

## How to respond to success in ministry

by Rick Warren

Success can ruin a ministry. I've seen it happen too many times. It sounds strange. We plan for success, we dream about success, and – most importantly – we pray for success. Yet when it comes, we often self-destruct.

God blesses our ministry. Our church grows. People respond to our preaching. Hurting people are helped. At first, we're just excited to see God work. We're just pointing people to him. But then we're tempted to turn our eyes off of God and put them on ourselves. In a matter of time, success can kill our ministry.

It doesn't just happen to senior pastors of big churches either. Whether you're at a church of 20 or 20,000, you could be next.

I understand the temptation. When I came to Orange County to start Saddleback in 1980, I dreamed big. You can read in *The Purpose Driven Church* about the vision I presented to the church on the very first Sunday. God gave me a vision of a church with tens of thousands of people in it. In the first 25 years of the church, God fulfilled every promise he gave me before I started Saddleback.

When *The Purpose Driven Life* came out in 2002, everything changed. It sold more hard cover copies than any other book in American history. Suddenly I was getting calls from presidents, CEOs, and movie stars. This was never something I asked for. I had to be on guard.

Honestly, it scared me to death. As I said earlier, success can kill ministries. We can start getting attacked by what the Bible calls "the lust of the flesh," "the lust of the eyes," and "the pride of life." Before we know it, we go from great mountaintop ministry experiences to being out of ministry all-together.

An appeal to "the lust of the flesh" is an appeal to what feels good. An appeal to "the lust of the eyes" is an appeal to materialism. And an appeal to "the pride of life" is an appeal to arrogance. That's what the world around us values. And it's those three values that'll take us down – valuing pleasure, prestige, and possessions. If you don't think that can happen to you, you're just fooling yourself.

There are three antidotes to these temptations, though:

1. **Integrity:** To fight against the "lust of the flesh," you need integrity. You need to put parameters in your life that keep it pure. For example, since starting the church 27 years ago, I've never been alone in a room with the door closed with another woman who isn't related to me – ever. It's a boundary I picked up from Billy Graham. I just don't want anybody to be able to accuse me of anything improper. There are other integrity traps as well. Try to build parameters that'll protect you from an integrity fall. And build the parameters now. Don't wait. Your ministry is at stake.
2. **Generosity:** There's only one antidote to the "lust of the eyes" (or materialism) – and that's generosity. Every time we give, we break the

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hold of materialism in our lives. When *The Purpose Driven Life* came out, I had more financial opportunities than I'd ever had before. Kay and I could have let that money change our lifestyles. We could have moved into a bigger house and got a nicer car. But we didn't. Why? I didn't write it for the money. I believe the first line of the book; it isn't about me. We decided that we wouldn't change our lifestyle one bit. I gave back every dime of money that I had earned at Saddleback. From that day on, I haven't taken a salary from the church. We also became reverse tithers. We give away 90 percent of our income.

When you find success financially, you start wanting more. It can happen on any step of the financial ladder. You make the move to a bigger church and a bigger salary. At first, you just look forward to being able to better support your family. But then you start daydreaming about some items that might make life a little easier. There's nothing sinister about the items, but you start wanting more, and more, and more. Before you know it, your focus has shifted away from God and onto "stuff." The only antidote to this is generosity. Give sacrificially.

3. **Humility:** It's easy to believe your own press when you start having success. That's why you have to stay humble when tempted by the "pride of life." Humor is one key. Did you know that *humility* and *humor* come from the same root word? Humility is not taking yourself seriously. When you're able to laugh at yourself, that's a sign of humility.

Remember, humility isn't denying your strengths. We all have great strengths. It won't do you any good to deny those strengths. Humility is simply recognizing your dependence on God. After a great success in ministry, that's a good thing to keep in mind.

God wants us to be successful in ministry. He wants us to reach people with the Good News. He wants us to help move people closer to him. But the moment we forget who we're working for is the moment our greatest success has become our undoing. When success comes calling – and I pray it does for you – remember these three things: stay away from moral failure, give generously, and stay humble.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Rick".