



## A Spiritual Encouragement Message November 28, 2020

### How Do You Measure Success?

(2 Corinthians 3:1-3)

By Randall Jarrell

This encouragement article will hopefully help us all... but it is especially dedicated to Derrick, Andrew, and Oscar. I hope to have a few more years of preaching the gospel...you three have many more years left to proclaim God's Word, I pray for you the following measure of success.

Would you hire this man as your preacher?

- Arrested many times.
- In and out of prison.
- Often run out of town.
- Never built a building.
- Never spoke on television.
- Never had a website.
- Never had a Facebook page.
- Never owned his own home.
- Had to work on the side to support himself.
- Never stayed very long in one place.
- Not a skilled public speaker.
- Unimpressive appearance.
- Sometimes preaches for hours at a time.
- Seems to get involved in public controversies.

Most churches would take a pass on a man like that. After all, you can't trust your pulpit to just anyone who comes along. And that's why the Apostle Paul would not feel at home in many churches today.

Success in preaching is notoriously hard to define. How do we measure success in preaching the gospel? That's the question Paul faced in 2 Corinthians. He had to justify himself because a group of critics had virtually taken over the church, filling the people's minds with base accusations against Paul's character and his conduct. *"You can't trust him. Look how fickle he is. He says he's coming for a visit, then he doesn't show up. How do you know he's not a fake?"*

Part of Paul's answer comes in 2 Corinthians 3:1-3 where he declares that the real measure of his ministry is the lives changed by the Holy Spirit. That constitutes true success in the eyes of the Lord.

It's not about programs or buildings. It's not about budgets or giving. It's not about a big reputation. What then defines a successful preacher? Before we define the Biblical measure of success for a preacher, here are some inadequate Measures of Success.

***“Are we beginning to commend ourselves again? Or do we need, like some people, letters of recommendation to you or from you?”***

2 Corinthians 3:1 Paul says, *“I don't need to boast and I don't need a letter of reference to prove the validity of my ministry.”* That's quite different from the way some do things today.

Sometimes we measure success by our degrees. So we go to college for four years to get a BA or a BS. Then we may go to graduate school for an MA or an MBA. Some will seek a professional degree, such as an MD, JD, DDS, or DMin. Those with a scholarly bent will pursue a Ph.D. so they are qualified to write or teach at the highest levels. In the end, the extremely studious person may have a string of degrees after his name, such as BA, MA, Ph.D. And of course, these things matter to some, perhaps to too many people. We pay attention to them. We put our degrees up on the wall. We want people to know we went to Georgia Tech or Miami or to Notre Dame or Princeton or Multnomah or Biola. And it's not just those letters. We gain status, we make friends, we network, we may meet our spouse at college or in graduate school, and when we graduate, having a degree from a particular school may land us a job someday. Having a Bible degree is important to some... but it wasn't to Paul.

Here then is another inadequate measure of success we impose upon ourselves. Often we measure preachers by church size. To some, probably nothing matters more than this. Go to any gathering of preachers and after the initial greetings, someone is sure to ask, “How large is your church?” That matters because 50 is better than 25, 100 is better than 50, 500 is better than 100, 1000 is better than 500, 2000 is better than 1000, and anything over 2000 is considered a megachurch. And these days there are quite a few churches in America that draw more than 7000 people every Sunday. Currently, the largest church in America attracts over 40,000 people. And around the world, there are mega-megachurches that number over 100,000 or 200,000. But have you noticed that Paul never gives us any attendance statistics from the churches where he labored? He never talks about programs for evangelistic outreach... he never mentions how many classes he conducts each week.

There are other ways of looking at success. Many of these are found in denominational thinking, but occasionally we find them in the church as well. Who do you know? How well are you connected? Do you know a senator? How many millionaires attend your church? Do you have Bill Gates' cell phone number? Do you drop by and say hi to Donald Trump when you are in Washington D.C.? Will Peyton Manning return your calls? Did you eat lunch with Chuck Colson last week? On and on it goes. Because we live in a celebrity culture, it matters to some as to who we might know. Knowing important people gives

But these things, the “letters of recommendation” that Paul is talking about, the approval and recognition of others, and the applause of the world, these are not the true measures of success.

God views it differently. There is One Thing That Matters Most. It’s all about lives changed by the Holy Spirit. See how Paul explains it in verses 2-3:

***“ You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts, known and read by everybody. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.”***

So what is the real mark of successful preaching? It must be the lives changed by the preaching of the gospel. That’s why the proof of the ministry can never be simply counting nickels and noses or listing degrees or books written or places preached or the size of your Sunday School or how many services you have or how big your budget is or who came to speak for you or how long you’ve been in the ministry. Paul never gives us any attendance statistics from his churches; never tells us how many baptisms were performed in a given year; never reports on the number of new programs he started, and he never even tells us how the giving was doing compared to budget! We count those things and say, “Well, if you’ve got those, you’ve got a successful ministry.” Paul said, “I’m not playing that game.” He wouldn’t ask for letters of reference nor would he provide any. He simply said, “If you want to know about my ministry, check out the people who listen to me. Look at what God has done in their lives.”

They are Living epistles. They are Living proof. That’s the only thing that matters. The rest is just details. And a lot of it is just ministerial window-dressing.

If you take this passage as a standard, it means that God measures our success in terms of lives changed. He’s evidently not that impressed by the size of our budget or by the stained glass in our buildings. The One who hung the stars in space doesn’t really care how many books we’ve written or how much money we make or whether or not we see our name in lights. He’s Almighty God, Maker of heaven and earth. Like we’re going to impress him? I think not. He has arranged things so that we get the honor and privilege of serving him. To us he committed the message of reconciliation and told us to go into the world and preach it in every nation, saying to one and all, “Be reconciled to God.”

We do the preaching...God does the saving.

We do the praying...God does the answering.

It is God who takes the message we preach and writes it on the hearts of those who hear. And let us be thankful for that. If we had to save people, no one would ever be saved. I can preach from sunrise to sunset, I can preach till the cows come home, but if God doesn’t work, no one will ever be saved. I don’t know how you feel about this, but I’m very happy that “God gives the increase” because that means it doesn’t all depend on me. My success depends on the Lord! Not partly, but entirely.

Let me draw three simple conclusions from this:

**First, I have a part to play and I must do my part.** I must preach and teach the Word of God. The where and the how and the when are not specified. Circumstances change all the time. Look at Paul's life. He had great success in one city and was run out of the next. He stayed in one city for months and in another for three or four weeks. He was loved and hated, admired and reviled, praised, and criticized wherever he went. Some of the churches he started had major problems. Not everyone who heard him believed his message. Not all of his disciples stayed true to the Master. And yet he determined to go, to become "all things to all men" so that by God's grace, he might win some to Christ.

Was Paul successful? From the perspective of twenty centuries later, we know the answer is yes. But he ended up in jail in Rome and evidently died by beheading at the order of Nero. In 1 Corinthians 4:1, Paul reveals a key secret of success in the ministry. "It is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful." There it is, plain for all to see.

Be faithful to our calling. Be faithful to the Lord. Be faithful to preach the Word.

**Second, we won't really know how successful we've been until we get to heaven.** Since we don't save anyone, all the glory belongs to the Lord alone. Whatever success we have in serving the Lord comes because the Lord himself granted it to us. Since we don't save anyone, all the glory belongs to the Lord alone.

**Third, I shouldn't bother comparing myself with anyone else.** For many years, I compared myself to a man I thought had great credentials. He taught Greek at Notre Dame, he counseled many about their failing marriages, he held meetings all over the country. He was what we might call a "big name preacher". It turned out that all of it was a lie, perpetrated in his own mind to elevate him above everyone else. As preachers, we must take to heart the passage in John 21:20-22 where Peter, evidently feeling a bit of apostolic competition, asks the Lord what will happen to the Apostle John. Here is the Lord's answer in verse 22, "If I want him to remain alive until I return, what is that to you? You must follow me." It's a polite way of saying, "What happens to John is none of your business." The King James Version renders the last phrase this way, "Follow thou me." the Lord used those three words to set him free. "Follow me, and don't worry about anyone else." "Follow me, and I'll take care of the others." "Follow me, and you'll have plenty to do.

Here is the preacher's responsibility put simply:

Feed God's sheep. Be faithful. Follow Jesus.

If we do that, we are successful already, and when our work on earth is done, we will no doubt discover that the Lord made more of what we did than we knew while we were on the earth. The applause of heaven will welcome us home, and that's the only success that really matters.