

HIGHER AIM WITH DR. CURT DODD

What Is Success?

A Heart For Ministry | Part 1 | 1 Thessalonians 2:1-20; Isaiah 6:1-13

INTRODUCTION

In 1621, the Pilgrims and a local Native tribe came together for the first Thanksgiving. This gathering was more than a meal; it was the celebration of a new relationship, a treaty born from mutual need. The Pilgrims needed survival skills, and the tribe needed protection. Their relationship, built on shared purpose, created a bond that lasted for decades. This historical moment reminds us of a timeless truth: nothing is more important in life than relationships.

This same principle is the very heart of ministry. True spiritual impact is not built on programs or events, but on the power of relationships. In his letter to the Thessalonians, the apostle Paul writes not about church growth statistics, but about the deep, personal love he shared with the believers. He models a ministry where success is not measured by numbers, but by faithfulness in the lives of others. As we explore Paul's words and the powerful calling of the prophet Isaiah, we must ask ourselves: what does true, God-honoring success really look like?

KEY POINTS

1. Ministry Success Is Relational, Not Statistical

Paul's connection to the church in Thessalonica was intensely personal. He writes, "Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well." For Paul, ministry was not a transaction; it was a deep, familial bond. He did not simply deliver a message and leave. He invested his heart and his life. We must be careful not to fall into the trap of measuring our impact by nickels and noses. Success in God's kingdom is often found in the quiet, unseen work of pouring your life into another person, building a relationship that points them toward Christ.

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2. Ministry Success Is Measured by Faithfulness, Not Results

When Isaiah stood in the glorious presence of God, he eagerly volunteered for service, saying, “Here am I. Send me!” God’s assignment, however, was staggering. He was called to preach a message of judgment to a people who would be “ever hearing but never understanding.” By worldly standards, Isaiah’s ministry would appear to be a failure. Yet, his success was not determined by the people’s response, but by his unwavering obedience to God’s command. God calls us to be faithful, whether we are planting seeds or reaping a harvest. Our responsibility is obedience; the results belong to Him.

3. Ministry Success Is About Pleasing God, Not People

Paul states his motive clearly: “We are not trying to please people, but God, who tests our hearts.” This is the foundation of a successful ministry. When our aim is to please people, we are driven by expectations, praise, and the fear of criticism. But when our sole desire is to please God, we are freed to serve with courage and integrity. This frees us from the burden of comparison and the anxiety of outcomes. True success is found in a life lived in obedient response to God’s call, trusting that He will accomplish His purposes through our faithfulness.

God’s definition of success often looks very different from the world’s. We can become discouraged when our ministry feels small or when we do not see the growth we expect. We may look at larger ministries and think God is not using us. But God does not measure success by the size of your platform, but by the faithfulness of your heart. Whether you are a pastor, a small group leader, a parent, or simply a friend, your calling is the same: to be obedient to God in the lives of other people. Let God do what only He can do. Your faithful, quiet obedience in the place God has put you may be the very foundation He is using to build something for generations to come. What has God placed on your heart to do in the lives of other people that you are holding back from doing? That God would choose to use any of us is a miracle. Let your response be like Isaiah’s: “Here am I. Send me.”

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QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. In what areas of your life or ministry have you been measuring success by worldly standards, like numbers or recognition, instead of by biblical faithfulness?
2. How does Isaiah's call to minister without seeing immediate, positive results challenge or encourage you in the specific calling God has given you?
3. What is one practical step you can take this week to shift your focus from seeking results to simply being obedient and pouring your life into others, trusting God with the outcome?
