

What Does A Successful Church Look Like?

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Preacher: Rev. Thomas Davis

[0 : 0 0] Well, for a short while this evening I'd like us to go back to Romans chapter 15 and the passage that we read. We're going to focus especially on verse 14 where Paul says, I'm satisfied about you, my brothers, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge and able to instruct one another. And as we look at this verse I want to ask what I think is an incredibly important question. I want us to ask, what does a successful church look like? I think that's a really important question because we want our church and every other church around us, the church of Scotland next door, the other churches on our island, we want them all to do well and to be successful. We don't want to see our churches failing.

We don't want to be unsuccessful as the church of Jesus Christ. We all want that, but that raises the question, what does success look like in the church? And I don't know what comes into your mind first of all, but there's lots of things that we can think of. I think the most obvious is we think of size. So big means successful, very often. Or we might think of activities. A successful church has lots of different stuff going on and it's wonderful to see that. We might think of resources. Often we can find that some churches that are sort of failing or almost on the brink of closing are doing so because they lack resources. They don't have money, their buildings are falling down and they're struggling. A successful church has loads of resources. It's wealthy. It's got lots of staff. It can support various ministries and they've got a good building and it's all well set up. But we might think of a good organisation. A successful church is one that functions well and that runs really well. And all of those things are important and I'm definitely not denying that these things matter. But are these the things that are most important? Are these the defining characteristics of a successful church? Well, I think the verse that's before us in Romans 15 is very important because here Paul tells us what he considers to be the hallmarks of a successful church. And that immediately makes this a very important verse for us to consider. And it's interesting that at the start of the verse he says that he's satisfied about his brothers and sisters in Rome. And that's a really interesting one.

The word satisfied can also mean persuaded and it conveys the idea that Paul is convinced about the condition of this congregation. He's satisfied. To them, they're a success.

And then he gives three statements which reveal what that success looks like. And in a moment ago we said that success thinks, we think about size and resources and wealth and all that kind of stuff. There is none of that in verse 14. Paul says he's satisfied for different reasons. It's because they're full of goodness. They're filled with all knowledge and they're able to instruct one another. And this is one of the moments where we kind of wish we could say to Paul, why did you pick those things? Is that really what a success for church looks like? Are these the things that we should be aiming for? Well, that's what I want us to think about for a wee while together tonight. So first of all, a successful church is full of goodness. Now that's the kind of phrase that I think can sometimes bounce off us. It's so obvious it's almost not worth saying. And at the same time, it's so optimistic. You can think, well, it's not even much point expecting that. So theoretically we endorse it. In reality, we don't necessarily expect it. So imagine I was sent to a big conference in America. There's often massive church conferences in America. People from all over the world go to them. And imagine I was standing up there in a lecture. Not that that'll ever happen. I'll never get invited to one of these things. But it's mostly you did. Imagine I was standing up there and someone put this hand up and an

American says, what's your strategy? What's your vision for your church? If I said, well, my vision is to be full of goodness. I think I think it would sound really silly. People would think that sounds very naïve, or maybe even deluded. It's so easy to read a phrase like that and to not take it seriously. And yet that would be a huge mistake. There is nothing in the Bible that we should not be taking seriously. And so when Paul identifies being full of goodness as a strategic target for the church, he's not being naïve. He's not being optimistic. And he's not being deluded. He's saying, that is your objective.

[5 : 38] If we want to be successful, then we want to be a church that is full of goodness. Now let's just unpack that phrase a little bit more. The word goodness refers to moral excellence, and uprightness of heart, whereby we're characterised by good and not by evil. And that then shows itself outwardly in kindness, generosity, sharing and in acting for the benefit of others. And then you've got the word full, which is actually a slightly rare word here. What it really means is to be very full, to fill a space beyond expectations or to be constantly preoccupied with something. In other words, Paul is saying a successful church is obsessed with goodness.

And its goal is to be bursting with goodness. That means that we want every part of our church life to be full of goodness, so that wherever you look, whether it's the Kirk Session or the Deacons Court or the Keshe or the Sunday School or the WFM or whatever activity we're involved in, we should be looking at these things and see that they're characterised by a moral excellence and an overflowing kindness. These things are to be full of goodness.

That's the hallmark of a successful church. Goodness should saturate every part of church life. And so whatever you're involved in in a church or whatever you might sign up to get involved in, your job is to bring a saturation of goodness to that role. And this is where a phrase like this is so encouraging to every one of us. Because no matter what your gifts or personality may be, you can bring goodness to your role in the life of the church. So you might be quiet and shy, but you can still be full of goodness. You might be bubbly and enthusiastic, you can still be full of goodness. You might be super organised and efficient, you can still be full of goodness. You might be quite happy to blend into the background and quietly work away where no one sees you and still be full of goodness. And of course all of this is reminding us that God's goal for life is that it would be full of goodness.

And so when we say that we want to be a church full of goodness, we don't just mean on a Sunday, we mean every single part of lives, our lives, our whole life is to be full of goodness because that's what God wanted for humanity from the very beginning. And one of the greatest tools that the devil has used to lure humanity away from God is to try to persuade us that God doesn't really want what's good for you. So many people think that, they think that God is not going to make life better, he's going to make it worse, that he's the great spoiler that's going to kind of muck everything up. That has got to be one of the greatest blasphemies that the world has ever known. God himself is so good and when he created human life, he created it to be so good. Now we know that that's been broken and spoiled by sin, a sin which resulted from the devil's lie to Eve that God wasn't really being good to her. And the old humanity, instead of enjoying God's goodness and everything that he intended for us, that old humanity has now been infected with badness. And you can see the evidence everywhere. But the great message of the Gospel is that through Jesus

Christ our work of restoration has begun and a new humanity is being raised up out of the old and God's great goal is that life would be full of goodness again. And the consummation of that will be in the future, in the new creation, but today there's a place where the blessings of the age to come are seen now and that place is the church of Jesus Christ.

[10:02] And so it all makes perfect sense. God wants goodness, he's promising goodness and our lives as a church is to be a beacon of goodness to the world around us. And of course that is why badness in a church is so damaging and so wrong. Bitterness, deceit, envy, strife, division, slander, malice, selfishness, gossip, criticism, all the things that Paul lists again and again in his epistles, all of these things are a pollution in the church of Jesus Christ. And what we have to all recognise is that just as we can be a source of goodness, so too we can be a source of that pollution. And so I read a verse like that and I find myself very often I'll read that and I'll blast through it. The two yourselves are full of goodness and I'll just move on and I'll not think about it. But when I stop and think about it and then I look at myself and I ask, am I full of goodness in everything I say?

And so often I'm not. And that's exactly what God's word is telling me to be. And so that's why I think by God's grace I want that to be my goal and that to be at the heart of my objective and strategy. And it makes perfect sense in terms of our witness to the world around us because no one wants badness. So yes, all around us in the community or at work or even in your families, there's people who live their lives without much thought of God or without much interest in church. But these people are still made in the image of God and they still know that goodness is better than badness. No one wants bad neighbours or bad friends or a bad husband or bad colleagues or a bad boss or bad parents. No one wants badness. And that is why a church full of goodness is everything that Scotland in 2021 needs. And that's what Paul says, make that your objective. Second thing he says is that a successful church is filled with all knowledge. Now, very often in our Christian lives and in our preaching, the focus is on the heart and that's a great thing. And so when we talk about goodness, whether it's in speech or actions, fundamentally that's an issue of the heart. And the Christian message is a message to your heart, a message of love, healing, peace and joy. The heart is so important and a hard heart is deadly. But the fact that the Bible speaks so much to your hearts does not for one second mean that the Bible is not also speaking to your mind. That's why Paul is reminding us that if we are to be a successful church, then we must aim to be filled with knowledge. We said a moment ago that one of the great lies of the devil throughout all of humanity is the lie that God doesn't actually want to be good to us. Another of the great lies that the devil has spread about

Christianity is that it's mindless. And that's what leads many people to doubt Christianity or even to oppose it because they think it's mindless. And it's perhaps the case that even Christians have reinforced that because sometimes we've behaved as though the mind is not that important, that we just believe and we just go on and we don't tend to think too much about it. And knowledge has often been replaced with feelings or experience in terms of what matters in the Christian church, especially in recent times. The key point that Paul and the whole of scripture constantly reminds us of is that mindless Christianity is not biblical Christianity. Again and again and again the Bible seeks to engage our minds.

Again and again we are challenged to think. That's what lies in the heart of being a disciple of Jesus. The word disciple means a learner. Learning means growing in knowledge. God wants us to think. He wants us to understand. And that's why there's a little word in verse 14 that's so important. Paul speaks about all knowledge. And that we word all is so important because I think it's telling us that Paul's not just saying I want you to be full of Bible knowledge. He's saying I want you to grow in every area of knowledge.

Now that doesn't mean we have to be experts in everything. That's impossible. But I think it does mean that Paul is reminding us that every area of our knowledge about the universe around us is utterly bound up with our knowledge of God. In other words our world view must be shaped by what the Bible teaches. Now a biblical world view is such a crucial aspect of being a follower of Jesus. It means that you don't just have Christianity as this wee box in the corner of your life and then you just have a rest of your understanding of life that doesn't bring Jesus into it. A biblical world view means that whatever you're looking at, politics, science, morals, philosophy, society, whatever it may be, all of it is shaped by the truths that God reveals to us in scripture. Five hundred years ago a very famous book was written by John Calvin. It's called The Institutes of the Christian

[16 : 26] Religion. It's a big, thick book but I would say don't be scared of it. It's actually not too hard a book to read. It's divided up into lots of little sections. So it's a kind of book you can just dip into and read a little bit of. You can actually get it online for free if you don't want to have to pay for it. It's a wonderful book and at the beginning Calvin begins with a vital point. He says that the only way we will have knowledge of ourselves as humans is if first of all we have knowledge of God. There's the quote there, and that never attains to a true self-knowledge until he has previously contemplated the face of God and come down from after such contemplation to look into himself. It's reminding us that we need a worldview, a grasp of all knowledge that has the God of the Bible at the centre of it. And our claim as Christians is that the only worldview that ultimately makes sense is the biblical worldview. Now that's a big claim but it is entirely logical because if

God is the creator of the universe then we are never going to understand it if we make no reference to him. But if our knowledge of the world is shaped by the Bible then it's going to enable us to properly understand the world around us. It's easy to think that Christianity is just like a walking stick or a crutch to help you through life or that it's about doing something nice on a Sunday or that it's about being a better person.

In many ways that's what Christianity and inverted commas has become in the West today and yet that's a tragic diminishing of what the Bible is saying. The message of the Bible is so much bigger than that. The message of the Bible is that the message of Jesus is the only place where you'll be able to make sense of the universe. God wants you to have two reliable logical knowledge. Now you might be saying well Thomas that's all very big claims that you're making. I'm standing here and I'm saying the only way you're going to understand the universe properly is with a biblical worldview. That is 100% what I'm saying. I think we can test it. So here are some statements that I think we can confidently say almost everybody in Scotland will agree with and anybody who disagrees with them would be seen as very much on the fringes of society and of acceptable understanding. So family special, cancer is bad, life is precious, injustice is wrong, joy is good, nature is beautiful, love is most important of all. And the test is this. How do you know any of that's true? I think you could stop anybody in the streets of Stornoway and ask them whether they agree with those things and they would say yes. But how do they or you know that any of that is true? What is the worldview that lies behind these statements? And this may be a wee bit of a simplification but I think that that question, how do you know any of that's true? I think it tends to result in three different categories of response.

Number one is distraction. Just don't think about it. And that's by far the most popular choice we live in a world today that is just longing for one more distraction after another.

And you can see examples of that everywhere in social media and activities and box sets and whatever. It's just don't think about that kind of stuff. Find the next distraction.

[20 : 46] The other option is denial. So even though someone's worldview might be pushing them away from these conclusions, they then kind of deny that they're going to accept the conclusion of their own worldview. So a brilliant example of that is what we'd call atheistic naturalism.

The kind of viewpoint today that the world is just a closed system, there's nothing supernatural and everything is just part of this great machine that starts with nothing and ends with nothing and does a little bit of mechanical processes in between. And in that worldview, at best, love, beauty and people are just accidents. But hardly anyone takes that worldview to its logical conclusion. They deny their own worldview and they just hold on to some kind of value in these areas. So there's distraction, there's denial. The third option is despair. That's the least popular option, but it's the most rational and logical. And this is where people who have no thought of God in their lives, but who really think. So people who deny God, but who really think about life, this is where they usually find themselves. And you can read about that if you read some of the great existential philosophers, the atheist existential philosophers at least in the 20th century, you see it often in some of the most gifted musicians and artists. They think things through and they realise that with no God, they could nothing. And we've always got to ask ourselves, are you one of these? And this is where we see that knowledge is so important in the church because knowledge gives us answers. And if anything is true of Scotland in 2021, all around us, people are looking for answers. Life is so cruel, so perplexing, so frustrating, everywhere people are looking for answers. And the Bible is giving us knowledge that provides us with answers. It explains beauty. So you can stand on the top of them and row in Scotland and see breathtaking beauty in front of you. The Bible explains why that is making you say wow. Because as an image bearer of God, you can recognise and appreciate beauty. That's why the sheep don't stand at the top of the hill saying wow. Only humans.

The Bible explains why injustice is wrong. And so you think of people exploited in the world, the Bible explains that that is wrong. And that, you know, to take the concept of survival of the fittest into social structures whereby you say the strongest man can take whatever woman he wants or the most powerful warlord can snatch whatever territory he is in. The Bible explains why you know that that is wrong. And all of these things we've listed, the Bible fills us with knowledge a biblical worldview gives an answer to all of these things. And this is where you see a successful church combines these two things. Goodness to the point of overflowing and knowledge. Often you think you sometimes have to choose between these two things in a biblical worldview. You don't. You can have all the goodness that we love and rejoice in and you can have the knowledge that satisfies the questions that you have in your mind. A successful church is full of goodness filled with knowledge.

That is a brilliant combination. But there's one more thing that Paul highlights, a final hallmark, a successful church is able to instruct one another. That word instruct is really interesting. It could also be translated advice. It could even be a translated warn. And sometimes that's what Paul does. Throughout this letter, he's giving them instructions and at times he's had to be bold. He says that in verse 15, I've had to speak very boldly towards you in times. But all of that correction and warning is in the context of God's grace.

And with the goal of helping these Christians in Rome grow in their faith. And so the key lesson for us as a church is that if we want to be successful, then it's crucial that we are able to instruct and warn one another. And thinking about our first two points, that makes perfect sense. The whole concept of goodness implies right and wrong, doesn't it? So some things are good and some things are bad. And the whole concept of knowledge implies a need to learn. That's why we need to instruct one another. Now for many of us, this is something that we maybe don't really like to think about. It can be off-putting, especially today. It's so easy to think, I don't want to be instructed. I don't want to be told to do. And we tend to think that we should not be subject to other people's instruction, especially in terms of our behavior or our convictions. But if you think about it for a moment, for all the stuff in life that is really important, then we definitely want to be told what to do. So if you imagine that you were at an airport and there was a security alert, the last thing you would want is for everyone to say, I'm going to do my own thing. You would want clear instruction from the security staff. If you were hoping to secure the purchase of a house, you would need a solicitor to tell you exactly what to do. If you were with a child who had breathing difficulties and you dialed 999, you would do everything that the person on the phone was telling you to do. When we talk about the most important things in life, instruction is a brilliant thing. And for us as a church, the message of the Bible is about the things which by a mile are the most important things in life.

[27 : 53] That's why instruction and even warning is an incredibly important thing. And it's really important that we don't think that warning implies harshness. It's easy to think that some people can think that warning is some kind of punishment. It's not biblical warning does not imply harshness. It implies the deepest level of love. If you like someone, then sometimes you know you'll maybe tell them nice things that they want to hear. If you love someone, you'll tell them the difficult things that you know they need to hear. And for all of us two important questions arise from that. We need to ask, are we ready to instruct one another? And in order to do that, we need to learn what the Bible says so that we have the knowledge that we need. That's why learning is so important. But we also need to know each other. And that's why being together on a Sunday and being together on a Thursday is so, so important. And as restrictions ease, please, please take the opportunity that we now have to be together to spend time with one another as brothers and sisters in Jesus.

We need to know each other if we're going to instruct one another. So we have to ask, are we ready to instruct? But we also have to ask, are we ready to be instructed? When you think about a warning, which one's easier to give it or to get it? It's a lot easier to give it. It's harder to take it. But Paul is reminding us that if a successful church is one where we're going to instruct one another, that doesn't mean that we're just good at instructing. It also means that these Romans were good at listening and they were prepared to learn. Sometimes our pride can make us reluctant to listen, reluctant to ask for instruction. I've maybe told this before, I've used this illustration before.

I am often very silly in a supermarket for lots of reasons, often by stuff I don't need, especially if I'm hungry and going through the shop. But the other thing I do is that if I can't find something, I'm so reluctant to ask someone. I'm like, I want to find it myself. I don't want to ask. I want to find it myself. And that's just pride and stupidity combined together, resulting in a waste of time. If I just ask for instruction, I get the information I need. And for us as a church, that's a crucial thing to remember. It's vital that we're able to instruct one another. So what does a successful church look like?

Big, rich, impressive? No. A successful church is full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, able to instruct one another. That's what we need to aim for. And that's why numbers aren't really very relevant. Resortions don't really matter and the measure of success does not lie in the number of activities that we have. But I'm sure that that church that's full of goodness, filled with knowledge, and able to instruct one another is the kind of church that will actually grow and the kind of church that people will want to be a part of. That's Paul's idea of a successful church. By God's grace, that's what we need to aim for. Let's go for it together. Amen. Let's pray. Father, we pray that as a church, both for ourselves here, but also in partnership with our brothers and sisters in the Church of Scotland next door, we pray that we would be full of goodness, that we would be full of all knowledge, and that we would be able to instruct one another. Amen.

Our closing item of praise is the St. Sam's version of Psalm 14, or the Psalter version of Psalm 40. Apologies from verses one to verse five. These wonderful words, I waited for the Lord my God, and patiently did bear. Please stand and we'll sing these verses together.