

Seeking Success in an Upside Down World

Ecclesiastes 9:11–10:7

This past August, during the Olympic Games in London, Chinese hurdler Liu Xiang stepped into the starting blocks of the 110 meter hurdles as the gold medal favorite. Xiang, who has been described by his opponents as “one of best hurdlers of all time,” and “probably the best hurdler in history,”¹ won gold in that race in 2004, and was expected to do so in 2008 in Beijing, when according to the *New York Times*, “China’s greatest hope [was] dashed” as Xiang pulled out of the race with an injured Achilles tendon.² For the next four years Xiang worked tirelessly to recover and train for another shot at gold in 2012. As the gun sounded, Xiang’s pursuit of success was dashed once again as he crashed into the first hurdle and reinjured his foot.

We’re all in pursuit of success of one kind or another. For many it’s the proverbial American dream—career, home, family, car, well-adjusted children. For others success is defined by academic performance, or athletic or artistic performance, or maybe relationships. For some it’s simply the opposite of whatever failure we grew up with—whatever flaws we saw in our childhood or our upbringing, it’s avoiding that—that’s success. And for still others success is simply keeping our head above water in a turbulent economy. We all pursue success, and we work hard, practice hard, and study hard to achieve it.

But what Xiang learned that day, the Preacher warns us in our passage—that the race is not always to the swift, that hard work doesn’t always pay off, that we live in a world sometimes turns our expectations upside down. It doesn’t work the way it should, or the way we think it should.

So what does it look like to strive for success in an upside down world? And what is true success? These are some of the questions our passage is going to force us to wrestle with this morning.

The book of Ecclesiastes has taught us a lot about how messed up this world is. His preferred description is “vanity” or “vapor”—the Preacher uses the word 38 times in this book to describe what he has found in his pursuit of lasting gain and significance. Life is vapor, smoke—it’s fleeting, it’s fruitless, and it doesn’t make sense. To use the imagery found in our passage, we live in an upside down world—a world where none of our expectations are sure, where nothing is guaranteed. Our passage opens with this imagery of things being upside down, and then closes with the same imagery. Look with me at ch. 9:11: “Again I saw that under the sun the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong, nor bread to the wise, nor riches to the intelligent, nor favor to those with knowledge, but time and chance happen to them all.”

¹ <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/sport/olympics/article-2184840/London-2012-Olympics-Liu-Xiang-falls-110m-hurdles.html>

² http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Liu_Xiang.

This is completely contrary to what we normally expect. We're told, and we tell our children, that if you work hard, you can do anything. If you study hard enough, you can get that scholarship; you can get into that college. If you train hard enough, you can win that race; you can make the varsity team. If you plan and prepare adequately, you can land that job. That's how we think this world should work. And then in a single verse, the Preacher undercuts our entire system of motivation. Like a glass of ice water in the face, he rips us from our little dream world and wakes us to the harsh reality that life doesn't always work the way it should. Neither physical ability (swiftness and strength) nor mental prowess (wisdom, intelligence, or knowledge) can guarantee success. We live in an upside down world, where sometimes those with the weaker resumes get the job, those with the slower times get the athletic scholarship, and those with the least education end up with the larger house and nicer car.

And the great equalizer here is what the Preacher calls *time and chance*: "but time and chance happen to them all." Back in ch. 3 he told us that there is a "time for everything under the sun"; here we're reminded that we don't know when that time is; the beginning of v. 12: "For man does not know his time." Because human sin and rebellion against God and his rule have turned this world upside down, we don't know whether this time will provide the success we're looking for, or whether this time will be our last time, period. There is a plan at work; God is sovereignly working out all things according to the counsel of his will (Eph. 1:11). But since we can't see it, everything feels from our vantage like chance, whether dumb luck or bad luck. None of these things are truly random; God is at work in everyone one of them. But *neither are they predictable*, and that's the point. When you step onto that soccer field, or into that job interview, you don't know whether this will be the day that you score big, or the day you either trip over your shoestring or over your words, thus ending your career. We are, in this respect, no different than helpless animals, minding our own business only to fall into a trap. As v. 12 puts it, "Like fish that are taken in an evil net, and like birds that are caught in a snare, so the children of man are snared at an evil time, when it suddenly falls upon them." There is no guarantee that life will go the way you want—not as long as we live in an upside down world.

That's how our passage begins, and that's how our passage ends—using this same imagery, this time with social structures all mixed up. Take a look at 10:5-7 with me:

There is an evil [something wrong with this world] that I have seen under the sun, as it were an error proceeding from the ruler: ⁶ folly is set in many high places, and the rich sit in a low place. ⁷ I have seen slaves on horses, and princes walking on the ground like slaves.

Here we see that sometimes life's inconsistencies are not innocent chance, but the result of human error—in this case, some ruler whom the Preacher observed completely messing up the social structures of his day.

Now for some of us, this picture rubs us the wrong way. We are rightly troubled by institutions like slavery, and so we see this picture and we might think—"Good! That's the way it should be. Let the spoiled princes walk while those they've taken advantage of ride on the horse." And there's a certain accuracy to that sentiment—we should be outraged at the wrongs in this world, especially when those who have power use it to exploit those who don't.

But the point of these verses is much simpler than that. It is again a picture of life upside down—things not working the way we expect them to, or even the way they should. Notice who

displaces the rich: *fools*—those who lack the sense to honor God or successfully navigate life. Again, neither money nor wisdom nor knowledge can guarantee any particular outcome for how life will go. We live in an upside down world.

And so all of this forces us to ask the question, how should we respond? If life is that unpredictable, that inconsistent, do I just need to try harder to overcome it? Redouble my efforts, leaving no obstacle and no person in my way? That would be to continue living in the dream, and when time and chance hit, we're going to wake up disoriented and disillusioned. So maybe we should just give up instead? Who cares about success if it can't be guaranteed and if none of it lasts anyway? But that would be to miss another major point that Ecclesiastes has made over and over again—the fact that *we were made for work*, that working hard is part of God's design for humanity in creation, and *there is much joy to be had in our toil, even if the results can't be guaranteed*. Our inability to predict or guarantee success is no excuse for laziness or spending our energy in self-centered ways.

If we're going to pursue success in an upside down world, we need to understand first what *true success* looks like in God's eyes, and then what it looks like to seek that success in amid life's inconsistencies. And despite the chaos that the Preacher observes, our passage actually helps us understand four things about true success—success in God's eyes, and what it looks like to pursue it.

First, *true success means living wisely*. True success means living wisely. Notice with me the emphasis that our passage places on wisdom. This passage actually extends all the way to the end of ch. 10, though we're looking at it over two weeks. But the main subject is the benefit of wisdom and the danger of folly. The words *wisdom* or *wise* are used 12 times here, contrasted against *folly* or *fool* 10 times. There is a benefit to wisdom. In fact this section more closely resembles the book of Proverbs than any other section of the book.

Now the benefit of wisdom is limited—we've seen that before, we're going to see that again. But that doesn't mean that wisdom is not necessary and appropriate. Look at v. 13 with me: "I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me." He commends wisdom here—the example he's about to describe is "great," significant, important. And he commends it throughout the passage. So the first thing we learn about true success, success in God's eyes, is that it means living wisely.

So what is wisdom? What is he talking about? We mentioned a couple weeks ago that wisdom is more than just knowledge or having information, but having the skill to put that knowledge into practice in order to live successfully in this world. It's not just knowing where the target is, but having the skill to pick up the bow and shoot the arrow into the target. And throughout Scripture that target is defined by what's called *the fear of the Lord*.

We read several places in the Bible that "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom" (e.g. Job 28:28; Prov. 9:10; Ps. 111:10; cf. Eccl. 12:13). To fear God in the Bible is not so much to be scared of him, like we might be scared of mice or scared of the dentist; rather it is to respect him, to stand before him with reverence and awe, recognizing that he is God, and I am not. This is his world, we are his people; we exist only by his good grace. He gets to write the rules, and our joyful and humble duty is to worship him and obey, to live in such a way that his purpose in

creation is honored, that his plan of redemption is advanced. So the goal of living wisely is fearing God, or we might say, being *faithful* to God. True success is living wisely, and living wisely is walking in faithfulness to God—to his plan and purposes.

This faithfulness to God, this measure of true success, doesn't always line up with how the world defines success. What is valuable in God's eyes isn't always what is valuable in the world's eyes. And this is in part because God's wisdom is not the same as the world's wisdom. According to the world's wisdom, success is measured by power, or money, or knowledge, or strength, or some other kind of performance. But the wisdom of God turns the world's wisdom on its head, and with it, the world's definition of success. As 1 Corinthians 1 says:

Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?²¹ For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.²² For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,²³ but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.²⁵ For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. (1 Cor. 1:20-25).

True success, success in God's eyes, is not a matter of power or performance, but of faithfulness to his purposes in creation and salvation. True success is what God accomplished through the cross of Jesus, who gave his life for the sins of his people. Jesus, who as Paul puts it in Philippians, "being in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped [or exploited for selfish gain], but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:5-8).

Who would have thought that the greatest victory and success this world has ever seen would take the shape of a king being unjustly murdered, willingly laying his life down for the sake of his people? The world has no category for success like that. And yet that's what it took for God's plan to be accomplished. That was faithfulness to God.

The point here is that it is often through our weakness that the power of God is made known. True success is not our greatness, but God's greatness through us. Paul continues in 1 Corinthians:

For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong;²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are,²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.³⁰ He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom and our righteousness and sanctification and redemption.³¹ Therefore, as it is written, "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord." (1 Cor. 1:26-31).

True success, success in God's eyes, depends entirely on God and gives all glory to God. It was his Son who secured our success—our faithfulness. He was faithful to his Father precisely where we all failed. It was Jesus who took our failures—our disobedience to God—and the folly of this

entire upside down world on himself to pay for our sins on the cross, and then to rise again to make us new and strengthen us by the Holy Spirit, that we might walk in faithfulness and success before God. Not by trying harder, but by trusting Jesus and depending on his Spirit.

And the shape of that success is often going to be equally upside down, as we follow the pattern of Christ: life through death, power through weakness, greatness through humility, while trusting the results to him.

How does this definition of success line up with yours? What if being successful in God's eyes meant attending less to things that advance my status, and attending more to the people in my life who don't yet know Christ? What if true success meant moving to a less advantaged neighborhood and laying down your life in loving service to your neighbors? Would you be willing to do it? What if it meant not sitting with your friends at school lunch everyday, but seeking out those whom the world overlooks, just as God sought you out in your weakness and shame? I don't know what it looks like in your case. But true success is not about performance, not about power, not about money or prestige, but being faithful to God and his purposes.

True success is living wisely, being faithful to God and his purposes. So how do we go about pursuing that kind of success? After directing our attention to wisdom, the Preacher goes on to give us three more pictures of what it looks like to live successfully and put wisdom into practice amid this upside down world.

So next, *true success means doing what is right, even when the world doesn't recognize us*. True success means doing what is right even when the world doesn't recognize us. Let's look at the example of wisdom that the Preacher gives us in vv. 13-16:

I have also seen this example of wisdom under the sun, and it seemed great to me. ¹⁴ There was a little city with few men in it, and a great king came against it and besieged it, building great siegeworks against it. ¹⁵ But there was found in it a poor, wise man, and he by his wisdom delivered the city. Yet no one remembered that poor man. ¹⁶ But I say that wisdom is better than might, though the poor man's wisdom is despised and his words are not heard.

From the sounds of it, the Preacher is relating to us a true story. Many have tried to figure out who it's talking about, but the fact that even the townspeople didn't remember the wise person's name is a pretty good indicator that we're not going to figure it out either. But that same fact, that this person was forgotten, illustrates what true success looks like here. We have an example of someone employing his wisdom to do what is right, even though it gained him no glory, no lasting honor, no success in the world's eyes. He even did it against great odds. Notice the language of size here—this is *great* example because it's a *great* king building *great* siegeworks against a *little* city with *few* men in it—and despite all that, this poor person was able to deliver the city *by his wisdom*. We don't know what shape that took, but as the Preacher concludes, wisdom is better than might or power. But the wisdom that gives success may not also bring recognition with it. This man was later despised and forgotten, despite doing what was right.

Sometimes we want to do what's right because we want to get noticed for it. We want the praise, the reward; in other words, we want the glory. But that's not true success. That's not fearing God or treating God like God, because it's stealing his glory. The temptation is to fear man instead of

God—to care more about what others think of us instead of what God thinks of us. But true success is doing what is right, being faithful to God, even when the world doesn't recognize us.

Think again of the success of Jesus. Isaiah 53 tells us in advance that “he was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. . . . But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed” (Isa. 53:3, 5). Jesus accomplished the greatest victory, the greatest act of love that this world has ever known, and for it received the rejection and ridicule of men. Yet he was faithful. What are we willing to lose? True success means doing what is right even when the world doesn't recognize us.

Third, true success means *trusting God instead of grasping violently for control*. Trusting God instead of grasping violently for control. We see a couple examples of this in our passage. Look at how wisdom is contrasted with intimidation and power in vv. 17-18: “The words of the wise heard in quiet are better than the shouting of a ruler among fools. Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good.”

When are you most prone to shout? To raise your voice or to use power? When things are spiraling out of control and you want to get your way. So you shout; you get attention. You use your power to take control. And how do people tend to respond? They shout back; they use their power to try to take back control.

Now you might actually accomplish something through your intimidation and power. You might be a “results guy,” someone who gets things done. But at what cost? If you have to resort to power and intimidation to be successful, is that the kind of success God would honor in his eyes?

Better than feverishly grasping back and forth for control is exhibiting self-control and quiet wisdom. We see this same value in ch. 10:4: “If the anger of the ruler rises against you, do not leave your place, for calmness will lay great offenses to rest.” And the point here is not merely the value of being calm or speaking quietly. What enables us to speak wisely and patiently is a confidence that God is the one in control of this situation and the results. If this depends on me, I must take control, at any cost. If it depends on God, and I trust that he will be faithful to accomplish his purpose, I'm free to be patient, to listen carefully, to speak slowly and to point others to him.

Again we see this wisdom, this faith, demonstrated preeminently in Jesus. No situation in the history of the world was more chaotic, more evil, more unjust than trial of Jesus Christ. It was a mockery of justice. And yet listen to how 1 Peter describes Jesus' response: “He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Pet. 2:22-23). When standing before unjust judges on earth, Jesus entrusted himself to the just Judge of heaven, and kept his mouth shut amid evil shouts and accusations. He remained faithful to his Father, recognizing that even though all creation was coming unraveled at that moment, God was still at work, and facing this injustice was part of God's plan to establish justice in all the world. True success means trusting God, rather than grasping violently for control.

But of course Jesus lost the trial. He was unjustly murdered. He did not receive the vindication he deserved while on earth. Which brings us to our fourth point, that *true success does not always come in this life*. True success does not always come in this life.

God wants us to walk wisely in this life, to live faithfully, doing what is right and trusting him when everything else goes wrong. But as powerful as wisdom is—stronger than the sword—it remains woefully vulnerable to foolishness and sin. Look with me at 9:18–10:3:

Wisdom is better than weapons of war, but one sinner destroys much good. Dead flies make the perfumer's ointment give off a stench; so a little folly outweighs wisdom and honor. A wise man's heart inclines him to the right, but a fool's heart to the left. Even when the fool walks on the road, he lacks sense, and he says to everyone that he is a fool.

We see here that a little folly ruins a lot of wisdom. Folly or foolishness is of course the opposite of wisdom, and like wisdom, it's not talking merely about knowledge, but about the posture of our heart toward God. As wisdom begins with the fear of the Lord, so folly begins by ignoring or even scorning the Lord, leading you to the left instead of the right (which are metaphors for right and wrong), and betraying your foolishness to everyone around you. A fool can't walk down the road without announcing by his behavior that he's a fool, that there is no fear of God before his eyes. So in Old Testament wisdom literature like Ecclesiastes or Proverbs, folly and foolishness go hand in hand with wickedness and sin.

And as powerful as wisdom is, it takes one drop of folly to mess up our world. One author comments, "A little folly in a wise man is far more visible than a little wisdom in a fool . . . [like] ketchup on a white shirt . . ." ³ And because wisdom is so vulnerable to sin and folly, it is only of limited benefit in this life. Time, chance, folly, and sin still get in the way of success. We still fail and let others down. We still sin and let God down. We are still sinners in need of his grace, and praise God that he has lavished it abundantly on us in Christ—not just grace to save us, but grace to change us and strengthen us.

We still live in an upside down world, and for that reason, even when we are walking faithfully with God by the strength of his Spirit, we're not always going to see the results of our work, the fruit of our labor. Even when we love others sacrificially, and passionately pursue relationships and tell others about Christ, we may see those people throw it back in our face.

But remember, true success is faithfulness to God. The results are up to him. And he will be faithful to accomplish all his purpose. There will come a day when every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:10-11). God will turn this upside down world right side up, and restore it to his purposes in a new heavens and new earth. He will receive the glory due his name. And in the meantime, he is using weak, small, foolish people like you and me to demonstrate his greatness, as he calls us in Christ and by his Spirit to live wisely, to do what is right even when the world doesn't recognize us, to trust God instead of grasping for control, while we wait for our Lord to return and make all things new.

May God make us faithful by the grace we have in Jesus.

³ Douglas Wilson, *Joy at the End of the Tether: The Inscrutable Wisdom of Ecclesiastes* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 1999), 97.