

# Achievement versus fruitfulness

There's a real difference between our *achievements* and our *fruitfulness*, between our successes and the actual good that we bring into the world.

What we achieve brings us success, gives us a sense of pride, makes our families and friends proud of us, and gives us a feeling of being worthwhile, singular, and important. We've done something. We've left a mark. We've been recognized. And along with those awards, trophies, academic degrees, certificates of distinction, things we've built, and artifacts we've left behind comes public recognition and respect. We've made it. We're recognized. Moreover, generally, what we achieve produces and leaves behind something that is helpful to others. We can, and should, feel good about our legitimate achievements.

However, as Henri Nouwen frequently reminds us, achievement is not the same thing as fruitfulness. Our achievements are things we have accomplished. Our fruitfulness is the positive, long-term effect these achievements have on others. Achievement doesn't automatically mean fruitfulness. Achievement helps us stand out, fruitfulness brings blessing into other people's lives.

Hence we need to ask this question: How have my achievements, my successes, the things that I'm proud to have done, positively nurtured those around me? How have they helped bring joy into other people's lives? How have they helped make the world a better, more-loving place? How have any of the trophies I've won or distinctions I've been awarded made those around me more peaceful rather than more restless?

This is different than asking: How have my achievements made me feel? How have they given me a sense of self-worth? How have my achievements witnessed to my uniqueness?

It's no secret that our achievements, however honest and legitimate, often produce jealousy and restlessness in others rather than inspiration and restfulness. We see this in how we so often envy and secretly hate highly successful people. Their achievements generally do little to enhance our own lives but instead trigger an edgy restlessness within us. The success of others, in effect, often acts like a mirror within which we see, restlessly and sometimes bitterly, our own lack of achievement. Why?

Generally there's blame on both sides. On the one hand, our achievements are often driven from a self-centered need to set ourselves apart from others, to stand out, to be singular, to be recognized and admired rather than from a genuine desire to truly help others. To the extent that this is true, our successes are bound to trigger envy. Still, on the other hand, our envy of others is often the self-inflicted punishment spoken of in Jesus' parable of

the talents wherein the one who hides his talent gets punished for not using that talent.

“How have my achievements, my successes, the things that I’m proud to have done, positively nurtured those around me?”

And so the truth is that we can achieve great things without being really fruitful, just as we can be very fruitful even while achieving little in terms of worldly success and recognition. Our fruitfulness is often the result not so much of the great things we accomplish, but of the graciousness, generosity, and kindness we bring into the world. Unfortunately our world rarely reckons these as an achievement, an accomplishment, a success. We don’t become famous for being gracious. Yet, when we die, while we may well be eulogized for our achievements, we will be loved and remembered more for the goodness of our hearts than for our distinguished achievements. Our real fruitfulness will flow from something beyond the legacy of our accomplishments.

It will be the quality of our hearts, more so than our achievements, that will determine how nurturing or asphyxiating is the spirit we leave behind us when we’re gone.

Henri Nouwen also points out that when we distinguish between our achievements and our fruitfulness, we will see that, while death may be the end of our success, productivity, and importance, it isn’t necessarily the end of our fruitfulness. Indeed, often our true fruitfulness occurs only after we die when our spirit can finally flow out more purely. We see that this was true too for Jesus. We were able to be fully nurtured by his spirit only after he was gone. Jesus teaches this explicitly in his farewell discourse in John’s Gospel when he tells us repeatedly that it’s better for us that he goes away because it’s only when he’s gone that we will be able to truly receive his spirit, his full fruitfulness. The same is true for us. Our full fruitfulness will only show after we have died.

Great achievement doesn’t necessarily make for great fruitfulness. Great achievement can give us a good feeling and can make our families and loved ones proud of us. But those feelings of accomplishment and pride are not a lasting or deeply nourishing fruit. Indeed the good feeling that accomplishment gives us is often a drug, an addiction, which forever demands more of us and sets loose envy and restlessness in others as it underscores our separateness.

The fruit that feeds love and community tends to come from our shared vulnerability and not from those achievements that set us apart.

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