

**THE FOUR DANGERS OF SUCCESS**  
By Stephen R. Graves

Most people handle failure much better than they handle success. Failure can build a person, while success can ruin a person. I have seen this in the lives of business leaders, politicians, athletes, actors, celebrities and local dignitaries. Perhaps the challenge of properly handling success is why Albert Einstein once said, "Try not to become a man of success, but rather try to become a man of value."

Success is not bad, but it must be digested. When we digest something, we break it down and it becomes part of the body, not something that sticks in our stomach and causes pain. Success is something we fully consume, or else it will fully consume us. How can success consume us? Four dangers come to mind:

**Success often causes an overinflated view of your abilities.** Think of what success brings –congratulatory praises for the star athlete; a bigger office, an impressive title, and more compensation for the rising-star executive; standing ovations for the speaker or preacher; honors and accolades for the straight-A student. Everything seems to shout, "I did this!"

**Success often brings with it a sense of entitlement that harms relationships.** People treat you differently when you are successful. They do not question your decisions as often or as forcefully. They go to great lengths to accommodate your whims. They ask your opinion, even if you have no expertise on a subject. Entitlement says, "You exist to serve me," rather than, "I exist to serve you."

**Success is addicting, and you become willing to do just about anything to keep it.** Israel's King Solomon, the wisest man who ever lived, tried to have a man killed when he felt his rule threatened. If Solomon could do that, then we are all vulnerable. We will cut corners, abandon friends, work longer than we should, fail to keep promises and commitments. Success becomes an idol, a false god we serve.

**We can go to the other extreme and get complacent.** Martin Filler said, "The danger for any artist whose work is both recognizable and critically acclaimed is complacent repetition." Successful CEOs stop looking to lead. Success often seems great until you realize you have slowly abandoned the beliefs and the people that contributed to your prosperity. Jesus said, "For what will it benefit someone if he gains the whole world yet loses his life? Or what will anyone give in exchange for his life?" (Matthew 16:26)

I am not opposed to success. The message here is how to properly handle success. People can do much good when they digest success properly, using their authority, finances and acclaim to help others and to serve God. This leads to a more fulfilled, satisfied life. Proverbs 27:21 says, "The crucible is for silver and the furnace for gold, and each is tested by the praise accorded him." The praise of men tests and refines us. It reveals who we really are inside, what we truly value.

How do we digest success? It begins with remembering who helped you in your success; remembering the more noble purposes of success; and, most of all, remembering the deepest source of success: God.

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If your success turns you to this kind of remembrance, three good things will result:

1. Success will increase your humility and restrain your arrogance.
2. It will cause you to think, “Look what God enabled me to do!” instead of “Look what I did!”
3. It will trigger a desire to help others and leverage your assets for others and God’s kingdom.

In the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy, God warned the Israelite people (and us) of future success: “You may say to yourself, ‘My power and my own ability have gained this wealth for me,’ but remember that the Lord your God gives you the power to gain wealth, in order to confirm His covenant He swore to your fathers, as it is today. If you ever forget the Lord your God and follow other gods to serve them and bow in worship to them, I testify against you today that you will perish” (Deuteronomy 8:17-18).

© 2024. Dr. Stephen R. Graves describes himself as an organizational strategist, pragmatic theologian, and social capitalist. He advises executives and business owners, as well as young entrepreneurs. He is author of numerous books and many articles, and a public speaker.

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### Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. Do you agree with the statement that most people handle failure better than they do success? Why or why not?
2. Which of the four potential dangers of success resonates the most with you? Explain why.
3. Why, in your opinion, should someone strive to achieve success? What is your reaction to Albert Einstein’s statement that we should strive to be persons of value rather than persons of success?
4. It is suggested that to properly handle success, we should remember – the people who have helped us, the noble reasons we began striving for success, and the understanding that ultimately God is the source of our success. Do you agree with this perspective? If so, give some examples from your own life and career.

### Challenge for This Week

Take time this week to evaluate your attitudes and motivations about success. If success is important to you, ask yourself why. Also consider who and what have contributed to the success you have achieved to this point. Have you felt or expressed gratitude for these contributions?

It might help to meet with someone else – a trusted friend, mentor or colleague, or the CBMC groups you are a part of – to share your thoughts about success and receive their feedback.

### NOTE:

For more about what the Bible says, consider the following passages:

Joshua 1:7-9; 1 Chronicles 12:18; Proverbs 13:21, 27:17; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; Matthew 6:19-24

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