

BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #102: GOD'S WAY TO THE TOP

By John Temples

Comedian Minnie Pearl used to say about her nephew, "He's not lazy--he just started at the bottom and liked it there." Most of us, however, want to succeed in life, to even achieve greatness. And everywhere you look, somebody is telling you "how to get to the top." Here are some book titles from the past few years:

- Winning Through Intimidation
- Awaken The Giant Within
- Look Out For Number One
- Pull Your Own Strings

It's pretty obvious what the basic message of modern success gurus is: Inside each of us is this glorious, winning personality that will enable us to get to the top if we will just:

- Be completely self-centered;
- Rely on our own inner strength;
- Practice intimidation and manipulation;
- And use any means necessary to make money.

From a Christian standpoint, there are two major problems with the popular approach. The first is that *winning through intimidation of others is exactly opposite to the way of Christ*. Jesus said, "He who is greatest among you shall be your servant" (Matthew 23:11). The religion of Christ is about *servanthood*--a concept totally foreign to the humanistic success gurus.

The second problem with the success makers is that *they assume they know where "the top" is*. Most of them seem to think that the top is the peak of a pile of money, or a position of power over a bunch of people. Where is the top, really?

- Is a father who heads a family that loves and respects him at the top?
- Is a mother who rears her children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, and whose children rise up to call her blessed, at the top?
- Is a Christian businessperson who can sleep peacefully and guilt-free at night at the top?
- Is a young person who maintains his or her purity and integrity at the top?
- Is an old person who has walked faithfully with Christ for many years, and dies in the Lord, at the top?

The answer to all these questions is yes.

But, say many people, doesn't God want me to be successful and happy? Indeed He does. But in God's view, success is spiritual and holiness is more important than happiness. But happiness will be a natural side effect of holiness. Peter says the normal state for a Christian is loving life and seeing good days (1 Peter 3:10). Jesus said His intent for us is an abundant and full life (John 10:10). God does not want us to fail; He wants us to succeed. But again, the emphasis is on spiritual success, not necessarily monetary or possession-oriented success.

So I offer you the ultimate self-help book: the Bible. How does God's word say to get to the top? One good way is to find someone who is successful by God's standards and do what he or she does. The apostle Paul was such a person. He was a spiritually minded, happy man, who loved and was loved by the churches. He could say at the end of his life that he had fought a good fight and kept the faith. What was his secret?

I'm going to give you 16 qualities of Paul that made him successful. Sixteen points is a lot, but success is not a "15 minutes per day/three easy steps" plan. These sixteen qualities will help you to succeed in any area of life, both secular and spiritual.

*First: Paul was a **confident** person.* He was a "can do" individual. In fact, one of his memorable statements is, "I can do all things" (Philippians 4:13). Now, all the success gurus will tell you the same thing. They get carried away sometimes--"If I can dream it, I can do it." Hey, I can dream of striking a match on a cake of soap,

but I can't do it. Their main error is saying or implying, "I can do all things *through my own inner strength*." Read the rest of Philippians 4:13 which puts it into perspective: "I can do all things *through Christ who strengthens me*."

*Second, Paul was a **servant-oriented** person.* He had a servant mentality. He began the book of Romans with "Paul, a servant of Christ..." He told the Corinthians, "We do not preach ourselves, but Christ Jesus; and ourselves your servants for Christ's sake" (2 Corinthians 4:5). I assure you, being a servant of others is not on the radar of most of the success gurus. I can guarantee you that your horoscope will never tell you that today you should take up your cross and put others ahead of yourself. Let the words of Christ we read earlier sink in: "He who is greatest among you shall be your servant."

*Third, Paul was a **thankful** person.* He wrote 13 New Testament books, and in those books he used the expression "I thank God" or a similar expression some 31 times. Ingratitude is a sin; thankfulness is a virtue.

*Fourth, Paul was a **caring** person.* He had a genuine concern for other people. Someone has said that "a person all wrapped up in himself makes a mighty small package." Paul shows us that being "other-people oriented" is an essential element of success. Read Romans 9 and 10 and see how genuinely concerned Paul was for his fellow Jews. He spoke in 2 Corinthians 11:28 of "...the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches." He wrote this in Romans 12:16--"Do not set your mind on high things, but associate with the humble." The KJV in that verse reads, "condescend to men of low estate." The J. B. Phillips paraphrase says, "Take a real interest in ordinary people."

*Fifth, Paul was a **considerate** person.* He knew the way of Christ involves kindness, good manners, and patience with others. He said in 1 Corinthians 8:13, "If food makes my brother stumble, I will never again eat meat, lest I make my brother stumble." The success gurus would say of such a brother that he is weak and needs to be intimidated and made to shape up. The Bible way is, I will treat a weak fellow Christian with patience and gentleness, all the while trying to bring him to greater maturity in matters of expediency.

*Sixth, Paul was a **humble** person.* He said in Ephesians 3:8, “I am less than the least of all the saints.” This does not mean that we should put ourselves down as miserable, worthless wretches. It is simply acknowledging our own moral weaknesses and our total dependence on God.

*Seventh, Paul was a **disciplined** person.* “I discipline my body and bring it into subjection” (1 Corinthians 9:27). But self-discipline is not a popular concept today. Nowadays, if someone has a bad temper, or spews forth foul language, or says “I can’t help myself,” we are supposed to congratulate him on being an honest, free spirit not bound by arbitrary rules of common decency. No, you will never be truly successful in any area of life if you can’t control your passions and your tongue.

*Eighth, Paul was a **positive** person.* He was an incurable optimist. He said, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” (Romans 8:31). Here’s a lesson I’ve learned over the years: you will definitely not accomplish any more than you think you will. The famous futures trader Larry Williams said, “For years, I never dreamed that I would make a million dollars, and sure enough, I didn’t.” Will you achieve all your goals and dreams? No; but if you fall on your face trying, at least you were going in the right direction. It is better to aim for a mountain and miss than to aim at a mud puddle and hit it every time!

*Ninth, Paul was a **contented** person.* He said in Philippians 4:11, “I have learned in whatever state I am to be content.” Does this mean being complacent, or simply resigning yourself to a lowly position--you can never move any higher? No, but it does mean that you do not find fault with God for whatever state you are in at the moment. A malcontent says about a bad situation, “HOW can I get out of this?” A contented person says, “WHAT can I get out of this?”

*Tenth, Paul was a **determined** person.* Once he was stoned and left for dead (Acts 4:19). We might think that would be a good time for him to retire from preaching and live a quiet life as a tentmaker! But Paul simply got up and went on to the next town to preach. His determination is seen in Philippians 3:13-14-- “Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things

which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

*Eleventh, Paul was a **happy** person.* In his 13 letters, he used the words *joy, joyful, or rejoice* 54 times. We all have down times, but there is no reason for a Christian to be in a permanent state of doom and gloom. We said earlier that Paul was a contented person. Isn't contentment the same as happiness? No, it is not. In general, happiness is a sense of elation based on external, momentary circumstances (as long as everything is going my way, I'm happy); whereas contentment is an internal sense of peace, a feeling of being free of care no matter what the circumstance.

*Twelfth, Paul was a **motivator of others**.* He said to Timothy, “I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (2 Timothy 1:6-7). He unselfishly brought out the best in others. He was always involving others in his work for Christ while not worrying about who got the credit.

*Thirteenth, Paul was a **goal setter**.* We read a moment ago from Philippians 3:14, “I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.” Acts 19:21 says, “When these things were accomplished, Paul purposed in the Spirit...to go to Jerusalem, saying, ‘After I have been there, I must also see Rome.’” Goals keep life exciting--keep us on target--keep us moving forward--and give us satisfaction when they are achieved.

*Fourteenth, Paul was an **enthusiastic** person.* You sense from Acts and the letters of Paul that he was excited about what he was doing. I can imagine Ecclesiastes 9:10 being his favorite verse: “Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might.” Ira North used to say, “Enthusiasm is as powerful as dynamite and as contagious as measles.”

*Fifteenth, Paul was a **bold and decisive** person.* “We were bold in our God to speak to you” (1 Thessalonians 2:2). It's significant that the book that tells us of the doings of Paul and the other apostles is named the book of “ACTS”--not “the book of good intentions.” Successful people make decisions and act on them.

*Sixteenth, Paul was a **rewards-oriented** person.* Some of his final words were, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing” (2 Timothy 4:7-8). “But,” people will say, “you shouldn’t do something to get a reward.” Why not? It always worked for me! There is nothing wrong with striving to earn a reward, especially a spiritual or heavenly one.

So...do you want to get to the top? First, make sure you know where the top is. It is not necessarily at the peak of a pile of money. It is not standing on the necks of people whom you have intimidated and overpowered. No, “the top” is a state of having pleased God and fulfilled His will for you, of having done your best to be fair, kind, and just with others.

Also, realize the fallacy of getting to the top through your own inner strength or by questionable or illegal means. “Let him who stole steal no longer” (Ephesians 4:28). Follow the tried and true Biblical principles of success. We have discussed one of those principles: find someone at the top and imitate him or her. Our example has been Paul. There are many others in our day. Find them and follow them as they follow Christ. --John Temples