



SUCCESS

How do I know if I'm succeeding in life?

We want to do well in life. We want our lives to count for something. We want to be successful. But when it comes down to it, what does that look like? And in particular, who should decide what is and isn't 'success'? In this study, we will explore these questions.



THINGS TO DO/QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

To begin, make a quick list of what you judge to be the 5 most successful people of the last 5 years.

- Why did you consider these people more successful than others?
- What criteria do you use to judge whether or not you are being successful in your life?

PAUL IN CORINTH: SUCCESS BY WHOSE STANDARDS?

Paul started the church in Corinth (Acts 18:1-18), but his relationship with the Corinthian believers soon became strained. Some Corinthians questioned his authority because he didn't fit their expectations of a 'spiritual' leader. In **1 Corinthians 4**, Paul addressed this issue of who should judge whether he is doing right or not. We will use this passage to help us think about what is success, and who makes that decision.

Read 1 Corinthians 4:1-5 (see text box on right)

1. JUDGED BY OTHERS TO BE SUCCESSFUL

In verse 3, Paul says he doesn't care how others evaluate him. The Message version puts it this way: *"It matters very little to me what you think of me, even less where I rank in popular opinion"* (v3).

- Other people around you will have criteria for what they think makes someone successful. Are there particular groups of people you feel under more pressure to conform to than others?

- What are some of these criteria you feel you need to measure up to in order to be successful?

2. JUDGED BY SELF TO BE SUCCESSFUL

Paul says he doesn't judge himself (v3) – and even though he has a clear conscience, that isn't the final measure as to whether he has done well or not (v4).

- Do you judge yourself often? Is your self-judgment based on comparing yourself with others?
- If you had to guess, would you say you tend to be more critical or less critical than the Lord would be of how well you are doing?

This, then, is how you ought to regard us: as servants of Christ and as those entrusted with the mysteries God has revealed. ² Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful. ³ I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. ⁴ My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. ⁵ Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait until the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of the heart. At that time each will receive their praise from God.

- 1 Corinthians 4:1-5

3. JUDGED BY GOD TO BE SUCCESSFUL

Paul says that, as a servant of Jesus (v1), Paul has been given tasks to do *by him* (v2), and so the only evaluation that matters is the one given by the Lord (v4-5). Similarly, regardless of what work we do, we also are encouraged to see ourselves as working for the Lord (Colossians 3:23 – see text box).

- What might be some of the differences for us if we lived and worked *for the Lord* as our ultimate ‘boss’, rather than for our human boss (or coach, peers, family,...)?

4. JUDGED BY WHAT CRITERIA?

Paul says that what is required of us is to be *faithful* (v2) to the trust or to the tasks that are given to us.

- Being faithful is not necessarily the same thing as ‘*getting the results we want*’. How important are tangible results to you as you measure success? In what ways might faithfulness be a better measure of success than tangible results?
- What trust or tasks has the Lord given you to do? (*for a reminder on foundational things, see Micah 6:6-8 and Matthew 22:36-40 in the text box.*) If we take these as key areas to be faithful in, how could we tell if we are doing well or not?

5. WHAT DO WE DO WITH THIS?

Ultimately the Lord is the one who defines success, not others or ourselves. And for us, success is being faithful to the trust and tasks that God gives us.

- In light of what we’ve covered in this study, are there any things the Lord has got your attention on? Is there anything you believe you need to do as a result?

“Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters, since you know that you will receive an inheritance from the Lord as a reward. It is the Lord Christ you are serving.”

- Colossians 3:23-24

“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? ... He has showed 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 with your God.” - Micah 6:6-8

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus replied: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

- Matthew 22:36-40



THOUGHT TO FINISH

In the passage we’ve been looking at in **1 Corinthians 4**, Paul says we should not judge the success of things too early, but rather ‘wait until the Lord comes’ (v5). In a given moment, something may appear to be a disaster, but in the fullness of time, we may see that the Lord powerfully used it for good. Equally, at the moment, we may think something is good, but in a bigger perspective, we may see it as a negative. Ultimately it is not for us to judge. The Lord alone sees all hidden actions and motives (v5) and is the definitive source of meaning. He alone has the right to call something successful or otherwise. Therefore, let us faithfully do what he calls us to do today. This is all we have, and it is all we need to live a successful life.