

What Makes a Successful Church?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 December 2024

Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 0 0] Amen. So, we are surrounded by a flurry of data and data analysis and different metrics and success criteria. So, if you're involved in education, most likely in particular areas of business and industry you're involved in, and definitely in the world of sports, data analysis, success criteria is everywhere. But it's really important, foundational level, that we learn to choose the right measures of success, that any organization is looking for the right indicators of success and progress. Now, I want to suggest that when we come to church, most likely we will have in our minds some kind of success criteria for a church. And that may be to do with size, or wealth, or age profile, or music, or staff and resources, or a preacher.

The vital question we all need to ask ourselves is, what does success look like in Jesus' eyes? And I wonder, as we spend time with these two churches, whether the answer might not surprise us and perhaps challenge us somewhat. So, we read earlier words of Jesus, the Beatitudes, and to listen to Jesus there as He spoke about life in the kingdom and the life of blessing, we understand it's not about power, it's not about prominence, it's not the typical world's measures of success. It's much more about the inner light, inner holiness, doing God's will, choosing a path of weakness and humility, practicing mercy, loving others even when we're hated and opposed.

So, when we consider Jesus' view of success, it actually becomes quite challenging because it is so different. And so, the same Jesus that spoke on the mountain, on earth, is the same Jesus who is speaking here in this letter that comes via an angel, via the Apostle John, to these two churches, Smyrna and Philadelphia. And they're the two smallest and the two least influential places and churches in the world's eyes, maybe even in their own eyes. But Jesus, in His letter, says to them, you are successful. I am pleased with you. There's no criticism here. If you were here last week, you will remember the image of the pendulum. There were churches that needed to repent because of an imbalance. Some were big on truth, but they weren't loving others. Some were so concerned about loving others that they'd ignored the truth. But that's not what we see here in these churches. So, what is

Jesus' success criteria? If we want to please Him as individuals and as a church, what measure does He apply? And what we're going to see is that Jesus praises these two churches in particular because they persevere in faithfulness. They hold on to the truth and they hold on with love and they do that at great cost, as we'll see as we get into the letter. So, let's begin with the letter to Smyrna, first of all. And we'll keep another question in our head. Whose opinion will we listen to? Okay, so the city of Smyrna is in modern-day Turkey, the city of Izmir, if you know where that is, a place noted in its day for emperor worship. It had a famous temple to Zeus.

It was again another place where Jewish opposition was fierce. As Christianity was still identified with Judaism and as Christians were coming under the attack of Rome, the Jewish people were scared that they were going to lose their status, their right to worship as they had been allowed to by the empire up until this point. And so, they were making life difficult for the church, as was Rome. And so, we meet a church under intense pressure and persecution. So, for us, I imagine we will experience at times that sense of apathy that comes when we try and share our faith. Maybe we find mockery, or we are excluded at some level, but for them it's much more intense. It's hatred, it's hostility, it's violence. And Jesus speaks. And Jesus describes himself. And this description is really good news for them in their condition. But it's also so important for us as we come into this Advent season to think about who is Jesus. How does he describe himself? These are the words of him who is the first and the last. We've already come across that in Revelation chapter 1. And we discover this title, the first and the last, is actually a title that's used of the Lord God in the Old Testament. And so, Jesus is saying to his church that he is truly God. He is the Son of God, the first and last. He is the eternal and true

[5 : 24] King over history, past, present, future. And this Jesus is the one, verse 8, who died and came to life again. So, now we're being invited to think about why did Jesus come into the world in the first place?

And the message of the Bible is clear. He came to be one of us to suffer and die in our place and for our sins. And the emphasis here is on the fact that Jesus won a victory, that beyond suffering and death there is glory. And now he lives eternally and he sits on the throne of the universe. And so, think about the message to the church. They're invited to take heart in Jesus, the one who is Lord over history, to understand that their victory is secure, that they are safe in his hands, that they are suffering, but glory and victory will come. To get into the details of the letter is to recognize that Jesus is deliberately drawing for us some really strong contrasts. We get the sense of how the church must have looked in the world versus how the church looks to Jesus. And again, just to think about a great need that we have is always to move beyond how we see ourselves, humanly speaking, or even how the world sees us, to find our hope, our identity and security in how Jesus sees his church. That because of faith, we are loved and accepted. And so, we need to be learning to let the word of Jesus, the opinion of

Jesus over us and over the church be the one that matters. But let's listen first to how the church looked in the world's eyes. First, we get a sense that they are struggling. Verse 9, I know your afflictions and your poverty. So, here's a reality you might recognize. It's certainly true for them, that since becoming Christians, life has gotten harder. So, life for the Christian, the normal trials that everybody endures, but they are also being opposed for their faith, and they're experiencing poverty most likely because they've had their job taken from them. They've had their property taken from them as a follower of Jesus. Not only that, there's slander. We're still in verse 9, I know about the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. So, slander, attacks against the church, speaking badly of the church is a common tactic the devil uses. We find it throughout the letter of 1 Peter, for example. And this is especially here coming from Jewish people who had rejected the idea that Jesus is their Messiah, and so they're turning their attacks on the Christians. You worship a crucified criminal. He said he was a son of God, but he's blaspheming.

You are those who have twisted the law. One of the things that they were saying about the Christian church actually was that you make salvation way too easy. That you say to people, believe in the Lord Jesus, and you'll be saved, and you don't insist that they keep the law. You have to merit your way into the kingdom. And so, the Jewish people are slandering the church, and they're stirring up the Roman Empire against the church. They're living through this, and they're suffering. Look at what Jesus says to them. Do not be afraid of what you're about to suffer. And then he goes on to talk about a time of testing and suffering persecution and even being faithful to the point of death. So, their suffering is bad, and Jesus says, it's going to get worse. There's this image of 10 days of testing.

Go to Daniel chapter 1. There's 10 days of testing for Daniel and his three friends as they seek to stay loyal to Jesus in an evil empire. There's a period coming for this church of imprisonment and of death.

[9 : 32] Now, we have had this humble privilege in the last few months of hearing reports from believers in Eritrea, from India. We hear reports from the suffering church. We know that this still happens.

So, from the outside, this church in Smyrna, no influence, no power, no status, no wealth, no security. But these are not Jesus' success criteria. This is not how he measures his church.

This church in Jesus' eyes, they're rich. Verse 9, I know your afflictions and your poverty, yet you are rich. They're rich in faith because they're ready to stand up and to suffer for Jesus.

They know that blessing of being persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven. They are clearly rich in love because their devotion to Jesus and his church continues, even when it's costing them everything—family, friends, money, jobs. Clearly, they're rich in hope.

Here is a group of Christians who are storing up treasure in heaven, not looking to find all their security and comfort here on the earth. Jesus says they're rich. Jesus commends them for faithfulness.

[11 : 04] Verse 10, be faithful even to the point of death. Keep doing what you are doing, Jesus says to them. He doesn't tell them they need to repent. He says you need to keep on being faithful.

Satan is tempting them to fall away, to turn their back on Jesus. God is using it to test and to strengthen their faith. And this is something that we need to remember when we go through trials and testings. To remember King Jesus on the throne, who knows us, who is in control, and who is with us, who promises not to let a trial or suffering to go so much as a hair's breadth beyond what he allows, and beyond what he considers to be for our spiritual good and for his glory. So, we can take heart.

Verse 10, be faithful. And I will give you life as your victor's crown. End of verse 11, the one who is victorious will not be hurt at all by the second death. So, the picture here is drawn from the Olympics.

So, the winners in those days at the Olympics or any games, they didn't get medals around their neck. They got a laurel wreath on their head, the flower crown of victory. And the victory crown here, specifically in verse 10, it's put positively as life. There is this promise of eternal life.

And remember, this is a guarantee from Jesus, the one who died and rose again. Jesus who said, John 11, I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me will live even though they die. And then he puts it a different way. At the end of verse 11, victory looks here like not being hurt at all by the second death. And we need to go towards the end of Revelation to find out what he's talking about there. So, if you have your Bible and you want to turn with me to Revelation chapter 20, you'll find the second death here in verse 14 and 15. Incredibly solemn, somber words.

[13 : 25] Then death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. The lake of fire is the second death. Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire. So, so to not be hurt by the second death is to not experience eternal judgment, condemnation, separation, punishment from a holy God. To have your name written in the book of life is to be spared judgment and to enter into eternal happiness. The faithful who keep trusting Jesus are in the book of life. And there is joy and there is love and there is peace for them. And so, Jesus talks about it positively and negatively to say to this church who are being faithful, he promises them victory. He says, you are safe and secure. Your enemies, they might kill your body, but they cannot prevent eternal victory and glory. And so, we hear Jesus honor the church in Smyrna because of their faithful endurance.

A truth that's important for us to grasp today, to return to that question, whose opinion will you and I live for? We will all choose someone whose word will carry the most weight. Somebody's opinion will influence us the most. That might be a family member. It may be a friend or a group of friends.

It could be a boss or a colleague. It could be the voice of culture, or it could be the voice of Christ. And Jesus' letter calls us to live for the audience of one, to seek to find our approval, identity, security in His Word.

So that while we may not feel influential in the world's terms, we may not feel particularly significant. The world indeed might call us, call us as a church, nobodies. But that's not the word that matters. Christ's Word over His people is the one that counts. You're my friends, and I died to save you. We discover that actually Jesus' joy, the joy of the Son of God, is bound up with making sure that all His people will be with Him forever in glory. And if we remain faithful, we have that promise of hearing words of hearing. We will be with you. We will be with you. We will be with you.

Good and faithful servant, enter your master's happiness. What measure of success we will choose to use matters the world will say to us.

[16 : 28] Choose money or status or success or comfort. Jesus says, choose to be faithful. Persevere to enjoy eternal life. He says, blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.

So that's the letter to the church in Smyrna. Now we turn to the letter to the church in Philadelphia. And again, slightly different question this time. Whose strength will we rely on? Let's keep that in our minds. So the city of Philadelphia, interesting city, it was known as the gateway to the east. It was on a major trade route. It was kind of midway between two major cities. So it was wealthy and influential.

Lots of people coming and going. But it was also built on a geological fault line. So there was a huge earthquake in AD 16. So it's probably like at least probably 70 years before this. But there was still a process of recovery. And there was still a great fear and anxiety in the city about the prospect of earthquakes. And we also discover that the church here is being shaken. We've got again Jewish persecutors trying to shake their faith. They have shut the door of the synagogues in their faces. You're not welcome here. You're not part of us. You're not the people of God. And so we find their strength is weak. But again, we discover Jesus is their strength and security. Let's again hear how Jesus describes himself. Jesus, a wonderful shepherd and pastor. What does he say about himself? These are the words of him who is holy and true. Again, Jesus saying, I'm truly God. Isaiah uses holy and true of

God over 20 times. And Jesus is the one who holds the key of David. So when we think about David, the great king of the Old Testament, and there was the promise of a king from his line who would reign forever, Jesus is saying, I'm that king. But he's also got the key. Well, it's an interesting image. If you have time, you can go to Isaiah 22. In the middle of that chapter, you meet a man called Eliakim. And Eliakim has the keys. And these keys give access to the king and to the king's palace. And so Jesus picks up this imagery. He says, I give access to God and his kingdom. He picks that up as well using the imagery of the door. Because Jesus also says, what he opens, no one can shut, and what he shuts, no one can open.

So at one and the same time, the enemies of the church, they're slamming doors shut in the face of Christians. You can't worship here. You're not going to get respect or influence here. But Jesus, who is the God-man, who is the king of the universe, he's opening a door. He's opening the door of salvation for his people. And he says, what I open, no one can shut. Security is in Jesus. And so he's bringing comfort to this church. He'll say to them, you are weak. But he also says to them, I am strong.

[19 : 47] Strong to save. Strong to welcome. Strong to protect. Let's think now briefly about two things that Jesus knows about this church. And then we'll think about three things Jesus promises. And what becomes clear is that faith in Jesus, who is their strong Savior, it is the key to life and hope for eternity. And what's true for them must be true for us.

Also, two things Jesus knows about them. Verse 8, we find them, I know your deeds. Here is a church where their faith is shown in action.

Where you can see in their acts of love that they are followers of Jesus. And the result, there's another open door. See, I have placed before you an open door that no one can shut.

So there's the door that enters them into salvation. But also because they are faithful, many commentators speak about this open door to witnessing for Jesus.

In other words, that their life of faith enables them to be ambassadors, that their lives of love are creating open doors for the gospel to be heard. The way that we live as Christians matters.

[21 : 12] So Jesus says, I know your deeds. He also says to them later in verse 8, I know that you have little strength. It's really clear that they are in the heat of spiritual battle. And they are battle-scarred.

And they are under siege, but they're holding the line. They're enduring in faith. You have kept my word and have not denied my name. So think about the contrast with last week. They're holding on to the truth of God's word, and they're continuing to love Jesus and the people of Jesus. So at one and the same time, humanly weak but spiritually strong. And what does Jesus promise them?

What does Jesus promise any who are humanly weak but spiritually strong? Because our faith is in Jesus. Jesus who is God. Jesus who has authority over the kingdom. Jesus, in verse 11, who is coming soon.

In the season of Advent, as we look forward, we look back to Jesus coming once, we look forward to the fact that he's coming again. And he promises he will come, and his coming will be soon.

Here is the one who holds open and who is the door into the kingdom. Three things he promises. First, he promises honor. End time honor. This is in verse 9.

[22 : 34] Jesus says to the church, in the end, you'll be vindicated. It will be clear for the world to see that you belong to me, and I love you. That those who trust in Jesus as Son of God and as Messiah, they really are God's children. And so you get this image, it's like after the war, after the heat of the battle, after the dust is settled, those who have been defeated, they now turn and look as Jesus publicly, Jesus publicly honors his people, his church. You are mine, and I love you. And so he invites us, he invites them to wait with hope because of this honor that's coming at the second coming. So he promises end time honor. He also promises spiritual protection. Verse 10, since you have kept my command to endure patiently, there's their mark of success, patient endurance, I will also keep you from the hour of trial that's going to come on the whole world to test the inhabitants of the earth. So they've kept the command. They are enduring, and they have this wonderful promise that Jesus will keep them.

Jesus, the good shepherd, watches over his church, always was watching over them in their present distress. And he says to them, you will be sheltered from this final judgment, from these times of testing. You're safe. Now, it's important that we understand that Jesus isn't saying to become a Christian means life gets easy. In fact, we often discover that life gets harder.

Jesus said shortly before going to the cross to his disciples, in this world you will have trouble. He doesn't sugarcoat it, you will have trouble, but take heart. I have overcome the world. And so when Jesus talks about protection, he's not saying, I will always protect you from all physical suffering.

And we know this is true. But he says to his people, I will protect you spiritually. You are safe and secure in your salvation in me. And the last thing that he promises, the interesting image, new status, new security, takes us to verse 12. Let's hear that verse. The one who is victorious, I will make a pillar in the temple of my God. Never again will they leave it. I will write on them the name of my God and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which is coming down out of heaven from my God.

And I will also write on them my new name. Okay, so what's happening here is that Jesus is giving us an image from the Old Testament temple. So in Solomon's temple, you can discover this somewhere. I can't remember the reference right now. There are two pillars. One was called Jachin, one was called Boaz. Jachin means God establishes. Boaz means in God is strength.

[25 : 56] Jesus is saying that he is his people's strength, and he will certainly establish his people in God's presence to be with God where he is forever. To use the image of a pillar is really significant.

Because a pillar represents strength and security. And remember where they live? They live in a place that's recently been hit by an earthquake, and they're worried about the tremors, and they're shaking. Jesus says, in me, you're solid and secure. But there's also this image of belonging and identity. So in Solomon's temple, those names were inscribed on the pillars, and Jesus says, there are names inscribed on his people, on his church. What are those names? You belong to the Lord. You know the way sometimes we, if we go on holiday, we mark our luggage with tags so that we know they belong to us? Or we mark our clothes when we go to school, they belong to us? Jesus writes, this one who's trusting in Jesus, you belong to the Lord. This struggling, suffering, you belong to God's church, God's kingdom. He writes on us, you belong to me.

In human terms, weak, isolated, suffering, struggling in Jesus' eyes, in the hands of a strong God and a mighty Savior, we are safe and secure, always and forever. So the letter is appealing to us, don't rely on our own strength. And it also says to us, don't judge the church, don't judge a Christian in a worldly way. Don't apply those measures of success. We need to see ourselves and see others as Christ sees us. And we're invited to wait and to trust in our strong Savior, to trust in His gospel promises, to trust in His coming return. So all of us, we need to take to heart what Jesus says about a successful church. Because think about this, He is the one we are called to follow.

Jesus came into this world and endured a life of suffering. He walked a path of obedience in the face of opposition, the suffering servant. He is the man of faith who goes ahead of us and who goes to the cross to suffer and die for us. The pattern of His life, suffering first with glory that follows.

The Jesus who came for us is the Jesus who gives us Himself. He is our strength, mighty King, merciful Savior. He is with His people. He knows His people.

[29 : 06] He is strength in our weakness. And it's good for us to be humble and dependent. And He honors us when no one else does. And so we need to live for His opinion. And it's this Jesus who calls us to follow, to walk that same road of faithful, patient endurance.

It may not look glamorous. It may not look that successful in the world's eyes or in our own eyes. But it comes with the promise of future glory. And it comes with the promise of Christ's approval if we live for Him. And if we do that, and as we do that, we discover no believer, no church, is insignificant to our wonderful Savior. With Jesus, there are no little people.

The one who saves us, the one who watches over us, the one who gives us strength, is the one who will one day welcome us into the joy of His presence forever.

Let's pray and give thanks as we prepare to come to the Lord's table. Perhaps somebody could give a quick nod to the junior chair. Oh, maybe they're coming in already.

That's fine. Let's pray. Our Father in heaven, we recognize how easy it is for us to apply the world's metrics of success onto our own lives and onto the church. But we pray to be Christians in a church that would be guided by Your Word, and especially by the Word of Jesus. And we thank You for who He is. And we thank You that He is the eternal Son of God. He is the promised King. He is the victorious King. He is the one who opens the door of salvation to all who will put their trust in Him, that He is mighty to save. And that what He looks for is faithful endurance, to love His truth, to love His church as a response of love to our God and our Savior.

[31 : 15] And so we pray that You would help us, You would teach us, You would encourage us as we think about that first coming of Jesus, His faithful endurance, His willingness to face opposition and persecution, being faithful to the point of death. But they would also be so thankful as we think about His return, when He will come to make everything new, when He will come to give His people the victor's crown. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

All right, our boys and girls are just coming back in. That's good. So just in a moment, we're going to turn as the people of God to share the Lord's Supper, this simple meal that God gives to His church. And as we come to the Lord's table, it gives us a chance to think very briefly about one or two things, to remind ourselves, you know, we're coming to the Lord's table, who is the Lord Jesus?

Jesus. And we've just been told Jesus is the first and the last. He is the eternal one. He died and came to life again. He is the Savior who died and rose. And He is the King. And He is the King who holds open the door of salvation. That's whose table it is. It's a table of grace and mercy. And so the question then is, who is to come to this table to receive the bread and wine, to receive the Lord's Supper? And again, we find our answer from Jesus in the book of Revelation. It's those who have faith. Those who have put their trust in the reality that in Jesus' death and resurrection, we have forgiveness of our sin.

That we are put right with God because of what God has done through Jesus. Not because of what we have done. Not because of who we are. Not because we are somehow great or special. But because we believe, actually, as Christians, that we are sinful people and that we are constantly in need of mercy and God's help. And that we come to help. And that we come to Jesus and that's what He gives to us.

It's for those who are weak. Weak in faith, but we know that He is strong. It's an invitation to receive grace. So when we know that we fail as Christians, when we know that so often we disappoint ourselves, never mind disappointing Jesus, when we know that we struggle to keep going, that's why we come. And we keep coming to Jesus. Because our strength and our hope is in Him and not ourselves.

[34 : 25] The Lord's table is for those whose hope is built, to go back to our opening hymn, whose hope is built on Jesus' blood and Jesus' righteousness. He died for me. His righteousness is given to me. It's for those who throw themselves on the mercy of God. And so if that describes you, if you believe in Jesus as your Lord, if you're a member of His church here or in other places, then please come and share as you're invited. But if that doesn't describe you, please stay where you are. You're very welcome to be here. And perhaps think about what Jesus has said about Himself. And think about that invitation that the door of salvation is open, if you'll put your trust in Him. And then just to think about what do we come to the table for?

This isn't just a bare ritual that we do from time to time. It binds us together as a liturgy. It's so much more than that. We come to be fed. To be fed by Christ and to feed on Christ.

His promises, His grace, His spiritual blessing. That it's in the good news of the gospel, it's in the good news of our strong Savior that we find the strength to endure and to live with faithfulness. We cannot do it by ourselves. And so it's good news that Jesus promises to be here to meet with us, to give us grace.