

Christian writer Henri Nouwen wrote: “I have come to realize that the greatest trap in our life is not success, popularity, or power, but self-rejection...When we have come to believe in the voices that call us worthless and unlovable, then success, popularity, and power are easily perceived as attractive solutions. The real trap, however, is self-rejection. As soon as someone accuses me or criticizes me, as soon as I am rejected, left alone, or abandoned, I find myself thinking, ‘Well, that proves once again that I am a nobody.’...I am no good...I deserve to be pushed aside, forgotten, rejected, and abandoned. Self-rejection is the greatest enemy of the spiritual life because it contradicts the sacred voice that calls us the ‘Beloved.’ Being the Beloved constitutes the core truth of our existence.”

Thus, I conclude that the problem with the ladder-to-success narrative is that there are only two directions you can go: up or down. You either climb up to the world’s adulation or step down to the world’s disdain. So, as we start climbing our individual ladders to success, we look side-to-side to compare ourselves with other people ascending their own success ladders. We are not satisfied with our individual net worth being grounded in the image of God; we seek validation from other people and gauge our success by the world’s standards. The ladder-to-success narrative is ultimately a no-win situation.

The obsession with success, therefore, is deeply selfish. One of the more important correctives the Bible offers is a verse in Philippians 2: “Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others” (2:4). When we speak of “business interests,” we typically mean money-making opportunities. If investors say, “I have an interest in that company,” they mean they took a portion of their net worth and bought a stake in that business. If the business succeeds, their net worth climbs a little higher; if the business falls on hard times, their net worth takes a hit. Society’s definition of a successful person is someone good at looking out for their own interests.

The apostle Paul takes a different approach to success, advising the Philippians to “look...to the interests of others.” Paul deeply loves the Philippian church, but he knows they have room to grow and improve. He advises them (and us) to complete his joy by “being of the same mind” (2:2), a deeply anti-self-centered message. Paul encourages us to let down our guard and allow others to get to know us deeply. We expect that of marriage partners, but Paul is talking about “being of the same mind” in the everyday life of the church. He yearns for the members of the church, his brothers and sisters in Christ, to attain that same sort of deep unity. He wants them to be as close to one another as they are to themselves.

Paul’s next piece of advice is, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves” (2:3). Not just the *same* as, but *better*

than! A keystone of our American democracy is that all people are created equal. Here, Paul argues for a sort of voluntary *inequality*, for us to step back and give up a little of our own personal privilege, putting others first. The only way to do this, Paul points out, is through the practice of humility. In *humility*, regard others as better than yourself.

Humility is not the abandonment of self-esteem, and it isn’t a means of beating ourselves up inside. Humility isn’t a deep dive into guilt and shame. The word “humility” is related to the word *humus*, that rich, fertile soil from which all vegetation springs. A truly humble person is of the earth, grounded; an insight in tune with the creation story where God molds the first humans from a handful of wet earth, *humus*. We might say that to be truly humble is to be truly human, to know the essential material from which we all spring.

Mike Rowe, the TV host of “Dirty Jobs,” goes out with a camera crew to interview people who do some truly dirty jobs. After eight years of getting to know all sorts of people who do nasty jobs, Mike told a TED Talk audience he came to a surprising conclusion. He is convinced that the people who do the dirtiest jobs in our society and stick with them over time are among the happiest, most satisfied people he has ever encountered. It doesn’t hurt that people who do jobs like these are typically paid well; but it is more than just the money. In taking on a dirty job, most of them have intentionally stepped off the ladder of success, at least as society commonly defines it. What parents, after all, raise their children to harvest bloodworms, test shark suits, or clean up crime scenes lines? Rowe says that people who make their careers doing dirty jobs notice where all the other people are headed and intentionally decide to go a different direction.

Les Swanson cleans septic tanks for a living. Rowe asked him: “Les...what are you doing here?” And he said, ‘well, what do you mean?’ You know, I’m — this is what I do.’ And I said, ‘well, what did you do before this?’ He said, ‘honestly?’ I said, ‘yeah.’ He said, ‘I was a guidance counselor and a psychiatrist.’ “And I said, ‘you’ve got to be kidding me. Why did you leave?’ And without missing a beat, he said, ‘I got tired of dealing with other people’s crap.’ And that’s how so many of these people did it. They didn’t start by going, what am I passionate about? What do I love? People on “Dirty Jobs,” they say ‘no, no, no. You don’t follow your passion. You always bring [your passion] with you, but you never follow it.’”¹

That may sound strange, even counterintuitive because it contradicts the conventional wisdom commencement speakers dispense to graduates about “Following your passion.” Those who step off the ladder of success altogether, take a dirty job, and perform it with good humor and even enthusiasm know it isn’t the job that defines them, but *they who define the job*. Society has a deep need for people to stand chest-deep in sludge, or remove

carcasses from roadways, or pick through the bottles and cans we toss into our recycling bins. Without these conscientious workers, we would be in a very bad way. Such workers are fulfilling Paul's advice to the Philippians: "Look to the interests of others" (2:4). Knowing we are in positions to be useful to others can be a source of honest pride. It may be that such work even makes them happy.

Studies suggest that money can buy you happiness, but only to a point. Desperately poor people who struggle to obtain food or a safe place to live will feel happier when they earn enough to cover those basic needs. But researchers discovered the effect doesn't continue as people climb higher up the ladder of success. There is a big difference in happiness between a person earning \$10,000 a year and a person earning \$50,000; but when you climb higher up the income scale, there is no longer such a stark difference. People earning \$50,000 a year report being about as happy on average as those earning \$100,000; and millionaires don't do any better regardless of all the fancy toys their money can buy.

There was a famous Lexus ad that touted: "Whoever said money can't buy happiness isn't spending it right." The implication is that buying the right luxury car will make you happy, but the scientific evidence shows this isn't true. There may be a *yearning* for an expensive car, but once the yearning is fulfilled and the vehicle sits in the driveway, day-to-day happiness doesn't take a huge leap. We would be happier if we bought a modest car for reliable transportation and donated the difference to a church or charity that makes other people's lives demonstrably better. Or use that car to drive to a place where we can volunteer. "Look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others." Paul's advice is not only a solemn command, but also a recipe for happiness. Our faith teaches that success comes not from advancing ourselves ever higher, but rather from making ourselves truly useful to others. We are created in the image of God. Our net worth is secure. Let's use that capital to enrich others, being of the same heart and mind as Jesus.

Prayer: Lord, forgive me when my mind is full of pride, fear, or selfish desires. Give me the humility of Jesus, looking not only at my own interests, but caring for the needs of others. Give me a servant's heart, obeying You with patience and grace. Unite my thoughts in a love like Christ's so my life honors You and brings peace and joy to those around me. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.

Sources:

- National Public Radio TED Radio Hour, "Are People with 'Dirty Jobs' the Most Successful?" November 1, 2013. Transcript: <http://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=240780579>.
- Henri J.M. Nouwen, *Henri Nouwen: Writings* (Orbis, 2009), lxii.

Success Is Not a Ladder

Sunday, September 27, 2026

Philippians 2:1-13

Federated Church, Fergus Falls, MN

Have you seen videos of motivational speakers? They stride across a stage, a microphone dangling from their ear, a remote control in one hand to change the images on a huge screen behind them. They smile a lot, with perfect, gleaming-white teeth. They're dressed to the nines. They talk about success: whether patenting an invention, losing weight, selling real estate, or getting along with a spouse, motivational speakers will tell you how to plan for and achieve success. Motivational speakers earn big bucks making the rounds at hotel ballrooms and football stadiums because success is a growth industry. The problem is that *I don't think these people know what they're talking about*. It's simple mathematics. If those easy, guaranteed paths to success were truly easy or guaranteed, then more of us would be living the American dream and would stop buying tickets to their talks.

Most of us are taught that our life's goal is to be successful. Success is nearly always defined in financial terms. We can use fancy computer algorithms to calculate our net worth, but the concept is a simple balance sheet: list your assets on one side and your liabilities on the other; subtract your liabilities from your assets and what is left is your net worth. The single most important goal in life we're taught is to nudge that net worth ever higher. But it's all a mirage. Here's how I know: way back in the book of Genesis, God created the first humans, Adam and Eve, "in the image of God." Let that sink in for a second. From the very first day of our lives, when we lie helplessly in the bassinet doing little more than crying, eating, and producing the inevitable outcome of eating, we are *already in the image of God* and we are *not accomplishing a thing*! God said of our ancestors, "*You are good. You are created in my image.*" This means our net worth is already infinite!

Unfortunately, most of us heard a different narrative growing up: the narrative that says we are born unworthy; the narrative that constantly reminds us we fall short of the glory of God; the narrative that portrays us as sinners in the hands of an angry, vengeful God to whom we can never make amends; or the narrative that says we must work hard to achieve our own salvation. This unhealthy and un-biblical narrative sticks with us as we grow up, go out into the world, and begin the long, slow climb up the ladder of success. While there is some biblical validation for this narrative – after all, we do sin, and fall short, and disappoint God – this is not the *original* God-created narrative which says we are made in the image of God, loved and precious as we are.