entire goal of history is to see Christ as king. This should hopefully be a good first step in helping us understand what Christian success looks like.

It must, in some way, be not focused on us, but something that leads to the exaltation of Christ as king. Because that is where the whole of history and humanity is heading.

The goal of God is the exaltation of Christ. Second point, the goal of Paul is the exaltation of Christ. The goal of Paul is the exaltation of Christ.

It is this reality that the whole of history is being centered on the exaltation of Christ that shapes and defines Paul's entire life and ministry. I want us to have a look now at chapter 3, verse 7 to 11.

Chapter 3, verse 7 to 11. Allow me to read that. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.

[13 : 47] Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith, that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share his sufferings becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible, I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

It's breathtaking, isn't it? How much Paul yearns for Christ compared to all his earthly accolades and achievements in terms of religiosity and career success, he counts them as literal refuse in comparison to knowing Christ.

And I want us to hold on to that word knowing. Why? Because Paul finds knowing Christ so valuable that he welcomes suffering and death because it will help him know Christ better.

I can, you know, that feels like it shouldn't make sense, right? But have a look with me again at verse 8 and verse 10. Chapter 3, verse 8. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

And verse 10, that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share his sufferings becoming like him in his death. You see, for Paul, Paul is saying that he counts everything as worthless in comparison to suffering for Christ, dying for Christ, and being raised to be with Christ.

[15 : 34] Why? Because that is the pattern his Saviour followed. Christ suffered, Christ died, and Christ was raised. And Paul, because his chief aim and joy is to know Christ, he delights in following that same pattern.

Or to put it another way, as Paul suffers, and as Paul dies, and as Paul is raised, he will know Christ better because that is the route Christ himself took.

Paul wants heaven not because there will be no more pain or that he will see loved ones again, but because in heaven that is where he will be most like Jesus.

It goes without saying then that for Paul, everything, literally everything, his ministry, his suffering, his death, his imprisonment, his letters, his prayers, his sermons, his travels, his desires, his wants, his needs, and his entire life is one that has written across every line, jot, and stroke, I want to exalt Christ.

Christ. The goal of Paul is the exaltation of Christ. So we've seen that the goal of God is the exaltation of Christ and the goal of Paul's life and ministry is to see Christ crowned as king for every believer, but it is the same for us too.

[16 : 59] And so my third and final point, the goal of every believer is the exaltation of Christ. The goal of every believer is the exaltation of Christ.

Now Philippians is structurally one big chiasm, which is just a posh way of saying sandwich, and at the center of this chiasm or the meat or the tofu, if you're that way inclined, which sadly my wife is, the heart or focal point of the whole book is the verses that we just had read for us in regards to Timothy and Epaphroditus.

Now many of you were probably thinking, as I was when I first saw this, probably nonplussed, with the choosing of this passage. Like, Benji, what's going on? Clearly Paul got this wrong. This needs to be at the ending. It's a bit weird that we're randomly having these greetings.

I mean, you have Philippians 2 and 3 either side. They're wonderful. I've got them on a Christmas calendar. And you're probably thinking, yeah, Timothy and Epaphroditus are great, but why have this here?

Why isn't it at the end of the book? Well, I think it becomes clear as to why they are the structural heart of the book when we take into account who they are and what their desires are.

[18 : 07] We've already seen that the Lord's desire is to see Jesus exalted, that history is marching towards his coronation, and that Paul has writ large across every facet of his life and death the exaltation of Christ.

But here, the lens turns away from Paul for a second and focuses in on two men, two wonderful, yet in the case of Epaphroditus, completely ordinary men.

Timothy, as many of you know, is Paul's main man, his problem shooter, the alpha male and church planter. Think Jake Tasker, not Benji Cook, or John, not Ben Jones.

Sorry, Ben. Epaphroditus, on the other hand, is simply a congregation member of the Philippian church. Have a look with me at chapter 2, verse 25.

I've thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need.

[19 : 06] Epaphroditus is the messenger, the guy with the money bag, the one they sent with a financial gift to help Paul, I suppose the Andrew Needham of the Philippian church.

So here we have the whole spectrum of the Christian church represented in just two men. the archetypal church leader and the ordinary congregation member.

And yet, what characterizes them both? A radical commitment to serving Christ as king. Have a look with me at verses 19 to 21 for Timothy.

I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon so that I too may be cheered by news of you for I have no one like him who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare.

But they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. And I wonder, pay a particular attention to verse 21. How do you think that verse should end? For they all seek their own interests, not those of others.

[20 : 07] But no, for Timothy, the service of the Philippians flows out not of a love for them first and foremost, but out of his unceasing desire to serve Christ as king. Because Christ serves them, he serves them.

And again, Epaphroditus in 29 to 30. So receive him in the Lord with all joy and honour such men. For he nearly died for what? The work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

Again, the same. The work is to support Paul financially, but it flows out of a desire to work for Christ. A desire so strong that he almost died for it.

So right at the heart of Paul's letter is a call for the Philippians to see these men and exemplify their lives. Men who are driven by everything they do to exalt the name of Jesus, to hasten the day when every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Lord.

The goal of every believer is the exaltation of Christ. So to close, I began this talk with a question. I wonder if you remember that far ago. What is success for the Christian?

[21 : 20] We've seen that numbers and faithfulness are unhelpful categories for success and that the central goal of God, Paul, and every believer is the exaltation of Christ.

Christ. But what does that actually look like? Well, we'll see more practically what that looks like next week in terms of the local church. But I think there are two major implications.

There are many others. But two major implications I want us to think about and chat about together afterwards. First implication, godliness, which looks like Christ-likeness.

Godliness for Paul is not an abstract concept. it is an opportunity to be like his first love. Paul really means he rejoices in his suffering and upcoming execution because it makes him more like Jesus.

And it's the same for after his death too. When Paul dies, he will be raised and it is then that he will be most like Jesus. Heaven is great to Paul because he will be most godly in heaven.

[22 : 32] He will be most like Jesus. To die really is gain. This for me was like being hit over the head with a bat, I'll confess. I never think of the principal joy of heaven being more like Jesus.

I think of eternal fried chicken without ever putting on weight and seeing my loved ones again but an end of suffering. Yeah, absolutely. But more godly. But it absolutely makes sense.

Yes, the chief aim of all creation, the chief aim of every person, the chief aim of you is to exalt Jesus as Lord and King and the believer gets to be like him now.

Godliness is getting to be like your first love and doing so exalts his name. I think this has particular bite as well in terms of Jonathan Fletcher and other abuses by church leaders.

for us as church leaders too. That famous maxim that everyone always said to me when I was starting this job and no one could ever quote who it actually was, the pastor's greatest service to their congregation is their own personal godliness.

[23 : 37] I was a little offended. It's not an empty or pithy turn of phrase. The call of every believer is to worship and adore and exalt Christ as King and godliness in essence Christ-like imitation is utterly essential as far as Paul is concerned and how much more so for those tasked with helping their congregation love Jesus more.

Simons, Andrews, Fiona's, Patasha's and my greatest need is not exegetical prowess or precision or administrative finesse although Vicky you are incredible but our greatest need is that we would love and adore Christ so desperately that our desire and our chief desire is to be more like him every single day.

Godliness in a world whose only goal is Christ's coronation is not optional. Your leader's chief love must be Christ and you will know that based on how they pursue godliness.

I hope it goes without saying please pray for us as we pray for you. Second and final implication a desire to exalt Christ's name to the world around us.

This is not to suggest that we do that by seeing how many people come to faith or how many ministry areas we've impacted but it does mean the thing we want above all else for ourselves the thing we want for our children the thing we want for our non-Christian colleagues friends and family is that they know and live for Christ their king.

[25 : 13] For our small group members we want to see them glorify Christ more because of us. For our non-Christian friends we want them to accept Christ as king for the first time because of how God used us.

For anyone we teach or encourage whether one-to-ones or our family or our friends at church the goal is not intellectual rigor or clarity of thought or orthodoxy or boat shoes and rugby shorts.

It is whether they go away from our teaching and encouragement glorifying and exalting Christ more. And can I say that this category of true Christian success to crown Christ as king is so liberating.

Success in the Christian life has nothing whatsoever to do with your academic acumen or the number of people who hear you speak or the area of ministry you are involved in whether that's leading a megachurch to a parish Sunday school to family Bible time.

It is not down to how brilliant your exegesis is how many people you invite to evangelistic events at school or whether you can debate the finer points of the compositional criticism over Isaiah's authorship which sadly I can.

[26 : 22] But success is defined and only defined if your life is characterized first and foremost by your desire to serve Christ as king. My prayer as we start this year is that as Grace Church Dulwich comes out of lockdown and Zoom church we are not known as a word-based church that we are not known as a faithful church that we are not known as a welcoming church but that we as a church family would be first and above all and always known for adoring supremely the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let me close us in prayer with those verses from Philippians 2 again. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father.

Amen. Amen.