

“The Marks of a Successful Ministry”
1 Thessalonians 3:6-8
(Preached at Trinity, August 11, 2019)

I'm supplying these notes for the benefit of busy pastors who may be engaged in bi-vocational work, feeling the pressure of preparing to preach twice on the Lord's Day while trying to balance full-time secular work as well as caring for their families. While the notes of another man are no substitute for personal study, I pray that these may aid in the process of preparing to preach.

Disclaimer: These are the actual notes I bring with me to the pulpit, which I follow loosely. They are not designed for publication. While I try to make every effort to give proper credit to my sources from the pulpit, adequate citations will sometimes be absent from my notes. If anyone feels their intellectual material has been used without adequate citation, please contact me and I'll make immediate correction giving credit.

1. Paul and his companions arrived in Thessalonica proclaiming the good news of the Gospel. Many of the Thessalonians responded favorably to the Gospel message but Paul was soon forced to leave the city. Paul was pleased with their response to the Gospel but was it genuine faith or merely an emotional response that would not endure the test of time.
2. Paul knew they were facing the same persecution he had faced. Were they demonstrating genuine faith by remaining steadfast in the midst of suffering? Paul was troubled as he thought about these new believers. Were they prospering in the faith? Were they enduring the persecution? Were they standing firm in the face of Satan's temptations? Or had Paul's labors among them been in vain?
3. Finally, Paul enlisted Timothy to make the trip to Thessalonica to make a report on their welfare.
1 Thessalonians 3:5 NAU - "For this reason, when I could endure *it* no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain."
4. Timothy returned with a wonderful report. The Thessalonians were enduring with joy. Their genuine faith was on display. There were two aspects to Paul's encouragement.
 - A. First, Timothy brought news of their faith and love. It is amazing how often these two graces are tied together. They are inseparable, two sides of the same coin.
 1. Faith is the substance of our life in Christ, the means of our justification, the assurance of our forgiveness and the sure confidence to press on through every trial.
 2. Where there is genuine faith, there will also be love. Jesus set love as the indisputable sign of saving faith:
John 13:35 NAU - "By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another."
 3. These Thessalonians were demonstrating both faith and love.
 - B. Secondly, Paul had been slandered severely. His opponents had made many false accusations about him.
 1. Had Paul's accusers been successful? Did the Thessalonians receive the accusations as true or had they been discerning? Were they exercising the righteous judgment taught by Christ?
John 7:24 NAU - "Do not judge according to appearance, but judge with righteous judgment."
 2. Paul was joyful at the news that he still had their hearts. Timothy reported that they thought well of Paul and were anxious to see him again.
1 Thessalonians 3:6 NAU - "you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you,"

5. Paul's suffering had been considerable, not only in Thessalonica, but in most of the cities he entered. Paul refers to this in **Verse 7**:
1 Thessalonians 3:7 NAU - "in all our distress and affliction"
1. Among Paul's distress was not knowing the condition of the Thessalonians. For Paul, the thought that their faith had not been genuine and that they had turned away in the midst of their suffering was more than he could bear. In ways, it would have been worse than death.
 2. The news of their prospering in the faith was a fresh savor of life for Paul.
1 Thessalonians 3:8 NAU - "for now we *really* live, if you stand firm in the Lord."
 Life is more than just breathing. What is life to you?
 3. Paul says he was greatly comforted because of their faith. The word translated "through" in **Verse 7** can also be translated "because."
 For Paul such news was worth living for.
6. Paul's statement in **Verse 6** is truly unusual. He stated that Timothy had brought the good news of their faith and love. But the word he chose to use is stunning. He used the word, εὐαγγελίζω. It is almost always translated, "preach the Gospel." This is the only time it is used to refer to good news of a different sort.
7. For Paul there was nothing more important than the Gospel.
- A. It was the power of God unto salvation. He was prepared to die in order to carry the Gospel far and wide. He was dogmatic to protect the integrity of the Gospel.
 - B. But for Paul, the only thing more glorious than sharing the Gospel was seeing the effect it had upon the lives of sinners. Paul is saying here that this was also good news. It is what he labored for. To see Christians prospering in faith and love was Paul's great pursuit.
8. This brings us to ask the question, what are the marks of a successful ministry?
- A. Most today measure a successful ministry by the size of the congregation or glitzy programs or the liveliness of the worship with a grand focus upon the music.
 - B. Some measure a successful ministry by the charisma of the preacher. Every generation has its share of celebrity preachers. Some, faithful to the Biblical text deserve to be heard. Others, however, are nothing more than animated wind.
 - C. Too many measure their ministry by the opinions of other men.
9. What are the true measures of a successful ministry?
- I. A successful ministry is characterized by faithfulness to the Word of God
- A. For this mark we have to back up a few verses
1 Thessalonians 2:4-5 NAU - "just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who examines our hearts. ⁵ For we never came with flattering speech, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed-- God is witness"
 1. Paul was careful to rest upon the Word of God, to focus upon pleasing God more than men. Far too many demonstrate a lack of confidence in the sufficiency of Scripture.
 2. Paul's goal was the salvation of men and seeing them prosper in the faith. He had one method: Preach the Word, to which he added prayer (See Verse 10)

LBC 14:1 – “The grace of faith, whereby the elect are enabled to believe to the saving of their souls, is the work of the Spirit of Christ in their hearts, and is ordinarily wrought by the ministry of the Word; by which also, and by the administration of baptism and the Lord’s Supper, prayer, and other means appointed of God, it is increased and strengthened.”

3. Faithfulness to the Word was always Paul’s practice as well as his instruction to other pastors.
 1. His instruction to young Timothy was, “Preach the Word!”
 2. He taught Timothy that this was the measure of his worth as a pastor.

1 Timothy 4:13 NAU - "Until I come, give attention to the *public reading of Scripture*, to exhortation and teaching."
1 Timothy 4:6 NAU - "In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, *constantly* nourished on the words of the faith and of the sound doctrine which you have been following."
 3. Paul instructed Titus:

Titus 2:1 NAS - "But as for you, speak the things which are fitting for sound doctrine."
 4. Upon his departure he reminded the Ephesian elders how he had patiently taught them.

Acts 20:18-20 NAU - "You yourselves know, from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, ¹⁹ serving the Lord with all humility and with tears and with trials which came upon me through the plots of the Jews; ²⁰ how I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house,"
- B. The success of Paul’s ministry was fixed upon his faithfulness to the Word of God
1 Corinthians 2:1-5 NAU - "And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. ² For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. ³ I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, ⁴ and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God."
1 Thessalonians 2:13 NAU - "when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted *it* not as the word of men, but *for* what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe."

- II. A successful ministry is characterized by gaining the heart of the sheep
1 Thessalonians 3:6 NAU - "you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you"
- A. This doesn't mean the pastor never faces conflict among those entrusted to his care. Paul had times of great conflict.
1. In some cases, there are goats among the sheep.
Goats do not follow shepherds. They do not gather in flocks.
 2. Sometimes there are even wolves. A good pastor must sometimes protect his flock from bloodthirsty wolves.
 3. Every pastor makes enemies along the way. It is the woeful reality. At times it is necessary to correct and even rebuke. Sometimes it is not well-received.
 4. Paul wrote of those who have only a form of godliness without its power
2 Timothy 3:5 NAS - "holding to a form of godliness, although they have denied its power; and avoid such men as these."
 5. But the great delight of a pastor is the joy of a flock who loves him.
 5. Richard Phillips: "Pastors not only should love their congregations, praying regularly and fervently for them, but also should prize the love that is returned by those they serve. There are occasions when it is virtually a pastor's duty to make himself obnoxious to wayward Christians and hard-hearted congregations. Paul did not shrink from this duty, especially in connection with the Corinthian church that he was founding at this time. But mutual love and close fellowship are of great value to the work of the gospel, and many prayers and much labor should be spent in this cause."¹
- B. At the heart of the pastoral ministry is leading a particular flock
1. Without a flock a man cannot be truly said to be a pastor just like a man would not call himself a husband if he didn't have a wife.
This was the model established by Christ, the Good Shepherd.
John 10:27 NAU - "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me;"
 2. A Biblical pastor must have a true love for his sheep
 - a. Jesus, the ultimate Shepherd was willing to lay down His life for His sheep.
John 10:11 NAU - "I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep."
 - b. Notice how Paul described his relationship in **Chapter 2 1 Thessalonians 2:7-8 NAU** - "But we proved to be gentle among you, as a nursing *mother* tenderly cares for her own children. ⁸ Having so fond an affection for you, we were well-pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives, because you had become very dear to us."
 - c. The pastor must labor to cultivate this love. He must truly care for his congregation.

¹ Richard D. Phillips, *1 & 2 Thessalonians*, eds. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, Reformed Expository Commentary, (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015), 104.

- d. Paul was filled with great joy over hearing of their faith and love. It was also essential that he personally possess this same faith and love.
3. God gives the pastor the hearts of those he is sent to shepherd.
- a. Pastoral care is reciprocal – the shepherd loves the sheep and the sheep love their shepherd.
- b. The congregation calls their pastor. After much prayer and careful consideration they are convinced that this is the man God has sent to care for them. They are prepared to follow his leadership. Their mutual love for one another grows.
Paul writes to the Thessalonians:
1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 NAS - "But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, ¹³ and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another."
- c. On one hand, this demands a work of grace. In other words, it is God who stirs the hearts of a congregation towards their pastor. On the other hand, the pastor should labor to cultivate the love of his congregation—to earn their respect and confidence. This happens best in the context of a long-term relationship. The pastor's actions can also erode the confidence of his congregation.
- d. I'm so grateful for the privilege of pastoring this congregation. And I am so grateful for the love you have shown to me and my family. It has been a constant source of comfort and encouragement.
Charles Bridges – "Rich indeed, and heart-gladdening is the 'consolation in Christ, the comfort of love, the fellowship of the Spirit,' which we enjoy in communion with a flock, to whom God has owned our labors. In this love—the most touching love that this world affords—we find full consolation for the scorn of an ungodly world."²
1 Thessalonians 3:6-7 NAU - "But now that Timothy has come to us from you, and has brought us good news of your faith and love, and that you always think kindly of us, longing to see us just as we also long to see you, ⁷ for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith"

² Charles Bridges, *The Christian Ministry*, (Edinburgh, The Banner of Truth Trust, 2006), 20.

- III. A successful ministry is characterized by the progress of those under the pastor's care. This is the heart of a successful ministry.
- A. For Paul, this outweighed everything else
1. Paul measured his ministry by the eternal blessings received by those under his care rather than upon the earthly or temporal. His goal in ministry was to see his converts prosper in faith and love.
 2. Paul made it clear, his chief interest was not their health, wealth, or self-esteem. He was interested in their spiritual life.
1 Thessalonians 2:19-20 NAU - "For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? ²⁰ For you are our glory and joy."
 3. This was his chief interest. His high goal of ministry
1 Thessalonians 3:7-8 NAU - "for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith; ⁸ for now we *really* live, if you stand firm in the Lord."
 4. Watching Christians grow in the faith was Paul's great joy
Philippians 2:1-2 NAU - "Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, ² make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose."
 5. For Paul, any other result would mean his work had been in vain
1 Thessalonians 3:5 NAU - "For this reason, when I could endure *it* no longer, I also sent to find out about your faith, for fear that the tempter might have tempted you, and our labor would be in vain."
- B. The Gospel is called "Good News" because it is God's gift for the redemption of man.
1. The NT word for Gospel is εὐαγγέλιον. The verb εὐαγγελίζω is most often translated "preaching" or "preaching good news" because it is at the heart of the message of Christ.
Acts 5:42 NAU - "And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Christ."
Acts 8:12 NAU - "But when they believed Philip preaching the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were being baptized, men and women alike."
 2. Paul's point is he was interested in the outcome of the Gospel – the demonstration of their faith and love.
Receiving the news that they were standing fast in the faith was the best news Paul could have received.
This apostolic pattern should be the pattern of every ministry today.

- C. A pastor shouldn't consider his ministry a success unless he sees his congregation prospering under the preaching of the Gospel.
1. It isn't enough just to prepare and preach sermons. It isn't enough just to see numerical growth. A pastor must have the spiritual life of the church in mind. Our desire is to see Christians grow and prosper in their faith and love.
 2. This is at the heart of Paul's words at the end of **Chapter 2**
1 Thessalonians 2:19-20 NAU - "For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? ²⁰ For you are our glory and joy."
 3. The Gospel imparts life to both the one who hears as well as the one who preaches.

Conclusion:

1. As I've often pointed out, the work of a pastor is merely a reflection of the care each member of the church has for the body. We find this model demonstrated in Scripture.
Acts 2:44-45 NAU - "And all those who had believed were together and had all things in common; ⁴⁵ and they *began* selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need."
Hebrews 3:12-13 NAU - "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is *still* called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin."
1 Thessalonians 5:14 NAU - "We urge you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone."
Galatians 6:1-2 NAU - "Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; *each one* looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted. ² Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ."
2. We should pray for one another. As we see our church growing in the faith and prospering in Christ it should fill our hearts with great Gospel joy and impart life to our souls. This must be the great joy, hope, and desire of our congregation.
1 Thessalonians 3:8 NAU - "for now we *really* live, if you stand firm in the Lord."