

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, May 12, 1991, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

PROVERBS 16:3

“Commit to the Lord whatever you
do, and your plans will succeed.”

GOD AND MY WORK **(3) HOW TO WIN AT YOUR WORK**

We’re going to look today at what God has to say about job success, how to win at your work. Last week we looked at job satisfaction this week we’re looking at job success and next time we’re going to look at job stress.

Now Solomon, one of the wisest men who ever lived, wrote two books of very practical wisdom, the books of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes; and it’s interesting to note that in both these books the Church is never even mentioned, but work is one of the major themes of Proverbs. In fact, Solomon says that you can tell how wise people are by the way they approach their work.

So, let’s look at what I would call Solomon’s Six Winning Ways - six principles you can apply to your life. Now the foundation for these principles is in Proverbs 16:3 (Living Bible) -- “Commit your work to the Lord, then it will succeed.”

Proverbs 3:6 (Living Bible) says, “In everything you do, put God first, and He will direct you and crown your efforts with success.” Now there is the foundation for job success -- put God first. How do you do that? You put God first by applying biblical principles to your job; and today we will look at these six winning ways of Solomon; and they all apply, regardless of what kind of work you do, whether you’re a homemaker or a CEO, whether you’re in the military or in school, whether you’re an employer or an employee, whether you’re nearing retirement or just getting started in the job market. To help you remember them, I’m putting them in the form of an acrostic -- W - I - N - N - E - R.

1. If you want to win at your work, work with a purpose. That’s the first difference between successful and unsuccessful people. The winners have a sense of mission. Do you know why you work? Without this sense of purpose your work becomes a prison. Proverbs 17:24 (Good News Bible) says, “An intelligent person aims at wise action, but a fool starts off in many directions.” Do you know someone who’s going fifty different ways at once?! What Solomon is saying here is that regardless of what kind of a job you have, you must be working toward a goal. The very first recorded words of Jesus, when He was 12 years old, were these, “I must be about My Father’s business” (Luke 2:49). And His last words on the Cross were, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). Those are like bookends in His life: “I must be about my Father’s business”; “It is finished!” That’s what I call working with a purpose.

Paul says, “This one thing I do...” (Philippians 3:13), not “these 40 things I dabble in...” He

worked with a purpose. Proverbs 13:16 (Living Bible) says, “A wise man thinks ahead; a fool doesn’t, and even brags about it!” He’s saying, “If you fail to plan, you’re planning to fail.” Successful people make daily preparations. Proverbs 21:5 says, “The plans of the diligent lead to profit.” That is: Plan your work and work your plan. If you want to score touchdowns, you’ve got to have a game plan.

I talk to people in middle life who say, “I worked so long, and I worked so hard - for what?” That’s a person who did not clarify his purpose at the beginning. Work with a purpose.

2. Solomon would say, “Insist on integrity.” Why? Because nothing lasts without integrity. Proverbs 10:9 says, “The man of integrity walks securely, but he who takes crooked paths will be found out.” You see, the world is interested in image -- how do I look? God is interested in integrity -- what I really am. The world looks on the outside (“Dress for Success”). God looks on the inside and sees the real “you.”

Look at Proverbs 21:6 (Living Bible): “Dishonest gain will never last, so why take the risk?” and Proverbs 12:3 (Living Bible) - “Wickedness never brings real success.” A recent book on advertising shows that a shocking lack of integrity is being promulgated in our society. Listen to this: “The magic word that can make you rich is verisimilitude.” Now what does that big word mean? It means “having the appearance of being true”; not truth but having the appearance of truth. “We have learned, as we have replaced original idealism with cynicism, that the whole truth not only does not set us free, it isn’t a particularly shrewd way to sell. But the appearance of truth is. Ah! That is the kingdom of heaven...” Folks, that’s the kind of stuff that is being taught in the business world today. Proverbs says, “If you want to be successful, insist on integrity.”

In Time magazine not too long ago, there was a powerful story entitled “Whatever happened to ethics?” It said, “Not since the reckless ‘20s has the business world seen such searing scandals. White collar scams abound, insider trading, money laundering, greed combined with technology has made stealing more tempting than ever...”

A young man came out from Europe and became apprenticed to a house painter. At once he showed great talent at his job, and before long he was able to establish his own business. He prospered until the Great Depression struck the country, and as his business declined someone said to him, “If you’re going to continue to make money, you’ll have to thin your paint.” This he did, and as the Depression deepened, the paint got thinner. One day he was asked by his priest to paint the church, and by this time the paint he was using was really thin. About six months after the job was finished, a very severe storm hit the church, with strong winds and driving rain mingled with sleet. The paint came off leaving the church a disaster area! The man went to his priest and explained what he had done and asked for pardon. He also asked how he might make restitution, to which the priest replied, “Repaint, and thin no more!”

The Bible says in Proverbs 16:11 (Living Bible), “The Lord demands fairness in every business deal.” Do you want to be a winner in your work? (1) You work with a purpose, and (2) you insist on integrity. Are you honest when it’s convenient? Or are you honest regardless of the cost, even if it may mean losing your job?

3. If you want to be a winner at your work, never make excuses. Proverbs has a lot to say about laziness. It calls the lazy man a “sluggard” (6:6, etc.). Isn’t that a descriptive word? It even sounds “yukky”! And, says Solomon, the sluggard is always blaming somebody else! Proverbs 22:13 (Living Bible) says, “The lazy man is full of excuses. ‘I can’t go to work!’ he says. ‘If I go outside, I might meet a lion in the street and be killed!’” I wonder how many lions roam the streets of Jerusalem! They’re not even in that part of the country! Isn’t it amazing the excuses people make to justify their laziness. In fact, we can reach the heights of creativity when we want to rationalize our laziness and lack of accomplishment.

I have heard every excuse in the book why people can’t come to church; so, I decided to draw up a list of excuses on “Why I’m giving up sports” -- football in the fall, hockey in the winter, basketball in the spring, and baseball in the summer. I’m going to quit attending sports events once and for all, and here are my ten reasons:

- a. Every time I went they asked for money at the box office.
- b. The people I sat next to didn’t seem friendly. They never spoke to me or said how glad they were to see me.
- c. The seats were too hard and uncomfortable.
- d. I went to many games, but the coaches never came to call on me. (That reminds me of the pastor who had a woman say to him one day, “Pastor, when are you going to come and visit me?” He said, “Lady, you really don’t want to be that sick!”)
- e. The referees made decisions I couldn’t agree with.
- f. (Here’s a dandy!) The game often went into overtime, and I was late getting home.
- g. The band played numbers I had never heard before; and it wasn’t my style of music anyway.
- h. It seems the games are always scheduled when I want to do other things.
- i. I suspect that I was sitting beside some hypocrites -- they came to see their friends, and they talked during the whole game.
- j. I was taken to too many games by my parents when I was growing up.

There’s an eleventh that I hope will apply to us at Faith before long --

- k. I hate to wait in the traffic jam in the parking lot after the game.

Now unfortunately many Christians are pros at making excuses. So here are a few I’ve heard from pastors who want to resist change:

“We’ve tried that before.”

“Our church is different.”

“It would cost too much.”

“It’s impossible; it wouldn’t work here.”

“We’ve never done it that way before.” And my favorite one:

“Let’s form a committee.”

Now the fact is, excusers are losers. Look at Proverbs 14:23: “All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty.” Do you know people who are great talkers, but there’s no action? Ecclesiastes 5:7 (Living Bible) says, “Dreaming instead of doing is foolishness.” A father said to his son, “You need to do one hard thing every day.” And the son said, “Dad, I get out of bed!” And his Dad said, “Then maybe you’d better do two!”

“Dreaming instead of doing is foolishness.” Lazy people live in a fantasy world. They’re always looking at tomorrow -- never facing reality today. Television, you know, is packaged fantasy. It used to be you had to go to sleep to dream. Now you can just turn on the TV and experience this escape from reality. Proverbs 13:4 (Living Bible) says, “Lazy people want much but get little, while the diligent are prospering.” Did you ever hear someone say, “Oh, I’m just waiting for my ship to come in”? I want to say, “Buddy, why don’t you swim out to it?!”

Laziness destroys your life. It saps you of energy. Don’t make excuses. Accept responsibility for who you are, if you want to be a winner.

4. If you want to be a winner at work, never stop learning — always be growing and developing. Proverbs 15:14 (Good News Bible) says, “Intelligent people want to learn, but stupid people are satisfied with ignorance.” Do you know any people who are brain dead at your work?! The last time they opened a book was the week before their final exams at college! Remember this: leaders are learners. So, you never stop learning. Proverbs 18:15 (Living Bible) says, “The intelligent man is always open to new ideas. In fact, he looks for them.” Do you look for new ideas? Are you adaptable and flexible in learning and wanting to grow?

One of the theories about why the dinosaurs became extinct was that they couldn’t adapt to rapid change in the environment. I read recently in U.S. News & World Report that the average worker today must assimilate 24 times as much information as he would have had to a decade ago. You must keep learning and growing. Growing businesses require growing business people.

So where do you learn? Let me give you some sources:

a. God’s Word. Proverbs 13:13 (Living Bible) says, “Despise God’s word and find yourself in trouble. Obey it and succeed.”

b. Wise people. Keep company with wise people. Proverbs 15:22 (Good News Bible) says, “Get all the advice you can, and you will succeed; without it you will fail.”

c. Critics. Learn from critics. Proverbs 13:18 (Living Bible) says, “If you accept criticism, you are on the road to fame.” How many of you like to be criticized? How many of you realize that you can sometimes learn from it?

d. Failure is a good teaching tool. In fact, we usually learn more from failure than from success. Proverbs 28:13 (Living Bible) says, “A man who refuses to admit his mistakes can never be successful. But if he confesses and forsakes them, he gets another chance.” So learn from your mistakes. Never waste a failure. Turn your failures into fertilizer for future growth. Thomas Edison said, “Never call it a failure; call it an education.” When he was developing the light bulb he said, “There are a thousand things that don’t work!” He tried them all before he finally got the right one. So grow and develop and never stop learning.

5. If you want to make it in today’s world, you need to economize your time and energy. How often did you say this past week, “Where did my time go?” Folks, time is an equal opportunity employer. Everybody gets the same amount, 168 hours a week. How do some people get more done? They economize their time. Do you realize that “Time Management” is a spiritual issue? To waste time is probably one of the greatest sins. Why? Because time is your life. Are you having “the time of your life”? You’ll only do so by using your time wisely. To waste time means to waste your life. You see, your time is much more valuable than your money because there’s a limit to the amount of time you’ve got. You might have an unlimited amount of money and yet you only have 24 hours in each day, and you have only a certain number of days that you’re going to live. The Bible says, “Teach us to number our days...” (Psalm 90:12). Winners know the value of time and they know how not to waste it. They do not squander their energy.

Ecclesiastes 10:10 says, “If the ax is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed, but skill will bring success.” He’s saying, “If you’ve got an ax, and you’re chopping wood, if the ax is dull, it takes more energy.” That’s why you’re tired all the time. But if you have a sharp ax, it doesn’t take as much energy. So work smarter, not harder. Develop your skills so that if you are a truck driver, be the most skilled truck driver you can be. If you are an accountant, or a salesman, or a government employee, a school teacher or a homemaker, or if you are a student, be the very best you can be. Develop your skills because that’s what’s going to make the difference. Not just commitment, not just determination, although these things are important, but develop your skills.

So you ask yourself (1) Is this the best use of my time? and (2) is there an easier, more efficient way to do it? There’s no virtue in doing something the hardest way possible! You see, you can do three things with time:

a. You can waste time. You can sit around glued to the TV set until you become a couch potato. Or

b. You can spend time on things that are fine and good. Or,

- c. You can invest your time so that there are payoffs in the future, because the way you invest your time now makes it easier for you in the future.

6. Solomon would say, “If you want to be a winner at your work, resolve to stick with it. He’s talking about staying power, stamina, endurance. Proverbs 22:29 (Living Bible) says, “Do you know a hard-working man? He shall be successful and stand before kings!” Winners simply don’t know how to quit. They are determined to succeed. They keep on keeping on. They never give up.

There is a myth, and the myth is that successful people do everything right. They don’t. The fact is, successful people probably make as many mistakes, and fail as many times as losers. They just don’t let it get them down. They learn from those failures.

Did you ever realize that the best basketball players make only about half their shots? The greatest quarterbacks complete only six out of ten passes. The finest major league baseball players make it to first base only 40% of the time, including walks. The top oil companies, even with expert geologists, find oil in only one of ten wells drilled. What am I saying? I’m saying, “You’re not such a failure!” If at first you don’t succeed, welcome to the human race! But winners resolve to stick with it. Proverbs 24:16 says, “For though a righteous man falls seven times, he rises again.” Even good people fall; they make dumb mistakes; they lose money. But the righteous man gets up again. He keeps on going. To quote that famous philosopher, Scarlet O’Hara, “Tomorrow is another day”! You don’t give up -- that’s the mark of a winner.

The fact is, if you’re discouraged this morning, it’s because you’re choosing to be discouraged. You don’t have to be discouraged. It’s how you look at things -- is the glass half full or half empty?

“Two men looked out through prison bars;
One saw mud, the other stars.”

You can choose to dwell upon past failure; or you can rejoice in the promises of God. The choice is yours.

You remember Ray Krock, the founder of McDonald’s. He wrote his autobiography with the intriguing title “Grinding it out”! Do you know that Ray Krock was 52 years old when he started McDonald’s? That says to me, “It’s never too late to try again.” One man at 52 decided to make his life count. So, go for it!

How strong is your will to persist? Do you give up when problems come along? Do you give up when you’re criticized? Or do you never, never, never give up? So

Work with a purpose;

Insist on integrity;

Never make excuses;

Never stop learning;

Economize your time and energy; and

Resolve to stick with it;

and God will bless you richly, and you'll come out a big winner!

AMEN.