

What God Delights In: The Kingdom Measurement of Success

2 Corinthians 10:7–18

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Introduction: Stinky Thinking About Success

In chapters 10–13 of 2 Corinthians, there is a noticeable shift in tone and theme. That shift is on full display in verses 3–5 of chapter 10:

For though we walk in the flesh, we are not waging war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ.

What Paul describes in those verses is exactly what he proceeds to do in these final four chapters. He is confronting stinky thinking — ideas, opinions, and theologies that are wrong, contrary to God — including wrong opinions about who we are and what it means to follow Jesus.

Possibly one of the areas of stinky thinking that most deeply influences people is the definition and measurement of success. A group of people had come to Corinth telling the church: *We are successful. Paul is not.* Our passage today presents Paul’s counter-argument and, in doing so, gives us a biblical definition and measure of success.

Paul had planted the church in Corinth and stayed there for about two years. After he left, a group of people arrived claiming to be better, superior, and to carry greater authority than Paul. We do not know exactly who these people were. Paul calls them, with considerable sarcasm, “super-apostles” in chapter 11:5 — *“Indeed, I consider that I am not in the least inferior to these super-apostles”* — because of what they were claiming about themselves, how successful and superior they were to him. A few verses later, in 11:13, he is more precise in his description: *“For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ.”*

What these so-called super-apostles did was come into Corinth and point to various things as proof of their success and superiority over Paul. They boasted of impressive public speaking and polished, commanding presence — unlike Paul, who struck some as unimpressive in

person. They claimed Jewish pedigree and credentials, presenting themselves as true Hebrew Jews from Jerusalem, not like that Greek Jew from Tarsus. They pointed to their wealth as evidence of God's blessing, while Paul had to work part-time just to survive. They spoke of visions and spiritual experiences, of having been shown things directly by God, while Paul kept having to explain and defend himself. And they pushed a form of religiosity, telling the Corinthians exactly what rules to follow for God to accept them — unlike Paul, who kept talking about grace and faith.

What Paul was experiencing is exactly what we experience all the time. We live in a world that constantly presses upon us its own measurements of success. When two people meet, there is an immediate Resume Contest: Where did you go to school? What is your title? Where do you live? Through questions like these, status, wealth, and influence are quietly measured and ranked. Then there is the Busy Badge — “How are you?” “Oh, so busy. Crazy busy. I don't even have time to breathe.” That is not a complaint. That is a brag. Busyness has become a signal of importance, of being needed, of mattering more. There are the Parenting Olympics, where every travel team, college acceptance, and kindergarten milestone becomes a trophy in a contest of whose child has accumulated the most impressive résumé before they turn ten. And we could go on — the Fitness Flex, the constant measuring of people against a yardstick of physical appearance; the social media Highlight Reel, where only the best moments get posted; the Biggest House contest; the contest of who can be the most visibly religious.

Now, I am not saying these things are unimportant. Being healthy matters. Working hard is good. Being a good parent is a wonderful thing. Having a home is important. What is not good is taking the things God has blessed us with and turning them into measurements of success and superiority over others.

We have all lived this, and I suspect we have all done it. Most of us have boasted and bragged — not just to feel good, but to look good. And most of us have also felt the other side of it: the sense that we have not measured up, that we are not successful, that some measurement placed on us by the culture or by friends or family has left us feeling like total failures.

And in a selfish, narcissistic, secular age, one common response to all of this is simply to deconstruct the measurements and declare there is no measure. True success, goes the argument, is to do what you want, to be authentic to yourself, answerable to no one. *You are your own measure. Don't worry about what others think; you do you.* But this too is stinky thinking. This too is a stronghold that needs to be demolished by weapons of divine power.

Paul confronts this thinking directly in the final verse of our passage. Verse 18: *“For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.”* There is a measure of success by which a life is to be weighed. And that is what this passage is about.

In Paul's response to these deceitful super-apostles, our passage gives us a clear picture of what true success looks like in God's eyes — the things that delight God. I want to call these Kingdom Measurements of Success, and I see three of them in our text.

Kingdom Measurement #1: Building Up Others With What God Has Given You

The first kingdom measurement of success is this: do you use what God has given you to build yourself up, or do you use it to build others up?

Notice that in our passage, the Lord has given Paul a special and unique authority — and notice what he seeks to do with it:

Look at what is before your eyes. If anyone is confident that he is Christ's, let him remind himself that just as he is Christ's, so also are we. For even if I boast a little too much of our authority, which the Lord gave for building you up and not for destroying you, I will not be ashamed. (vv. 7–8)

The Lord gave Paul something — in this case, a unique apostolic authority — and Paul tells us plainly why it was given: to build up the church, not to tear it down. In that brief phrase, Paul describes how authority is so often abused. People with authority frequently tear down, punish, belittle, or expel others as a means of building up and protecting their own prestige. In other words, people take what God has given them and use it to glorify themselves. And the world says, the more glory and power and authority you accumulate, the more successful you are.

But that is not the kingdom measure of success. The kingdom measure is using what God has given you to build others up — for His glory, not yours.

Every single person here, God has given you something. He has given you influence, certain blessings, forms of authority, gifts and talents, various opportunities, and unique privileges. And greatest of all, He has given you Himself. Christ has died for you; in Him you are forgiven. In His resurrection, so too do you live. His Spirit has been poured out upon you. In Christ, you have been blessed beyond measure.

What will you do with what God has given you? One of the great failures of Israel in the Old Testament is that they came to believe that God's gifts and blessings to them were a form of reward or special privilege — that sharing them would somehow lessen them — and so they shunned others from drawing near to God. But Paul is saying: we have been blessed to be a blessing. What God has given us is to be used to build others up.

Great leaders throughout history have understood this. Jack Welch, who led General Electric for two decades, put it this way: “Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others.” Harvey Firestone said, “The growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership.” Ronald Reagan observed, “The greatest leader is not necessarily the one who does the greatest things. He is the one that gets the people to do the greatest things.” And of course, the greatest leader of any age is Jesus, who said it this way in Matthew 23:11 — “*The greatest among you shall be your servant.*”

Success is measured by the building up of others with what God has given to you.

Kingdom Measurement #2: Committed Faithfulness to God’s Calling

Let’s read on in our passage:

I do not want to appear to be frightening you with my letters. For they say, “His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech of no account.” Let such a person understand that what we say by letter when absent, we do when present. Not that we dare to classify or compare ourselves with some of those who are commending themselves. But when they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another, they are without understanding. But we will not boast beyond limits, but will boast only with regard to the area of influence God assigned to us, to reach even to you. (vv. 9–13)

There is a lot here. Look first at verse 12. Paul describes how people of the world measure themselves: they measure themselves by one another and compare themselves with one another. And to that, he says plainly — they are without understanding. This has not changed. People still think, *I am successful if I am better than you*. But if that is your measurement of success, if winning the comparison is the goal, how can you possibly build others up? You need them to stay beneath you.

There is a Bengali parable about a farmer who digs up a genie’s bottle. The genie appears and says, “I will give you whatever you ask for — riches, wealth, land, power, anything. But whatever you ask for, your neighbor will receive double.” The farmer thinks for a long while, and finally answers: “Make me blind in one eye.” His entire measurement of success is relative to his neighbor. Even if he is well off, he does not feel successful if his neighbor is doing better. And so he constructs a wish that guarantees he is worse off than his neighbor — as long as his neighbor is worse off still.

It seems the false apostles who came to Corinth said something like, “If Paul were really a good apostle, he would be doing this, and this, and this — he would be more polished, more impressive, more prosperous.” They compared themselves to Paul and used the comparison to showcase their own superiority.

To which Paul responds in verse 13: I am doing what God has assigned me to do. And in verses 11 and 12, where he is responding to the accusation that he is different in person than in his letters, he says simply: I am the same no matter where I go. Wherever I am, I seek to be faithful to what God has assigned me to do — namely, to preach the gospel — and I hope that faithfulness carries beyond you to others as well.

How about you? We live in a day unlike any other in history when it comes to the pressure to have certain things, look a certain way, and participate in certain activities. A motivating force in our culture is FOMO — the fear of missing out, the anxiety that someone else is getting something you are not. And so people jump from one thing to the next, never settling, never going deep, always scanning the horizon. That is not success.

Success is being faithful to what God has assigned you to do. If you are not sure what that is, begin by reading God’s Word. There are clear, general commands of Christ that, when lived out in the presence of His Spirit, lead in time to a sense of particular calling upon one’s life.

Kingdom Measurement #3: Knowing and Enjoying the Lord

Paul closes this section by drawing on the prophet Jeremiah. Verses 17–18:

“*Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.*” For it is not the one who commends himself who is approved, but the one whom the Lord commends.

We do not set the standard of measurement. God does. The passage Paul is paraphrasing is Jeremiah 9:23–24:

Thus says the LORD: “*Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD.*”

When Jeremiah first spoke those words, Judah looked successful by every visible standard. King Josiah had brought sweeping reforms. The temple had been reopened. The Book of the Law had been rediscovered. Worship had been restored. Religious revival had swept the land,

the nation was more secure than it had been in years, and the economy was thriving. By the world's measurements, Judah was doing exceptionally well.

And that is precisely when God sent Jeremiah. Why? Because the people had begun to confuse God's blessings with God's approval. They were boasting in their wisdom, their strength, and their prosperity. They had become so impressed with what they had accomplished for God that they had nearly forgotten God Himself.

God interrupted all of that with one simple statement: *If you are going to boast, boast in this — that you understand and know me.* That is the measure of a life well lived.

The world says: measure your life by what you achieve. Religion says: measure your life by how well you follow the rules. Our culture says: measure your life by being true to yourself. But God says: measure your life by whether you know Me.

Not simply whether you know *about* Him. Not whether you can explain the Trinity or win a theological argument. Do you know Him? Walk with Him? Delight in Him? Trust Him? Love Him?

And notice the second half of verse 24. God does not just say *know me* — He tells us what He delights in: *"I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD."* If you truly know Him, these are the things you will begin to delight in too. Do you know and enjoy the Lord?

The Good News That Makes This Possible

This raises an obvious and honest question: How does anyone measure up to this? How does one live up to the standard of success that God sets? That is a rather high bar.

It begins with believing, accepting, and trusting in the one whom the Father delights in. *"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."* Jesus is the fulfillment of everything that delights the Father. He is the one who embodied steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. And here is the amazing grace and mercy of God: Jesus' success in pleasing the Father is given to you and to me.

I think one of the deep, felt problems with every measurement of success — whether the world's, religion's, or our own — is that we are never quite good enough. I think that is why people labor so hard to appear better than others, more successful, more superior. There is a longing in us to be good enough, and so we labor furiously to make it so.

But something has happened in history. Jesus, the one who pleases the Father, welcomes people into relationship with Himself — a relationship through which His success and the

Father's delight are credited to you. Which means your life is not ultimately measured by what you do, but by what Christ has done for you. This is the good news of Jesus Christ.

And by knowing Him and trusting Him, something remarkable happens. You become freed — freed not just from the bondage of sin and death, but freed from the bondage of needing to prove yourself, to defend your reputation, or to manufacture your own glory. And being freed from those things, you are freed to build others up even when you receive no credit for it. You are freed to be faithful to the work God has given you, even when others pressure you toward something else. You are freed to know and enjoy the Lord because of what Christ has done — even when everything else in your life is not working.

So let him who boasts, boast in the Lord. Point to Him. Give Him the glory.