

12@12
“You Can Get There from Here”
January 12, 2017

We are twelve days into the New Year now, which mostly means you have either abandoned your New Year’s resolutions or are seriously behind. For those of you who frequent gyms, you know the scene. The beginning of January is crazy, then by February 1 everything is completely back to normal. People have great intentions, but it’s tough to really follow through.

I don’t plan to talk about New Year’s resolutions per se today, but I do want to talk about success and how to enjoy a bit of that. The beginning of a new year is a fine place to start heading in the success direction, but frankly, there are all kinds of points during the year that we might need to get on the success path – whether it is in the professional arena, or in the arena of relationships, health and fitness, community service, or overarching spiritual concerns. So rather than just limit my talk to today to New Year’s resolutions, I want to speak more broadly on how we might find success beginning at any date in the calendar.

Now, if you are like me, you have seen plenty written on the rich and famous, and even noted some of their secrets to success. You perhaps have read books on how to go from good to great, or perhaps even just from lousy to mediocre. I have done the same. That said, I don’t pretend to think that much of what I share today will be original. But what I will share does reflect at least what I have found to be helpful to remember in the pursuit of success. Maybe you will find a few of my points to be helpful for you as well.

Success begins with a plan

It is no surprise that I would begin by saying that success starts with a plan. Buildings don’t just build themselves, oil does not just come out of the ground, people don’t just find themselves rolling out of bed and running a marathon. Success almost always begins with a plan. Having said that, however, I find that much success goes well beyond the original plan. For example, while there are some people who have never run before who say, “I’m going to run a marathon, there are a whole lot more people who say, “I’m going to start running regularly.” Then after they’ve run a bit, they tackle a 10k, then it’s a half marathon, and then

the big daddy. So when I say that success starts with a plan, I don't mean to say that it must begin with grandiose dreams, but it must begin with something that gets the engine going.

My neighbor, Steve, is an industrious fellow. He just finished a 30-year career with Shell. About 20 years ago though, he decided to start a little side business in landscape irrigation. To his surprise, he found supplies a lot harder to come by than he thought they should be. His work at Shell was on the tech side of things, so he wondered whether he could start an online sprinkler parts company. It was just to be a side business run out of his garage that would add a few dollars to his salary at Shell. In time that little side business has become the largest online sprinkler supplier in the country with sales in the tens of millions. Each day during the growing season, he fills at least an entire 18-wheeler full of sprinkler parts to individual customers.

Whenever I talk to Steve, you can tell that he is as surprised by his success as anyone. He did not plan to have a business this big, but that does not mean that he did not have a plan to begin with. And frankly, I think that is all we need to start on the road to success, we don't need a plan to climb the highest mountain, but we do need a plan to make it to the first street corner, to start up something out of our garage, or to improve a relationship with someone just a little.

Success is an endurance game

It's true, the best of the best are freaks. What I mean by that is that in many fields the very best are somewhat freaks of nature. Try as we might, we could never do what they do and neither could 99.99% of the people out there. In other words, desire as you might to play golf like Jason Day or sing like Celine Dion, it's just not going to happen. It's easy then to say that success is about talent, but we know that is not the whole story. Every one of us here can think of people who have incredible natural skill, but who consistently underperform, or frankly never even try to perform.

Over the last 23 years, I have overseen four weighty experiments in my home. These four experiments are my kids, of course. My oldest child is the most gifted in terms of raw intellectual ability. None of us relish playing a board game with him, since he has the probabilities of virtually every move figured out, leaving the rest of us mental lightweights in a

rather disadvantaged position. He has taken his intellectual gifts and has done well, but not just because he has those gifts but because he couples it with lots of long arduous hours of effort.

But my point in bringing him up is not really to say anything about him, it's to use him a bit as a control for my other three experiments. And here is what I have found, although they don't have the same raw gifting that he has, they frankly succeed at almost the same level. Yes, some of it is because they compensate with other skills, but in large part because they all have recognized that success more than anything is an endurance game. It's about taking one step after the next. It's about doing the next right thing today, and then doing the next right thing tomorrow.

You have heard the phrase, "Rome wasn't built in a day." Indeed, nothing of significance is built in a day. Success takes endurance, regardless of the talent you have. There is a little verse in the Bible that echoes this sentiment. It reads: "And let us not grow weary of doing good, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up" (Galatians 6:9).

Success is a dance between looking up and looking down

You do it without even knowing that you do it. You go out for a jog, or even a walk and your eyes look up and they look down. They look down the road to see what might be ahead in the distance that needs to be planned for. They look up to make a decision about what pathway to take. But then in between those upward glances, there is a lot of looking down at nothing but perhaps the next 10-20 yards. When you take those downward glances you are looking for bumps in the road, a firm place to put your foot, or roadkill to avoid. This practice of looking up and looking down is a key to success.

Now to be honest, each of us has a tendency to look up or down too long. Those of us who are big idea people, we are always looking up the road at what could be. We talk about how we can accomplish this or accomplish that and how grand that would be. This in itself is not bad. The problem is that if we have the tendency to look up too long, we can find ourselves tripping all along the way because we don't see the crack in the sidewalk that lays just five feet away. Some of these little

missteps just cause us to lose our balance for a bit, but others can end up crippling us and keep us anywhere near reaching our grand plans.

On the other hand, there are those of who have a tendency to look down too long. We are great at getting the details done. We are on top of our emails. We put out every fire as nearly as they get started. We meet every deadline. Again, this tendency in itself is not all bad. It's great to be good on the details. The problem is if we never look up, we might find we've done a whole lot of work without really accomplishing much. We might have made sure our kids eat healthy, get to every school and extra-curricular activity on time, and have the right clothes for each occasion, yet in the end have never really done anything to build an enduring relationship with them. Clearly, in that scenario, our tendency to look down instead of up has not worked to our advantage.

So what is your tendency? Is it to look up too much or to look down too much. Right the ship a bit, and I think you'll find yourself more likely to find success.

Success calls for times of uninterrupted focus

It is crazy how easy it is to be distracted these days. Sit down at your computer to get something done and little pop-ups can disturb your very train of thought. Sit in an important meeting and the vibrate of a text goes off in your pocket. Check your phone to see if an important email was returned and you see some sensationalist news article that screams out at you. Now, if what you are doing something that does not take a lot of concentration to complete well, little interruptions are no big deal, but if you are about something important, these kinds of interruptions can be a killer.

You might guess when I put together these 12@12 talks. I don't put them together while I am sitting in the living room with a ballgame in the background and a dog begging me to go out and play. The only way I can put these talks together is to go into my office, shut the door, purposely avoid any social media, and get after it. It just requires that. It does not take me a crazy amount of time to put together a talk, but it does take at least a couple hours of uninterrupted focus. There is just no way around that for me. And I think there is no way around it for you in many areas.

Success Is a Team Sport

As many of you know, I am a tennis fan. I very much follow the top players. And it doesn't take much following to recognize that the top players don't make it to the top on their own. In fact, when a player wins a trophy, he or she almost always first thanks their team. Their family, their coaches, their trainers, and so forth. Sure the player is the one who performed, but she knows she couldn't get there on her own. Certainly, this idea that success is a team sport applies to many arenas of life, but I am not so sure that people see that it applies to our life with God as well.

Once Jesus said that the relationship between he and his followers was to be like a vine and a branch. A branch can't produce anything unless it is connected to a vine. Jesus' point was that in terms to producing lasting fruit in his book, we are dependent on him. If we want to perform in God's book, we aren't going to do it on our own.

I don't pretend to know what area of your life might need a little more success right now, but my guess is you could identify an area pretty quickly. Some of you need a bit more success in your family life. Others of you could use a little more success on the business side. Still others of you need a little more success in what goes on inside you and how you relate to God. I don't think success for you in any of these areas will be easy, because success is never that easy. But I do believe it is possible. I do think you can get there from here, when you just practice a few of the things I mentioned today.

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