

UnEasy Street

The Curse of Success

February 11, 2024

Today we're recognizing the slippery spiritual slope of earthly success. Cuz as sweet as it can seem *down here*, success *also* has a way of holding us *back* from *up there*. So we're gonna work on sorting things out by answering this: **What do you want out of life?**



Tough question! Cuz Last week we talked all about how **struggle builds strength**, so it feels like we *have to* say *"I'm so spiritually mature that I do actually desire earthly difficulties cuz I know they're making me eternally better, yada, yada, yada..."*



For [as Scripture promises us,] our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.



But the problem *is*, while we're down here, **it's hard to want what we can't see** but, **it's easy to see what we shouldn't want!** And because God knows it, *this* Scripture goes on to tell us *how* to change our desire.



So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is *temporary*, but what is unseen is *eternal*. [But, that change is a whole lot easier said than done.] – 2 Corinthians 4:17-18 NIV

I mean, *they're eyes...* and they kinda prefer *visible* things. So *how* do we take them *off* all the incredibly *attractive* and *easy-to-see* things that the *earth* offers and *turn* them toward something *better*, but *invisible*?

Well, we got *two tactics* that *can* shift our focus from those *damaging* desires to more *productive* pursuits: *one*, **we can glorify our goals** like we did *last week*, by *emphasizing* the *hard-to-see* appeal *hidden* in earthly *struggles*. Or *two*, we can also shift our focus when we **vilify our vices**. So *today*, I'd like to vilify our vices by *minimizing* the *easy-to-see* appeal *flaunted* by earthly *success*. Because we know what we *want* to want – but it's *hard* to look past all this earthly stuff we *wish* we *didn't* want! Good thing Paul offers some encouraging *advice* and *explanation*:

Walk by the *Spirit*, and you will *not* gratify the desires of the flesh. For the *flesh* desires what is contrary to the Spirit, and the Spirit what is contrary to the flesh. They are in conflict with each other, so that you are not to do whatever you want. ... [So what do we do with those **unwanted earthly desires?**] Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other. – Galatians 5:16-17, 24-26 NIV

So there you go – **we gotta kill the appeal of earthly desire by erasing any opportunity for envy**. And that means our *worldly* success shouldn't be *bragged about* or *wished for*, it should be *downplayed* until the desire for it is *dead*. Cuz we can take the teeth *out* of *temptation* when we **stop romanticizing what the world offers** and **start recognizing its inadequacy**.

So, let's crucify some earthly desires by erasing some envy! *It's surprisingly easy!* Just take a *closer* look at *any* person with the *worldly success* you *think* you want. And here's what you'll find: lottery winners have a greater chance of going bankrupt in the next 3-5 years than you do.¹ Famous musicians are two to seven times more likely to commit suicide.² And professional athletes are 75% more likely to suffer a mental health crisis than you;³ which is *extra* crazy, cuz athletes *start* more mentally stable than the average but *grow unstable* the more elite they are!⁴



But however you slice it, the bottom line is *this*: **easy street ain't all it's cracked up to be!** So we should feel *pity*, not *envy*, for all those poor saps who've had the *misfortune* of *achieving* all their *earthly* dreams! Like all these kids who are about to play the *Superbowl* today, only to find out, it's *not enough!* And if you still don't believe *me*, just listen to the *desperation* in *this* 27-year-old's voice as *he* talks about it.

Whether it's *Superbowl rings*, a *supermodel spouse*, or a *super-sized bank account*, all *materially-measured achievements* ultimately promise the same *sad* thing: *they end*. Because **you can't buy happiness, you can only rent it!** And if *that's* your strategy, you'll find yourself *stuck* in a *lifelong loop* of trying to *expand* and *extend* your *material* value:

Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never *satisfied* with their income. This too is meaningless. [Cuz as Ecclesiastes loves to point out, it's all just "chasing the wind"] – Ecclesiastes 5:10 NIV

And if you want to *see* a striking example of what it *looks* like when our *earthly* answers *close in* on their *unavoidable end*, check out how poor Tom Brady handled that *final* season which he had been *fearing* would *rob* him of meaning since he was 27. Now obviously, I'm going for *dramatic* effect, but still, he ain't *happy!* And this is an *unfortunate theme* for *many* who experience great *worldly* success. Like Rainn Wilson says, **"When I was in *The Office*, I spent several years really mostly unhappy because *it wasn't enough*. I was making *hundreds* of thousands. I wanted *millions*. I was a *TV star*, but I wanted to be a *movie star*. It was never enough."** Or as Troy Aikman put it **"Here I was at the top of professional football, and I found myself thinking, '*Now what?*'"**

You believe it yet?! Earthly *goods* aren't part of the good *life!* Cuz **real life isn't about what we get in this world, it's about what we get out of this world.** It's about *learning* what has *real* value.

[So] Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; cuz it can keep you grounded down here, but real life does not consist in an abundance of possessions. – Luke 12:15 NIV

"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you *hope* and a *future* [Cuz His plan is use this life's *insufficiency* to teach us to reach out for the *satisfaction* of a *real* life!]" – Jeremiah 29:11 NIV

¹ Certified Financial Planner Board of Standards, USA Today (2023)

² Dianna Kenny (University of Sydney), CDC, NCHS

³ Reardon CL, Hainline B, Aron CM, Sports Med 2019;53:667–699

⁴ Athletes for Hope, Global Sports Matter & Inside Higher Education.

Because *real* life is *perpetually* vibrant, thriving, and satisfying – while everything in *this* life – always *dulls*, *dies*, and *never* satisfies. And because of *that*, our *material* successes are *fleeting*. And because of *that*, our lives are filled with *new* struggles. When we win a Superbowl and ultimately feel the *insufficiency* of success, we’re *forced* to struggle with the *new* question, “*Why is this not enough?!*” And *voila!* We’re right back to *wrestling!*

“*If success means everything, and everything isn’t enough. What do I do?*” Well, we got two options, *get mad at everything* for letting you down, or *get a bigger everything* that won’t.



And **if we choose anger, our success will lead to oppressing, exploiting, and discouraging others** – and we’ll become some form of *bully, tyrant, or megalomaniac*. This is where we get the *athletes* who *shoot* someone at a *nightclub*, the *movie producers* who *assault* women, and the *Hitler’s* who try to *take over* the *world!* So, let’s go ahead and *rule out* anger as a *productive* response; that leaves us searching for a *bigger* everything to aim for. So *where* do we find it? Well, *not down here!*



Cuz **that approach just leads us to a new experience of the same mistake.**



If we’re let down by *wealth*, don’t think it’s *power*. If we’re let down by *power*, don’t think it’s *fame*. And if we’re let down by a *Superbowl* victory, don’t think it’s *women* – I’m looking at you David! Cuz, we’ve been *praising* the *strength* from his *struggle*, but it was his *success* that *messed* everything up. *Remember*, David beat Goliath in a battle *bigger* than the Superbowl when the whole *nation* was watching. And *after* that, he spent *years* succeeding at *everything* – while his legend *grew* and he *became King!* So he was pretty much the *biggest* deal *ever* and yet, it was right *then*, when he had his “*Now what?*” moment and:



One evening David got up from his bed and walked around on the roof of the palace. From the roof he saw a woman bathing ... and David sent someone to find out about her. The man said, "She is Bathsheba, ... the wife of Uriah the Hittite." [But still]: Then David sent messengers to get her. She came to him, and he slept with her. – 2 Samuel 11:2-4 NIV

David, David, David... you had everything! What are you doing?! How could this happen?

[Well,] This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says [to David about this]: 'I anointed you king over Israel, and I *delivered* you from the hand of Saul. I *gave* your master's *house* to you, and your master's *wives* into your arms. I gave you *all* Israel and Judah. And if *all this* had been too *little*, I would have given you even *more*. Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in His eyes? – 2 Samuel 12:7-9 NIV



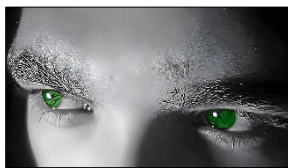
Well what have *we* learned? Why would David throw everything away when he had such incredible success? **It wasn’t enough!** And don’t let God’s question *mislead* you – *He* knows *exactly* why we do evil in His eyes – the *question* is for *our* benefit! Cuz *that* question is what pushes us through God’s brilliantly designed *training* circuit:

Struggle builds strength, strength builds success, and then success builds struggle. And on it goes.

Until *hopefully*, at some point, it *accomplishes* its goal: **we give up on earthly answers!** Cuz when success falls short, the *easy-to-see* answers in this world start to *lose* their appeal. And our eyes start to *recognize* that *only* an infinite and loving *God* could provide a *big enough* “everything” to *satisfy* our desires. And once we realize **only God can offer everything the earth can't**, it becomes *easy* to also see, **the only thing earth can offer that God can't, is sin**. And all the sudden, it also gets *easier* to *shift* our focus from what we *see* down here to what's *unseen* up there.

[The way it took David's Bathsheba debacle, for him to finally kill the desires of his flesh and look to the Lord:] Against You [Lord], *You only*, have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight; so You are right in Your verdict and justified when You judge. – Psalms 51:4 NIV

[And when our eyes wander upwards, we learn:] Whom have I in heaven but You? And earth has nothing I desire besides You. – Psalms 73:25 NIV



Deep down, everyone in this room has something that we think, **“If I just had that, I'd be a success.”** And whatever that *is*, you're *full* of it. But if that something *isn't* God, you're setting yourself up for that lifelong *loop* of *disappointment*. And you'll only ever find *crisis*, not comfort.



However, if you finally have *your fill* of *underwhelming* answers and shift your focus to a relationship with an overwhelming *God*, well, it completely changes *both* experiences of *struggle* and *success*; just listen to the *satisfaction* in this 24-year-old's voice as *he* talks about it.



Now I can't tell you how hard it is for me to root for a 49er, but when someone has the only gameplan that guarantees a victory, well, you gotta respect their game. And his is: **Win or lose, glorify God**. That's the game-changer. Cuz chasing things down here keeps us in the *painful* cycle of struggle and success but **when you aim it all at the Lord, it adds a new dimension, up**. And the nature of your *cycle* of struggle and success changes, as it turns into a spiral staircase. Cuz **each step doesn't just spin you in circles but actually takes you closer to God**.



So what do you want out of this world? Well, **to get out of this world!** Life down here, *doesn't have* what we want. But if we *use* all of its *struggle*, *strength*, and *success* to glorify *God*, and *we're outta here!* Cuz **without God, easy street is a dead end!** but **with God, it leads to the beginning of real life!** And if *this* life is merely a means to an end, *God's* gotta be the goal.

Therefore ... let us throw off [the insufficient *earthly*] everything that *hinders* and the sin [only earth offers] that so easily entangles. And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes [upward,] on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before Him He endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. – Hebrews 12:1-2 NIV

Look, this place ain't it. And the more we realize what a *letdown* it *is*, the *easier* it becomes to *shift* our focus from the *false* promises of material *success* to the *proven* promises of *Jesus Christ*. Cuz **without Jesus, this place is a vicious cycle** but **with Jesus, it's a stairway to heaven!**