Success Through Scripture: Redefining Success from a Biblical Perspective

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Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to reveal how an intimate relationship with God can bring internal and external success. The research will demonstrate that success from a relativistic society does not always produce overall success. Through a secular approach, success is defined differently by each human being and formed by his or her own perception of the subject. However, through a biblical worldview approach, one can achieve internal and external success brought about by a relationship with God. First, the research will recognize a few of the many man-made theories of success and analyze the different components that are within those theories. Then, it will explore a biblical approach to success defined by a faith and relationship with God. Through a comparison of a secular approach to success and a biblical approach to success, one can see the benefits and the deep fulfillment that arises when one lets faith determine the outcomes of one's life. When believers commit their whole lives to God and trust in Him to establish their steps, not only do they receive lifelong success, but also the final success of eternal life.

Keywords: success, scripture, theory of success

Success Through Scripture: Defining Success from a Biblical Perspective

What is success, and more specifically, when can one know one has reached success? According to the *Oxford Dictionary* (2018), success can be defined as "the accomplishment of an aim or purpose," "the attainment of fame, wealth, or social status," or even "the good or bad outcome of an undertaking." From these literal definitions of "success" it is easy to conclude that success is achieved when one has fulfilled a big goal in one's life or maybe even when one has enough money to rid any financial restraints in one's life. All of these are great accomplishments, but do they truly produce overall success?

Success is a broad term that can be difficult to define. Many scholars such as Angela Duckworth, Tim Cork, and Malcolm Gladwell offer different opinions and theories on their understanding of success and how it can be achieved in different aspects of society. After exhibiting some of those more popular theories of success, research will begin to show just how broad this topic can be. When comparing theories, there are some similarities and differences between theories, but overall, neither do these theories completely agree with each other nor do they present an idea about success that is truly sustaining for the soul.

Differences in opinions and beliefs in a relativistic society are abundant. It is extremely difficult to define "truth" in a society where there is no absolute definition of morality. In turn, it is difficult to define the true meaning of "success" in a society where all the members believe different truths about reality. With this being the case, all the members of society have their own basic opinions and conclusions about success. People will define success differently based on their own opinion or even on how they

were raised. Many factors transform one's belief on what makes one successful. With this

being the way society functions, it is truly impossible to come to a conclusion on one

universal definition of success from a secular perspective; however, through a biblical

worldview approach, this is no longer the case. A biblical worldview approach relies on

the belief in one omnipotent God, the creator of the universe, who brings both internal

and external success to those who faithfully trust in him. Through this specific approach,

there is a clear and foundational picture of what it looks like to be successful in this

society when success is defined by God's Word rather than man's opinion.

What is Success?

Is success that *butterfly-feeling* one receives while standing on the highest podium

and being present a gold metal? Is it acceptance to one of the most prestigious colleges?

According to TED (2018), a nonprofit devoted to spreading technology, education, and

design, success is the feeling or "tingle of excitement about what you do, sticking with

what matters through hard times, living a life you can feel proud of in retrospect." But

when can one know when one has become successful and what is the defining factor of

that success? Today, many authors, psychologists, businessmen and businesswomen

attempt to grasp this broad idea of success and reduce it down to a set of bullet points or

even a step by step process. When the phrase "how to become successful" is typed into

the google search bar, the top article that shows up is "How to be Successful in Life: 13

Tips from the most successful people" (Google, 2018). Below this article are other

similar articles titled, "Simple Guidelines for Successfully Achieving Your Goals," or "6

Things You Should Quit Doing to be More Successful," and "21 Ways to Achieve

Wealth and Success" (Google, 2018). By the looks of it, much of today's world believes

that success and the process to becoming successful can be dwindled down to just a few bullet points or a step by step process.

On a similar note, secular theorists believe that success can be obtained merely through an external behavior. Secular theorists believe that success is something that can be grown on the outside like manipulating a person's genetic makeup to have a greater outcome or even enhancing a person's persona to make him or her more appealing (Cork, 2013; Smart, Feldman, & Ethington, 2006). Other secular theorists like Kevin M. Kniffin and Brian Wansink tend to argue that success derives from excelling in athletics, while many others believe success is derived from surpassing others (Kniffin, Wansink, & Shimizu, 2014). All this to say, there are many different viewpoints which have great ideas and motivating factors, but there are so many. How can one know which viewpoint reveals the greatest potential for achievement? In order to come to that conclusion, one must understand some of the more well-known theories of success in today's society and then analyze the results.

Iceberg Theory of Success

Tim Cork, CEO of Apple Company and author of *Tapping the Iceberg: Achieve Straight A's in Life Through Attitude, Aptitude, and Action,* proposes an intricate template for reaching success, which he has labeled the Iceberg Theory of Success. Cork (2013) claims that most people never become successful because they never truly grasp all their natural potentials and strengths, leaving them with lost opportunities and unsuccessful stories. Instead, he describes how to get straight A's in life with attitude, aptitude, and action, his keys to success. Following his previous claim, Cork (2013) indicates that

success is not about perfecting these three areas, but about "practicing and excelling in all three of them in your daily life" (p. 1).

He defines attitude as the "first thing people notice about you when you walk into the room" and how you are "perceived and how successful you will be in accomplishing your end goals" (Cork, 2013, p. 1). Ultimately, Cork is trying to explain that our attitudes and outer appearance can affect our future success or failure. The way people perceive our appearance can be a hindrance to achieving our goals. Therefore, Cork puts an emphasis on practicing how to have a better attitude and a buttoned- up outer- appearance around others.

The next A on Cork's list, aptitude, is what comes after one's initial assessment of another, when one begins to truly judge, evaluate, and assess another person's attributes and personhood. This happens after the initial perception and can be a "make or break moment in life," but also especially in the business world. Cork emphasizes learning how to create a better self by journaling to see where one can grow, by having a mentor to give advice, and by simply gaining more knowledge to be more credible. Lastly, with the third A on his list, he calls men and women to take action with their knowledge, plan their work through goals, have discipline and "flawless execution," and accept the "indispensable prerequisites for success:" fear, rejection, and failure (Cork, 2013, pp. 2-3). Cork's book presents helpful tips and suggestions for each of the three categories: Attitude, Aptitude, and Action.

After evaluating Cork's argument for reaching success, it is clear that he believes man can become successful through the manipulation of the way others perceive him. His theory is that men and women should understand the importance of first impressions,

should have "flawless execution" because they are continually being judged on their

behavior, and should set goals despite the fact that they will inevitably experience both

failure and rejection at some time in their career. It does not seem like Cork (2013) would

agree with the famous saying, "it's only what's on the inside that counts." In 1974,

psychologists Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman discovered what they like to call the

anchoring-and-adjustment heuristic biases. According to Tversky and Kahneman (2008),

this is a bias that is built-in to human beings, which states that "we are influenced by an

initial anchor point and do not sufficiently move away from that point as new information

is provided" (McShane & Von Glinow, 2008, p. 188). An anchor point is an initial point,

an initial opinion of someone else, in which a judgement has been made and is unlikely to

be counteracted. This research puts a bit of pressure on Cork's theory as it shows that

first impressions do truly matter because it is unlikely that one will deviate from an initial

impression of someone, making it much harder to rebuild a negative first impression.

Cork ends his book with the top ten steps to finding success. First, "dream and visualize

goals," then "feel the passion," "believe in an achievable goal," "write down the goals,"

"analyze where you are," "set a deadline," "identify possible obstacles," "identify

knowledge needed," "make a plan," and finally, "persist with discipline and resolve"

(Cork, 2013, p. 143-147). Cork focuses on the importance of dreaming goals, feeling the

desire to achieve these goals, and persisting with self-discipline and determination to

never give up.

   Cork is a magnificent author who has spent years of his life dedicated to his study

of success and reducing this world down to ten steps, which he believes could help

people live victorious lives. However, one thing that he does not mention is what success

looks like once you have arrived. In an article by Joe Pinsker, Raj Raghunathan explains the key principles of his book, *If You're So Smart, Why Aren't You Happy.* He explains what he calls the "scarcity mindset," which is the idea that someone's win has to come at someone else's loss, ultimately creating room for people to "engage in social comparisons" (Pinsker, 2016, p. 1). He reveals a common belief held by most of society that once they have reached their short-term goal or long-term goal, they will be completely satisfied and feel the awe of finally reaching the top of the food chain. This scarcity mindset is a person's hardwiring to be outcome-oriented causing them to compare one's self to others; however, if most people are being honest with themselves they will still wind up feeling dissatisfied with themselves and unhappy with where they are in life. This is a description of a never-ending chain of thought brought upon by a secular perspective of success.

Holland's Theory and Patterns of College Student Success

John C. Smart, professor at the University of Memphis, Kenneth A. Feldman, professor at Stony Brook University, and Corinna A. Ethington, professor at the University of Memphis published a report for the National Symposium on Postsecondary Student Success that analyzed much of John L. Holland's Theory and Patterns of College Student Success. John L. Holland, psychologist and professor at John's Hopkins College, came up with a person-environment fit theory on success, a "theory-based approach for advancing our knowledge and understanding of student success in postsecondary education" (Smart, Feldman, & Ethington, 2006, p. 7). Holland suggests that success at work or in a school environment largely depends on the workplace environment or the education program that matches with that person's personality.

In the beginning, Holland goes into detail on the six different personality types: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising, and conventional (Smart, Feldman, & Ethington, 2006). Then, he uses those six personality types to create a set of codes in the *Dictionary of Holland Occupational Codes* (Smart, Feldman, & Ethington, 2006). Finally, he classifies all occupations included in the entire *Dictionary of Occupational Titles* by the U. S. Department of Labor into specific personality types (Smart, Feldman, & Ethington, 2006). Holland's findings concluded that "students are most likely to be successful in terms of further developing their initially prominent characteristics in an academic environment having the same label" (Smart, Feldman, & Ethington, 2006, p. 16). He conveyed this to be truth because the environment that paired with the person's personality would provide "opportunities, activities, tasks, and roles congruent with the competencies, interests, and self-perceptions of its parallel personality type" (Smart, Feldman, & Ethington, 2006, p. 17). Holland's main point is one will reach success in school or even in work by choosing an environment that is compatible with one's personality type.

A student's success can be judged by the "extent to which students grow in terms of the abilities and interests reinforced and rewarded by their chosen environment (say, their academic major) rather than enhancing their initially prominent characteristics" (Smart, Feldman, & Ethington, 2006, p. 17). In this case, Holland supposes that success is reached by strategically pairing one's genetic makeup to the different environments built into society. Holland's formula here for success is simply taking a person's most dominant personality type and using a set of codes to figure out what environment he or

she would fit best in, inevitably producing success because he or she is comfortable and is best suited for that specific environment (Smart, Feldman, & Ethington, 2006).

Sports at Work

Kevin M. Kniffin and Brian Wansink, both professors at Cornell University, along with Mitsuru Shimizu, a professor at Southern Illinois University, recently published their own research on how the participation in youth sports can reap professional benefits in the future. They planned and documented two different studies in an attempt to test this hypothesis. Study 1 simply showed that most people expect former athletes to have significantly more self-leadership, respect, and confidence outside their sports. In accordance, study 2 used biodata to show that in fact it is true that the men who played high school sports on average, 60 years later, showed signs of great leadership, had better prosocial behavior than non-athletes, and had a higher career status (Kniffin, Wansink, & Shimizu, 2014). This piece of evidence has complimented other studies that have shown that "former student-athletes earn significantly higher salaries at age 30— approximately 12 years after high school graduation" (Kniffin, Wansink, & Shimizu, 2014, p. 1).

The two studies that they conducted reveal that participation in competitive youth sports produce relatively greater success throughout a person's career. Kniffen, Wanskin, and Shimizu (2014) contend that a way to reach success is being involved in sports. Being active in youth sports will help teach kids important values they will need in the future. They reveal that the good characteristics needed to be successful can be taught and obtained through sports, teamwork, and activity. They propose that leadership is one of the greatest qualities found in making a successful person; therefore, if that trait can be learned through athletics, they propose that most parents should enroll their kids in junior

league baseball or middle school soccer so that they may reap the benefits in the future. This approach is different than the Iceberg theory and Holland's theory; however, it is a popular secular theory for success.

External Factors

Whether it be strategically placing people based on their character makeup or pushing parents to get their kids involved in athletics to enhance their probability for success, the first three theories discussed are all related to manipulating the external in order to increase the chances of greater achievement. The Iceberg theory proffers that in order to overcome the judgement of others, one should manipulate the way others perceive one in order to have a positive first impression. Holland's theory avers that greater success is a direct byproduct of adherence to the formula. It is about finding the perfect environment for a person based on his or her personality trait. When that person is immersed into such a fitting environment, they are bound to excel. Kniffin, Wansink, and Shimizu reveal that engaging kids in sports is the key to building good leadership skills that are needed for success. All three theories reiterate the idea that to have greater success, one can manipulate the external factors around them.

Grit

Angela Duckworth, award-winning author, psychologist, and teacher, has devoted her life to studying her logarithm of success. After countless interviews with many successful business owners, West Point cadets, professional athletes, and other highly "successful" men and women, Duckworth crafted her own theory. She boils success down to one word—grit. Grit, in Duckworth's words, is "the combination of passion and perseverance that [make] high achievers special" (2016, p. 8) Throughout history, one

was known to find achievement through their innate talents or by changing one's

environment or even engaging in sporting activities. Duckworth contends that one can

reach success not just through external means, but also through internal means.

Duckworth has come to theorize that it is not just external changes that can help bring

greater achievement, but grit, the balance between passion and perseverance, that when

applied to all different courses of life, increases one's success rate.

Bill McNabb, CEO of Vanguard, noticed that there was a distinct difference

between applicants who have truly excelled in the company, and others who have

plateaued. McNabb proclaims that "the people who have continued to be successful

[there] have stayed on a growth trajectory" (Duckworth, 2016, p. 85). Specifically, when

he looked at two applicants who come into the company, both with great resumes, both

fairly equal at the start, he found a great difference between the applicant who ended up

being successful and the other applicant who did not. He recognized the major difference

as the difference in their "growth trajectory" (Duckworth, 2016, p. 85). Some people

truly embody the growth mindset while others do not.

Although man's inherent talent can play a role in aiding success, it is not the only

factor. According to Duckworth, it is shown (in some specific cases) that talent can have

an inverse effect on success. Talent can sometimes lead people to be less gritty and

hardworking because they do not see a need for it based on their innate talents and skills.

McNabb vulnerably recognizes that he too fell ill to "more of a fixed mindset" in the

beginning of his career (Duckworth, 2016, p. 185). He "took pride in finishing tests faster

than anyone else" and "took great pleasure in not working that hard to achieve what [he]

did" (Duckworth, 2016, p. 186). Even the CEO of Vanguard, one of the largest

investment companies in the world, fell prey to the idea that raw talent would sustain his

success (Duckworth, 2016). Duckworth makes the point here to explain that although raw

talent may lead to some successes, it will not promote continued success without any

drive or passion. One's passion and perseverance, one's grit, is going to build up a

growth mindset that will help push one to excel in all areas of their life.

With this in mind, achievement can be reached where hard work and grit are practiced

and applied. It is the mixture of talent and grit that drives people to push past the

competition.

Success in Academics

Academics is a prominent area of life where talent and hard work intersect. Take

the admissions process to get accepted into college. About every college takes into

account high school grade point average and SAT or ACT scores, but most do not ask for

a personal interview to get to know the student's work ethic or drive. A website called

BigFuture is frequently used by high school students looking to know more about

different colleges and their requirements for admissions. After typing in the name of any

college, the main information that appears is the acceptance rate, graduation rate, and

statistics of what a prospective high schooler's GPA and SAT score would need to be in

order to be considered for acceptance. These statistics reveal what colleges tend to value

in regard to admissions. To make things even more clear, each college ranks the different

factors as most important, important, or least important in the acceptance process. For

Columbia University in New York, New York, it ranked academic GPA, application

essay, class rank, rigor of secondary school record, standardized test score,

recommendations, extracurricular activities, and character as very important, while talent

and ability were simply important, and an interview, work experience, and volunteer work were things that are just considered by the college in the acceptance process (Big Future). Why is it that test scores and GPA have a greater weight than a personal interview or any real-world work experience that could show the applicants work ethic and drive?

Along with her practice as a well-known psychologist, Angela Duckworth was a seventh-grade math teacher for twelve-year-old and thirteen-year-old children. She noticed in the first week of teaching that some of her students "picked up mathematical concepts more easily than their classmates," but also that some of these very able students were not doing as well as she thought they should. On the other hand, she noticed some students who initially struggled in her class but came to class everyday prepared to take notes and if "they did not get something the first time around, they tried again and again" (Duckworth, 2016, p. 16-17). Duckworth (2016) realized that "talent for Math was different from excelling in math class" (p. 17). After seeing this contrast in her class, Duckworth was initially surprised and realized that she had been "distracted by talent" and concluded that her students were not equally talented, but if her students mustered up sufficient effort over time they would get where they needed to be, they were all talented enough (Duckworth, 2016, p. 17).

Successful Geniuses?

Malcolm Gladwell, author of *Outliers: The Story of Success*, writes a section of his book revolving around the Terman study, which examines supposed "geniuses" according to the IQ test. This study tracked those considered geniuses until they were older and documented how many of them truly became extremely successful according to

society. Turns out, according to Gladwell's study, those "geniuses" turned out to be quite

average human beings in the end. Malcolm writes in his book that "the relationship

between success and IQ works only up to a point. Once someone has reached an IQ of

somewhere around 120, having additional IQ points does not seem to translate into any

measurable real-world advantage (Gladwell, 2013, p. 79)". Gladwell points out that an IQ

test cannot accurately tell if someone is going to successful. One can be naturally smart

from the start, but that may not accurately depict how they are going to react to their first

job or if they have the determination to push through the difficulties of work life.

It is not just the gifted student in class that pull ahead from the rest. It is not just the 4.0

high school graduates that are a good fit for college. Gladwell (2013) notes that academic

success is not based on a number that quantifies excellence, but an action that shows

pursuit. Success is the passion and perseverance that drives a twelve-year-old kid to study

his fractions for an hour at night because it may not come as easy to him as it does the

rest of the kids. Success is the high school graduate who may not have graduated highest

in her class but will put forth the effort in college to come to class everyday prepared to

listen, absorb, and persevere.

The End Goal

        After discussing all these different secular theories on success, what do all of

them have in common? The common factor behind all of these theories is that they are all

very different from one another. Each theory is relative to the author's prediction and

analysis on what it takes to truly be successful in society. Taking a step back, one will

find that there are numerous ideas when it comes to making progress in life and each

theory aims to predict a strategy that will accurately do so, yet each theory also fails to

explain what success looks like when one finally obtains it. Most of the theories

discussed are focused on the external "trappings of success:" one's dress, car,

appearance, house, spouse, marriage, kids, job, career, resume, etc., because those are

some of the major things that society values. Society values success because it supplies a

sense of temporary happiness and because it reaps many future benefits, but how long

will the benefits and the feelings last? This is the distinction between a secular

perspective on success and a biblical view on success.

Society wants to take more time trying to examine success and reduce it down to

a step-by-step process that will give people a satisfying life, but sooner or later people

start to notice that there really is no end goal to this process. Just when people think they

have made it big, there is always somebody else that reminds them there is more to do

and more that they need. None of these secular theories present a theory that is sustaining

and fulfilling throughout life.

Which Theory is the Right Theory?

How can one know which theory to implement? How can one discern if it is

better to push oneself into an environment best fitting to one's character traits or if it

better for one to manipulate one's outer appearance to be more accepted by society? How

can one discern if it is better to sign one's kids up for every junior league sports team or

if it is better to teach one's kids how to be gritty? After analyzing the underlying

principles between these theories of success, there is quite a distinction between the

suggestions of each theory. Tim Cork (2013) in his Iceberg Theory of Success, suggests

that success can be reached by changing our attitude, growing our aptitude, and taking

action. John L. Holland in the Holland's Theory and Patterns of College Student Success

(2006), shows that one can fit his or her characteristics to a specific environment to reach

success. Kevin M. Kniffin, Brian Wansink, and Mitsuru Shimizu (2014), documented

their research on how sports at a young age show to be a catalyst for success. Duckworth

(2016) explains that in order to be successful one must have grit, the mix between passion

and perseverance. The first three theories deal with outside environments. They deal with

changing the one's outer appearance, strategically placing people based on their character

traits, and even pushing people to get involved in athletic atmospheres to enhance one's

probability for success. Duckworth's theory on Grit uses passion and perseverance as her

motivator for success and shows that external changes may not always lead to greater

advancement; instead, in order to determine success, one may have to look a little deeper

inside.

All of these principles are opposite of what the Bible teaches about success. The

bible teaches that "God created mankind in his image" (Genesis) and each human being

has been blessed with specific gifts and talents that are already good enough to reach

success if utilized properly. In 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, Paul writes that truly there are

"varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same

Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all

in everyone" (NIV). Rather than manipulating the external environment and attempting

to place people in environments where they may have a better outcome, God provides

each person with gifts and abilities that are specifically tailored to that person so that they

may have great success in life. Paul is clear that there is one God who empowers these

gifts and talents in those who invest in an intimate relationship with Him.

A Universal Definition of Success

Where is success derived from? If success is defined by secular standards, there is no way to pinpoint which is the best theory of success because each person refers to success differently. One person may think getting all A's in school gives is great success, but the next person may think getting a football scholarship to University of Southern California is greater success. From a secular viewpoint, success has no end goal and has no means of fulfillment. In general, most people push harder and farther towards their goal and just when they think have done all that they can do to reach this thing we call "success," they still feel empty and unsatisfied. In a relativistic society, success feels unattainable because just when a person thinks that he or she has reached the pinnacle of success, another person's opinion of what it means to be successful puts him or her back down. However, success defined through a biblical perspective is not unobtainable, is not empty, and is not unsatisfying. A biblical approach to success is defined by a steady truth that is unchanging and encouraging. Success is no longer this abstract idea that man is reaching for and will never actually be satisfied with, but it is a tangible truth he can reach when aligned with God's Word.

Success in the Bible is defined by a relationship with God where faith establishes success and ultimately leads to the ultimate success of eternity with God. For believers, success is committing "your work to the Lord" and trusting that "your plans will be established" (Proverbs 16:3, NIV). It is also when one can say, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7, NIV). Success is no longer about the praise of society or the constant race to the top of the totem pole, instead, it is about the continual trust in God to bring favor in one's life and the final

inheritance of eternal life given to those who have run the race of faith, living out the kingdom of God.

The World vs. the Word

Success according to this world is much different than success according to the Word. Success according to society is achieving something that is useful for this life on earth; however, success in God's eyes is something achieved that is sustaining and infinite. Psalms 1:1-3 states, "blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law, he meditates day and night…In all that he does, he prospers" (NIV). This piece of scripture confirms a solid truth to believers that if they stay away from evil and sinful people, choosing to delight fully in the Lord, they will prosper in the end. This is confirmation that man can find ways to excel in life by refusing to do evil in the world. God lays out the simple truth that if His people delight in the Lord and meditate on His Word day and night, they will prosper—they will have success in life. Joshua 1:8 reiterates this truth when God commands that the Book of the Law "shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success" (NIV). This scripture clearly reaffirms the truth proclaimed in Psalm 1 that man can be successful when he trusts in the guidance of the Lord and not man.

God's Word gives people great success in life. Once again, Proverbs conveys to remember the teachings and "let your heart keep my commandments, for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you. Let not steadfast love and faithfulness

forsake you; bind them around your neck; write them on the tablet of your heart. So you

will find favor and good success in the sight of God and man" (Proverbs 3:1-4, NIV). The

more we transform to the image of God, the more favor and success we find in the sight

of God. Success in God's Word is much different than success in the world. In the world,

man is constantly chasing the material trappings of this world that will undoubtedly fade

away at the end of time, but when man is chasing a definition of success defined by the

Word, he is submerged into a truth that is fulfilling and unchanging.

The Parable of the Talents

One of the most famous parables in the New Testament, the parable of the

Talents, is a biblical demonstration of how to be successful. In the book of Matthew,

Jesus speaks to the disciples through a parable about the three servants who are all given

a different portion of talents, each according to his own ability. It states that "to one he

gave five bags of gold, to another two bags, and to another one bag, each according to his

ability" (Matthew 25:15, NIV). The reason the master gives different portions to different

servants is to test to see what each servant does with the amount of talents he is given by

his master. In the end, "The man who had received five bags of gold went at once and put

his money to work and gained five bags more," and "the one with two bags of gold

gained two more," but "the man who had received one bag went off, dug a hole in the

ground and hid his master's money" (Matthew 25:16-18, NIV). Upon their return, when

their master asked them each what they did with the money, the first two were faithful

with their money and gained double their investment. Because the two servants were

faithful with the talents bestowed upon them, their master proclaimed to both of them:

"Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will

put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness" (Matthew

25: 21, NIV)! However, the servant who was entrusted one bag of gold went out in fear

and hid his money in the ground bringing back no investment to his master. Hearing this,

the master was furious with his servant's inactivity and so he gave away his money to the

one servant with ten bags. In light of this occurrence, the master explains that "for

whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance. Whoever does not

have, even what they have will be taken from them" (Matthew 25:25, NIV). In other

words, whoever is faithful with little will be given much more because they were faithful

with little to start with and can now be trusted with more, but those who are not faithful

with what they have been given, will be given even less.

The Parable of Talents Explained

The parable of the talents teaches many different lessons on success. First, it

teaches that success is a byproduct of the believer's faith. God entrusts each one of His

children with gifts and talents according to their ability and each person is meant to take

those talents and increase them; therefore, success is a product of our faith in God to

provide for his people and how we invest our given share to this world. With that being

said, it is not right to completely discredit the theories of success discussed earlier,

instead, attempting to look at them from a different perspective. These theories can be

helpful in teaching practical ways in which we can multiply our God-given investment

for His glory. One can implement Holland's theory of success (2006) or Angela

Duckworth's theory on Grit (2016) into one's life as strategies to being more proficient

with one's God-given talents. In the end, all the return on man's investment should goes

straight back to God in praise, who then defines man as a successful steward of His

gracious gifts and talents.

Another important component of this parable is that all three of the servants

 work for the master, not for their own selfish gain. It is essential here to note that the two

servants who multiplied their investment were the ones faithful to their master. The one

servant who did not multiply his talents was only concerned for himself and was living in

fear of the master. Man is called to be faithful to God and trust that God gives each and

every person enough to sustain themselves. Man is to trust that God knows exactly what

each person needs for what He has called them to do. Man is to go in faith with his talents

so that God can bless him in due time.

        This idea goes hand-in-hand with the underlying principle brought forth in the

gospel of Luke when a sinful woman anoints Jesus' head with oil and washes His feet

and Jesus in turn claims that "her sins, which are many, are forgiven—for she loved

much. But he who is forgiven little, loves little" (Luke 7:47, NIV). In this excerpt of the

gospel of Luke, Jesus teaches a similar principle from the parable of the talents, that

although the woman had many sins, her anointing of His head and feet showed that she

knew she needed forgiveness and knew Jesus was the only one who could heal her. This

story is a picture of the faith and love every man and woman is called to have for the

Creator, and in turn the faith and love he or she will receive in return. If man is not aware

of the degree of his sinfulness, then he will not understand the depth of God's grace and

mercy. The more man loves God and understands what He has done for him, the more He

is compelled to do good with what He has entrusted him. When man understands the

depth of God's love and that He has entrusted each of His children with gifts and talents

perfected for their specific calling, the more he should essentially desire to do good with those talents and multiply the investment out of love and gratitude for his Creator.

He Will Establish Your Steps

A personal and intimate relationship with God can bring internal and external success. The Lord wants His followers to be successful in life. He deeply desires for His creations to prosper and find fulfillment in Him. As stated above, Proverbs 16:3 instructs to "commit your work to the Lord, and your plans will be established" (NIV). God promises His creation that if they commit their work, gifts, talents, etc. to the Lord, He will establish their steps. As long as they love Him and have faith in Him, He will put them on a righteous path to success.

The Bible story of Joseph unpacks a great truth about God's provision. It is a heart-wrenching story that ends in God's favor because of Joseph's faithfulness. Joseph was the eleventh son of Jacob and was his father's favorite child. Joseph was a godly man who had a dream that one day all his brothers would bow down to him. In their jealousy, Joseph's brothers staged his death before their father and sent Joseph away to Egypt. When he arrived in Egypt, Joseph became so well liked and utilized that he lived in the house of the Egyptian master. This made it clear that although Joseph was in an unfathomable circumstance, "the Lord was with Joseph so that he prospered" (Genesis 39:2-6, NIV). His master, Potiphar, noticed that the Lord was continually with Joseph and "that the Lord gave him success in everything he did" (Genesis 39:3, NIV). The Lord put Joseph in charge of the master's household and all that he owned— "the Lord blessed the household of the Egyptian because of Joseph" (Genesis 39:5, NIV). Because of Joseph's faithfulness, "the blessing of the Lord was on everything Potiphar had," so

"Potiphar left everything he had in Joseph's care; with Joseph in charge, he did not

concern himself with anything except the food he ate" (Genesis 39:2-6, NIV). Because

Joseph never stopped believing in God and trusting in His power, the Lord blessed him

abundantly. Throughout his struggle with his brothers and his new life in Egypt, God

always had a plan and brought Joseph great success because of his abounding

faithfulness. Both of these pieces of scripture show that biblical success derives from a

faithful relationship with God.

This story of Joseph is a perfect example of what it looks like when people let

their faith determine their success. When believers commit all their lives, their work, their

talents, their gifts, their plans, and their trust in God to establish the steps of their path,

they become like Joseph who trusted in the Lord's plan and was rewarded by the Lord

with great success. Joseph was not just put in charge of the master's house, he was in

charge of everything he owned, which is the same principle for God's followers today.

As believers, if we acknowledge the magnitude of success that Joseph received because

of his unwavering faith, we should also recognize that the same success that was

available to Joseph is also available to all of those who call upon His name and trust in

Him.

Let Go, Let God

Success is a delicate subject to handle. Many scientists, psychologists, business

owners, coaches, and universities have attempted to tackle this concept to find a perfect

equation for success. Each entity portrays a different idea of success and what it means.

A secular view of success may be that *butterfly- feeling* while standing on the podium

with a first-place medal. It may be getting accepted to the most prestigious college, and it

even may be getting a promotion at work, but a secular view of success if fleeting. Each

of these are great achievements, but they will pass away in light of eternity. At the end of

this life, these achievements will mean nothing when we are face-to-face with God. God

will not ask about what we did on this earth to boost our own name, but what we did on

this earth to bring success to His name. This is why success is so difficult to define

through a secular perspective, because all the theories regarding success are relative to

society's wants and desires. These theories are centered upon bringing glory to self rather

than glory to God. In his sermon *Glorifying in the Lord,* Charles Spurgeon wrote, "you

will never glory in God till first of all, God has killed your glorying in yourself (p. 348).

In a society where people are constantly glorifying themselves and trying to figure out

how to make themselves more successful, the Bible reminds people to let go of trying to

outdo others and let God produce the success in their lives.

Success Through Scripture

In a Christ-centered approach to success, success is defined through an intimate

and personal relationship with the Father. This type of success produces external success

through faith in God. When believers commit their whole lives to God and trust in His

plan for their lives, His Word promises prosperity and fulfillment. His Word reveals that

with faith like Joseph, there is great opportunity for blessing and success. That by

faithfully pursuing God, believers may experience an external success like never felt

before because of their persistence in the faith. This approach to success also produces

great internal success. Internal achievement occurs when believers use the gifts and

talents God has given them for His glory, while persisting in the faith until they have

received the greatest success of all, eternal life. In the end, their entire life will be a

testament to their ongoing success, and at the end of the day, they will be able to say that

they have the run the race, and they have indeed won. Although there are many secular

theories of success, a biblical theory of success can produce great internal and external

success that is enriching and rewarding.

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