

Success?

Dear Paul,

Last week I worked through stacks of mail that had accumulated during our family vacation. At the bottom of the pile remained two pieces that caught my eye. They could not have been more opposite. One was large, professionally printed and multicolored. The other was small, hand-labeled and plain. One was a must-see experience; the other a heartfelt thanks. The one told me about some of America's most dynamic and successful pastors. The other told my wife and me about our example of faithfulness that had given another person hope.

The brochure offered success . . . the letter exemplified it.

My wife Karla and I have been in pastoral ministry for over twenty years. We've served in associate positions in churches of less than 100 and, for the last sixteen years, in the senior pastorate. We have seen our church plant grow from infancy to more than 2,500. I share that brief history for one reason—to let you know that at every level the pressures to succeed have been real and relentless.

But for too many years, I labored under a faulty definition of success. As a youth pastor, I thought success was measured by how many kids swelled our youth group or how many hands were raised at meetings. As a church planter, success seemed to be defined by growth and how fast one could get off denominational support. Yet as our church grew beyond 500, then 800, and then 1,000, I noticed the pressures to succeed never went away.

Today's cutting edge leaders are usually described with words like change agent, paradigm shifter and difference maker. They are introduced as dynamic strategists, innovators, revolutionaries, and entrepreneurs. We hear that successful pastors are articulate, charismatic, visionary and bold risk-takers. They know what they want, they have their thumbs on the pulse of the culture, and continually make accurate assessments regarding what will attract people in droves and keep them happy. We feel like we must have the entrepreneurial skill of a Bill Gates and the servant hands of a Mother Teresa. Who can measure up?

Contrary to the subliminal tug within us, however, our lives do not need to clone those successful conference speakers. Yes, many are effective leaders: but success does not require that your church become like their church. Success is not being featured as a keynote speaker in an upcoming national seminar. It's not in pastoring a mega-church or publishing a best seller. Success is becoming what God wants each of us to be as a person and in filling the ministry He wants us to have as pastors. God wants us to be living, breathing, touchable jars of clay filled with the treasure of Jesus.

Often, in the face of another important ministry decision, I find myself prayerfully reminding the Lord that I don't seem to have what those other guys have. The Lord graciously reminds me that I'm thinking too much about succeeding and not enough about seeking. Then a deep peace from God assures me that He is not asking me to be like those guys . . . He is asking me to be like Him.

Now this doesn't mean that cultural issues and ministry strategies aren't important to me. At every level of church growth and development I have sought God's wisdom, devised program strategies, solidified core values and assessed outcomes. There is never a place in ministry for sloppy theology, laziness, or passing the buck. We need to pray hard, study hard, and work hard. We need to keep in touch with our community and our world. But effective ministry is more than vision, culture, and strategies. Take heed, Paul, and remember that it is also mystery and, above all, a spiritual work. Therefore, we need to seek God's mind and heart, and obediently follow what He reveals for our particular situations.

I have also been greatly encouraged to realize that when God calls us to serve Him, He defines success not in terms of strategies and outcomes, but in terms of godly character. He didn't say we had to be CEOs, change agents, or paradigm shifters to be successful in ministry. He said we just need to walk worthy of Him. Neither did He use a long list of marketing terms to define entrepreneurial potential. He describes the secret to success with words like *humility, gentleness, patience, perseverance, holiness, faithfulness and truth*. The more others see Christ reflected in our lives and in turn desire to draw nearer to Him, the closer we come to living a life and having a ministry that God would call a success.

Yes, it's an awesome privilege to bear the name of Jesus and to lay our lives down in service to Him. With this privilege comes the divine calling to walk worthy, to become a vessel fit for His use, to know Him and to make Him known.

Two pieces of mail—one offered success, the other defined it. One version of success may lead to having our names inscribed on the pages of a glossy brochure. The other will mean that God was pleased to use us to inscribe Jesus' name on another human heart.

Hey, Paul, have you checked your mail lately? Perhaps God's acknowledgment of success is closer than you think. It may even be waiting for you buried beneath the mountain on your desk.

Your Brother,

Larry Adams

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*As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life
worthy of the calling you have received.*

Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.

Ephesians 4:1-3