

"Finding True Success"

Ecclesiastes 9:11-18

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A number of years ago a man named Sam Findly decided it was time to retire from the garment business. He called his son Marvin and gave him the news and a bit of advice. "Son, it is all yours. I've made a success of this business because of two principles. Reliability and wisdom. Your customers need to know that you are reliable, that you always keep your word.

If you promise goods by the 15th of the month, you make sure you get them there by the 15th, even if you have to pay overtime, double time, or work the line yourself, you make sure everything is delivered by the time you promised." Marvin thought about this a few moments and asked, "But what about wisdom?" His father shot back, "Wisdom is never making such a stupid promise."

Well friends, I'm not sure Mr. Findly had a very Christ-like attitude, but he is correct that wisdom is the key to success, at least the type of success that really matters. Today our journey through the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes brings us to chapter 9:11-18.

Here we find Solomon, the great, wise king of Israel, reflecting on the relationship between wisdom and success. In the midst of a world which often seems to be confused about both of these topics, it is important we grasp the truth the Lord has for us through this passage. Let's pause and pray that we hear and understand what God has for us in His Word today.

As Solomon reflects on life, he makes a simple but important observation. **Ecclesiastes 9:11 I have seen something else under the sun: The race is not to the swift or the battle to the strong, nor does food come to the wise or wealth to the brilliant or favor to the learned; but time and chance happen to them all.** Friends, you have probably noticed that too. The best team doesn't always win the game, which is why they have to play them. There are first round draft choices in the NFL who have been total flops, while guys who were never drafted, walk-ons, have become all-pros.

Many things in life don't turn out the way we expect. I wonder how many individuals voted "Most Likely to Succeed" in their high school class have actually found a high degree of success? In my brother's graduating class, the fellow who has made the most money, who seems to be most successful, didn't even have a "C" average when he graduated. There is probably someone in this room who feels a bit cheated, because he thinks of himself as wise, skillful and well educated, but doesn't feel he's found much success in life. There is probably someone else here who feels very fortunate, because even though she doesn't consider herself wise, skillful or well educated, life has gone very well for her.

Why are things this way? Solomon's answer in verse 11 is "time and chance." Now, by the end of the book, Solomon realizes he is wrong about this. It is God, not chance that governs the universe. Things don't just happen; they are part of God's plan.

He is the one **Ephesians 1:11 who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will.** Yet, on the surface, when it comes to success it seems, as Solomon says in verse 11, just time and chance. Or as the NLT puts it **Ecclesiastes 9:11b "It is all decided by chance, by being in the right place at the right time."** Many believe that in life, being lucky is more important than being good.

Not only is it impossible to predict success, tragedy can take us by surprise as well. **Ecclesiastes 9:12 For certainly no one knows his time: like fish caught in a cruel net or like birds caught in a trap, so people are trapped in an evil time as it suddenly falls on them.** Unfortunately, most of us realize how true that is. you can get up in the morning feeling great, but an icy patch on the road that causes a car accident, a call from the doctor's office saying there is an abnormality in your mammogram, an announcement at work saying there will be major layoffs next month, can instantly change that great feeling. Again, Solomon would say, being lucky seems more important than being good.

Solomon then describes a particular event which illustrates his thoughts. **Ecclesiastes 9:14-16** **There was once a small city with only a few people in it. And a powerful king came against it, surrounded it and built huge siege works against it. Now there lived in that city a man poor but wise, and he saved the city by his wisdom. But nobody remembered that poor man. So I said, "Wisdom is better than strength." But the poor man's wisdom is despised, and his words are no longer heeded.**

Folks, note that wisdom is the key to success. It was the wisdom of one fellow that saved the town, Yet the value of that wisdom was not recognized. And that happens often because people tend to be more impressed by things like strength, wealth or fame, than they are by wisdom.

Yet Solomon recognizes. **Ecclesiastes 9:17** **The quiet words of the wise are more to be heeded than the shouts of a ruler among fools.** Because, **Ecclesiastes 9:18** **Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner** (someone who is not wise) **destroys much good.** A wise leader can accomplish all sorts of wonderful things, but a foolish leader can really mess things up for everyone.

Okay, I don't know about you, but I think what Solomon says is interesting. Yet, what does it mean for our lives today? What is God saying to us through this passage? Well....

#1 We need to focus on the right kind of success. As human beings, I think we all have a natural desire to succeed. Now, you may not want to reach the top of the corporate ladder or accumulate a ton of money, but that doesn't mean you don't want to be successful. I don't think anyone here would say "My goal is to be a failure."

There are various paths people take when looking for success. Some folks equate being successful with being wealthy, so they make that their goal. Some of these people try the path of hard work, while others are attracted to every get rich quick scheme there is.

I think many of us look for success in our careers. Being promoted to a top position is what some want, while others simply would like to be known for doing a good job. Having a reputation of being

a good mechanic constitutes success for some. Others try to succeed academically by being on the "A" honor roll or earning a master's degree.

For some the goal is to succeed in sports, or in music. Or in a hobby. A blue ribbon on a quilt at the County Fair can make someone feel very successful. Some people make having a nice car, boat, laptop, home, yard or garden the measure of success.

For others their goal is essentially to be a good parent or a good mother-in-law. Some try to find success by being very involved in church or a community organization. My point is simply that we all want to succeed, in at least some aspect of life.

Remember what Solomon writes, however. There often doesn't seem to be any rhyme or reason as to who succeeds and who doesn't. The runner who trains the hardest and is the fastest doesn't always win. If he/she stumbles out of the starting blocks and finishes in 4th place it doesn't seem like a successful race. There are so many things over which we have no control, really nothing to do with, that often determine our degree of success.

And then there is the fact that many of our successes are in reality very empty. Solomon doesn't address this truth here but does so in other parts of Ecclesiastes. Those who reach the top of the ladder frequently find themselves saying, "So what?" I always think of Leon Lett, a former lineman for the Dallas Cowboys. An hour after his team had won the Super Bowl, he looked up at a reporter and softly asked, "Okay, so who do we get to play next?"

I know a number of people who have been promoted to a new position, and then after a few months realize they really were happier in their old, "lower position." Or, as I said in an earlier Ecclesiastes sermon, "the trouble with the rat race is that even if you win, you are still a rat."

Those who we consider celebrities are maybe the best examples of the fragile, shallow nature of what we often label "success." I think of what Will Rodgers once said, "I'm not really a celebrity, I've got the same wife I started out with 28 years ago." There are a lot of unhappy successful celebrities out there.

Friends, there is, however, one type of success that is totally fulfilling and which is not dependent on chance or being in the right place at the right time. It is the most important success we could ever imagine. It is a success that each of us, by God's grace is able to attain. It is the kind of success for which every one of us should strive. It is the success of being faithful to God.

Some of the most beautiful words in the whole Bible are the ones Jesus speaks in Matthew 25:21, foreshadowing what God the Father will one day say to all who are faithful to Him. **Matthew 25:21** **"Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master."**

Oh friends, God is not impressed at how high we climb the ladder or at where we place in the rat race. "Employee of the Month" or "Mother of the Year" awards really mean nothing to Him. His only concern is whether or not we are faithful to Him. Are we doing the things He has called us to do? Are we doing them out of love and with the other attitudes He wants us to have?

Now keep in mind the whole key is being faithful to the Lord, doing what He wants you to do because we love Him. In the world's eyes men like Joel Osteen or T. D. Jakes are very successful pastors because thousands of people attend their churches, and millions of people read their books. In God's eyes, those things don't really matter.

The most successful pastor is the most faithful pastor. And if he happens to be serving a church in the middle of North Dakota with 35 people, that's fine. Being a successful pastor is not about counting nickels and noses, about budgets and attendance, but about faithfulness.

And friends, it is not just pastors, but every Christian who should aim for this success of faithfulness. If the Lord calls you to be a missionary in Africa, that is what you need to do, no matter what sacrifices that involves. But if God wants you to be working at Walmart in Hibbing, Minnesota, right now, do not try to be a missionary in Africa. Instead, you had better get to work at Walmart tomorrow morning.

If He wants you to spend more time reading your Bible, that is what you need to do, but if He wants

you to spend a couple of hours tomorrow raking your neighbor's lawn, you better not be inside reading your Bible. The type of success I am talking about doesn't require that we compete with anyone else. Each of us can be a great success, if we are willing to discern who the Lord wants us to be and what He wants us to do, and then be that person and do those things.

Now, I need to say that as long as we are on this earth none of us will totally be the individual God has called us to be, nor will we do everything He wants us to do. We are all sinners, who fall short of the glory of God. From God's perspective, the one that really matters, we all fail to be successful. Spiritually, we are all losers, big time.

But friends, that is why Jesus Christ came to this earth. On the first Christmas He became a human being and for 33 years, was totally, 100% successful in being who God had called Him to be and doing God had called Him to do. So, when He died on the cross, He paid the penalty, not for any failure on His part, but for all of our failures.

The Bible tells us, that if we acknowledge our sin and turn to the Lord Jesus, placing our trust in Him, our sins are forgiven and we receive His righteousness. His success becomes our success.

And friends, if you are here this morning and not trusting in Jesus as your Savior and Lord, that is what you need to do today. No matter how successful you are in the eyes of people around you, without Jesus, you are a total loser as far as God is concerned. If you are not sure what I mean by trusting in Jesus, make sure you talk to me, give me a call or there will be an Elder or Deaconess up front here after the service and they would be glad to share with you what it means to receive Jesus as your Lord and Savior.

So, friends, the bottom line is not my spiritual success, but Jesus' perfect success. Yet, once we have become a Christian, a believer in Jesus, the Lord wants us to strive for that success of faithfulness. In fact, He has given us the Holy Spirit to help us do that.

As I said a few moments ago, this faithfulness essentially involves understanding what God wants us to do and then doing it. Sometimes, the

biggest challenge is knowing what the Lord wants us to do.

Friends, that is the second part of our topic, wisdom. Though there are a number of dimensions as to what wisdom involves, I think the best definition is that wisdom is seeing things as they really are, or in other words seeing things from God's perspective.

And friends, that should be our goal: we should focus on gaining a wisdom that enables us to see things as God does. A wise person has more than information. He/she understands what is important and what is not, what is good and what is bad, what is true and what is false.

Now, of course, God is the only one with perfect wisdom. As we talked about a couple of weeks ago, some things are God's business, not ours. There are secret things only He understands. Yet, the more we understand the things God has revealed, the things that belong to us, (Deut. 29:29) the wiser we are.

And friends, if you are a truly wise person, if you see life pretty much from God's perspective, it is much easier to figure out who He's calling us to be, and what He wants us to do.

Now, as Solomon said in verse 16, the value of this type of wisdom is seldom recognized. In our culture gaining scientific and technical knowledge, is usually preferred to being able to see things from God's perspective.

Our public education system is clearly focused on helping people gain knowledge, rather than wisdom, since in many classrooms God is the forbidden topic. And in reality, many in our culture value wealth, health, pleasure, fame, comfort and good looks much more than they value knowledge, and they value wisdom even less. Yet, if we are to find true success, wisdom is an essential tool for us to have and use.

How do we obtain this wisdom? Listen to what the Lord tells us in **James 1:5 If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.**

God is the source of true wisdom, but most of the time He chooses not to speak through an audible

voice, where He says, "Okay, Dan this is what I want you to do." Rather He says, if you want to be wise, start with this book, the Bible. Friends, these are the words and truths that have been revealed and belong to us. **Psalm 19:7 says the testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple.**

In other words, you may not have a really high IQ, you may not have gotten past the 8th grade, but if you read this book, if you study this book, you will be a wise person. Through the Bible God reveals His perspective on life, He tells you how things really are, what is good and bad, right and wrong, true and false, beautiful and ugly.

That is why, in this church we put so much emphasis on learning what the Bible says. The children's club, Sunday School class, Bible studies, life groups and Sunday morning sermons are all intended to help us grow in wisdom.

As we grasp what the Bible says and what it means we grow in our understanding of reality.

Another way to gain wisdom is through spiritual maturity. Now, it is probably true that there is no fool like an old fool, but age and experience can increase our wisdom. **Hebrews 5:14** puts it this way: "solid food is for those who are mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."

Seeking counsel from mature believers in Christ, folks who are grounded in God's Word, is another way to increase our own wisdom. Many folks out there are in difficult situations because they have taken bad advice that they have received from a friend or family member. "Ya, I took all my money and bought a bunch of lottery tickets, so now I'm broke. My friend told me that if I did that, I was sure to win."

Folks, don't listen to those types of people! If you want to be truly wise, you need to look to wise people, godly people for advice. You need to look to people who know this book and have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

Friends, what we have talked about today is not easy, but it is hardly rocket science. We need wisdom to understand what God wants us to be doing, and then we need His grace to do it. It is

that simple. And when we are doing what God has called us to do, we have found true success. Friends, when all has been said and done, not only will there be a lot more said than done, but there will be just one thing that matters.