

Acts 20:17-24

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[0 : 00] Please join me in taking out your copy of God's Word, which I hope you have with you this morning, that it is well read and treasured in your hearts.

This is God's Word to us. It was written for His glory and for our good. We would all do well to listen to it in order to believe its promises and obey its commands.

I'm going to begin reading in verse 17 of Acts 20. Now from Miletus, he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.

And when they came to him, he said to them, And now behold, I am going to Jerusalem, constrained by the Spirit, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

But I do not account my life of any value, nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course in the ministry that I receive from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

[1 : 55] Experts in various fields, from relationships to time management, from investing to gardening, are highly sought after.

If anyone has been successful at anything, they will find an eager audience waiting to glean the secrets for their own success. When it comes to successfully ministering the gospel of Jesus Christ, we are not meant to look to the successes of our contemporaries, because their success, by God's definition of the word, is yet to be seen.

Ministry success cannot be measured by its size or its resources. Remember a very large crowd gathered to chant, crucify him, crucify him.

The largest church in America is pastored by a man who does not preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. You see, God's kingdom comes most often in quiet ways.

It is ever advancing, pressing on, bringing light to the darkness of the heart of mankind, but it does so most often quietly.

[3 : 24] Jesus said in Luke chapter 17, verses 20 and 21, after being asked by the Pharisees when the kingdom of God would come. He said this, The kingdom of God is not coming in ways that can be observed.

Nor will they say, look, here it is, or there. For behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you. So how then is success measured by God's definition?

How can we know if what we are doing as a church, as a ministry, or as individuals with ministries working?

We hold up our work to the inerrant, authoritative, sufficient word of God. If we are walking in obedience to his word, then regardless of what results may come, that is success.

Charles Colson, who is a very interesting character I would encourage you to go look into, founded a ministry called Prison Fellowship, and I want to read to you a quote from their monthly newsletter, which is called Jubilee.

[4 : 43] This is from a book by Kent and Barbara Hughes, which I commend to you, called Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome. Charles Colson wrote this, By the time you read this, we will have dedicated our new national offices near Washington, D.C.

As a result of this and other recent expansions, many people have written me to the effect that, quote, God is obviously blessing Prison Fellowship's ministry, end quote.

As much as I am sincerely certain that God is indeed blessing us, I believe even more certainly that it's a dangerous and misguided policy to measure God's blessings by standards of visible, tangible, material success.

The inference is that when things are prospering, God is blessing us, and conversely, that when things are going poorly or unpublicized, God's blessing is not upon the work or it is unimportant.

We must continuously use the measure of our obedience to the guidelines of his word as the real and only standard of our success, not some more supposedly tangible or glamorous scale.

[6 : 00] So in our text today, Paul is meeting with the Ephesian elders in the city of Miletus. We found out some weeks ago in verse 16 of this chapter that Paul's travel itinerary was pressing him to skip past the city of Ephesus in order to make it to Jerusalem by Pentecost.

However, he knew that he would not be given another opportunity to meet with the church in Ephesus, so he meets with the elders of the church on a layover on this journey toward Jerusalem. You see that in verse 17. So he has these final words with the elders of the church of Ephesus, his final words to the Ephesian church.

These are Paul's parting words for the church that he loved so dearly and had spent so much time with. And he begins by reminding them of his ministry among them.

He will encourage them to continue faithful ministry in the rest of his discourse in chapter 20. But he begins by setting himself forward as a model for successful ministry.

[7 : 14] He says in verse 18, You yourselves know how I lived among you the whole time from the first day that I set foot in Asia.

So this morning, as we consider the success of our individual service to the Lord, we look to the Bible for God's definition of success.

And in the Bible, the example of the Apostle Paul, who in this text models success for our benefit in four ways. Firstly, Paul models success as a suffering servant.

Paul models for our benefit this morning success as a suffering servant. We can see this in verse 19 and further down in verse 23.

Paul mentions in verse 19 two areas from which suffering comes. The first is internal suffering, internal grief, anguish, feelings that are expressed with tears.

[8 : 28] As I'll show you momentarily, Paul was deeply grieved whenever God was dishonored by unbeliever or believer.

Let me give you three examples in particular, things that grieved Paul to make this point. Number one, Paul was grieved.

Paul was suffering internally by unbelief, by unbelievers. We can read in Romans chapter 9 verses 2 and 3. Paul writes that he has great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart.

For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen, according to the flesh. Paul looked at the lost world and people who were rejecting the good news of Jesus Christ.

It moved him to tears. Secondly, Paul was grieved by struggling believers. Believers who weren't walking well before the Lord, who weren't pursuing holiness as they ought.

[9 : 41] He wrote to the Corinthian church in 2 Corinthians 2, verse 4, For I wrote to you out of much affliction and anguish of heart and with many tears, not to cause you pain, but to let you know the abundant love that I have for you.

Thirdly, Paul was grieved by false teachers. Acts chapter 20, verse 29 through 31. We're about to read here.

I know that after my departure, fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. And from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things to draw away the disciples after them.

The false teachers will exist from outside and from within. Verse 31, Therefore, be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease, night or day, to admonish every one of you with tears.

Paul's very concern for the future of what would happen to the church at Ephesus moved him to tears in this way. And in Philippians 3, verse 18, Paul wrote, But for many of whom I have often told you and now tell you, even with tears walk as enemies of the cross of Christ.

[11 : 09] So Paul suffered with tears. He suffered internally. Do you suffer in this way? Are you concerned about the glory of God in a way that you are grieved, even moved to tears over the lostness of the world, the sinfulness of the church, and the venom of false teachers?

You should be. You should be. I think that Christians all together and all at the same time ought to be the saddest and the happiest people. Sad because we see how horribly, wretchedly broken the world is around us and happy because we have a hope beyond it.

You should be grieved in this way. Paul was. Jesus Christ was. In a striking account from Jesus' life recorded in Luke chapter 19, this is verse 41 and 42, Luke records, And when Jesus drew near and saw the city, Jerusalem, he wept over it, saying, Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace, but now they are hidden from your eyes.

Jesus wept over the lostness of Jerusalem. So Paul suffered internally, as should we. He also suffered externally.

With trials, you see in verse 18. We know that Paul was no stranger to persecution.

[12:50] And because I have made the point repeatedly over the past year, I'm not going to belabor it this morning. If this is a new thing to you, what I'm about to say, please go back to really just about any sermon we've preached in Acts and listen to it and pick up this theme of persecution that's laid on the life of a Christian.

Those who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted. Paul was no stranger to it, and it must be said that neither should we be strangers to persecution, external suffering.

Wherever Paul went, some responded favorably to the gospel preached, and some responded with hostility. Verse 23, further down in our text, Paul says, The Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me.

Beloved, do you experience hostility? As you compassionately plead with people to respond to the gracious call of the gospel of Jesus Christ, do you meet opposition?

Persecution looks different in different places, right? We are not likely to be detained, imprisoned, beaten. Do you experience hostility toward the message that you preach?

[14:22] If you do not, you are either, A, not preaching, you're just not sharing the good news of Jesus Christ, or B, if you are, you're not actually sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

You've neutered it. You've taken away its offense. Because when the gospel is preached, some will respond favorably to it, and some will respond with hostility.

So we see Paul modeling success for us as a suffering servant. Secondly, Paul models success as a shepherd of God's people.

They're going to alliterate. I think I heard a snicker. Yes, they will. Paul models success as a shepherd of God's people.

Here we go. Verse 20. Paul did not fear man, but rather Paul feared God and therefore sought the good of God's people.

[15:33] He did not shrink from declaring anything. He did not draw back. He did not withhold anything that was profitable.

Paul proclaimed the gospel with all of its nuance, the whole counsel of God he taught, and he did so unashamedly.

He wrote to the Galatian church in Galatians chapter 1, verses 6 through 10. I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel.

Not that there is another one, but there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.

As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed.

[16:42] Now verse 10. For am I now seeking the approval of man or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were still trying to please man, I would not be a servant of Christ.

Paul models his success as a shepherd, as a faithful expositor of God's Word. He takes the text and he explains it.

Of course, this has very weighty implication for public teaching. Paul taught the Ephesians in public. You at this point may be thinking, well then this has nothing to do with me because I am not gifted as a teacher and I do not have a public ministry.

But Paul also taught from house to house. Now, he did so as an apostle and I'm sure that he saw this activity as part of his public service to the church, that he didn't divorce the two in his mind.

But it did mean that he was in relationship with the Ephesians. He was meeting with them in their homes, breaking bread with them, addressing their questions and concerns, giving personal application of gospel truths.

[18 : 03] And we are all meant to be in relationship with others, drawing them toward God and godliness. You may not hold the position of pastor, but there is someone in your life that needs Bible instruction and you may be the only one that can teach them what is profitable.

So beloved, do you shrink from declaring God's Word? May it not be so of the members of Christ Family Church, Dahlonega.

Third, Paul models success as a seeker of the lost. As a seeker of the lost.

Verse 21. Paul was an evangelist. He viewed himself as such. And if you are a follower of Jesus Christ, so should you.

In Mark chapter 4, Jesus tells the parable of the sower who sows seed, which is the Word of God. And that seed falls on various types of ground.

[19 : 13] I hope that you're familiar with this parable. The good soil. The ground that represents those who are true followers of Jesus Christ.

The good soil does what? Bears fruit. It bears fruit. This is the very evidence that it is the good soil. How do we know good soil is good soil? It bears fruit. Jesus gives an explanation of the parable off to the side with the disciples later on in Mark chapter 4.

This is verses 20 through 22. Jesus says, But those that were sown on the good soil are the ones who hear the Word and accept it and bear fruit thirtyfold and sixtyfold and a hundredfold.

And He said to them, Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket or under a bed and not on a stand? For nothing is hidden except to be made manifest, nor is anything secret except to come to light.

[20 : 19] Now there can be some debate over what Jesus meant by fruit. Those that give evidence that they are good soil. What is the fruit? What is the evidencing?

And I think that we can speak a lot about fruit. There's lots of fruit analogy in the Scripture. Fruits of the Spirit. We could run down that list and say these are the things that Jesus is talking about. Is He referring to good deeds? Yeah, He is. Does He specifically mean conversion? I think so. I think He's coming in more narrowly. It can include the others, but I think He's coming in more narrowly. I believe that verse 21 and 22 help us to see that those who are good soil become sowers in various measures.

Thirty, sixty, hundredfold. But sowers nonetheless. Is a lamp brought in to be put under a basket?

[21 : 20] Right? This good Word that's been sown in us, is it meant to be hidden away? Absolutely not. Is a thing that's invisible meant to stay invisible?

No, it's meant to come to light. So the good soil becomes sowers. We sow the Word. So a successful ministry is one that seeks the lost by faithfully sowing the seed of God's Word in the world.

God makes the soil. We sow the seed. The effect that the Word bears in a person's heart is the work of God. But we must ask ourselves if we are sowing a seed that can be germinated, sprouted, and cultivated.

Are we preaching the gospel? Are we sowing seed at all? And if it's being sown, is it the gospel of Jesus Christ that God may use it to change the lives of people?

Let's look at Paul's summary of his evangelistic method to consider that just a bit this morning. First, we can see that he testified.

[22 : 35] He testified. This doesn't mean merely that he shares his testimony, although it can mean that. He typically did. He often shared the grace of God to him.

He talked about what had happened, the transformative power of God in his life. But it must include more, right? It must include more. And to testify means in the original language that he solemnly urged his hearers.

He was urging them to flee from the wrath to come. He was teaching them of their infinite transgression before an infinitely holy God.

He was speaking of God's judgment for those who were his enemies and urging them, pleading with them to flee from that wrath and to flee to Christ.

He did so indiscriminately, both to Jews and to Greeks. If someone does not know the gospel of Jesus Christ, then they have fulfilled the prerequisite to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[23 : 40] Paul shared with everyone, everywhere. And what was it that he testified to? He preached repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ.

Repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. You don't have to pay attention when I'm sitting with the kids. But if you are, when I pray with them on Sunday morning, what do I pray that God would work in their hearts?

Repentance and faith. I use biblical language because biblical language communicates Bible ideas. So what are these things? Repentance and faith.

Repentance, the word in the original language carries with it a lot. It's not simply being sorry. A lot of people are sorry for their sin because they're afraid of the consequence of their sin.

But godly sorrow leads to repentance. So what is repentance? It's being sorry for sin. It's recognizing your guilt before God.

[24 : 50] It's wanting to flee from God's wrath, understanding the judgment that will come. But it's not just that you don't want the consequence. It's that you hate the sin itself.

You hate that you ever offended the holiness of God. This good and loving and kind God that gave us good instruction that we just threw away because we wanted to be gods ourselves.

It's hating that. It's hating that I ever said, I am a God and I don't need your good instruction. It's running back to Him and recognizing that He is good.

And it's turning from that sin into His good command. So repentance is the whole of us. And the Christian life is a life of repentance, turning from sin and turning towards holiness and improving in these things.

So repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ. Now the word here, translated faith, means mental recognition.

[25 : 59] It's a little weightier than we might think of if you just say, do you believe that Jesus lived? Well, sure. Do you believe that Jesus was the Son of God?

Well, yeah. Do you believe that His atoning work on the cross is the only way to be reconciled to God? We must be saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, forever.

Yes. Rest. We pick up all of these things. All that comes with what the Bible has to say about our Lord Jesus Christ. Believing in Him.

There are some these days that will say that you can have Jesus as your Savior and not as your Lord. And that is a lie from hell. The two come together and they always do.

And Paul says here, He pleads with people. He testifies. He's strongly urging them to repentance towards God and of faith in who?

[27 : 00] Our Lord Jesus Christ. If He is your Savior, He is your Lord. It's understanding who He is and what He has done for us.

Worship Him with our minds and faith. Worship Him with our whole selves in repentance. This is the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is the good seed that we want to sow in people's lives.

Paul stated in Romans 1, verse 16, I am not ashamed of the gospel for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

Beloved, are you ashamed of the gospel of Jesus Christ? Don't be. It is powerful and eternally good.

Learn to share it. Just solemnly urge people to come to faith. Show yourself to be good soil.

[28 : 02] Fourthly, Paul models success as a spirit-filled bond servant. Now you like it when I hyphenate words back to back.

Spirit-filled bond servant. Verses 22-24. Paul speaks of being constrained by the Spirit as the reason he is hastening to Jerusalem.

He is convinced that this is the next step in his ministry and desires to be faithful to that step, to go to Jerusalem, to make it there by the day of Pentecost.

The word that ESV translates constrained could also be translated bound. Paul began his summary of his ministry in Ephesus in verse 19 with the phrase serving the Lord.

Serving here is the verb form of the Greek word doulos or bond servant. So Paul is presented in this short summary of his ministry himself as being bound up to, in service to, enslaved to the Holy Spirit and to Christ.

[29 : 25] He has laid aside his will and he is walking in the will of his Lord. Jesus as his Savior and his Lord.

He states this in verse 24 in this way and I absolutely love this. He says, but I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself.

He was saying by my own terms, I don't count my life as of any value. There's no value to me. It's not precious to me if only. Don't miss the if only.

He has great value. He has a service to be rendered. He has a purpose for his life. If only I may finish my course in the ministry that I receive from the Lord Jesus to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

So the value of his life is that he's been given a ministry as all who are in Christ have to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.

[30 : 27] Jesus charged the apostles to the same type of mentality in Mark 8 verses 34 and 35.

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it.

But whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospels, will save it. By giving our lives to God, our lives are saved.

Our lives have value. This gospel call, it is a costly call, but all that we have to give, our everything does not compare to the immeasurable worth of knowing Jesus Christ.

Have you surrendered your life for the sake of Jesus and the gospel? Have you said, truly said, in your heart, it does not matter, Lord, do with me as you will.

[31 : 38] I am bound to you as a grateful response for saving my soul. This is for our eternal good, beloved. This is success.

if we can see our lives lining up in increasing measure with the model of Paul and of Jesus, with the good instruction of the Bible, we can say success.

Let us put God's definition of success on our ministries. Let us look to Paul as a model and be suffering servants, shepherds of God's people, seekers of the lost and spirit filled bond servants.

Let us rejoice in the inerrant, authoritative, sufficient instruction we receive from God's word. Let us have a confidence that God's work done in God's ways yields God's good intent and brings him the most glory.

Let's pray together.