EXCLUSIVE PREVIEW

Emotionally Healthy Success



Measuring What Matters Most to Jesus



Peter Scazzero

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To the pastors, shepherds, and leaders around the world
who pour out their lives,
often unseen and uncelebrated,
for the sake of Jesus and his church.

Thank you for entrusting Geri and me with your stories.
We are deeply grateful.

This book is dedicated to you,
with hope and prayer
that the soil of your hearts
might remain rich and fruitful;
that you might finish well,
with joy;
and that you may know, ever more deeply,
the inexhaustible love of Jesus
for you.

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Foreword

"Is Pete Scazzero the real deal?"

It's a question I'm routinely asked. And as someone who has known Pete for twenty-six years, having worked closely with him and his wife, Geri, and having observed his life and leadership as a husband, father, pastor, and leader of a global nonprofit.

I have a clear and simple answer to that question: Yes.

I first met Pete in 2001 when I was an intern at New Life Fellowship, the church Pete and Geri founded in 1987. Pete and Geri had been through a crisis of marriage and leadership five years prior to this, and they had begun implementing several of the transformational lessons of emotional health and spiritual maturity they learned from that time, lessons reinforced throughout my internship. Shortly after I finished my intern year with Pete, I joined the church staff, and for the next nine years I worked closely with him, eventually serving as a senior associate pastor at New Life.

Then, after ten rich years of learning and development, my wife Tina and I left New Life to plant Hope Church NYC. I recall the pressures I felt at that time as both a church planter and a lead pastor, and I was tempted to quit whenever my fears and anxieties

left me feeling discouraged. I would routinely write Pete a note at every milestone we reached as a new, infant church, whether it was an anniversary, an Easter Service, or a baptism celebration:

> Thank you for everything you've taught me and shown me—there's no way we'd be where we are without you.

Then I would add:

> And I'm sorry I didn't listen to you more. No matter how much you stressed how important emotionally healthy discipleship is, I was too proud to listen. Now that I'm in the throes of pastoring a church, I'm more grateful for you—and humbled—than ever! So thank you . . . and I'm sorry.

We are now fourteen years into planting Hope Church NYC, and I am even more grateful today for Pete and Geri's influence on my life. And yes, I'm even more convinced than ever how desperately the global church needs a discipleship that goes beneath the surface and slows down enough to *be with* God before *doing for* God.

So when people ask me if Pete is the real deal, my answer is easy—*absolutely!*

Because I've spent twenty-six years witnessing his life of prayer and solitude beyond the books, the podcast, and the platform, seeing firsthand Pete and Geri's depth of love in marriage spilling out into their family, and observing how pastors and leaders continue to be moved by Pete and Geri's investment in the kingdom, my respect and admiration for Pete continues to expand each passing day.

As a cynical New Yorker, I'm tempted to roll my eyes at what I

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just wrote, except I'm writing it—and I know it's true! Aside from my wife and family, Pete has been God's greatest gift in leading me to a deep, transformative relationship with Jesus, changing *everything* for me as a son, husband, father, brother, and pastor.

So yes, he's the real deal.

That's not to say Pete is perfect.

I'm probably on a short list of the most qualified people outside of Pete's family who can list his weaknesses. But in all my years of knowing Pete, he's always been open to admit his shortcomings while consistently pursuing a better way of following Jesus. I know this much: Pete loves Jesus. And Pete loves the church. And it's Pete's love for Jesus and the church that continues to enthrall, inspire, and challenge me to pursue a better way too.

Emotionally Healthy Success is a once-in-a-generation book. It's message has brought me back to the reason I entered vocational ministry in the first place—namely, a love for Jesus and his church. It gives me tools for reflection and prompts me to take the next steps to be the pastor and leader Jesus has always called me to be.

Now that I've read this book, my prayer for myself, for you, and for generations of pastors and leaders to come is that we will enlarge our imagination to embrace a different vision for what pastoral leadership might look like, one that overflows with love for Jesus and the church and transforms our lives and the people around us.

My hope is that others will notice that change and be able to say with the same confidence I have, "Pete is definitely the real deal."

Drew Hyun
President, Emotionally Healthy Discipleship
Pastor, Hope Church NYC

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An Invitation to Reimagine Success

For more than two decades, I have worked with pastors and leaders around the world—in coaching cohorts, formation intensives, and conferences. I've consulted with pastors serving in small, midsize, and megachurch contexts. I've walked with leaders through church plants and mergers, staff conflicts and board crises, burnouts and breakthroughs. And regardless of the context or challenges, the number one question I am relentlessly asked is this: "Pete, how exactly do I know if I am succeeding or failing?"

Although it's a question I wrestled with personally for years, and even touched on in some of my books, the best response I felt I could offer was only a general statement: "*Success, according to Scripture, is becoming the person God calls you to be and doing what God calls you to do—in his way and according to his timetable.*"

I didn't have much specificity beyond that.

And yet, as much as I hoped that answer might settle the conversation, the leaders I worked with kept raising the question.

The felt need was deep. The question wouldn't go away.

Then one day I got a call from the vice president of an association of churches, someone deeply committed to emotionally

healthy discipleship. "Pete, we have over 350 churches in our movement. They are looking to us for direction—for greater clarity about how to know if they are succeeding or failing beyond numbers.

"Pete, can you help us?"

"I want to help," I said, "but I'm not sure I'll be able to come up with anything that will make much of a difference."

That was the honest truth, and yet the conversation stayed with me. I knew I would've loved having something like a scorecard for success when I was pastoring—a framework or scaffolding to keep me oriented toward God rather than pulled down by anxiety and worldly measures of success.

So I cried out to God in earnest, asking for the wisdom and direction I needed to finally offer a clearer answer to that persistent question. Over time, a new scorecard took shape—one that moved beyond the vague exhortation to "just do God's will" to something more concrete. And it was something that could apply just as effectively in Ghana, Kenya, China, Japan, Ecuador, Mexico, France, Bulgaria, and Australia as it could in North America.

Ultimately, what emerged was a scorecard that went beyond numerical metrics alone—a way of measuring success with the potential to reshape not only how we evaluate ministry, but also how we form disciples and leaders, cultivate healthy culture and communities, and join God in his mission to the world.

A NEW DEFINITION FOR SUCCESS

If you choose to embark on the journey this book provides—if you allow it to read you, not just inform you—it will change how you define success.

You will begin to see God differently. You will look at the people you serve with new eyes. You will notice God in people and places you may have previously overlooked. You will lead differently. And you will reorder your days and weeks accordingly.

In short, you will not be the same.

You will discover a steadier inner life, a deeper joy, and the easy yoke Jesus promised.

You will learn how to serve without losing yourself. How to lead without rushing. How to discern without fear. How to say no without guilt. How to live free from the weight of other people's expectations.

Emotionally Healthy Success is not about surviving another demanding season. It's about flourishing over a lifetime of ministry.

Imagine serving Jesus joyfully for thirty, forty, fifty years—with your inner life in him deepening rather than thinning as your responsibilities and influence increase.

***Emotionally Healthy Success* is about flourishing over a lifetime of ministry.**

Imagine your capacity for love and nonjudgmentalism expanding rather than contracting over time.

Imagine your joy growing rather than diminishing with age.

Imagine finishing well—not merely being faithful to your calling, but seeing yourself, your family, and those you served all thriving.

Imagine leaving behind a legacy not of a brand, a platform, or a season, but of transformed lives—people who are spiritually rooted in Jesus, emotionally mature in relationships, alert to the movements and gifts of God all around them, and more fully alive because they walked with you.

That kind of legacy *can* be yours—but it won't happen by accident.

It requires a profound reordering of what you pursue, what you say yes and no to, what you celebrate, and how you invest your time and energy. It requires *formation*, not just information, and a fresh revelation of Jesus, not just the addition of the latest innovations and methods.

This legacy requires *formation*, not just information, and a fresh revelation of Jesus.

That is why this book exists.

HOW TO READ *EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY SUCCESS*

As you begin, know that these principles and practices were written based on what I and many other leaders have experienced in the crucibles of frontline ministry. Which is to say, it was written for you—a leader serving faithfully in a complex and demanding context. Whether you are a lead or associate pastor, staff or board member, small group or ministry leader, denominational or parachurch executive, a marketplace or nonprofit leader—know that the insights in this book are based not on theory but on lived experience. While many examples come from church and ministry life, the guidance here is applicable for anyone seeking to lead faithfully under pressure.

Also know that this journey requires something of you—a willingness to be stretched spiritually, emotionally, and theologically—so you can discover new freedom in how you lead both yourself and others.

The chapters in this book are organized into three parts. Part 1, "The Problem with How We Measure Success," explores

five primary ways we absorb the world's scorecard into the church: the size of our ministry, the scope of our influence, the praise and affirmation we receive, the pace of our growth, and the way our ministry compares with others. It takes an honest look at the wreckage this produces in our inner lives, our relationships, our teams, our ministries, and the mission to which God has called us.

Part 2, "How Jesus Turns Success on Its Head," introduces Jesus's radically different vision of success through what I call the *four great reversals*. Here, Jesus dismantles the assumptions we've inherited and offers a new way of seeing faithfulness, fruitfulness, and power in the kingdom of God. We then turn to a new scorecard with two chapters of honest assessment: the first on our personal formation, the second on the culture of the church or ministry we are shaping. Together, they form a holistic picture of success in the way of Jesus. Completing these assessments will help you understand where you are right now and provide a reference you can return to for guidance, discernment, and renewed vision.

Part 3, "Becoming the Kind of Leader—and Church—Jesus Imagined," moves from vision to lived reality. How do we embody a new scorecard in a way that enables us and those we lead to serve the world out of this radical vision of success? We'll explore how a reordered life—shaped by discernment, new rhythms, and embraced limits—makes lasting transformation possible. Rooted in the ancient monastic tradition, when leaders deliberately resisted the world's measures of success, this section invites you into a countercultural yet enduring way of following Jesus today.

This book is not meant to be read in isolation but in community. Its deepest work happens in conversation with trusted colleagues, a team, or a small group willing to slow down and wrestle through these ideas together. I encourage you to invite others on

this journey with you. And when you are ready to go deeper, a free discussion guide and additional resources are available at www .emotionallyhealthy.org/success.

AS YOU BEGIN

Slow down.

Transformation unfolds over time, and this book invites you to read with attentiveness rather than urgency and speed so you can be present to where you truly are.

Allow the book to read you. Pay attention to what stirs in you, what prompts resistance in you, and what speaks to you.

Pause when God speaks.

Make notes when something feels significant.

Journal along the way.

Most importantly, respond to the invitations Jesus places before you as you read.

My prayer is that God will meet you in new ways as you journey through these chapters, awakening a deeper freedom, a more grounded joy, and a truer vision of success shaped by Jesus himself.

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Part 1

The Problem with How We Measure Success

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Chapter 1

The Lies We Call Success

Poet and farmer Wendell Berry once observed that modern industrial farming is built on a ruthless form of short-term economics: "[It] is the practice of making as much money as you can as fast as you can by any means while ignoring the long-term effects. . . . People who operate on the basis of short-term economics accumulate large 'externalized costs,' which they charge to the future—that is, to the world and to everybody's grandchildren."[1]

While this short-term approach produces cost-effective results, it also pushes the true costs—depleted soil, poisoned water, and disappearing family farms—to future generations. The fields initially appear healthy—the crop yields are impressive and the profits rise—but the soil itself is slowly dying. The practices used to produce the apparent abundance slowly create a kind of desert beneath the surface.

For many years I practiced the ministry equivalent of short-term economics. And it worked, at least by the metrics I had been taught to pursue.

Seven years into our church plant in Queens, New York, we had already planted three other churches—a Spanish-speaking

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congregation and two English-speaking congregations. All were growing numerically, and our Sunday services were marked by a palpable sense of God's presence—dramatic conversions, regular healings, and timely prophetic words that spoke directly to challenges we were facing as a church.

We were such a success, at least by the world's scorecard, that we were written up as a case study in a book. People were amazed that we were not only growing quickly but doing so as a uniquely multiracial congregation that was simultaneously engaging our community with the gospel and serving the poor.

By every external measure, we were thriving.

But the truth was more complicated.

Things weren't as good as they appeared. We were, in many ways, the church equivalent of a Potemkin village.

The term *Potemkin village* is shorthand for an impressive facade hiding an undesirable reality—an image of prosperity that deceives observers into thinking things are better than they actually are. The origins of the term go back to eighteenth-century Russia during the reign of Empress Catherine the Great. When her field marshal, Grigory Potemkin, organized a riverboat tour of the newly annexed Crimean territory, which he was responsible for overseeing, Potemkin created fake villages along the river's banks and populated them with happy peasants. To sustain the illusion of prosperity, Potemkin had the building facades and the peasants transported from one fake village to the next. Potemkin's goal was to bolster his image of success by hiding the region's poverty and disrepair.

As Empress Catherine gazed out on seemingly happy subjects and flourishing towns, she could only conclude that all was going well within her empire and that Grigory Potemkin was doing a

great job. Although historians no longer believe Potemkin actually did this,[2] the term *Potemkin village* endured because it captured the human temptation to engineer impressive appearances as cover for a fragile or crumbling reality.

Despite our church's impressive numbers and the public affirmation we received as a result, our church at the seven-year mark was largely just such a facade. We were expanding rapidly, but our spiritual soil was depleted. We curated great worship experiences, launched new programs, and mobilized large numbers of volunteers to serve the poor and marginalized.

But below the surface, our roots were thin and fragile, the soil too shallow to support the weight of what we were trying to grow.

Like the industrial farmers who squeeze the land for one more record harvest, we were extracting more from our people and leaders while neglecting the long-term health of their heart soil. But the hidden costs were growing—tired leaders, simmering disagreements and friction, bruised egos, unresolved hurts, and an increasingly stressed pastor (me).

We had embraced the lies of short-term success. And like all short-term practices, it worked—until it didn't.

For years I mistook numerical growth as a sign of health, excitement as evidence of God's hand, and momentum as proof of the Holy Spirit's power. I had been discipled—subtly but powerfully—by a set of measurements or markers for success that I never thought to question. I assumed what everyone around me assumed: that success meant *more*—more people, more activity, more services, more leaders, more everything.

If our ministry was expanding, God must be blessing it. He must be pleased. He must be using us.

It never crossed my mind that Jesus might define success

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differently than I did—or differently than the church world that formed me. Nor did I recognize that my inner life with Jesus was shrinking even as the ministry was expanding. We were a fast-growing church planted in deteriorating soil, a ministry built on speed, activity, and appearance rather than depth, integrity, and a hidden life with God.

It never crossed my mind that Jesus might define success differently than I did.

The painful truth is that the Western church at large has been discipled more by the short-term demands of our ministry culture than it has by what Jesus taught and modeled in his own ministry.

We want results now, so we do whatever works to extract those results from our people. But we rarely stop to consider what our rushed, extraction-based approach is doing to the long-term soil of our lives with God or how it impacts the emotional and spiritual health of our families and our communities. As a result, we create churches that are impressive for a season but incapable of enduring into the next generation. And because we've pushed the costs into the future, we may or may not be around to see the damage we've caused.

Ultimately, we have embraced lies—wrong measurements—and called them success, which has subtly but powerfully undermined the health and longevity of our ministries. Among the most powerful wrong measurements are these:

1. The size of our ministry
2. The extent of our influence
3. The amount of praise and affirmation we receive
4. The pace of our growth
5. The way our ministry compares with other ministries

These five wrong measurements profoundly shaped my priorities, my marriage, and the culture of our church—and they continue to shape much of the Western church today. To move toward a healthier, Jesus-informed vision of success, we must name these wrong measurements for what they are—lies—so we can break their hold on us.

Because we've pushed the costs into the future, we may or may not be around to see the damage we've caused.

We must acknowledge that they are modern-day Baals, idols we imbue with power that demand our devotion and shape our hearts. If we don't name them and topple them, they will continue to mislead and malform us.

So let's take a closer look at these wrong measurement idols, beginning with the size of our ministry.

WRONG MEASUREMENT 1: THE SIZE OF OUR MINISTRY

Of all the false measurements we've absorbed, perhaps none is more deeply rooted in Western culture than this: *Bigger is always better.* Bigger bank accounts, bigger houses, bigger companies. If our lives aren't growing bigger in some way, we assume something must be wrong. And the church, especially in the last fifty to seventy-five years, has adopted this cultural value without question. We want bigger ministries, bigger attendance, and bigger impact—because we've equated numerical growth with God's blessing.

When megachurch pastors became celebrities in our Christian subculture, their churches became the model for smaller ministries to imitate. Conferences were held, books were published,

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and entire industries were built to promote large-church methodologies. Church growth even became a doctoral program in some seminaries.

The biblical case for measuring success by the numbers seems obvious: the book of Acts. After the Holy Spirit was poured out at Pentecost (Acts 2), the church grew from 120 to three thousand (Acts 1:15, 2:41) and then to five thousand believers (Acts 4:4).[3] Right there on the pages of Scripture it states that the Jerusalem church became a megachurch as "more and more men and women believed in the Lord and were added to their number" (Acts 5:14; see also 21:20). On the surface at least, the Bible itself seems to celebrate numerical expansion as a sign of God's favor.

We want bigger ministries, bigger attendance, and bigger impact—because we've equated numerical growth with God's blessing.

But the story of Acts is more nuanced. As New Testament scholar Craig Keener and others note, the rapid growth of the Jerusalem church did not automatically translate into faithful mission. It was the multicultural church in Antioch, not the Jerusalem megachurch, that became the launching point for the gospel's expansion across the Roman Empire. The Jerusalem church, deeply embedded in Jewish customs, struggled to embrace its gentile mission—so much so that God used persecution to scatter them into Samaria and beyond.[4]

This shift from Jerusalem as the missional power center to the cosmopolitan city of Antioch is a quiet rebuke to our assumptions. Acts does not celebrate size as the only measure of success. It celebrates faithfulness, adaptability, and obedience to God's larger purpose in the world, even when those qualities emerged from a smaller, largely gentile, multicultural community.[5]

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We often forget, as New Testament scholar N. T. Wright reminds us, most of the churches Paul planted were quite small. In many cities, the community of Jesus followers likely numbered only a few dozen people—perhaps a hundred or two hundred at most, even in large cities such as Ephesus and Corinth.[6] Wright argues that Paul's letters may have been written for eight to twelve scattered house churches, each with perhaps five to thirty believers whom he describes as "a motley crew, probably more slaves than free individuals, quite likely more women than men, and almost certainly more poor than rich."[7]

In other words, the church that carried the gospel across the Roman Empire was not built on large congregations but on many small communities faithfully following Jesus.

Small but faithful is not failure. It is historically normal Christianity. Yet most contemporary churches, denominations, and parachurch ministries measure success almost exclusively by numbers—attendance, conversions, baptisms, small groups, new ministries, budgets, social media reach, or new church plants.

The church that carried the gospel across the Roman Empire was not built on large congregations but on many small communities faithfully following Jesus.

At this point you might expect me to argue that smaller ministries are somehow inherently better or more pleasing to God. But the issue is deeper than size. We are called to proclaim the good news of Jesus and to make disciples of *all* nations (Matthew 28:19). God calls and gifts some people to steward large ministries and others smaller ones. Size has never been the measure of God's favor.

Faithfulness isn't about how big something becomes but how

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true we are to what God asks of us. God weighs different things than we do:

Obedience over outcomes.

Depth over scale.

Integrity over image.

By that measure, it is entirely possible for a ministry to be growing rapidly and yet actually failing, or declining in numbers and yet actually succeeding.

Think about it. Jesus sure didn't measure his ministry success by the numbers. Rather, there were seasons when he intentionally did *not* want things to get bigger. After dramatically healing a man with leprosy, Jesus sent him away with a warning: "See that you don't tell this to anyone" (Mark 1:44). After healing a man who was deaf and mute, Jesus commanded all who witnessed it not to tell anyone (Mark 7:36).

Faithfulness isn't about how big something becomes but how true we are to what God asks of us. God weighs different things than we do.

Nor did Jesus seem overly concerned with what we might consider spectacular ministry setbacks. When he preached a challenging message and thousands of his followers deserted him, Jesus did not soften his message and try to win them back (John 6:66). Even when Jesus stood before Pilate and the crowds shouted, "Crucify him!" he remained free from the temptation to make something happen so he could get his numbers back up (Luke 23:21). Had Jesus succumbed to that temptation, he might have "succeeded" in salvaging his earthly ministry, but he would have utterly failed by God's definition of success.

Few of us fully appreciate that two of the three temptations Satan posed to Jesus in the desert revolved around ministry success (Matthew 4:1–11). Satan offered him immediate popularity and a shortcut for

saving the world. All Jesus had to do was jump off the pinnacle of the temple and bow to Satan. Satan suggested that if Jesus jumped off the temple, God would save him and people would be amazed at the miracle. And if Jesus bowed in worship to Satan, he would receive all the kingdoms of the world, which meant every person in the world would come under his rule and experience salvation.

Even if the methodology was off, wasn't that the goal—to reach the whole world with the good news? And wouldn't it be amazing if Jesus could accomplish the goal without the agony of the cross? Definitely sounds like a win-win, right? But, of course, it wasn't.

When the size of our ministry becomes a nonnegotiable measurement of success, we will inevitably be tempted to consider strategies for expansion that originate with the Evil One himself.

Numbers Are a Factor in Decision-Making, Not a Measure of Success

Numbers matter, but not in the way we might think. While numbers must never drive the mission, they can be a factor in discernment. For example, a sudden drop in attendance or giving may point to an ineffective strategy or a growing cultural gap between our ministry and a rapidly changing community around us.

Here are some guidelines to help you use numbers for decision-making. Numbers are:

- Sources of information, not validation
- A means of reflection, not a measure of worth
- Worth noticing, not idolizing

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- Indicators of limits or opportunities, not revelation
- Gauges on a dashboard, not the engine
- Opportunities to ask questions, not drivers of the mission
- Servants for discernment, not definers of direction
- Diagnostic tools, not indicators of success
- Pointers to what may need attention, not definers of faithfulness or fruitfulness
- Never the whole truth—and certainly not the final word

Throughout Scripture, the prophets and even Jesus himself often looked like failures by numerical standards. But they were successful in God's eyes.

Two questions can help us read numbers with discernment:

- What might these numbers—rising, falling, or steady—reveal about the spiritual health of our people and the ministry culture we want to cultivate?
- Given our mission, what might God be inviting us to notice, name, or change based on the trends these numbers reveal?

WRONG MEASUREMENT 2: THE EXTENT OF OUR INFLUENCE

Influence has become the new currency of ministry success. A leader with tens of thousands of followers on social media can command prominent speaking platforms, lucrative publishing contracts, and VIP treatment.

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A friend recently told me about a national pastors' conference that featured a young man who had amassed a large social media following but had not yet planted or led a church. Why? He had cracked the code for influencing over a million people online, a skill most leaders in attendance had never learned. And he had done so without ever taking on the costly work of forming leaders, sustaining a congregation, or building a genuine community.

While I do occasionally meet leaders who are eager to expand their influence—by growing their social media, speaking at events, writing books, or launching a podcast—more often I see something subtler: the slow gravitational pull of greater influence shaping ministry decisions.

For example, my friend Drew, who leads Hope Church NYC, a multicampus church in Manhattan, was once approached by another church about merging. This opportunity promised more people, more resources, and wider influence. His board was enthusiastic, and the numbers made obvious sense from a missional standpoint, yet Drew felt a strong sense of resistance he could not ignore. After slowing down for prayer and discernment, he declined the merger, choosing to keep Hope Church NYC's structure lean and his own calling focused.

Eighteen months later, the wisdom of that decision became unmistakable. Drew was invited to step into the role of president of Emotionally Healthy Discipleship while continuing to lead Hope Church NYC. This change positioned him and the church for a global influence that required the very spaciousness he had protected when he said no to merging with the other church.

The appeal of expanded influence as a measure of success isn't

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limited to local church leaders. Emily, a church consultant with twenty-five years' experience, recently shared with me that she was wrestling with how to leverage her gifts and experience to maximize her kingdom impact for the next decade. Her prayers to God had essentially narrowed to one question: "How can I use what you've given me to have the most influence?"

While this is a good question—and one I was trained to ask for decades—it is not the *first* question we are called to ask.

"How can I use what you've given me to have the most influence?" is not the *first* question we are called to ask.

In John 4:34, Jesus makes it clear that discernment begins with surrender: "My food . . . is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work." And in Gethsemane, Jesus showed us what surrender truly looks like. Face down on the ground, overwhelmed and depressed, he prayed, "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39 NASB). This was a surrender he learned through suffering (Hebrews 5:8). For Jesus, obedience was not a single, effortless prayer but a groaning, painful, and continual yielding of his will to the Father's. In the same way, our surrender is not instantaneous but learned in the costly places where our will meets the will of God.[8]

This kind of surrendered obedience must reframe how we think about influence.

Jesus did not wield much influence over the oppressive political, social, or religious power structures of his day. The Pharisees, Sadducees, Herod, and the Roman Empire all remained firmly in power during his earthly ministry. He seemed to be running more of an ambulance ministry, serving individuals in crushing need, one at a time. His miracles happened mostly in the middle of

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nowhere, such as in Galilee, which was well outside the strategic power centers of Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome.

And the twelve disciples whom Jesus chose for his leadership team? Unlike the rich young ruler who had power, wealth, and status, Jesus's top twelve picks brought little value in terms of influence. Jesus chose them because it was the Father's will, not because they were in any way impressive or influential.

Not only that, but Jesus showed little interest in strategically cultivating the influencers of his day, especially the religious elites. Instead, he spent much of his time with the marginalized and outcast: lepers, Samaritans, the poor, the sick, widows, tax collectors, and children. These were the "expendables," as New Testament scholar Joel Green notes, the lower 5 to 10 percent of the population—and the upper echelons of society had little need for them.[9]

Jesus showed little interest in strategically cultivating the influencers of his day.

Is it any wonder, then, that the crowds chose Jesus Barabbas, and not Jesus of Nazareth, when Pilate asked them whom he should release? Barabbas was admired because he was a brave patriot, unafraid to use force against Rome. He was a nationalist revolutionary who believed in the power of violence. Jesus of Nazareth, on the other hand, was a nonviolent man who trusted the Father's purposes more than the power of the sword. He seemed more of a dreamer than a realist.

From the crowd's perspective, who held the greatest promise for defending Israel against hated Rome? Who had more influence to make something happen? The best choice was clearly not Jesus of Nazareth, who seemed to have little influence at all.

While the human tendency is to strategize our way into greater

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influence for the sake of impact, Jesus himself disrupts this logic. Instead of grasping for reach, he waited on the Father, listened for his voice, and surrendered to his way—often at great cost. His path reveals that true influence flows not from ambition or calculated strategy but from a life completely poured out to the Father.

Jesus showed little interest in strategically cultivating the influencers of his day.

WRONG MEASUREMENT 3: THE AMOUNT OF PRAISE AND AFFIRMATION WE RECEIVE

Few temptations distort our decision-making more subtly yet powerfully than our almost crack-like addiction to the praise and approval of others. The thrill of being seen and affirmed can become so intoxicating that it feels like oxygen we can no longer live without. And yet Jesus calls us to examine this hunger with ruthless honesty because, left unchecked, it will dictate our decisions, our relationships, and the very shape of our leadership.

When praise from others is our scorecard, the effects show up everywhere:

- We keep silent rather than speak up in difficult conversations.
- We say things designed to impress rather than serve others.
- We make decisions we might not otherwise make.
- We pretend things are okay when they're not.
- We become dishonest or evasive to avoid disapproval.
- We say yes when we'd prefer to say no.
- We curate our image, on social media and in public, to impress others.

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For many of us, our "audience" is small but weighty. It may be denominational or network leaders, influential people in our church, a parent who lives across the country, or simply those we lead week after week. But the result of living for their approval is always the same: We live from a place that isn't true, allowing our inner world to be shaped more by the approval of others than by the love of God. As Trappist monk Thomas Merton wrote, we "wind experiences around [ourselves] and cover [ourselves] with pleasures and glory like bandages," trying to make our hollow, false self visible and real so we can cover our emptiness.[10] And in the process, we never become the unique person or leader God has called us to be.

The thrill of being seen and affirmed can become so intoxicating that it feels like oxygen we can no longer live without.

This human hunger for praise is not new. Jesus repeatedly exposed this wrong measurement, especially as used by the religious leaders of his day. One core reason they refused to follow him was their craving to be admired and honored by their peers. Following Jesus would have cost them much of their platform, their influence, their status. How could they possibly identify with Jesus—someone who flouted dietary laws, healed on the Sabbath, dined with outcasts, and spent most of his time with the very people they avoided?[11]

Jesus confronted the leaders of his day (and of ours) with devastating clarity: "How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?" (John 5:44). He declared their desire for praise to be a form of idolatry, saying, "What people value highly is detestable [idolatrous] in God's sight" (Luke 16:15).[12] He then warned his disciples to resist the same temptation of doing things to be

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noticed or seeking the admiration and honor that comes with public visibility (Matthew 23:5; Luke 20:45–46).

After Jesus's earthly ministry, his call to categorically reject measuring ourselves by the approval or praise of others became a central theme of many spiritual writers.[13] One of my favorite examples comes from the era of the Desert Fathers and Mothers. When these Christian ascetics of the third to sixth centuries withdrew to the deserts of Egypt to separate themselves from worldly influence, many people sought them out for wisdom and guidance. One remarkable story tells of a young man who approached the Egyptian elder, Macarius. The following is my retelling of that story.

Jesus warned his disciples to resist the temptation of doing things to be noticed or seeking the admiration and honor that come with public visibility.

The young man asked Macarius, "Abba, give me a word that I may be saved?"[14]

Macarius commanded him, "Go to the cemetery and abuse the dead."

And so the young man went to the cemetery, cursing and mocking the dead, calling them nasty names, and throwing rocks at their graves.

The young man returned to Macarius, who asked him, "Didn't they say anything back to you?"

When the young man confirmed they had not, Macarius told him, "Go back tomorrow. This time praise them."

The young man did as he was told, returning to the same graves. He called them "apostles, saints, righteous ones," offering them every honor he could imagine—words of admiration

he secretly wished someone would speak about him. But again, the dead remained silent.

Once more Macarius asked, "Did they not answer you?"

The young man again replied, "No."

Then wise elder Macarius said to him, "Become like the dead. Take no account of people's scorn or their praise. Do this and you will be saved."

The story is strange but also profound because it exposes a universal truth: Our lives and leadership can be constantly pulled off course by the voices of praise and criticism. Left unchecked, these voices have the power to corrupt our decisions, distort our relationships, and slowly draw us away from the life God invites us into.

This human hunger for praise is not new. Jesus repeatedly exposed this wrong measurement.

Until we are freed from the need for human praise, we will never be fully free to do the will of God. But praise is not the only idol demanding our allegiance. Another is speed—the relentless pressure to grow faster to keep up with those around us. And few lies distort our leadership more than this one.

WRONG MEASUREMENT 4: THE PACE OF OUR GROWTH

"Pete, I feel like I've failed," Redd lamented in a depressed tone. "Things have moved along way too slowly in this new congregation."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

Redd is a gifted and seasoned pastor who had been sent out with his wife from New Life Fellowship Church in Queens to

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plant a new congregation in Long Island, New York. It was now two years later, and he was discouraged.

Our lives and leadership can be constantly pulled off course by the voices of praise and criticism.

"We should be farther along," he continued. "I mean, we're only eighty adults. The goal was 125!"

I listened sympathetically. I knew well the dark hole of discouragement in which he now found himself.

"It's hard," Redd explained. "We make progress, but then the demands pile up again. There's just so much to do." He paused and then said, "It's relentless. And so frustrating."

Yet when my wife Geri and I visited the church three months later, what we encountered was a flourishing community. After the service we joined more than fifty others for lunch in the multipurpose room, where the atmosphere was filled with joy and laughter. As we ate, we heard many beautiful stories of God's deep work in their midst.

On some level, Redd knew it too. But the progress they made was too slow—at least according to his timetable.

I understood Redd's struggle more than I cared to admit.

When Geri and I planted New Life Fellowship, I defined success not simply by our numbers, our influence, or the praise of others but also by the pace of our growth. How quickly we were growing was always on my mind.

The problem is that speed changes everything—and rarely for the better—in the work of God.

We rush, while wisdom calls us to slow.

We strive, while grace invites us to rest.

We worry, while God invites us to trust.

I never stopped to consider how the arbitrary pace I had set

might be harming me, my family, our church, or even the work of God itself. I wasn't aware of the powerful forces—from my family of origin, Western culture, the business world, other Christian leaders, or even Christian media—that were driving my unsustainable pace. What I did know was that serving Jesus felt heavy, exhausting, and often crushing.

I understand why many leaders engage in reckless and even scandalous behavior. They don't know how to slow down, much less step off, the high-speed ministry train. So they unconsciously sabotage themselves until a church board does for them what they cannot do for themselves. Burnout or moral failure become the only way off the train.

What's particularly tragic about this is that Jesus tells us the kingdom of God is, and always will be, like a mustard seed, a seed that grows slowly and quietly. The slowness of God's pace and the apparent smallness of his ways have almost always frustrated his people—from Abraham and Sarah waiting in Canaan, to the Israelites' four hundred years of slavery and the long exile in Babylon. We want God to work swiftly and decisively, acting dramatically to champion our cause and convince people he is who he says he is.

The problem is that speed changes everything—and rarely for the better—in the work of God.

People in Jesus's day expected God's kingdom to be massive, powerful, and quickly established. Instead, it arrived in a small and vulnerable package—as a baby in a manger—and grew slowly. And yet Jesus promised that, like the mustard seed, it would eventually take root and cover the whole earth (Matthew 13:31–32).

Nonetheless, most of us move at a pace far faster than God

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asks of us. I know because I lived a large portion of my ministry life at breakneck speed. In fact, the gravitational pull toward speed remains strong in me to this day. And I know I'm not alone. That is why a nonnegotiable task for each of us is to slow down to fall in step with God.

Jesus moved through the world at the pace of an ordinary human being. Nothing in the Gospels gives us any indication that his life was hurried. His ministry unfolded at the speed of presence; he was unhurried, attentive, open to interruptions. Our culture may worship speed; Jesus did not. He moved at what might best be called a loving pace—slow enough to see, to listen, to linger, and to truly be with people.

In Jesus, God willingly limited his speed. And he continues to move slowly today.

But we have one speed—fast.

We run rather than walk. We drive as fast as the law allows—and often faster. We tap our devices and expect to instantly connect with a friend on the other side of the world. We grow impatient if a webpage takes more than two seconds to load. We are not accustomed to keeping pace with a God of love who walks slowly.

Most of us move at a pace far faster than God asks of us.

Few of us recognize what living at this speed is doing to us. And even when we do, we struggle to break its grip. Our addiction to hurry forms in us a chronic impatience and a harshness of spirit that damages our hearts, our relationships, and our life with Jesus. And once we begin living at that frantic pace, another distortion soon follows: We start looking sideways, measuring our ministry against other ministries rather than listening to the voice of Jesus.

WRONG MEASUREMENT 5: THE WAY OUR MINISTRY COMPARES WITH OTHERS

Few temptations cut into the human heart as sharply and deeply as comparison.

It is subtle, constant, and draining. It slips into our minds during team meetings, in casual conversations, and even during our time alone in prayer, always whispering that someone else has more people, more momentum, more fruit than we do.

Is it any wonder that one of the first questions pastors often ask each other when meeting for the first time is, "How large is your church?" The answer often determines the tone and length of the conversation.

Comparison immediately establishes a pecking order. And once we begin measuring ourselves against someone else's ministry, genuinely connecting with them becomes almost impossible.

Jose, a young pastor in New York City, captured this dynamic well.

Nothing in the Gospels gives us any indication that Jesus's life was hurried.

"Pete, I really do enjoy pastoring," Jose said, smiling slightly as he looked me in the eye. "I love our services, our people . . . until I scroll through social media." He peered down into his coffee cup.

After a long pause, Jose's voice lowered to a depressed whisper. "I see all the great preachers. Their insights, their clever one-liners, their incredible worship teams, and the people packed in their pews, all on fire for God."

He paused again. "And you know what makes it even worse, Pete? All I can think about is that this is what my people are

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listening to and watching all week. They even tell me I should follow these pastors and ministries! It's demoralizing."

His gaze drifted, as if slipping into some painful place inside. "The truth is that I feel like I'll never be enough."

Our addiction to hurry . . . damages our hearts, our relationships, and our life with Jesus.

Sadly, I knew his terrible struggle all too well.

For years I compared our church with other churches—in our city, around the country, and around the world. To avoid feeling like a loser, I became adept at the mental gymnastics of justifying why we didn't measure up. We didn't have a parking lot, there was limited subway and bus service on Sundays, our budget was tight, our staff was small, and we were in a transient neighborhood.

Comparison with others is a unique kind of self-torture. What begins as a glance sideways often grows into something far more dangerous: envy and covetousness. Comparison says, "How am I doing?" Envy whispers, "I'm not enough unless I have what they have." It is the voice that says, "I'll be happy when our church reaches two hundred or five hundred." "I'll be content when we finally have our own building or are debt free." "I'll feel so much better when we have a bigger youth ministry or a second campus."

This struggle with comparison isn't new. It's a dynamic that appears repeatedly in Scripture. Consider a few examples:

- *Joseph and his brothers (Genesis 37).* The older brothers' resentment and jealousy of Joseph's favored status not only poisoned an entire family system but also led them to commit violence against Joseph.

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- *Saul and David (1 Samuel 18–26).* King Saul's fragile ego and identity collapsed when young David became more popular than him, turning the king into a paranoid, violent man who wanted David killed.
- *The Twelve (Matthew 20:20–28).* The arguments the disciples had with one another about status and who was the greatest kept them from understanding Jesus's upside-down kingdom.
- *The older brother in the story of the prodigal son (Luke 15:25–32).* Comparison with his younger brother hardened the older brother's heart and kept him from receiving the Father's love.

This pattern isn't limited to biblical characters. Christian thinkers and writers across the centuries have documented the same progression—comparison giving way to envy, envy distorting discernment, and spiritual leaders losing their way as a result. Evagrius, a fourth-century monk whose writings shaped generations of Christian leaders, taught that comparison awakens the spirit of vainglory—the need to be seen and admired—and from this swelling of pride comes envy.[15]

Comparison with others is a unique kind of self-torture.

In the nineteenth century, French mystic Thérèse of Lisieux experienced a spiritual breakthrough when she stopped comparing herself to the "great saints" and embraced her own small and ordinary path, which she called the "little way." She realized that holiness was not measured by heroic achievements but by love that was often given in hidden ways. Her freedom began when she accepted her littleness: "It is to remain little that I must strive."[16]

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Renouncing the pressure to be anything other than a beloved child of God set her free.

Few moments speak more directly to our struggle with comparison than Jesus's words to Peter after the resurrection. After Jesus reinstated Peter, Peter immediately looked sideways to John: "When Peter saw him, he asked, 'Lord, what about him?'" (John 21:20–21).

Jesus replied with one of the most liberating and confronting statements in all of Scripture: "What is that to you? You follow me!" (John 21:22 ESV).

Jesus refused to let Peter find his identity in comparison. He refused to let him measure himself by another person's identity or story. Rather, he called Peter to a single focus: "Follow me!" In other words, "Be who I made you to be. Stick to your unique assignment. Walk the path I've set for you."

Jesus called Peter to a single focus: "Follow me!" In other words, "Be who I made you to be. Stick to your unique assignment."

Whenever we look sideways, the results are predictable: insecurity, discouragement, resentment, and anxiety. We become blind to the uniqueness of our calling and lose the joy of being exactly who God made us to be in the context where God has placed us. Comparison does not lead us toward Jesus; it leads us toward discouragement and despair.[17]

A WORD FOR THE JOURNEY AHEAD

At this point, I'm guessing you may be feeling a mixture of emotions. Perhaps heaviness, relief, and even a little sadness. Naming these false measurements of success often stirs up old

wounds—memories of striving, of comparison, of years spent trying to prove ourselves. It can also surface a buried fear: *If I let go of these familiar scorecards, what will be left?*

Let me offer you some encouragement. You are not alone in this struggle. Every leader I know—myself included—has used these measurements to assess themselves. These false scorecards did not form overnight, and they will not disappear overnight.

But Jesus is patient and gentle with us. He knows that much of our formation around success has been distorted and enslaving. And he wants to set us free.

Whenever we look sideways . . . we become blind to the uniqueness of our calling and lose the joy of being exactly who God made us to be.

The first step is simply *awareness*—to see where our vision of success has been shaped more by Western culture and our families of origin than by Jesus. The second step is *honesty*—to acknowledge where these measures have hurt us and those we serve. And the third step is *surrender*—to begin releasing the grip these old metrics have on our hearts.

You do not need to fix everything today.

You do not need to untangle every pattern at once.

You do not need to become someone you were never called to be.

Jesus invites you to trust that his way is good, even when it feels slow, hidden, or small.

So pause for a moment. Take a breath.

Listen to the gentle voice of Jesus cutting through the noise of comparison and the pressure to perform. Hear him say, "I love you." And know this is true not because of what you've

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accomplished or might accomplish but simply because you are his. Then from that place of being loved, hear him say the same words he spoke to Peter: *Follow me!*

Jesus offers a new way of living and leading—one that frees us from the false scorecards that crush us and invites us to follow him from love rather than fear.

The next chapter takes a courageous look at the wreckage our false scorecards leave behind—not to discourage us but to show just how deeply we need a new way to measure success. Because until we face the extent of the damage, we'll never embrace the radical, countercultural journey that authentic change requires.

These false scorecards did not form overnight, and they will not disappear overnight.

So stay with me because on the other side of what's hard lies something beautiful—spacious rhythms, a new Rule of Life, and a life-giving pathway to becoming the kind of leader, and community, Jesus longs for.

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