

God loves His Church. It is the apple of His eye. It is the Bride of Christ. You well know, however, this does not mean that the Church is without blemish. God loves us in spite of who we are and what we do, not because of it.

My heart sinks every time I hear an account like the one I read this past week in a letter that crossed my desk ("Grace to You", MacArthur, 7/27/95). It's the sad, yet true account of a "war" in a church in Georgia. The conflict began in what would seem to be a harmless matter--the church decided to re-roof their sanctuary. The "gunfire" started when it came time to make the big decision--what color roofing tiles to install.

You can guess what happened. The color choices were narrowed to two, and at that point the congregation formed ranks and drew battle lines. It was war, and neither side would budge. The rainy season was coming, and a decision had to be reached. And it was--the church tiled the roof with both colors, half and half. To top it off, after the project was completed, church members showed support for their color by boycotting one side of the sanctuary and sitting on under the roof color they had voted for!

And I want you to know the angels were NOT rejoicing in heaven.

Sadly, this is not an isolated account. Churches are being torn apart over matters which will have no eternal significance. Satan knows he can impair a church on two fronts--he can attack from the outside (by using his secular, godless pawns), but he can also attack from within (by using petty squabbles and personality conflicts).

A pastor shared with me last week the tragic account of a Sunday School leader in his church who is spreading wrong information about the pastor, seeking to discredit and thus remove him. Another friend shared with me the dismal news of a church that is being hampered from moving ahead for God because its people are holding grudges over issues like replacing curtains in the church, and who's on the nursery schedule.

Don't miss this. A church that is divided is a church that is robbing itself of its power. A house that is divided cannot stand (Mt 12:25). A schismatic church is a non-successful church.

We know that, so let me flip the coin and look at the issue from the other side. What is a successful church? How does God measure success? What does a successful church (or Christian) look like? What are the marks of a successful church?

With that question in mind, we are beginning a new, three-week series this morning entitled, "Marks of a Successful Church." What are the marks? The question is not as easy to answer as you might first think. In fact, if we took a survey this morning, the answers would be quite diverse.

Perhaps someone would say, "A successful church? That's a church that has great programs. It has programs for children and teens and singles and middle-aged and seniors. It's got lots of staff, and it offers ministries for all ages."

Another would reply, "What's a successful church? It's a church that has a fine facility that is a credit to God--a lofty steeple, a majestic pipe organ, and solemn stain glass. That's a great church."

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Someone else would reply, "No, it's not programs and buildings. A successful church is a church that has vibrant worship, a church where you can FEEL the difference. Emotion-stirring music, revival meetings, big-name guest speakers who can fan the flame of the Spirit, and get results. That's a successful church."

And certainly, a few (in the minority) would say, "You're all wrong. A successful church is a missionary-minded church, a church that gives 50% of its budget to world missions. That's a successful church."

So what is a successful church? For that matter what is a successful Christian? Though there's little wrong with most of the assessments I've just identified--hold on to your seat--none of the above fit the biblical definition of a successful church. What does the Bible say are the marks of a successful church? As I took a careful look at the New Testament, I kept noticing three marks over and over. I seldom read about these in the church growth material, which reveals to me that we are prone to define success differently than God does.

Turn to Colossians 1. In this text, we'll discover three marks of a church that is successful in God's eyes. My aim this morning is to identify these three marks, and then zero in on the first. In the next two weeks, we will develop marks two and three. My prayer is that God would help us to be a church full of individuals known for these three marks.

**Proposition: The Colossian church will be our case study this morning. Let's probe Colossians 1:3-5 by asking two questions.**

- I. What are the marks of a successful church? (1:3-5)
  - A. Mark #1: Faith in Christ
  - B. Mark #2: Love for the saints
  - C. Mark #3: Hope that is eternal
- II. How do we develop the first mark?
  - A. What will NOT do it?
    1. Mere stirring of emotion will not.
    2. Mere exposure to truth will not.
  - B. What will?
    1. It involves an acceptance of the truth (1:6).
    2. It involves an allegiance to a Person (1:4).
  - C. Why is it so hard?
    1. We lack information.
    2. We are passive.
    3. We fail to live out what we know.

Application: How can I tell if I am a person of faith?

1. Do I possess a radical allegiance to Christ?
2. Am I a person that takes God at His Word?

I. What are the marks of a successful church? (1:3-5)

Paul and Timothy wrote this epistle to a local church in the city of Colosse (1-2). Listen to their introduction in vv 3-5, "We give thanks to God and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, praying always for you, since we heard of your faith in Christ Jesus, and of

the love which ye have to all the saints; For the hope which is laid up for you in heaven, of which ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel."

You need to realize something about this church. Paul did not start the church at Colosse. In fact, he did not know most of the believers there. He had "heard" about them (4). And he was thankful for them.

Isn't that interesting? Paul was thankful for people he had never met. We're prone to be thankful for people we know personally, people who have done something for us. Paul had learned to operate on a higher plane. He was thankful for people who were doing something for God, not himself.

A friend of Paul's named Epaphras had evangelized Colosse, and was used of God to plant the church there (see vv 6-7). Paul was thrilled. What was it that he thanked God for when he thought of this church? He mentions three marks. Frankly, Paul was thankful for things that sound strange to us: faith, love, and hope. I don't find Paul thanking God for good health, or for his possessions, or for a sunny day for his picnic. No, Paul thanked God for things which will matter for eternity, namely, faith, love, and hope. What do you thank God for in your prayers?

Don't miss this. The church at Colosse was not a perfect church--in fact Paul's going to deal with some delicate doctrinal problems later in this letter. But here was a successful church because it was known for three marks. Here they are.

**A. Mark #1: Faith in Christ**

V 4 reads, "Since we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus." Notice that faith is mentioned first. Without saving faith, there is no Christianity. But not just any, generic faith will do. It must be faith in Christ, which we'll explore more in a moment.

There was a second mark which characterized the Colossian church.

**B. Mark #2: Love for the saints**

Paul had heard about their love. They had a reputation for being a people who extended love "to all the saints." See the connection? James taught that faith without works is dead. Here Paul emphasizes that faith and love go hand in hand. If I have a vibrant faith in Christ, I cannot help but love the brethren. The vertical and horizontal dovetail. What's the basis for faith and love? The answer brings us to mark #3.

**C. Mark #3: Hope that is eternal**

The reading in the NIV captures the sense in v 5, "The faith and love that spring from the hope that is stored up for you." Hope is the key to faith and love. Hope is grounded in two perspectives. The first looks ahead (see v 5) to what "is laid up for us in heaven." The second looks back (see the end of v 5) to the historical events of the gospel.

Here's the connection. We can have a confident expectation of the future. Why? Because we've come to grips with what happened in the past at Calvary. We are a people who hope in the eternal! Christians are people who have hope! We know where we are going, and what is in store for us. That kind of hope generates faith and love.

What then is a successful church? A church known for faith, love, and hope.

We're talking about something pretty radical in our cultural context. When was the last time you heard someone say, "Hey, you should try that church. Those people are known for faith, love and hope." What do we usually hear? "Try that church. It's got nice programs, comfortable pews, and a big radio program." We've bought the world's definition of success.

Someone may object, "Wait! Just because God's Word commends the Colossian church for faith, love, and hope, doesn't mean these are God's premium marks, does it? It's just one church, isn't it?" True, but this triad of qualities is commended throughout the New Testament.

For instance, consider what Paul wrote of the church in Thessalonica in 1 Thes 1:2-3, "We give thanks to God always for you all...remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labor of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul was thrilled because he knew there was a church marked by faith, love, and hope in that city.

We see two of the marks in 2 Thes 1:3, "We are bound to thank God always for you, brethren, as it is fitting, because your faith groweth exceedingly, and the love of every one of your all toward each other aboundeth." Don't miss this. In his first letter, Paul said this church had faith, love, and hope. But they hadn't arrived. In his second letter, he thanks God that their faith and love are what? Growing and abounding. Faith, love, and hope are not static concepts. We never arrive in this life. God commends a church that is known for faith, love, and hope, but he expects that church to keep increasing in the development of those virtues.

Sometimes in his letters, Paul mentions only one or two of these marks. Concerning the Roman church, he wrote in Rom 1:8, "I thank my God...that your faith is spoken of throughout the whole world." He commended the Ephesians in Eph 1:15-16, "After I heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus, and love unto all the saints, cease not to give thanks for you."

Paul's not the only writer to applaud these either. Peter wrote this in 1 Peter 1:21-22, "...that your faith and hope might be in God...see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently." (see also Heb 6:10-12; 10:22-24)

What's the point? We need to rethink what a successful church is. According to the biblical standard, a successful church is a church that is known--not necessarily for big buildings and youth programs and hi-tech music (the early church had none of this)--but a church known for faith, love, and hope. What an impact the church in America would have if the church would be and do what it was called to be and do!

Would you consider some pointed questions with me? As a church, are we known in this community as a people of faith, love, and hope? As a person, are you known by your peers as a person of faith, love, and hope? Listen. We will never be successful, in God's eyes, as a church or as individuals, until the answer is yes. Hopefully, you're asking yourself an important question--"How can it be so?" It can! Let's see how.

## II. How do we develop the first mark?

How can we become people of faith, as a church and as individuals?

### **A. What will NOT do it?**

#### *1. Mere stirring of emotion will not.*

Tragically, not a few sincere people try to live the Christian life based on emotion. And they bounce from one emotional high to the next. They think a successful worship service is one that stirs the emotions. Listen. A heart-wrenching storyteller and a tear-jerking soloist cannot do what the Spirit of God using the Word of God alone can do.

Years ago, Ezekiel described a people who loved to have their emotions stirred. Do you know what their problem was? Listen to Ezek 33:32 (NIV), "Indeed, to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice and plays an instrument well, for they hear your words but do not put them into practice."

Becoming people of faith takes more than emotion. Wiersbe says it well (107), "Saving faith involves the mind, the emotions, and the will. With the mind we understand the truth of the Gospel, and with the heart we feel conviction and the need to be saved. But it is only when we exercise the will and commit ourselves to Christ that the process is complete." Mere stirring of emotion won't make us people of faith.

*2. Mere exposure to truth will not.*

Do you want to ponder something tragic? Hell is full of people who were exposed to the truth. Even now, there are people sitting in pews who have been exposed to God's truth for three years, five years, fifteen years, or more, yet who are not people of faith.

They're like Simon in Acts 8. Remember him, the sorcerer from Samaria? Did he have a religious experience? Yes. Did he know some truth? Yes. But when he showed his true colors, Peter said this to Simon in Acts 8:20-21, "Thy money perish with thee, because thou hast thought that the gift of God may be purchased with money...for your heart is not right in the sight of God. Repent therefore."

Emotion and exposure alone will not produce people of faith.

**B. What will?**

There are two essentials for faith revealed for us in Colossians.

*1. It involves an acceptance of the truth (1:6).*

In the text of v 4, Paul thanked God for the faith and love of the Colossians, both of which are linked to their eternal hope (5). What had produced these marks in the lives of the Colossians according to v 5? The gospel had. The gospel came to them, as v 6 reveals, "Which is come unto you, as it is in all the world, as it doth also in you, since the day you heard of it and knew the grace of God in truth." And what had they done with the gospel? They accepted it.

Don't overlook this. Faith is not a feeling. It's a decision. It's a decision to take God at His Word, accept the truth, and act upon it. Literally, the phrase in v 4 reads, "the faith of you," indicating faith is a person to Person matter.

Faith involves a personal acceptance of the truth. There's a second essential.

*2. It involves an allegiance to a Person (1:4).*

Many have missed a simple truth that I want to clarify. Faith is not blind. It's not a leap in the dark. Faith must have a valid object.

Consider this. Faith doesn't save a person. What does? Faith in Christ does. Faith is only as good as its object. What was the object of the Colossians' faith? "Faith IN CHRIST JESUS."

A Mormon has faith. So does a militant Muslim. So may your neighbor who doesn't even go to church but says he "believes in God." Does their faith save them? Not according to the Bible. Why not? Only faith in Christ saves.

What's involved in faith in Christ? The verb form of the noun "faith" is "to believe." Faith is a commitment. It involves an allegiance to the Person of Christ. Don't miss this. People of faith are people who are known for total allegiance to the Person of

Jesus Christ. Not mere mental assent to some facts about Him, but a life changing trust in Him. They're people who bring every decision before Him. They dedicate every goal to Him. Every second is used for Him, and lived in dependence upon Him.

### **C. Why is it so hard?**

Why is it so hard for us to believe God when it's so easy for us to believe people? Think about it. We receive a letter in the mail from Ed McMan at Publishers Clearinghouse, read about his offer of millions, and what do we (some of us) do? Take him at his word, and rush to the Post Office. Yet what are the odds? Nigh to impossible. Yet though God's offer is guaranteed, and His promise certain, we find it hard to believe Him. Why? There are three common reasons we find it hard to be people of faith.

#### *1. We lack information.*

If we don't know the truth of the Bible, we can't be people of faith. That's why having a plan of personal Bible study is so key.

#### *2. We are passive.*

Have you noticed how easy it is to get excited about things that don't matter for eternity? If you're a football fan, about this time of year you're fanatical about football. You spend hours reading up on your team, watching ESPN commentaries, and get all excited. But when it comes to spiritual matters, well, we don't have time to read our Bibles or come to church Wednesday evening or read a good book.

Why don't we get excited about the things of God? If we are going to be people of faith, we can't be passive. We need to commit ourselves to spiritual growth.

#### *3. We fail to live out what we know.*

Here's why the Israelites failed in the wilderness. They didn't lack knowledge--they knew the Promised Land was there--they lacked obedience. They failed to live in light of what they knew (see Heb 4:2). Like we often do.

Ask yourself something, "Would I witness more if I knew I would get \$10,000 for every person that got saved?" Yet God has said there are crowns in store for those who live for Him (1 Cor 9:27; 2 Tim 4:8)! Do we believe that? Listen. If we really believe something, we'll do it, not just talk about it.

By the way, several years ago Dr. Victor Matthews, professor of Systematic Theology, taught me something in class that I need to mention at this point. Faith is not quantitative, but qualitative. Faith is something that is increased by using it. The remedy for us when we moan, "Oh, I need more faith," is to start using the faith we already possess!

Now let's get specific.

#### Application: How can I tell if I am a person of faith?

Ask yourself two questions.

##### *1. Do I possess a radical allegiance to Christ?*

We're saved by faith in Christ. We're called to live by faith in Christ. Are you?

##### *2. Am I a person that takes God at His Word?*

When we get to heaven, many of us are going to be shocked by the number of God's promises we failed to claim. We'll be stunned by what our lives could have been. Every one of us has the potential to succeed in the Christian life. The question is this. Are we willing to take God at His Word?

What are the marks of a successful church? God calls us to be a people of faith, love, and hope. Are you such a person? Does the allegiance of your life belong to Christ? Are you a person who takes God at His Word? Would you like to today? I challenge you to choose to do so right now.