

How Paul planned for success

By Rick Warren

There are lots of books that talk about what it takes to succeed in ministry. You can find advice for missionaries, pastors, youth leaders, educators, and just about every ministry you can think of. And we all hope the latest book will be the one to turn our ministry around. Ironically, much of that advice comes from people with no track record of success.

When I want to learn about success, I go to someone who has experienced it. I look to somebody who has accomplished what I want to accomplish. We learn much more from models than manuals.

The best model for ministry we'll ever find is Jesus. Next to him, the most successful minister who ever lived would have to be Paul. Other than Jesus, no one had a greater impact on the growth of the church.

In Philippians 3, Paul gives us his autobiography. In the first 11 verses he deals with his past. Then he turns to his present and his future. In verse 17 he encourages us to take his example: "Join with others in following my example, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you."

What's that example? He lived out this four-part pattern:

1. **Evaluation: Face your faults.**

Being successful means admitting you don't have it all together and you still have a long way to grow. Pastor, your journey to success should start by doing an inventory of your life. You've got to know where you are before you know where you're going. You start by looking at where you need improvement.

Paul was honest about his faults. In verses 12 and 13 he says, "Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect. I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it." The Good News translation says it this way: "I don't claim that I have already succeeded or become perfect."

That's an amazing statement. Paul was an old man at that point. If anybody had the right to claim he had arrived, it would have been Paul. He wrote most of the New Testament. He single handedly spread Christianity throughout the Roman Empire. He made an incredible impact on the world. Yet Paul at the end of his life says, "I don't have it all together. I haven't arrived. I'm not perfect. I'm still growing." Successful ministers never stop growing. They are always developing, growing, expanding, and learning.

Many Christians will give you the impression they never have any problems. I get indigestion from those kinds of people! The longer I grow as a Christian, the more acutely aware I am of my own inadequacies, limitations, weaknesses, and faults. This is the starting point for successful ministry – face your faults, be honest, and evaluate yourself.

2. **Elimination: Let go of your past.**

As pastors, we need to stop being manipulated by our past mistakes and failures. Paul says in verse 13, “This one thing I do, forgetting what is behind.” Paul knows to be all that God wants him to be, he can’t focus on yesterday. Yesterday is over. You and I must let go of our guilt, grief, and grudges. We must let go of the past, so we can get on with the present.

To forget actually means to not allow the past to affect you anymore. Successful people (whether they’re pastors or not) learn from the past without dwelling on it. There’s a big difference. They don’t keep hounding themselves about the past.

Many of us are harboring things in our hearts that God has long since forgiven and forgotten. Yet we won’t forgive ourselves. Satan’s favorite tool is to paralyze us with the past and manipulate us with memories.

You don’t want to hang on to past *successes* either. It’s pretty easy to rest on your laurels and base your security on past performance. This is even true of churches. How many churches out there are still resting on what God did through them 30 years ago or 50 years ago? “The good old days” are over. Let them go.

3. **Concentration: Focus on the future.**

If all you do is forget the past, you just have amnesia. That doesn’t make you a successful minister. Successful people are goal-oriented people who focus on the future.

In verse 13, Paul says, “But this one thing I do ... straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal.” In Greek the word Paul uses for “one” is like you’re using an exclamation point: ONE! Paul is talking about concentration.

Pastor, you need to figure out what’s important and focus on that. If a river spills over its banks, you get a swamp. But if that river is confined between banks, and you dam it up and channel it, it becomes a tremendous source of power. That’s the power of concentration. You need to write a goal down and focus on it.

There is no more rewarding goal in life than to please God. Paul wanted to be able to stand at the end of his life and hear Jesus say, “Well done, good and faithful servant!” That’s what we need to be living for too.

4. **Determination: Fight to the finish.**

Nothing worthwhile happens without effort. The only time you coast is when you’re going downhill. If you’re coasting in life and ministry right now, you’re headed downhill. Paul said, “I fight to the finish.”

The great people in life are just ordinary people with an extraordinary amount of determination. They don’t know how to quit.

Notice the term Paul uses in verse 12: “I *press on* to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.” *Press on* in the Greek literally means, “I over extend myself – I go for it with all I’ve got.”

What would happen if Christians would put as much energy into growing spiritually as they do into making money or their favorite sport?

In Acts 20:24 (NLT) Paul says, “My life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus – the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.” This is Paul's life verse. He's not going to give up. He's going to complete the purpose for which God made him.

To be the kind of pastors God has called us to be, we've got to go after that purpose with everything we have.

When was the last time you sat down and did a frank, personal evaluation of your life and ministry? The healthiest thing you can do is evaluate your life. Take a look at these four areas and see what may be holding you and your ministry back.



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