

The Keys To Lasting Success

John 15:1-5

Bryn MacPhail / Mar. 27, 2011

The Book of Ecclesiastes, written by King Solomon, has an important message for the people of our day.

Some might accuse Solomon of being unduly cynical in Ecclesiastes, but I don't think this is the case.

What I'm about to read are the sincere reflections of a man known for his abundant wisdom. And these reflections will, in turn, help us to better understand the message of Jesus recorded in John 15.

Here is the testimony of Solomon from Ecclesiastes 2:

"I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them" (Ecc. 2:4,5).

He goes on, **"I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired men and women singers, and a harem as well—the delights of the heart of man. I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me...I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure" (Ecc. 2:8-10).**

Solomon had seemingly unlimited access to worldly pleasures—access to real estate, to natural resources, to money, to power, to fame, and he even had a harem.

Reflecting upon all that he had acquired and accomplished, Solomon offers the following conclusion:

“When I had surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun” (Ecc. 2:11).

Really Solomon? *Meaningless?* Nothing gained?

Solomon explains how this is possible at the outset of Psalm 127:

“Unless the Lord builds the house, the builders labour in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchmen stand guard in vain” (Ps. 127:1).

Jesus offers a very similar warning to would-be followers in chapter 15 of John’s Gospel. Jesus declares: **“Apart from Me you can do nothing”** (Jn. 15:5).

What is Jesus saying here? And in what sense could it be true that Solomon, in all of his splendour, had gained **“nothing”**?

As I compare these texts in the light of all of Scripture, I reckon that what Jesus is saying is this:

*Apart from Him we are incapable of pleasing God.
Apart from Christ, we can accomplish no lasting thing.*

I grant you that a person may become quite popular and successful with worldly matters without ever enlisting the help of the Lord.

Undoubtedly, we know of individuals who have accumulated great wealth apart from having any kind of devotion to Jesus Christ.

Important competitions are won, and significant milestones are reached, by individuals who never took a single moment to call upon the Lord for help.

Admittedly, there is a way to succeed without the help of the Lord, but the Bible continually warns us that this way leads to ruin.

As Solomon has said in Proverbs, **“There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death”** (Prov. 14:12).

Or as Jesus put it, **“For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”** (Mt. 16:26).

So you see, there are at least *two categories for success*:

1. Success that counts for this world only
2. Success that counts for this world and the next.

Friends, I want the latter for you.

I don't want our efforts to be in vain. I want our work to count for something. I want our work to last.

Beloved, I fear that all of us have spent considerable time and energy on things that will not be regarded by our Lord in eternity.

I suspect that, even now, many of us are neglecting to engage in the right things—or we are engaged in the right things, but in the wrong manner.

In this passage, Jesus is reminding us of just how badly we need Him. We need Jesus to help us set our priorities. And, secondly, we need Jesus to help us complete the work entrusted to us.

We may win awards, there may be dinners in our honour, we may be financially rewarded for our work in this world, but *if the Lord is not in our labour our reward will be limited to this life only.*

The wise person doesn't simply want his work to last for this life only. For our work to last for eternity, it is necessary for us to abide in the Lord, and to enlist His help.

Accordingly, Jesus instructs us using the image of a vine and its branches, saying, **"I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for apart from Me you can do nothing"** (Jn. 15:5).

To this point, we have only focused on the *negative aspect* of Jesus' words—apart from Him we can do nothing that will last for eternity.

But there is a *positive aspect* to His statement as well—if we do abide in Jesus, He promises that we will **bear much fruit**.

If we abide in Christ we can accomplish something that pleases God and will last forever.

The scope of what we can accomplish while abiding in Christ is beyond what I could ever hope to cover in this sermon. For this reason, I would like to limit our application to our home, where we live, and to God's house, where we worship.

I wonder which Solomon had in mind when he wrote, “**Unless the Lord builds the house, they who build it labour in vain**”. It is possible he was thinking of both.

As we think about what is most precious to us, I hope we agree that our relationship with Christ, and our relationship with our family are of paramount importance. And I hope that we do not unduly elevate the importance of our career, our status within society, or our wealth.

I can tell you that in all the times that I have sat with a dying person, not once have I heard anyone say, ‘Pastor, I wish I would have spent more time at work. I wish I had spent more time working on my professional reputation.’

I have never heard anyone say, 'I wish I had more money in the bank.'

What I have heard instead is regret about time not spent in worship and in the service of our Lord. What I have heard is regret about time not spent with family.

So, what are we to do? If abiding in Christ is the key to pleasing God in the context of our family, and in the context of worship, how do we do this?

We do this, first of all, through *prayer*.

What do you normally do when you need help from someone?

You ask them. You explain to the person what you need, and why it is you are incapable of completing the task without their help.

This is what you must do with Christ. In prayer, we confess our inadequacies and our weaknesses. In prayer, we declare our inability to appropriately worship and serve God apart from Christ.

We are to pray for Divine assistance out of a genuine sense of need.

And when we do this, what does the Lord promise? He promises this from Psalm 50:15, **"Call upon Me in the day of trouble (and) I shall rescue you, and you will honour Me."**

Thankfully, the Lord, in His mercy, sometimes helps us in spite of our neglect in calling upon Him.

But if we aspire to constantly abide in Christ, if we desire unbroken fellowship with Him, this cannot be accomplished apart from *praying out of a genuine sense of need*.

The second thing we must do, if we are to abide in Christ, is *we must drop those things we are clinging to*.

Jesus says, **“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other”** (Mt. 6:24).

What does this mean?

Is Jesus saying, ‘Never mind your family; serve Me instead’?

Is Jesus saying, ‘Forget about your career and professional obligations and serve Me’?

No. He is simply saying that *we can only have one Master*.

A bit further on in the same passage within Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus commands us, **“seek first His kingdom and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you”** (Mt. 6:33).

In other words, don't seek to do ten things at the same time. Don't seek to please multiple masters. You cannot abide in Christ while you are clinging to the things of this world. **No one can serve two masters.**

By way of illustration, I remember what Anya was like when she was a young toddler. Anya had a favourite teddy bear that she dragged around everywhere she went.

Allie and I had to purchase identical models of the same bear because the original was becoming quite worn.

It then became common for Anya to carry around two bears at the same time—one in each hand. This was good and fine until Anya wanted a bottle of milk.

Unwilling to relinquish either bear, Anya found it impossible to grip her milk bottle and drink. In fact, her dexterity was such that for Anya to grip this milk container she needed to drop both of her bears—she needed empty hands.

Beloved, this is how we are to approach Christ. We cannot abide in Him if our arms are full of the things of this world. We cannot abide in Him if our chief priority is elsewhere.

The apostle Paul says that there will come a day when all of our works will be tested by “**fire**” (1Cor. 3:12-15).

That is, everything we have done will either be *refined* by the fire, or *consumed* by the fire—depending on the quality of our work.

And, the quality of our work will depend upon whether or not it has been built upon the foundation of Christ; it will depend on whether or not Christ has co-laboured with us in the work.

When my earthly life has ended, and when I'm with the Lord, I don't want to find out that much of my labour was in vain.

I'm guessing you don't want to hear that either.

I urge you then: *Seek first the Lord in every context.*

Seeking Christ ought not to be just a Sunday thing, or a church thing.

Seek the Lord at home, as you interact with your family.

Seek the Lord in your place of work, as you coordinate with colleagues.

Seek the Lord wherever you find yourself—*pray to Him, ask Christ to co-labour with you in all things.*

And when you call upon Him, *call upon Him with empty hands*—give over to Him those things you are clinging to.

This world offers us a great deal, but we have heard Solomon's testimony—our projects, our real estate, and our financial resources have an expiry date.

The Lord is offering us something better—He is offering us Himself.

The most satisfying thing in the Universe is a vibrant relationship with Jesus Christ.

Just about every day, I pray the same way—I pray that my love for Jesus would grow and grow. I pray that as well for Allie and Anya, “Lord, draw them close. Lord, increase their love for you. Help them to treasure You above all else.”

This morning I present Jesus to you in a similar manner.

Jesus is not supposed to be an “add on” in our life. He is not an addendum. Jesus is not the thing that helps us to round out, or balance our life—He is our life!

My prayer is that each of us would learn to cherish Jesus more than anything else in this world.

Our success depends on that. Our joy is hinged to that.

Dear friends, abide in Him!