

REASON TOGETHER STUDY



THE SUCCESSFUL BUSINESS

When Does Success Become Failure?
MARK 4:18-19





SERMON & PASTOR'S COMMENTARY

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Pastor & Teacher

REASON TOGETHER CHURCH

The Successful Business

Sermon Transcript

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Aloha.

Welcome to Reason Together Church.

Whether you have attended church for most of your life, whether this is your first time with us or whether you are not yet sure what you believe, we are glad that you are here.

We especially want to recognize our honored guests.

You are not expected to pretend that you have all the answers.

This is a place where sincere questions are welcome.

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

Let us Reason Together the Word of God.

If you would like us to stay in touch, our guest card asks only for your first name and email address.

You are welcome to complete it, but there is no pressure to do so.

After the study, please join us at Reason Together Cafe.

The coffee is free.

And there are always free refills on conversations.

For families with children, our Keiki Kids Center is available.

Before we begin, let us pray.

Heavenly Father, thank You for gathering us together today.

Thank You for the work You place before us.

Thank You for the abilities You give us.

Thank You for every honest opportunity to provide for our families and help other people.

Protect us from pride when our work succeeds.

Protect us from despair when our work fails.

Teach us to measure our lives by faithfulness rather than applause, possessions or profit.

Give us wisdom to know when to continue.

Give us courage to know when to stop.

Open our eyes to anything good that has begun to occupy a place belonging to You.

Speak to us through Your Word.

In the precious name of Jesus Christ we pray.

Amen.

Our primary Scripture reading today is Mark 4:18-19.

Jesus said:

"And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word,

"And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful."

We will return to those words throughout our study.

Before we continue, if you are visiting with us, we want you to understand our approach to giving.

We do not pass a plate.

Guests are never expected to give.

If you are a member of another church, we encourage you to support your home church.

If you choose to give here, please do so privately, cheerfully and only as God leads you.

There is a giving box at the back.

Money can feed someone who is hungry.

Money can support a Pastor or Missionary.

Money can purchase Bibles and provide a place for people to worship.

Money is a useful servant.

But it is a terrible master.

That brings us to the title of today's message.

The title is "The Successful Business."

The question we will Reason Together is this:

When does success become failure?

Many years ago, my wife Danielin and I returned to America after serving in the Philippines.

We had been married for approximately one year.

During most of that year, we had spent nearly every waking hour together.

We had traveled together.

We had served together.

We had prayed together.

Danielin translated for me when I preached in places where the congregation did not understand English.

We visited churches and communities together.

Life was not always comfortable, but our marriage was growing sweeter.

When we returned to America, I did not want to take a position that would place me in an office all day and separate us for most of our waking hours.

I wanted to find something that Danielin and I could do together.

Before going to the Philippines, I had sold merchandise on eBay as a hobby.

By the time we returned, several people told me that Amazon had become a better place for certain products.

I began searching for something we could purchase and resell from home.

I contacted suppliers.

I priced merchandise.

I calculated fees, postage and possible profit margins.

There were many things we could sell.

But none of them appeared likely to produce the return I wanted.

So I waited.

While visiting family in Maine, I reconnected with a friend who had owned video rental stores for many years.

By then, DVDs had largely replaced VHS tapes.

My friend still had a large quantity of old VHS tapes sitting in storage.

To most people, those tapes looked obsolete.

They were dusty.

They occupied space.

Many stores simply wanted them gone.

But I discovered that some older movies had never been released on DVD.

Collectors still wanted certain titles.

The ordinary titles might be worth very little.

The rare titles could be worth considerably more.

My friend offered to sell the inventory to me for approximately four thousand dollars.

Shipping several pallets from Maine to Florida would cost another twenty-five hundred dollars.

That meant Danielin and I would invest approximately sixty-five hundred dollars in old VHS tapes.

Danielin converted that amount into Philippine pesos in her mind.

She thought about how much could be done with that money in the Philippines.

She also knew that VHS was already a dead market where she had lived.

She could not understand why I wanted to spend so much money on old, dusty tapes.

Her concern was reasonable.

Danielin was not inexperienced in business.

She had begun several small businesses before she was eighteen years old.

By the time she finished high school, she was earning more than many families in her community.

She understood risk.

She understood work.

And she understood the value of money.

She asked honest questions.

But after we discussed it, she supported the decision.

She promised to work beside me and help in every way she could.

That was important then.

It remains important to this story now.

The business was never mine alone.

Danielin and I built it together.

We spent days placing the tapes into boxes.

We had to determine which ones might sell online and which ones were worth very little.

I contacted another dealer who sold VHS tapes at flea markets.

He explained that he would pay approximately one dollar for popular titles and between fifty and seventy-five cents for less familiar ones.

The tapes we considered least valuable online were the ones he wanted most.

We created two groups.

If a tape appeared likely to sell online for less than three dollars, it went into what we called the reject pile.

If it appeared likely to sell for more, we saved it for Amazon.

After we completed the sorting, the other dealer offered approximately seven thousand dollars for the reject pile.

Think about what that meant.

Our purchase and shipping expenses totaled approximately sixty-five hundred dollars.

Before we sold a single one of the tapes we considered valuable, someone offered seven thousand dollars for the ones we had rejected.

We had recovered the entire investment.

We had already made a small profit.

And we still possessed several thousand tapes that appeared to be worth considerably more.

A friend taught us how to list the remaining inventory on Amazon.

We organized every item so that we could locate it when an order arrived.

When everything was listed, the asking value exceeded fifty thousand dollars.

Then the orders began.

They arrived so quickly that Danielin and I could barely keep up.

In less than a month, fewer than four hundred tapes remained.

After Amazon fees, postage and supplies, we had made close to forty thousand dollars.

That sounds like success.

We had purchased an unwanted product.

We had recovered our investment from the least valuable portion.

We had made a substantial profit from what remained.

We had found a business we could operate together.

We took what we had learned and repeated the process.

We purchased inventory from video stores throughout the country.

We expanded from VHS tapes into CDs and DVDs.

We retained the most profitable merchandise for online sales.

We sold the remaining merchandise to other dealers.

It seemed that we could hardly make a bad purchase.

Even when a shipment was not what someone promised, we could ordinarily find another buyer and still earn a profit.

Sales increased.

Inventory multiplied.

We hired employees.

We rented a large warehouse.

We developed systems for receiving, scanning, shelving, picking, packing and shipping products.

The business continued to succeed.

But something else was happening.

Danielin and I were working fourteen to eighteen hours a day.

We were trying to raise a family while operating a rapidly growing company.

The business we had created so we could remain together was leaving us with less meaningful time for one another.

The business that helped provide for our children was competing with our children for their parents.

The business God appeared to have blessed was leaving us with less time for God.

The company was succeeding.

But were we?

That is the tension I want us to examine today.

When does success become failure?

We must begin with an important truth.

Business is not sinful.

Honest profit is not sinful.

Growth is not sinful.

Wealth is not automatically evidence of greed.

The Bible begins with work.

Genesis 2:15 says:

"And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it."

Work existed before sin entered the world.

Sin made work painful.

But work itself was part of God's good creation.

Deuteronomy 8:18 says:

"But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth."

God gives people strength.

God gives people intelligence.

God gives people creativity.

God gives people opportunities.

God gives people the ability to organize resources and produce something valuable.

The warning in Deuteronomy is not that producing wealth is inherently evil.

The warning is that success can make us forget the One who gave us the ability.

Proverbs 31 describes a virtuous woman who is also commercially capable.

She considers a field and buys it.

She makes fine linen and sells it.

She delivers merchandise to the merchant.

She cares for her household.

And the chapter says that a woman who fears the Lord shall be praised.

In Acts 16, Lydia is identified as a seller of purple.

Her home and resources became available for Christian service.

In Acts 18, Aquila and Priscilla worked as tentmakers.

Their business existed alongside hospitality, discipleship and ministry.

We must therefore reject a shallow conclusion.

The lesson is not that Christians should avoid successful businesses.

The lesson is not that poverty is automatically holy.

The lesson is not that selling a company is more spiritual than operating one.

The issue is not merely what we possess.

The issue is what possesses us.

Jesus described seed falling among thorns.

He said the people heard the Word.

The Word was not absent.

Something grew.

But other things grew in the same ground.

Jesus called them the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches and the lusts of other things.

They entered in.

They choked the Word.

And the Word became unfruitful.

Notice how quietly that can happen.

The thorns do not announce themselves as enemies.

The cares of this world are often legitimate cares.

Customers need answers.

Employees need supervision.

Orders must be shipped.

Bills must be paid.

Inventory must be counted.

Problems must be solved.

None of those things sounds wicked.

But together they can consume the attention that something fruitful needs in order to grow.

The plant may still look alive.

The person may still attend church.

The Bible may still be somewhere in the house.

The prayers may not have completely stopped.

But the fruit becomes less and less visible.

God may not be rejected in one dramatic decision.

He may simply be crowded out by one ordinary responsibility after another.

That is why riches are deceitful.

Money tells us that one more sale will make us secure.

Growth tells us that one more opportunity must not be wasted.

Profitability tells us that what we are doing must be right.

Success can make us believe that an open commercial door is automatically a divine direction.

But profitability proves only that an activity can make money.

It does not prove that continuing the activity is God's present will.

Luke 10 gives us another example.

Jesus entered the home of Martha and Mary.

Martha served.

There was nothing sinful about preparing for a guest.

There was certainly nothing sinful about serving Jesus.

But Luke 10:40 says:

"But Martha was cumbered about much serving."

She became frustrated that Mary was sitting at the feet of Jesus and hearing His Word.

Martha wanted Jesus to tell Mary to help her.

Jesus answered in verses 41 and 42:

"Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things:

"But one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her."

Martha was not distracted by evil.

She was distracted by service.

Something useful had begun to crowd out something necessary.

That can happen to a business owner.

It can happen to an employee.

It can happen to a parent.

It can happen to a Pastor.

A Pastor can become so busy preparing sermons that he has little time to sit before the Lord of the sermon.

A church can become so busy organizing programs that it has little time to care for the people the programs were created to serve.

A parent can work for a child while becoming unavailable to the child.

A husband can say that he is providing for his wife while his wife is losing the companionship she cannot purchase with his paycheck.

Something does not have to become evil before it becomes improperly placed.

A gift can become a burden.

A burden can become a master.

And a master can become an idol.

Not every burden is an idol.

There are seasons when love requires sacrifice.

There are times when a family must work unusually long hours.

There are emergencies that require nearly all of our attention.

There are assignments that remain right even when they become difficult.

But when something consistently demands the devotion that belongs to God, the trust that belongs in God or the attention owed to people God entrusted to us, it has crossed a spiritual boundary.

That brings us to another question.

Who gets to define success?

The business world has familiar measurements.

How much did we sell?

How much did we earn?

How fast did we grow?

How many employees did we hire?

How much inventory did we acquire?

Those measurements are useful.

They can tell us whether a company is commercially healthy.

But they cannot tell us whether a life is spiritually faithful.

Joshua 1:8 says:

"This book of the law shall not depart out of thy mouth; but thou shalt meditate therein day and night, that thou mayest observe to do according to all that is written therein: for then thou shalt make thy way prosperous, and then thou shalt have good success."

In that passage, good success is connected to knowing and obeying the Word of God.

Genesis 39 describes Joseph as prosperous while he was serving as a slave.

The same chapter describes the Lord being with Joseph while Joseph was confined in prison.

If prosperity can exist in slavery and prison, Biblical prosperity cannot be reduced to comfort, freedom or possessions.

The highest definition of success appears in the prayer of Jesus.

In John 17:4, Jesus said to the Father:

"I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do."

Jesus did not say that He had accepted every opportunity available to Him.

He did not say that every person in Israel had believed.

He did not say that the political authorities admired Him.

He did not point to property, savings or an organization carrying His name.

He glorified the Father.

He finished the work the Father gave Him.

Biblical success is not doing everything we are capable of doing.

Biblical success is faithfully completing what God has given us to do.

That definition changes the question.

The question is not merely, "Can this business continue?"

The question is, "Has God assigned it to continue in this form?"

The question is not merely, "Can I do more?"

The question is, "What has God actually given me to do?"

First Corinthians 4:2 says:

"Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful."

A steward does not own the assignment.

A steward receives it.

A steward manages it.

A steward remains accountable to the owner.

And a steward must be willing to return it.

Success can be more dangerous than failure because failure forces us to ask questions.

When something fails, we ask whether the plan is working.

We ask whether something must change.

We ask whether we should continue.

But success rewards repetition.

Success encourages expansion.

Success makes stopping appear foolish.

Success can prevent us from asking whether yesterday's assignment remains today's assignment.

Second Chronicles 26 tells us about King Uzziah.

He sought God.

God helped him.

His name spread abroad.

He built towers.

He strengthened the kingdom.

Second Chronicles 26:15 says:

"And his name spread far abroad; for he was marvellously helped, till he was strong."

Then verse 16 says:

"But when he was strong, his heart was lifted up to his destruction."

The words "till he was strong" should make us stop.

Weakness had taught him to seek God.

Strength introduced a different test.

The difficulty did not begin when nothing was working.

The danger intensified when everything was working.

Deuteronomy 8 gives Israel the same warning.

God was bringing His people into a good land.

They would eat and become full.

They would build goodly houses.

Their herds and flocks would multiply.

Their silver and gold would multiply.

Then their hearts might be lifted up.

They might forget the Lord.

They might say in their hearts that their own power had produced their wealth.

The wilderness asks, "Will you trust God when you have nothing?"

Prosperity asks, "Will you remember God when you have much?"

The second question may be more difficult.

Our business reached a point when Danielin and I could honestly say that we did not need the additional money.

That did not make earning more money sinful.

It meant we had to ask why the business should continue demanding so much from us.

Ecclesiastes 5:10 says:

"He that loveth silver shall not be satisfied with silver; nor he that loveth abundance with increase."

Money never announces that we have reached enough.

The next opportunity always promises something more.

The next purchase may be profitable.

The next expansion may work.

The next year may produce more than the last.

If we never prayerfully determine what enough means, growth becomes automatic.

Then the ability to do more begins to feel like an obligation to do more.

But an opportunity is not automatically an obligation.

Jesus told the story of a man whose land brought forth plentifully.

The man faced a business problem most people would welcome.

He did not have room to store everything he had produced.

He decided to tear down his barns and build larger ones.

He would store his fruits and goods.

Then he would tell his soul that he had enough for many years.

He could take his ease, eat, drink and be merry.

But Luke 12:20 says:

"But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?"

Jesus concluded:

"So is he that layeth up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God."

The man was not foolish simply because his farm produced an abundant harvest.

He was not foolish merely because he planned.

He was not foolish merely because he stored something for the future.

His speech revealed a world in which God, eternity and other people had disappeared.

He planned as though his possessions belonged entirely to him.

He planned as though his future belonged entirely to him.

He spoke to his soul as though stored goods could provide what only God can provide.

Danielin and I were not simply hoarding everything for ourselves.

We were using money from the business to support ministry.

We helped Pastors and Missionaries.

We helped Bible college students.

We helped fund work in places where a small amount of American money could produce meaningful assistance.

But that leads to a more difficult question.

Can I be generous with money while being careless with time?

Can I financially support a family while becoming unavailable to that family?

Can I fund someone else's calling while avoiding the work God has personally given me?

Money is not the only thing God entrusts to us.

He entrusts relationships.

He entrusts children.

He entrusts health.

He entrusts opportunities.

He entrusts time.

Ephesians 5:15-16 says:

"See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise,

"Redeeming the time, because the days are evil."

Money can be earned again.

Inventory can be replaced.

A company can sometimes be rebuilt.

Time moves in only one direction.

Children grow while adults are busy doing other things.

Marriages change while two people keep promising that life will become less busy next month.

Every yes to one activity becomes a no to something else.

That is why Ecclesiastes 4:6 says:

"Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit."

The verse does not praise laziness.

It does not condemn diligent work.

It asks whether two full hands are worth what they prevent us from receiving.

Our business was filling our hands.

It was also emptying portions of our lives.

So we attempted to correct the problem.

We examined what we were selling.

We eliminated approximately seventy percent of our sales.

We retained only the products that produced the greatest return for the effort required.

We left the large warehouse.

We eliminated the need for employees.

We returned the operation to our home.

And something surprising happened.

The smaller business became more profitable.

We were doing less volume and producing a better financial result.

That experience taught us that more activity does not necessarily create more value.

Downsizing was not failure.

But it did not resolve everything.

Without employees, Danielin and I were again doing most of the work ourselves.

The company was smaller and more efficient.

It still demanded substantial portions of our lives.

I was burned out.

I had lost much of my enthusiasm for the business.

Danielin assumed greater control of the operation.

She streamlined processes and made them more efficient.

But we also had two active young children.

Their needs could not be reduced through a better inventory system.

Their childhood could not be postponed until the final order was shipped.

Efficiency improved the company.

Efficiency could not tell us whether the company remained our assignment.

This distinction matters because our culture often tells us that every problem can be solved through productivity.

Wake earlier.

Create another schedule.

Delegate another task.

Install another system.

Work faster.

Sometimes those are wise answers.

Sometimes better management can restore proper order.

But no management technique can answer a question of lordship.

Only God can decide what He has assigned.

Danielin played an essential part in that discernment.

She was not a wife standing outside the business and asking her husband to work less.

She was a capable businesswoman who had helped build the company.

She understood its risks.

She understood its profits.

She understood its processes.

She had demonstrated that she could operate it efficiently.

She also understood what it was costing our family.

For several weeks, Danielin and I prayed.

We talked about the business.

We talked about our children.

We talked about our marriage.

We talked about ministry.

We talked about what we believed God wanted from the next season of our lives.

Eventually, we reached the same conclusion.

We should sell the business.

We should take a short rest.

Then I should return to full-time ministry.

The agreement matters.

Marriage did not compete with the calling.

Our marriage helped us discern the calling.

God may use the person beside us to reveal a cost that success has made difficult for us to see.

That does not mean every concern expressed by another person automatically reveals God's will.

But it does mean we should listen to the people who are paying part of the price for our success.

If a husband says he is doing everything for his family, he should be willing to hear what his family says it needs.

If a Pastor says he is sacrificing for his congregation, he should be willing to hear whether his own household is being sacrificed.

If an employer says the company is like a family, that employer should consider what the work is doing to actual families.

There is another question beneath all of this.

Can a blessing outlive its purpose?

Numbers 21 tells us that poisonous serpents came among Israel.

God commanded Moses to make a serpent of brass and place it upon a pole.

When a bitten person looked upon it, that person lived.

The brass serpent was not created through rebellion.

God commanded it.

God used it.

Lives were preserved through it.

Centuries later, Second Kings 18:4 tells us that the people were burning incense to that same brass serpent.

King Hezekiah broke it into pieces.

Its divine origin did not justify its later misuse.

The object had not become morally evil.

Its place among the people had become spiritually disordered.

We should be careful with this principle.

We should not discard responsibilities merely because they are difficult.

We should not call every change in our feelings a change in God's direction.

But we also must not use past blessing to silence present conviction.

Yesterday's blessing does not automatically constitute tomorrow's assignment.

There are times when faithfulness means continuing.

There are times when faithfulness means releasing.

The challenge is knowing the difference.

Are we continuing because Scripture and prayer direct us to continue?

Or are we continuing because success has created momentum?

Are we protecting a responsibility?

Or are we protecting our income, identity, comfort or control?

Have we prayed only for strength to continue?

Have we also prayed for willingness to stop?

Would we obey God if He asked us to release something that was still succeeding?

There is an early Christian writing called The Shepherd of Hermas.

It is not Scripture and we do not use it to establish doctrine.

But it shows that early Christians wrestled with this same danger.

The writing warns about people becoming excessively occupied and distracted by their business until they no longer serve their Lord properly.

The language is strong.

Its observation remains useful.

Business can distract a person without first making that person dishonest.

Another early writing, Sirach, describes someone who becomes rich through diligence and believes he can finally rest and enjoy his possessions.

But he does not know how much time remains before he must leave them to someone else.

That historical warning closely resembles the Rich Fool in Luke 12.

Again, these writings are not our authority.

The Bible is our authority.

But they remind us that believers have recognized this conflict for a very long time.

The evening Danielin and I agreed that we should sell the business, our devotion included Second Corinthians 6:1:

"We then, as workers together with him, beseech you also that ye receive not the grace of God in vain."

That verse had been read approximately six years earlier when we were led to begin Together With Him Ministries.

Its reappearance was personally meaningful to us.

We received it as a reminder that grace calls for a faithful response.

But we should interpret the Bible carefully.

Second Corinthians 6:1 is not a command for every business owner to sell a company.

Paul was writing about the ministry of reconciliation and responding faithfully to God's grace.

The verse did not make our decision by itself.

It came alongside weeks of prayer, agreement between husband and wife, the needs of our family, the condition of our spiritual lives and a calling we believed had not been completed.

We sold the business.

We did not sell because it had become commercially worthless.

We did not leave because no one wanted the products.

We were not forced out through financial collapse.

We released something that was still capable of succeeding.

That is sometimes harder than walking away from failure.

When something fails, circumstances may remove it from our hands.

When something succeeds, obedience may require us to open our hands voluntarily.

Selling the company did not mean the business years were wasted.

The business had provided for our family.

It had enabled Danielin and me to work together.

It had helped us support ministry.

It had developed abilities that would continue serving us.

We had learned purchasing and negotiation.

We had learned inventory management.

We had learned to create systems and procedures.

We had supervised employees.

We had analyzed financial results.

We had learned publishing, writing, shipping and long-distance coordination.

God could redirect those abilities toward another purpose.

Moses left Pharaoh's household, but his education was not wasted.

David left the sheep, but the lessons of shepherding followed him.

Elisha left his oxen, but his years of labor had prepared him.

Peter and Andrew left their nets, but Jesus used the language of fishing in their new calling.

Paul made tents, but tentmaking did not define the whole of his assignment.

Releasing an assignment does not mean the assignment was a mistake.

God may use something for a season.

He may form abilities and character through it.

He may accomplish real good through it.

Then He may redirect everything learned toward another work.

The business did not have to continue forever in order to have been successful.

Perhaps selling it was its final successful act.

The company had served its season.

We refused to allow yesterday's assignment to prevent tomorrow's obedience.

Now I want to turn the question toward each of us.

Your successful business may not be a business.

It may be a career.

It may be a ministry.

It may be a position.

It may be a reputation.

It may be a financial goal.

It may be a hobby.

It may be a relationship.

It may be a routine that once served you well.

It may be a dream you have carried for many years.

What good thing currently receives most of your attention?

What is that good thing costing your relationship with God?

What is it costing your marriage?

What is it costing your children?

What is it costing your health?

Are you continuing from present conviction or past momentum?

Have you allowed profit, popularity or growth to make a spiritual decision?

Have you prayerfully determined what enough means?

If God asked for this thing, what would you fear losing?

Would you lose income?

Would you lose status?

Would you lose the identity that tells you who you are?

Would you lose the explanation you give other people for why your life matters?

An idol is not identified merely by its price.

It may be revealed by our inability to imagine faithfulness without it.

Some people need to continue.

Difficulty is not proof that God has closed a door.

Weariness is not always evidence that an assignment has ended.

There are responsibilities we must carry even when they are heavy.

Some people need to make changes without abandoning the assignment.

They need boundaries.

They need rest.

They need to delegate.

They need to stop treating every opportunity as an obligation.

And some people already know what God has asked them to place back into His hands.

They have been asking God to bless what He has been asking them to release.

They have been calling fear responsibility.

They have been calling momentum faithfulness.

They have been using yesterday's blessing to resist today's obedience.

The answer is not simply better work-life balance.

The deepest question is lordship.

Who has the right to decide what your work is for?

Who has the right to establish its boundaries?

Who has the right to tell you when to continue?

Who has the right to tell you when to stop?

Jesus Christ is not merely a consultant we ask to improve our plans.

He is Lord.

Every one of us has allowed created things to occupy places that belong to the Creator.

Some people are ruled by money.

Some are ruled by achievement.

Some are ruled by approval.

Some are ruled by security.

Some are ruled by control.

Some are ruled by the need to appear successful.

We have all sinned.

No amount of business success can pay for sin.

No amount of generosity can purchase forgiveness.

No act of surrender can earn eternal life.

Jesus Christ completed the work the Father gave Him.

He lived without sin.

He willingly went to the cross.

He died in our place.

He was buried.

And on the third day, He rose again.

Romans 3:23 says:

"For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God."

Romans 6:23 says:

"For the wages of sin is death; but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord."

Romans 10:9 says:

"That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved."

And Romans 10:13 says:

"For whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved."

If you have never trusted Jesus Christ as your Savior, you can call upon Him today.

You do not need to make yourself successful enough for God.

You do not need to repair your entire life before coming to Christ.

Come honestly.

Come humbly.

Come believing that Jesus died and rose again.

If that is the desire of your heart, you may pray with me.

Heavenly Father, I know that I am a sinner.

I know that I cannot save myself.

I believe that Jesus Christ died on the cross for my sins.

I believe that He was buried and rose again.

I turn from my sin and place my trust in Jesus Christ alone.

Please forgive me.

Please save me.

Help me follow You as the Lord of my life.

In the name of Jesus Christ I pray.

Amen.

Before we leave, I want each of us to carry several questions.

What good thing may be crowding out something better?

Am I providing money while withholding time?

Am I confusing profitability with God's approval?

Am I continuing because God has directed me or because success has created momentum?

Have I decided what enough means?

Have I listened to the people who are paying part of the price for my success?

Is there something I need to continue faithfully even though it is difficult?

Is there something I need to reduce so that it can return to its proper place?

Is there something I need to release into the hands of God?

The world would have looked at our sales, inventory, employees, warehouse and profits and called the business successful.

The world might have looked at our decision to sell it and wondered why anyone would walk away.

But God uses another measurement.

The business provided for our family.

It allowed Danielin and me to work together.

It supported ministry.

It developed abilities God would use later.

The business was not a mistake.

The business did not fail.

It served its season.

The danger would have been allowing its success to make disobedience appear responsible.

The successful life is not the life that keeps everything it gains.

The successful life is the life that glorifies God, completes what He assigns and remains willing to place everything back into His hands.

Aloha Nui Loa.

REASON TOGETHER CHURCH
PASTOR'S COMMENTARY

The Successful Business

When Does Success Become Failure?

Mark 4:18-19

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Pastor & Teacher

www.ReasonTogether.Church

*Bring your questions. Open your Bible.
Let's Reason Together the Word of God.*

Introduction

A successful business presents a difficult spiritual question precisely because success contains so many genuine goods. It can provide for a family, employ other people, reward diligence, reveal creativity and support generous ministry. The business behind this study did all of those things. It began with a husband and wife wanting work they could do together. It grew through sound observation, risk, labor and operational skill. Its eventual danger cannot be explained by pretending that the work was evil from the beginning.

The controlling question is therefore not, 'Is business wrong?' It is, 'When does success become failure?' Jesus answers at the level beneath revenue and reputation. In the parable of the sower, hearers among thorns receive the Word, but the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things enter in. The Word is choked and becomes unfruitful. A life may look increasingly productive by one measure while becoming less fruitful by the measure that matters to God.

This commentary develops the Biblical reasoning beneath the sermon. It affirms honorable commerce, examines prosperity's spiritual tests and distinguishes an opportunity from an assignment. It also gives marriage, children, worship, rest and present obedience their proper place in stewardship. The answer is not a universal order to sell a company. It is a call to place every company, ministry, position, schedule and dream under the present authority of Christ.

Controlling conclusion

Success becomes failure when preserving what we gained causes us to neglect what God entrusted or prevents us from obeying His present assignment. A blessing remains a blessing only when it stays under the authority of the Giver.

1. The Story Behind the Question

A Business They Could Build Together

After returning from ministry in the Philippines, Dr. Hawksley and Danielin wanted a business they could operate together. That desire matters. The enterprise was not conceived as an escape from marriage or a substitute for ministry. Working side by side could provide income and

shared purpose. The story begins with a reasonable vocational hope, which makes the later conflict more instructive than a simple warning about obviously sinful ambition.

Danielin brought substantial business experience to the decision. Before she was eighteen, she had already learned to evaluate buying, selling and commercial risk. When a large inventory of dusty VHS tapes became available, her questions were sensible. The purchase price was about four thousand dollars and freight was about twenty-five hundred dollars. A pile of old media could become valuable inventory, or it could become an expensive warehouse problem. Her caution should be heard as competence, not unbelief.

The Purchase That Changed the Scale

The transaction produced a startling early result. A dealer reportedly offered seven thousand dollars for the pile initially treated as rejects. The remaining tapes carried a listed value exceeding fifty thousand dollars. After fees, the magazine account reports that close to forty thousand dollars was made in less than a month. These figures are remembered testimony rather than an audited financial statement, but they explain why the opportunity appeared so compelling.

Success taught the couple what appeared to be a repeatable model. They purchased inventory from additional video stores, expanded into CDs and DVDs, added a warehouse and employed other people. Each new capacity made the next acquisition possible. This is how a successful decision can become a successful system. The system then develops needs of its own: more inventory, more processing, more space, more payroll and more attention to preserve what has already been built.

When the Cost Became Visible

The hours expanded until work commonly occupied fourteen to eighteen hours a day. The cost was not limited to fatigue. Dr. Hawksley and Danielin had little time for one another and little time for God. Financial generosity and ministry concern remained present, but those good qualities could not replace relational presence or communion with the Lord. Stewardship must account for more than money given away. It must also account for time, affection, attention and obedience.

The couple eventually reduced sales by roughly seventy percent, simplified operations and became more profitable. That result exposed an assumption: more activity had not produced more genuine fruit. Even after operations returned home, doing too much themselves created renewed strain. Danielin took operational control and streamlined the work. Her role was not to stand outside the business and complain about it. She helped lead it, improve it and discern its future.

Prayer, Agreement and Release

Two active young children brought the couple's priorities into sharper view. Children were not interruptions to the real calling. They were part of what God had entrusted. Dr. Hawksley and Danielin prayed for several weeks and reached agreement that the business should be sold. Their plan included rest and a return to full-time ministry. The decision was neither impulsive quitting nor romantic contempt for business. It was a shared judgment about season and assignment.

During this period, a devotion returned to 2 Corinthians 6:1, a verse associated with an earlier ministry turning point six years before. In its original context, the verse concerns the ministry of reconciliation and the appeal not to receive God's grace in vain. It is not a general command to sell a business. In the story it functions as personal providential confirmation. That distinction protects both the testimony and the text.

2. Work and Business Are Good Gifts

Work Before the Fall

Genesis 2:15 places work before human rebellion: 'And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.' Cultivation, protection, organization and development belong to created stewardship. The fall brings thorns, sweat and frustration, but it does not convert every form of labor into a necessary evil. Christians should not speak as though retirement from work were the only spiritual goal or as though commercial competence were embarrassing.

A theology that begins only with the dangers of money will misread the story. The ability to identify value in neglected inventory, organize thousands of items, train employees, serve customers and build reliable processes can reflect patience, intelligence and care. Those capacities remain accountable to God, but accountability does not erase their goodness. The same hand can receive a gift gratefully and later hold it too tightly. The fault lies in disordered rule, not in the existence of the gift.

The Businesswoman of Proverbs 31

Proverbs 31 praises a woman who evaluates land and buys it, plants a vineyard, perceives that her merchandise is good and supplies goods to merchants. Her work is not separated from household care, generosity and the fear of the LORD. The portrait joins commercial judgment to an integrated life. Profit is not presented as a rival to virtue, but neither is profit allowed to stand alone as the definition of virtue.

Danielin's place in the business story deserves the same integrated respect. She had experience, exercised judgment and eventually streamlined operations. Describing her merely as 'the wife

who wanted him to slow down' would diminish the source and repeat a poor assumption about leadership. Husband and wife were both stewards. Their eventual agreement carried spiritual weight because it emerged from shared knowledge of the business and shared prayer before God.

Lydia, Aquila and Priscilla

Lydia is introduced in Acts 16 as a seller of purple. Her home becomes a place of hospitality for the Gospel. Aquila and Priscilla share the trade of tentmaking with Paul, then participate in teaching Apollos more perfectly the way of God. Scripture does not require believers to choose between real business activity and real ministry usefulness. Commercial life can provide relationships, resources, skills and places through which ministry occurs.

These examples also prevent a false conclusion about vocational ministry. Selling the Hawksley business did not make secular work unclean and ministry work holy. The distinction was one of assignment. For Lydia, commerce and hospitality belonged together. For Aquila and Priscilla, trade and Gospel partnership belonged together. For the Hawksleys, a later season required release. The same Lord may govern different forms of faithfulness.

Work Under the True Master

Colossians 3:23-24 calls believers to work heartily, 'as to the Lord, and not unto men,' while reminding them that they serve the Lord Christ. That command supports excellence, but it also limits every employer, customer and business demand. Christ is the true Master. If a company begins to command what belongs to Him, the believer cannot defend the disorder by pointing to diligence. Excellence under Christ includes knowing when another demand has exceeded its authority.

Genesis 2:15

And the LORD God took the man, and put him into the garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.

3. Mark 4 and the Thorns

The Word Is Heard

The hearers among thorns are not described as people who never encounter the Word. Jesus says they hear it. The problem develops as other powers enter and compete with what has been received. This makes the passage especially searching for believers who remain active in church, retain Christian language and continue to support ministry. Hearing can remain visible while fruitfulness is quietly diminished.

The parable should not be forced to answer every disputed question about the spiritual condition of each soil. The sermon's use is more focused. Jesus clearly teaches that cares, riches and competing desires can choke the effect of heard truth. A crowded life may leave the Bible present but increasingly unable to govern decisions. The question is not merely whether Scripture is read, but whether it still has room to rule.

The Cares of This World

Business growth creates legitimate cares. Employees expect pay. Customers expect fulfillment. Inventory must be received, protected and sold. Bills, regulations and deadlines do not disappear because the owner wants to pay. Jesus does not call every care imaginary. He warns that the cares of this world can enter the interior life and become choking powers.

A care becomes spiritually dangerous when urgency consistently outranks importance, when every operational problem receives immediate attention but worship and relationships receive whatever remains. The owner may say, 'This is only a busy season,' while the season becomes the permanent structure of life. Responsible attention then turns into anxious rule. The work no longer receives care; it manufactures a state in which nothing else can be cared for well.

The Deceitfulness of Riches

Riches deceive because they make promises that exceed their ability. Money can purchase inventory, pay freight, meet payroll and create options. It cannot guarantee tomorrow, secure the soul or establish a person's worth before God. The deceit is not that money does nothing. The deceit is that its real usefulness encourages trust in powers it does not possess.

Success can also make continuation appear mandatory. Once an enterprise proves profitable, reducing it feels irrational and selling it feels like failure. The owner may fear losing income, identity, admiration or proof of competence. At that point riches are not merely being used. Their promises are disciplining imagination. The business tells the owner what cannot be surrendered, and its voice begins to compete with the Word.

The Desire for Other Things

Mark includes 'the lusts of other things entering in.' The phrase is broader than money. A successful person may desire recognition, expansion, control, security, usefulness or the excitement of the next opportunity. Some of these desires attach themselves to noble language. The owner wants to provide, employ, give or build. Good motives can be present while unexamined desires quietly enlarge the commitment beyond its faithful place.

The test is fruit. Jesus says the Word becomes unfruitful. The business may be producing more orders while patience produces less. Revenue may rise while prayer disappears. Customers may

receive excellent attention while a spouse receives exhausted fragments. The passage gives permission to evaluate visible productivity by invisible and relational fruit.

Mark 4:18-19

And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as hear the word, And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, choke the word, and it becometh unfruitful.

4. Prosperity Is a Spiritual Test

Remember the Source of Power

Deuteronomy 8 warns Israel in the hour of multiplication. Houses, herds, silver and gold will increase. The danger comes when the heart is lifted up and says, 'My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth.' Moses does not deny human effort. He commands Israel to remember that God gives power to get wealth. Capacity itself remains received.

Remembering God means more than thanking Him for the first opportunity. If He is the source, He remains Lord over the result. The owner cannot say, 'God gave me this business,' and then use that history to shield every present decision from Him. Gratitude must include availability. What came through God's strength must remain available for God's purposes, limits and timing.

Uzziah Was Helped Until He Was Strong

Second Chronicles 26 says that Uzziah 'was marvellously helped, till he was strong.' The help was real. His later pride was also real. Strength created by God's help became the setting in which the king crossed a boundary God had established. The phrase exposes a danger in testimony language: a true account of past help can be converted into confidence that present strength validates every choice.

Prosperity removes some tests and introduces others. Scarcity tests trust when resources are absent. Abundance tests trust when resources appear sufficient. In scarcity, a person may ask whether God will provide. In abundance, the person may stop asking what God requires. The second test can be harder to recognize because it arrives wearing the appearance of answered prayer.

The Rich Fool

In Luke 12, the rich man's ground produces plentifully. Jesus does not condemn good soil, careful farming or the need to store a harvest. The man's folly appears in his closed conversation

with himself. He speaks of my fruits, my goods, my barns and my soul. God, neighbor, mortality and purpose are absent. He knows how to enlarge storage but not how to become rich toward God.

The Hawksley story is not identical. The magazine account includes generosity, prayer, ministry concern and eventual surrender. The parable therefore serves as a warning mirror rather than a complete description of their character. It asks every successful person: What is the larger barn meant to serve? Who has authority to say it is large enough? What happens when the Owner asks for a different use or a different season?

Contentment Establishes a Limit

Ecclesiastes 5:10 observes that the person who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver.

Without contentment, every achievement becomes the reason for another expansion.

Contentment does not forbid growth. It breaks growth's claim to be self-justifying. A contented owner can consider a new opportunity without needing it to prove worth or quiet fear.

Paul learned how to be abased and how to abound. His contentment in Philippians 4 did not come from controlling circumstances but from strength in Christ. This is essential for release. A person who can live faithfully only while the business expands is not free. Christian contentment allows abundance to be enjoyed without being worshiped and allows reduction without the collapse of identity.

5. What Does the Bible Call Success?

Joshua and Obedient Prosperity

Joshua 1:8 joins good success to meditation on and obedience to God's law. Success is not autonomous achievement blessed after the fact. It is action governed by what God has spoken.

The text does not promise that every obedient person will produce identical financial results. It teaches that God's Word, not visible scale, defines the path Joshua must make prosperous.

This corrects both envy and pride. A smaller business may be successful if it faithfully serves the assignment God has given. A larger business may also be successful if its growth remains obedient. Size does not answer the question. The governing issue is whether the work is being conducted within the purposes, relationships and limits established by the Lord.

Joseph Was Prosperous in Prison

Genesis 39 repeatedly describes Joseph as prosperous while he is enslaved and later confined.

His circumstances would not satisfy ordinary definitions of success, yet the LORD is with him and his entrusted work is blessed. The passage separates prosperity from comfort, title and control. A person may lose the visible signs of achievement without losing the presence of God.

That truth makes surrender less frightening. Selling a successful business can look like moving backward. Joseph's story says that God's presence is not imprisoned by circumstances and cannot be measured by status. The believer does not carry God by carrying the enterprise. If an assignment changes, the Lord remains present on the other side of release.

Jesus Finished the Given Work

In John 17:4 Jesus says, 'I have glorified thee on the earth: I have finished the work which thou gavest me to do.' The sentence joins glory, completion and assignment. Jesus does not describe faithfulness as doing every possible good action or meeting every available need. He finishes the work given by the Father.

This provides the study's clearest positive definition. Biblical success is faithfulness to the work God gives. Sometimes faithfulness expands a work. Sometimes it sustains the work through hardship. Sometimes it completes a season and refuses to preserve it merely because it still functions. Completion is not failure when the assignment has been fulfilled.

The Requirement of a Steward

First Corinthians 4:2 says, 'Moreover it is required in stewards, that a man be found faithful.' A steward manages what belongs to another. The business, capital, skill, time, marriage, children, body and ministry are not separate kingdoms. They belong within one stewardship under one Owner.

An owner can therefore manage company assets carefully while managing the whole trust poorly. Excellent inventory controls do not compensate for neglected worship. Generous donations do not automatically repair relational absence. Conversely, time with family cannot excuse dishonesty toward employees or customers. Faithfulness asks how all entrusted responsibilities are being ordered together under God.

A Biblical definition of success

To glorify God by faithfully completing the work He has given, whether that work requires building, sustaining, pruning or releasing.

6. When a Good Thing Becomes Disordered

Martha and Much Serving

Martha's service in Luke 10 is not evil. Hospitality is good, and Jesus receives it elsewhere. The problem is that she is 'cumbered about much serving' and is careful and troubled about many

things while the one needful thing is displaced. A good action has become absorbing enough to damage presence with the Lord and peace with another person.

The story offers a close spiritual analogy to business busyness. Work can be genuinely useful and still become disordered by anxiety, comparison and excess. The answer is not to despise service but to recover priority. Jesus does not need Martha to prove her worth by maintaining a standard He did not command.

The Brass Serpent

In Numbers 21, God commands Moses to make a serpent of brass. Looking upon it becomes the appointed means of healing. Centuries later, Hezekiah breaks that same object because Israel is burning incense to it and calling it Nehushtan. A thing can be genuinely given and used by God in one setting, then wrongly related to in another.

This does not mean every old blessing should be destroyed. It means a history of usefulness does not grant permanent immunity from examination. The believer must ask whether the gift still points to God and serves His purpose, or whether preserving the gift has become more important than obeying the Giver. Yesterday's blessing does not automatically constitute tomorrow's assignment.

From Tool to Burden to Master

The language of progression helps avoid careless accusations. A tool serves a purpose under the user's direction. A burden carries real weight and may require support, limits or pruning. A master begins to dictate time, loyalty and identity. An idol receives trust, fear, love or protection that belongs to God. Not every demanding season is idolatry, but every movement toward mastery deserves attention.

One revealing test is the ability to place the thing on the altar. If every suggestion of limitation produces panic, anger or elaborate spiritual justification, the reaction may reveal more than the proposal. The question is not whether the believer must immediately surrender possession. The question is whether Christ possesses the believer fully enough to command the possession.

Sacred Success Is Not Exempt

Gideon's ephod became a snare after a God-given victory. Israel treated the ark as though it could compel God to support a battle. Jeremiah's generation repeated, 'The temple of the LORD,' while injustice continued. Religious instruments can also become substitutes for present obedience.

Pastors should apply this study to ministry before applying it to business owners. Attendance, buildings, programs, media reach and a leader's reputation can become systems that must be fed.

A ministry may be visibly successful while prayer, truth, family and pastoral care are being choked. Calling the activity ministry does not make it immune from Mark 4.

7. Marriage, Children and the Stewardship of Time

Marriage Is Not the Leftover Category

Ephesians 5 places marital love within Christ's own pattern of self-giving care. First Peter 3 requires honor and knowledge between spouses. These commands do not become optional during expansion. A spouse is not an obstacle standing between an entrepreneur and a calling. Marriage is itself part of the entrusted calling by which opportunities must be judged.

This does not mean a spouse automatically decides every vocational question or that faithful work never requires sacrifice. It means sacrifice must be truthful, shared and bounded. Danielin's perspective carried weight because she was wife, co-owner and operational leader. The final decision to sell was strengthened, not weakened, by agreement reached through prayer.

Children Are Part of the Assignment

Psalm 127 calls children an heritage of the LORD. They are not merely beneficiaries of income. They require presence, instruction, patience and protection. Providing more goods for a child can become a poor exchange if the process repeatedly withholds the parent the child was entrusted to know.

The Hawksleys' young children helped clarify the season. The study does not say that parents may never build demanding enterprises or that children must receive every desired hour. It says the children belong in the decision itself. Their needs cannot be treated as sentimental objections to the serious work of business.

Redeeming the Time

Ephesians 5:15-16 calls believers to walk circumspectly, 'redeeming the time, because the days are evil.' Time is not an empty container into which limitless commitments can be added. Every yes uses life that cannot be recovered. Stewardship therefore includes the courage to ask what a profitable yes is requiring us to say no to.

The answer will not be identical for every household. A demanding temporary season may serve a clear purpose and be carried in unity. A less intense schedule may still be spiritually wasteful. The measure is not a universal number of hours. It is faithful use of finite life under God's revealed responsibilities and present direction.

One Handful With Quietness

Ecclesiastes 4:6 says, 'Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit.' The verse does not praise laziness. It questions the assumption that two full hands always represent greater success. More can cost so much peace, presence and freedom that one faithful handful is better.

The Hawksleys discovered a business version of this wisdom when reducing sales improved profitability. The financial result is not a promise that every reduction increases profit. The spiritual lesson is stronger: activity and fruitfulness are not synonyms. Pruning can reveal that some of what looked like growth was merely motion consuming the strength needed for better things.

Ecclesiastes 4:6

Better is an handful with quietness, than both the hands full with travail and vexation of spirit.

8. Opportunity, Blessing and Assignment

An Open Door Is Not Automatically a Command

Christians often describe profitable or unusually timed opportunities as open doors. Scripture does use door language for opportunity, especially in Paul's ministry, but an available path still requires discernment. A door can be open because the world contains real freedom, because another person is inviting action or because a temptation is possible. Availability alone does not identify the source or establish obligation.

The VHS purchase became a striking opportunity. It may rightly be received with gratitude. Yet the later question remained: What does obedience require now? A person who believes every opportunity must be seized will eventually become governed by opportunities rather than by God. Wisdom includes the ability to leave a profitable door unopened.

A Blessing Is Not the Same as an Assignment

A blessing is a gift received under God's ownership. An assignment is a responsibility God calls a person to carry. The two may overlap, but they are not identical. A business can provide blessing without becoming a permanent assignment. A skill can remain a blessing even when its public exercise changes. Money from a completed season can support later obedience without requiring preservation of the original system.

Confusing blessing and assignment creates fear. If the business was blessed, selling it seems ungrateful. If the season ends, the believer may conclude that the beginning was a mistake. Scripture allows a better account: God may use a work truly, teach through it deeply and then direct the steward to complete it. Release does not erase gratitude.

Perseverance and Preservation

Perseverance is a Christian virtue. Believers should not abandon responsibilities whenever work becomes difficult. But preservation can borrow the language of perseverance while being driven by fear, identity or sunk cost. The fact that much has been invested does not prove that more must be invested. The question is whether continued labor remains faithful to the Owner's purpose.

Discernment must therefore examine motive, responsibility and fruit. Would stopping violate a clear duty to employees, creditors or family? Can the burden be corrected through delegation, pricing, systems or rest? Has the person sought counsel and prayed over time? Is the desire to continue rooted in calling, or in the need to prove that earlier sacrifices were justified? Faithful release is rarely discovered through one feeling alone.

Completion Without Repudiation

Moses, David, Elisha, the disciples and Paul each illustrate different forms of vocational transition. Moses leads to the border, while Joshua carries the next stage. David prepares for the temple, while Solomon builds it. Elisha leaves oxen. The disciples leave nets when Christ calls. These accounts do not create one universal transition pattern, but they show that a faithful life contains beginnings, continuations and endings.

A season can be completed without having been a mistake. This sentence protects testimony from two errors. It refuses to idolize continuity, and it refuses to despise the past. The business taught skills, created provision and supported later ministry. Its sale did not make those gifts unreal. It placed them inside a larger story of obedience.

9. Discerning When Success Is Failing

Measure the Whole Trust

The first diagnostic is breadth. Revenue, profit and growth are valid business measures, but they are not the whole Christian measure. The owner should also examine integrity, customer service, employee treatment, health, marriage, children, worship, generosity, rest and responsiveness to God's present call. A company can score well in one column while accumulating serious losses elsewhere.

This evaluation should avoid perfectionism. No season produces ideal performance in every area. The question is whether sacrifice remains chosen and accountable or has become chronic, hidden and self-protecting. Temporary imbalance may serve faithfulness. Permanent immunity from examination does not.

Ask What the Work Is Producing in You

Mark 4 directs attention from what the work produces to what it produces in the worker. Is success cultivating gratitude or entitlement? Patience or irritability? Freedom or fear? Generosity or control? Attention to God or constant mental occupation? The same financial result can accompany very different spiritual fruit.

A second question follows: What is the work keeping you from? Every commitment excludes alternatives. The answer may expose neglected prayer, unkept promises, a marriage conversation repeatedly postponed or a ministry assignment permanently deferred. Naming the displaced good often clarifies the true cost better than simply counting hours.

Test the Ability to Stop

The ability to stop is not the only test, but it is revealing. A steward should be able to consider limits without treating the question as betrayal. Sabbath itself teaches that creation continues while human work ceases. Stopping confesses that God is God and the worker is not.

A practical test may begin small: decline one opportunity, take one protected day, delegate one responsibility or set one honest limit. The reaction provides information. If the entire identity feels threatened, the issue may reach beyond operations. The person may not merely be managing the work. The work may be managing the person.

Discern in Community and Over Time

Major decisions should not rest only on private emotion. Scripture, prayer, marital unity, wise counsel, obligations and providential facts belong together. The Hawksleys prayed for several weeks and reached agreement. That process does not guarantee ease, but it differs from using one exhausting afternoon as an oracle.

Counsel must also be chosen wisely. A person whose identity depends on endless expansion may hear every caution as fear. A person who dislikes responsibility may label every challenge a closed door. Mature counsel helps separate calling from ego, weariness from disobedience and temporary strain from an ended season.

Five questions for discernment

Is the Word becoming more or less fruitful in me? What entrusted person or duty is being displaced? Can this work receive limits without controlling my identity? Am I preserving a past season at the expense of a present assignment? What do Scripture, prayer, my spouse and wise counsel say together?

10. Witnesses Beyond the Canon**Canonical Authority Comes First**

The study reviewed noncanonical and early Christian writings because they show how communities near the early centuries of the Church reasoned about wealth, business and distraction. They may illuminate a historical conversation, but they do not establish doctrine. Mark 4, Deuteronomy 8, Luke 12 and the wider canonical witness govern the conclusions of this commentary.

This order matters pastorally. An ancient statement can sound impressive because it is unfamiliar, but age does not make it Scripture. Historical witnesses should be identified honestly, weighed carefully and used only where they clarify rather than control the Biblical argument.

Sirach and Imagined Rest

Sirach 11 describes a person who becomes rich through diligence and plans to rest and enjoy his goods, yet does not know how soon death will come. The resemblance to the Rich Fool is useful for background. Jewish wisdom traditions already connected accumulation, imagined security and mortality.

The value of the comparison is not doctrinal authority but historical texture. Human beings have long mistaken stored goods for stored life. Jesus' parable gives the warning its canonical force: the soul cannot be secured by larger barns, and a person may be rich in possessions while poor toward God.

The Shepherd of Hermas

The Shepherd of Hermas warns that excessive business and wealth can distract people from serving the Lord. Its concern sounds remarkably current. Ordinary commercial entanglement can divide attention without involving an obviously immoral product. The problem is often accumulation of cares rather than one dramatic act.

The work's imagery and assumptions do not govern Christian doctrine. Its usefulness is historical: early Christian pastoral reflection recognized that busyness could become spiritually disabling. The warning supports, but does not replace, Jesus' teaching about thorns.

Clement and the Passions Attached to Wealth

Clement of Alexandria, in *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?*, resists a merely external treatment of wealth. He emphasizes release from passions attached to possessions rather than assuming that physical divestment alone purifies the soul. The distinction fits this study's pastoral caution.

A person can sell a business and remain mastered by status, regret or the next opportunity. Another person may retain substantial wealth while holding it generously under Christ. External action matters, but it must express inward lordship. Selling did not save the Hawksleys. Christ's grace made faithful surrender possible.

The Didache and Shared Goods

The Didache urges generosity and concern for the needy. It reminds readers that successful work must be evaluated beyond private comfort. Yet charitable giving cannot become a spiritual receipt that excuses every other cost. A person may give money and still withhold presence, truth or obedience.

The whole stewardship remains controlling. Generosity is one fruit of rightly ordered success, not an exemption from examining marriage, family, worship or identity. The Giver governs both what is shared and how it is gained.

11. Historical Preaching and Interpretive Restraint

Do Not Condemn the Barn

Modern preaching on the Rich Fool commonly observes that the man is not foolish merely because he farms well or plans storage. This restraint is important. Barns can protect a harvest and serve a community. Planning can be an expression of wisdom. The moral failure appears in the owner's closed horizon and false security.

The same restraint should govern this commentary. A warehouse, employees and rapid growth do not prove greed. Their presence explains scale, not spiritual guilt. The sermon identifies danger when the enterprise begins displacing higher trusts and resisting present obedience.

Do Not Romanticize Burnout

Burnout language can help people name exhaustion, cynicism and reduced effectiveness. It can also become a single explanation for complex decisions. Scripture does not teach that every hard

season is outside God's will. Paul knew labor, pressure and suffering within faithful ministry. Parents and caregivers may carry unavoidable burdens for a time.

Exhaustion should therefore be taken seriously without being treated as an infallible revelation. Rest may be required before a person can discern clearly. Medical or mental health care may be appropriate. Operational changes may repair the work. In other cases, fatigue may expose a deeper refusal to release. Wisdom resists both shame and simplification.

Do Not Turn Providence Into a Formula

The surprising dealer offer, rapid profitability and recurring devotional verse belong to the Hawksleys' testimony. They should not be transformed into formulas by which every believer interprets events. Profit can accompany wisdom, exploitation or ordinary market conditions. A repeated verse can carry personal significance without changing its original meaning.

Providence is often understood retrospectively and humbly. The believer may give thanks for timing and guidance while admitting limited knowledge. Testimony becomes stronger, not weaker, when it distinguishes what happened, what was inferred and what Scripture directly teaches.

Do Not Make Release the Only Faithful Ending

The sermon ends with sale because that is what the Hawksleys discerned. Another owner may be called to hire help, change pricing, reduce product lines, protect Sabbath, reconcile with a spouse or continue through a difficult but bounded season. Faithful application begins with surrender, not with copying the storyteller's transaction.

The common command is lordship. Christ may say build, stay, prune, delegate or release. The disciple's responsibility is to hear and obey without granting success the authority to answer on His behalf.

12. Pastoral Practice for Business and Ministry Leaders

Build Limits Before Crisis

Limits are easier to establish before growth makes every activity feel indispensable. Owners and leaders should decide what will protect worship, marriage, family, health and integrity before the next opportunity arrives. A weekly day of rest, clear work hours, delegated authority and regular financial review can become spiritual disciplines as well as operational practices.

Limits should be concrete enough to reveal exceptions. A vague promise to spend more time with family can disappear beneath urgent work. A scheduled conversation, protected meal or

device-free period can be observed and repaired. The point is not legalism. It is refusing to let the loudest demand make every decision.

Give a Spouse Real Voice

A spouse should not learn the true condition of a business only after decisions are made. Shared financial information, honest reporting of hours and regular conversation help a marriage discern together. Agreement may take time, especially when both spouses experience the risks differently.

Danielin's story shows why voice must include authority and respect. She was capable of analyzing the purchase, leading operations and helping determine the final direction. Pastoral counsel should resist stereotypes that automatically label caution as lack of faith or expansion as courage.

Audit Fruit, Not Only Activity

Leaders commonly review sales, attendance, output and expenses. A Christian audit should also ask about truthfulness, prayer, relational health, employee dignity, customer care, generosity and freedom from fear. These measures are less easily placed in a spreadsheet, but they are not less real.

An honest audit may discover that one product line, program or client consumes disproportionate life. It may reveal that the organization is rewarding behavior that contradicts its stated values. Pruning that activity can increase financial health, spiritual health or both. Even when it reduces income, it may increase faithfulness.

Plan for Completion

Many people plan how to begin and grow but never ask how a season might end. A completion plan can include succession, sale, transfer, reduced scope or a clear review date. Planning for an ending does not confess lack of faith. It acknowledges stewardship and mortality.

A business owner should also consider obligations created by release. Employees, customers, creditors and family members deserve truthful treatment. Surrender to God does not authorize careless abandonment. The manner of ending should reflect the same integrity required during growth.

Rest Before the Next Assignment

The Hawksleys planned to rest before returning to full-time ministry. That sequence is wise. A new calling should not always be used to outrun the exhaustion produced by an old one. Rest allows grief, gratitude and identity to settle. It also makes space to recognize which skills and lessons should be carried forward.

The business season was not wasted. Operational discipline, technology, purchasing, logistics and leadership could be redirected into ministry. God often redeems the skills of one season for service in another. Release changes ownership and form, but it does not erase what faithful learning produced.

Pastoral practice

Before making a major vocational decision, tell the truth about the whole cost, rest enough to discern clearly, listen seriously to your spouse, seek wise counsel, honor existing obligations and place every possible outcome under Christ's authority.

Pastoral Summary

The Successful Business is not a warning against success. It is a warning against allowing a partial definition of success to govern the whole life. The business began with a good desire, required real skill and produced substantial results. Its danger emerged when preservation and expansion consumed time with Danielin, time with God and the freedom to hear a new assignment.

Mark 4 supplies the controlling diagnosis. Cares, riches and other desires can enter a life that has heard the Word and choke its fruit. Deuteronomy 8 warns that prosperity can forget the source of power. Luke 12 warns that abundance cannot secure the soul. Ecclesiastes teaches that one handful with quietness can be better than two hands full with travail. John 17 defines success through the work the Father gives and the work faithfully finished.

The believer should therefore ask more than whether an undertaking is legal, profitable or admired. Is it remaining under the Giver? What is it producing in me? What entrusted relationship is being displaced? Can I receive limits? Am I preserving a former season because I am afraid to obey in the present?

The answer may be to build with renewed faith. It may be to delegate, simplify or rest. It may be to sell and begin again. The action is not predetermined, but the ownership is. We are the Lord's. Biblical success is faithfulness to His assignment, including the faith to begin, the courage to continue and the freedom to release.

Questions for Reflection

Which visible measures most strongly shape my definition of success?

What good thing currently receives the first and best of my attention?

Is the Word becoming more fruitful in my character, relationships and decisions?
What responsibility or person has been repeatedly displaced by my work?
Can I say no to a profitable opportunity without feeling that my identity is threatened?
What has my spouse or another trusted person been trying to help me see?
Am I calling fear of release perseverance?
What practical limit, pruning or period of rest should I test now?
If God ended this season, what gifts and lessons could still be carried forward?
What would faithful completion look like if visible growth were no longer the controlling measure?

Selected Biblical References

Primary passage: Mark 4:1-20, especially Mark 4:18-19. Work and commerce: Genesis 2:15; Proverbs 31:10-31; Acts 16:14-15, 40; Acts 18:1-3, 24-26; Colossians 3:23-24. Prosperity and its tests: Deuteronomy 8:10-18; 2 Chronicles 26:1-21; Luke 12:13-21; Ecclesiastes 5:10. Biblical success and stewardship: Joshua 1:8; Genesis 39; John 17:4; 1 Corinthians 4:1-2; Philippians 4:10-13. Good things disordered: Luke 10:38-42; Numbers 21:4-9; 2 Kings 18:4; Judges 8:22-27; 1 Samuel 4; Jeremiah 7. Marriage, family and time: Psalm 127; Ephesians 5:15-33; 1 Peter 3:1-7; Ecclesiastes 4:4-6. Lordship and surrender: Romans 12:1-2; Romans 14:7-9.

Selected Sources

Hawksley, Thomas W. 'From Boardroom to Mission Field.' 2016 Ministry Magazine, Mission Field Edition, printed pages 55-71, with the business narrative principally on pages 68-70.
The Shepherd of Hermas, Book III. New Advent. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/02013.htm>
Sirach 11. United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. <https://bible.usccb.org/bible/sirach/11>
Clement of Alexandria. Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved? New Advent. <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0207.htm>
The Didache. Christian Classics Ethereal Library. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/richardson/fathers.viii.i.iii.html>
H. B. Charles Jr. 'The Rich Fool (Luke 12:13-21).' <https://hbcharlesjr.com/resource-library/sermon-outlines/the-rich-fool-luke-1213-21-2/>
Ligonier Ministries. 'The Parable of the Rich Fool.' <https://learn.ligonier.org/sermons/parable-rich-fool>
Theology of Work. 'Living Life Under God: The Rich Fool.' <https://www.theologyofwork.org/the-high-calling/living-life-under-god-the-rich-fool-luke-12-sermon-notes/>
Source classification: Canonical Scripture governs doctrine. The magazine controls the autobiographical facts. Noncanonical writings and modern sermons are included only as historical or comparative witnesses.