

Ladder to Success

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And He told them a parable, saying, “The land of a rich man was very productive. And he began reasoning to himself, saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘This is what I will do: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years to come; take your ease, eat, drink and be merry.”’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your soul is required of you; and now who will own what you have prepared?’ So is the man who stores up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

Luke 12:16-21

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It had been a good year. Business was booming. Expectations were exceeded. In fact it had been the mother of all bumper crops. So the “rich man” in Luke 12 was making plans to increase the storage capacity for the bounty he was harvesting. You remember the story (vv. 16-21). Space for his crop was woefully lacking. He had to make a decision. What does a successful businessman do? He prepares. Hire an architect, a contractor, and plan a building project. Tear down the old barns and replace them with even larger ones. His future guaranteed, his money in the bank, and everything to live for, Luke tells us the man reasoned to himself, “[I will] have many goods laid up for many years *to come*; take your ease, eat, drink *and* be merry” (v. 19).

Man’s Outlook

If we were in his position, probably most of us would have a similar response. Hard work has its rewards. Certainly his skill and endeavor should be commended. And why not, considering the rich man’s resume:

Successful executive—administrative skills resulted in vast business venture

Top producer—generating and expanding business assets

High net worth—sound financial future

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Revered for reaching the pinnacle of achievement, the rich man may find himself awarded by the Chamber of Commerce for his accomplishments, or asked to be a member of the church board serving as treasurer, or perhaps sought out by a renowned publisher to author a book on success and wealth management.

God's Outlook

Looking at this prosperous businessman, God's response was totally opposite. He says, "You fool!" (v. 20). Why that reaction? That seems a little strong, don't you think? What is wrong with a

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well-run, successful business? Is God against achievement? God's evaluation sees beyond the winning business venture to discern the thoughts and motives of the heart. Is life only about possessions? Is living just about stocking up stuff? Prior to Jesus telling the story of the rich man, He gave the divine outlook on wealth saying, "Not *even* when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions" (v. 15).

Luke then reminds his readers of the old adage, "Here today, gone tomorrow." There was no tomorrow in the life of this businessman. On the eve of his greatest success God said, "This *very* night your soul [life] is required of you" (v. 20). The rich man was dead the next day. His possessions were of no benefit to him (vv. 20-21). If this rich fool had known he would die the next day, what do you think would have occupied his thoughts, his time, and his attention? What would occupy yours? The issue is, What is of real importance in everyday life? The rich fool was prosperous indeed, but his wealth was focused on himself with no

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regard for God (v. 21). He embraced the world's idea of success, not God's.

Life's Priorities

Today, when successful businessmen are interviewed, they are often asked, "Looking back, what would you have done differently?" Invariably, they respond, "I would have spent more time with my family, been there when my children needed me, etc." Yet compelled to defend their accomplishments, they typically respond, "But..." and then add one of the following:

I had to postpone some areas of my life to concentrate on the business venture.

or

The company couldn't have succeeded without my total attention.

Priorities are the obvious issue! What is really important? The Bible pulls us up short with God's version of what really matters most in life! Is it really about me or about you? Maybe the issue of most significance is "Why am I here?" Am I here to invest in a material world that has no chance of lasting or to invest in a lasting life legacy of eternal principles? The response to that question will provide the "true" measurement of success. That answer is revealed in the words and life of Jesus. Particularly, it is demonstrated on the evening before His arrest in the Garden while He was with His disciples in the Upper Room.

Biblical Optometry

Soon Christ was to leave the disciples, in order to go to the Father. He knew these men to whom he had devoted the last three and one-half years were to face enormous trials. This intensified

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His affection for them and their need for final instructions. With this in view, John 13:1 tells us that Christ loved them “to the end,” that is, completely and eternally. This love was the motivation for His final instructions to the disciples in John 13-17.

To understand the introduction to the Upper Room Discourse (John 13–17), we need to consider it in the context of the life of Christ. *First*, we must understand how the disciples viewed Christ’s teachings. In the years they were together, Christ had been announcing that He was the promised King who was to sit on David’s throne and rule over David’s people. Some of the disciples had seen Jesus as the King in His glory on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-12). They understood that Christ would reign, and they delighted in the prospect of ruling with Him. Christ promised them that they would sit on twelve thrones ruling the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28). But they missed the chronology of events. Christ had also taught of His death and departure (Matt. 20:17-19). They continued to think only of His reign. And their chief concern was who would be the greatest in the kingdom.

In fact the question of who is greatest had come up twice before (Matt. 18:1; 20:17-28) and each time the disciples were vying for positions of authority. The result was strife and contention. In Matthew 20:20-21 the mother of James and John went to Jesus and asked that her two sons be allowed to sit next to Him in His kingdom. As you would expect, the other ten disciples were displeased. Christ then said that the greatest in the kingdom would be the one who humbled himself and served others (vv. 26-28). The jealousy and strife, however, continued as each disciple tried to grab the most eminent and elevated position.

Second, we need to understand and appreciate the custom of foot washing. Sandals were worn and they provided little protection against the dust and filth from the roads. For this reason, a waterpot was situated at the door of each house, and as guests entered a servant would wash the soiled feet of the visitors.¹ Christ’s small group had no servants because only wealthier individuals had someone to

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take this responsibility. So for this reason the disciples themselves should have taken turns performing this task.

With this historical perspective, let's review the actions of both the disciples and Christ that evening in the Upper Room for context (see Luke 22:24-27). The disciples were still in the throws of competition and rivalry.² The contention was at such a pitch that they all shuffled into the room with no one accepting the job of washing the others' feet. Their need was evident, but no one would humble himself to do so. In Luke 7:36, 44 Christ rebuked a Pharisee for neglecting to provide this customary act for Him. In the Upper Room (John 13:4-5), Jesus now silently and dramatically rebuked His disciples. He Himself did what none of them were prepared to do. They refused to put themselves in a servant's position, not wanting to appear inferior to the others. Nevertheless Christ rose from the table and laid aside His outer robe. He kept on His tunic and girded Himself with a linen towel or apron. These were the garments of a slave at work.³ He then took the water and washed the disciples' feet. He became their servant. Love expressed itself in servanthood, and Jesus gave a dramatic example of love in action!

Christ was willing to put Himself in a servant's position because He *knew who He was*, He *knew where He had come from*, and He *knew where He was going* (John 13:1-3). He was absolutely secure in His position. Christ knew that the "Father had given all things into His hands" (v. 3). Knowing His hour of crucifixion had come, His instructions in John 13-17 are of utmost importance. He had come for a purpose and this was soon to be fulfilled in His death and His return to the Father. Jesus was not confused about the *Why Am I Here* question. Because He was secure in the Father, He put Himself in the servant's place. He did not think this act was degrading or made Him inferior. As a result, Christ did not refuse to stoop to serve; instead He served in light of what and who He is.⁴

Christ was confident in where He was going and what He had

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come to do. So to it should be with every believer. In Christ believers are safe and sound! They know their final destination! *Heavenly security* in Christ should be reflected in *life*. Knowing we are in the care of a sovereign God and motivated by love, we too should serve others. *To love is to serve!*

Following the washing of the disciples' feet, Jesus explained that He had given them an example of what they should do (John 13:15). They should serve as He served. Then He provided a biblical perspective of servanthood and a promise when He said,

Truly, truly, I say to you, a slave is no greater than his master; nor is one who is sent greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, you are blessed if you do them (vv. 16-17).

Genuine success and God's blessing come from being a servant. To die to self is to live in service for others! That is true biblical success!

Ladder to Success

Someone has said, "We can climb the ladder of success only to find we have placed our ladder against the wrong wall!" Climbing evidently is not the problem. In fact, choices and effort are part of life. The decision as to which goal—against which wall to lean our ladder—is the crux of the issue.

The lesson of the rich fool teaches that where a ladder is placed is more important than how many rungs we have climbed. How to find the right wall is essential. Where are we to look? Christ's instruction on servanthood gives the answer. Like the disciples, we may need a radical reorientation of our perspective of authentic success. Many believers need to *reevaluate what is truly important*.

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Introduction, NOTES

1. J. Dwight Pentecost, *The Words and Works of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 427.
2. Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 197.
3. Frederick Louis Godet, *Commentary on the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1970), 3:248.
4. Marcus Dods, "The Gospel of St. John" in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, ed. W. Robertson Nicoll, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1970), 1:815..

