

Overcoming the Temptations of Success

by Dr. Mark Smith

August 16, 2009

1 Kings 10:23-11:13, Luke 12:48

I want to suggest to you this morning that we are most vulnerable to temptation not when things are going poorly, when we are weak and miserable and everything seems to be falling apart; but rather when things are going really well and we are feeling pretty darn good about ourselves. The heart is most likely to stray from God not in times of poverty and failure but in times of prosperity and blessing, when we're pulling down a big monthly paycheck, when we've just been promoted and are on top of the world.

Speaking of being on top of the world, no one enjoyed more prosperity than King Solomon. Scripture describes his fantastic wealth.

^{1Ki 10:23} King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth.

^{1Ki 10:24} The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart.

^{1Ki 10:25} Year after year, everyone who came brought a gift—articles of silver and gold, robes, weapons and spices, and horses and mules.

^{1Ki 10:26} Solomon accumulated chariots and horses; he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, which he kept in the chariot cities and also with him in Jerusalem.

^{1Ki 10:27} The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones, and cedar as plentiful as sycamore-fig trees in the foothills.

^{1Ki 10:28} Solomon's horses were imported from Egypt and from Kue—the royal merchants purchased them from Kue.

^{1Ki 10:29} They imported a chariot from Egypt for six hundred shekels of silver, and a horse for a hundred and fifty. They also exported them to all the kings of the Hittites and of the Arameans. [NIV]

Things couldn't have been going better for Solomon! His kingdom was at its zenith, running from present-day Lebanon in the north to Egypt in the south.

But sadly, all this success began to go to his head and he lost his perspective on life. He began his reign with such promise. His heart was in the right place. He loved God, loved people, and the thing he wanted more than anything else was wisdom to rule his people aright. He was known far and wide for his wise counsel. But then something happened. His heart began to turn away from wisdom and was redirected not only to obtaining further wealth, but to women and pleasure. Scripture documents this sad defection:

^{1Ki 11:1} King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter—Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites.

^{1Ki 11:2} They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, "You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods." Nevertheless, Solomon held fast to them in love.

^{1Ki 11:3} He had seven hundred wives of royal birth and three hundred concubines, and his wives led him astray.

^{1Ki 11:4} As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been.

^{1Ki 11:5} He followed Ashtoreth the goddess of the Sidonians, and Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites.

^{1Ki 11:6} So Solomon did evil in the eyes of the LORD? he did not follow the LORD completely, as David his father had done.

^{1Ki 11:7} On a hill east of Jerusalem, Solomon built a high place for Chemosh the detestable god of Moab, and for Molech the detestable god of the Ammonites.

^{1Ki 11:8} He did the same for all his foreign wives, who burned incense and offered sacrifices to their gods.

^{1Ki 11:9} The LORD became angry with Solomon because his heart had turned away from the LORD, the God of Israel, who had appeared to him twice.

^{1Ki 11:10} Although he had forbidden Solomon to follow other gods, Solomon did not keep the LORD'S command.

^{1Ki 11:11} So the LORD said to Solomon, "Since this is your attitude and you have not kept my covenant and my decrees, which I commanded you, I will most certainly tear the kingdom away from you and give it to one of your subordinates.

^{1Ki 11:12} Nevertheless, for the sake of David your father, I will not do it during your lifetime. I will tear it out of the hand of your son.

^{1Ki 11:13} Yet I will not tear the whole kingdom from him, but will give him one tribe for the sake of David my servant and for the sake of Jerusalem, which I have chosen." [NIV]

Solomon caved in to the temptations of success. He began to worship not only at the shrines of false gods, but at the shrine of his own ego. He began to congratulate himself for his own good fortune. Full of himself, he went on to build a palace for himself that was even bigger than the temple he built for the Lord. That tells you something right there!

Jesus told a parable about good seed falling on weedy soil. When the seed began to sprout, its growth was choked by thorns and thistles - which is to say, the green shoots of faith have a way of getting choked by riches and the cares and concerns of this world. You lose your perspective in life; you forget what's most important. That seems to have happened to our friend Solomon.

That's the real issue at heart here. It is not that it is bad to be successful and prosperous – far from it. But success has its special challenges and dangers, chief of which is that it can cause you to lose perspective, and it can choke God out of your life. It can happen to all of us who have enjoyed some success in life. We don't all have to be as rich as Solomon to know that prosperity and good fortune can cause us to become self-absorbed, self-indulgent, proud and arrogant, oblivious to the need of others.

Presbyterians tend to be, by in large, successful people. Inheritors of the Protestant work ethic, they work hard and tend to be prosperous in business and in the professions. Presbyterians tend to be pretty comfortable financially. Sometimes that very prosperity can cause us to be resistant to the gospel, for when you are doing well, who really needs God? We get to feeling pretty self-sufficient. The tendency is to congratulate ourselves for our own success. Wrapped up in worldly affairs, we can become spiritually desensitized, neglect God and concern for our neighbor. It is not that we set out to wander away from God. It certainly wasn't Solomon's intention. But over time, our heart goes astray and becomes attached to money, to power, to position, to success, and to maintaining and polishing the symbols of success – a nice home, a nice car (on in Solomon's case, a nice chariot!), a well-heeled lifestyle - and if the process goes on long enough, we may find ourselves spiritually dead.

How can you and I overcome the temptations of success?

You and I can take care to thank the Source of that success. We can thank God, for after all, it was God who gave us the ability to be successful. Think about it: what do we have that we have not received from God?

I think of the proud old fellow who grumbled: *"I do not have to thank anyone for anything I have. Everything I have I got the hard way-by the sweat of my own brow."*

"But who gave you the sweat?" asked his neighbor.

The fellow hung his head in guilty silence. He could not ignore the fact that God had given the "sweat," the strength to work hard and gain material wealth.

It's not just Thanksgiving time when we ought to thank the Lord for whatever good fortune we enjoy. Our energy, our time, our talent, our opportunities are all God-given. Every day we ought to thank him for whatever success we enjoy.

Did you win a huge promotion? Did you get on the Dean's roll at school? Did you graduate summa cum laude? Is your business going like gangbusters – even in these days of recession? Did you win an athletic contest of some kind, or some sort of service award? Turn from the trophy to the Giver of every good and perfect gift and say, *"Thank you, Lord! I want to praise you for it!"*

I think about the actors and artists who win an Oscar or an Emmy and find themselves on stage accepting their award - or athletes who are being interviewed after winning some great competition. Often the first thing out of their mouths is *"I want to thank God."* Some people may think that is corny. But for one who takes God seriously, it is totally appropriate. They realize they have been given a gift. The fact, is the more these successful people thank God and mean it the better they will be able to maintain a healthy perspective on handling their wealth and fame. They will keep their ego in check.

In success, be careful to praise the Source. Cultivate a spirit of gratitude. Thank God!

Secondly, we ought to celebrate our success, but store the trophy. It is perfectly appropriate to celebrate our good fortune. By all means – we can go right ahead and gather some family and friends and have them celebrate with us. We ought to share our joy with people around us – the people who care about us. But after the celebration, we can't go on repeating it. People get tired of hearing a rehearsal of our victories. We have to store the trophy. We can't keep taking it out and polishing it. We can't keep rehashing past triumphs. We can't keep congratulating ourselves, lest we get a big head. The Apostle Paul talked about *"forgetting what is behind, and straining for what is ahead"* (Phil 3:13). Although Paul had been quite successful in many ways - he could point to a rich spiritual heritage and to many great achievements - he had the wisdom to say, *"forgetting all that, I push on."* God has new things for us to do, no opportunities and challenges to face. Past success is wonderful, but we cannot rest on our laurels; you and I need to move forward.

Thank the Source. Celebrate your success but store the trophy. And finally, remember that with success comes responsibility. Jesus says, *"From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked."*

Success is a good thing. Don't get me wrong. There is nothing wrong with making lots of money, or running a successful business or living in a nice home or driving a nice car. There is nothing wrong with climbing the career ladder and making it to the top, as long as you realize that there is more to life than being #1. May we all live long and prosper! But if we are successful, it is not for our own enjoyment alone. You and I also have the responsibility to use that success to bless others. If we have been blessed financially, God expects us to give far beyond what anybody else can give because we have more. What a privilege it is! Through our generous giving, great blessing can come! If we possess a position of some influence in society, then we are accountable to God to use that position to make a positive impact on our world. To whom much is given, much is expected. With success come responsibility and accountability.

Thankfully many Christians understand this. Many prosperous people have wisely used their resources to build orphanages and houses for the poor. They educate and vaccinate children; they send the Gospel around the world. These people don't care about wearing designer clothes - blue jeans and a sweatshirt are just fine. They get their hands dirty. They get involved in causes that matter. For them, real success is not reaching the top but finding the will of God for their lives - using their resources and influence for the Kingdom of God. Their prosperity is a platform to make a difference in the lives of others.

It is sad to think that King Solomon refused to use his success in way that would have blessed the people of his nation. He built himself a gigantic palace, while his people were burdened with heavy taxes and substandard living conditions. When he began to rule, he asked God for wisdom to rule his people aright - with righteousness and justice. But he quickly became self-absorbed in his success and insulated himself from others. It's sad.

Beware of the temptations that come with success and prosperity. We can end up worshipping our success rather than the Lord who makes our very success possible. Watch out! We are most vulnerable when things are going well, when we begin to congratulate ourselves for our own good fortune.

Are you enjoying success? Thank the Source. Celebrate your good fortune but store the trophy. And remember that to those to whom much is given, much is required. Amen.