

## Acts 14:1-28

### Outward Church: What is a Successful Mission?

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My friend got hired at a retail company to work in their software department. This company does most of their retail online and they use a very specific software to sell their products. My friend has a lot of experience in software and about six months in he recognized that there was a serious problem with this company's software. The software worked fine, but it had a fatal flaw that left its users personal data vulnerable to theft. The only problem was that the problem was so ingrained in the software that they would have to rebuild it from the ground up, costing the company millions of dollars.

When my friend approached management about this issue they agreed it was a problem, but when they took it to their company executives, they ignored the problem. Pretty soon he began to hear rumors that upper management was not pleased with him and his work. Pretty soon some of his coworkers began to give him the cold shoulder for fear of losing their own jobs. Some of his coworkers recognized the problem, and wanted to address it, but before he could do anything the executives fired him.

But the executives didn't stop there. When my friend got to his next company, things seemed to go really well for him. The company really liked him. They even celebrated his expertise. But then the executives at his last company sent his new employers false reports; and the rumors started happening again. He got fired from this company too. He thought about suing his employers, but decided as a Christian, he didn't want to do that. So now he's out of a job, but for some reason it doesn't bother him. Instead, he celebrates what he was able to accomplish at both jobs, and how he was able to help make some changes. He trusts God will take care of both situations.

What do you think? Was he a success? Or a failure? By most external factors, he was a failure. He got fired and chased out of multiple companies. His reputation was sunk. But he spoke the truth and tried to do what was right. If you haven't guessed it by now, my friend is a loose allegory of the Apostle Paul. This is a creative re-telling of Acts 14 in the modern world. No, Paul wasn't a software engineer, but he did speak the gospel truth and get cast out of town because of it.

At the beginning of Acts 14 Paul and Barnabas go into a city. They preach the gospel—the message of forgiveness and grace through Christ Jesus. They even performs signs and wonders. But the Gentile and Jewish leaders mistreat them, throw rocks at them, and they flee to the next city. But then those same people track Paul and Barnabas down in Lystra and convince the locals to stone Paul and drag him out of the city. Paul did the right thing. He preached the gospel message. And he nearly lost it all.

So my big question today is, “What is a successful mission?” By all outward factors, Paul seems like a bit of a failure here. He's chased out of the cities where he's supposed to be starting churches, and yet, at the end of the chapter Barnabas and Paul throw a party to celebrate what God has accomplished. They go back to Antioch where it all started in Acts 13:1-3 and it says this:

**Acts 14:27** And when they arrived and gathered the church together, they declared all that God had done with them, and how he had opened a door of faith to the Gentiles. (ESV)

I think if we can understand what makes their missionary effort a success, it will help us assess how we are doing as a church to reach our mission. Our mission is “to make, mature, and multiply followers of Jesus”

and our vision is to “change lives” with the gospel in Westford. I don’t want to assume we’re successful or not successful. Rather, I want to better understand what can make our mission a success. We find that out by going back to see what happened in Paul and Barnabas’s first missionary journey. Here’s the big events:

**Acts 13:4-12** | On Cyprus Paul confronts a magician, blinds him, and a local government leader believes.

Paul performs a miracle and someone in power comes to Christ. That seems like a success.

**Acts 13:13-52** | Paul preaches to the Jews in Antioch in Pisidia, but after initial interest, even drawing a large crowd, the Jews reject him. The Gentiles believe and the word spreads. The leaders of the city drive them out. Paul and Barnabas shake off the dust on their feet as judgment against them as they leave.

This seems successful in some aspects and a failure in others. Some people come to Christ, but they’re driven out of the city. How about today’s text?

**Acts 14:1-7** | They come to Iconium, they preach, and both Jews and Greeks believe. But unbelievers poison the majority against them. They persevere for a long time, but after an attempted stoning, they leave.

People come to Christ, but then they get chased out of the city. Success? Maybe not in man’s eyes, but in God’s judgment, it seems so.

**Acts 14:8-18** | They go to Lystra, a small backwater city. Paul heals a cripple but the people think he and Barnabas are Zeus and Hermes so they start worshipping them. Paul and Barnabas tear their garments and insist they’re not the one true God. Creation testifies of God.

A miracle and healing is a supernatural sign of God’s power. Success, right? But then the people think they’re gods. I learned this this week:

Lystra had a temple to Zeus, its patron god. According to a local legend, these same gods, Zeus and Hermes, once descended to this region disguised as humans seeking lodging. Though they asked a thousand homes, none took them in. Finally, at a humble cottage of straw and reeds, an elderly couple, Philemon and Baucis, freely welcomed them with a banquet. In appreciation, the gods transformed the cottage into a temple and appointed Philemon and Baucis priests and priestess. Then they sent a flood to destroy the homes of the inhospitable people who had turned them away (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 8.626 - 724). - NIV Zondervan Study Bible (Acts 14:12 note)

So Paul unintentionally attracts false worship to himself. Although outwardly having this huge celebration looks successful, in reality this was probably their least successful mission location. But Paul does take this chance to tell them that all of creation testifies of God. Right after this they get chased out again.

**Acts 14:19-23** | Then opposition comes from the previous cities, Antioch and Iconium, persuade the crowds against them, and stone Paul. He survives and goes to Derbe where he preaches the gospel and makes disciples. Then they return to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, strengthening the disciples, encouraging them, and appointing leaders.

They get chased out of town again but raise up disciples and leaders. When I worked for the fish-tank cleaning company, success was how many tanks you could clean in a day combined with not killing fish or flooding houses... I only killed about a dozen fish once, and I also flooded the waiting room of a medical center. Not my most successful day. They flood the region of Galatia with the gospel, and it’s a success.

**Acts 14:24-28** | They return to Antioch, celebrating what God has done, and stay there for a long time.

Was this missions trip a success or failure? How do we as churches typically measure if we're succeeding? The **three B's: budget, building, and bodies**. If we have a healthy budget, a nice building, and lots of bodies filling the chairs, we look pretty successful. But would Paul and Barnabas meet any of those measures? No buildings, maybe a small budget, some bodies believe, and others want to kill them. I was reading an author recently who pointed out we shouldn't judge the success or failure of something based on its immediate results. Rather, as believers, "its significance is only found in eternity." (The Liturgy of Politics, p. 160). We'll let God judge what is a success and what's not.

However, does that mean there's nothing left to tell us if we're heading in the right direction? No, we can still evaluate what we're doing based on if it matches up with faithfully following the mission God has given us. So instead of asking, "What is a successful mission?" maybe we should ask, "**What is a faithful mission?**" I want to pull out **five principles of a faithful mission** from our passage today:

## **1. Bold sharing of the gospel message.**

Wherever Paul and Barnabas go, they share the gospel message. They share that Jesus came to save sinners like you and me. They share that he died and rose again to redeem us and to create a brand new people called the church. Christ pays for our lives and our lives are counted in his. We get his perfection and he renews us. As the church, we are being transformed into a different kind of people, a resurrection kind of people that believe God can raise the dead and change hearts. The primary way God applies that gospel message to people is by them hearing it, when we share, and their believing.

How are we doing this as a church? Are we being faithful because I try to include a gospel presentation in every single sermon I preach? Are we boldly sharing the gospel message just by doing church in Westford and live-streaming on Facebook? I don't think so. When Paul and Barnabas went into a city, they went to the synagogue, which was a place for Jews to worship, read the Scripture, and debate. So while there are some similarities with a church, churches typically have many people who already believe in Jesus, Synagogues did not. Synagogues had people who were much more familiar with the Old Testament Scriptures, but who also rejected Jesus.

So to be faithful to our mission we need to be sharing the gospel with non-Christians on a regular basis. This is why I'm so excited about potentially doing the Christmas Eve service on the Westford Common. We'll be outside our own walls, hopefully sharing Christ with our neighbors and the community. This is why I participated in the Westford Interfaith service at Thanksgiving, to boldly share the gospel with those who don't yet believe. Please pray for which friend you could invite.

How about you? At Cornerstone we believe God places us each on a frontline, a place where we are called to share the gospel with our friends, neighbors, and family members. When might you boldly share the gospel with someone you already know and love? What else makes a faithful mission?

## **2. Enduring on mission despite opposition.**

Paul and Barnabas faced so much opposition—Elymas the magician, Jews and Gentiles who wanted to stone them, being chased out of cities. In Acts it even says some people poisoned other people's minds.

**Acts 14:2-3a** But the unbelieving Jews stirred up the Gentiles and poisoned their minds against the brothers. So they remained for a long time, speaking boldly for the Lord (ESV)

Have you ever had someone else poison other peoples' minds about you? It didn't make it a pleasant place to be, did it. And yet Paul and Barnabas endure because they care more about preaching the gospel. They keep doing what God has called them to do, no matter what. We too need to endure on the mission God has given us even when we face hardship, suffering, and trial.

Keller tells a [story] about two men who were both convicted of serious crimes and given long sentences. As they began their time in prison, one prisoner was told that his wife and son had died. The other knew that his wife and daughter were still alive. How do you think that affected their experience while they were in prison? The guy who heard the news that his wife and son had died, after about two years of wasting away, ultimately died in prison. The other prisoner, who knew that his wife and daughter were still alive, endured the harsh conditions of the prison and was freed ten years later to be reunited to his family (page 314). - [Micah for You](#)

What couldn't you endure if you knew that the Savior of the humankind had risen from the grave and one day soon you would be united with him? Endure on mission despite opposition.

### **3. Humility in selves, but confidence in Spirit.**

Even though Paul and Barnabas get rejected, Acts 13:52 says they "were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit." (ESV) They are so filled Paul performs miracles in many of the places they go; in Cyprus (Acts 13:11), in Iconium (Acts 14:3), and in Lystra (Acts 14:10). One of the commentaries I read by N.T. Wright talked about the highs and lows of Christian mission. Without the lows, we won't experience the highs. Without the rejection, the opposition, the suffering, we're never going to cry out so much to God that he gives us signs and wonders. We don't see God work because it's more comfortable to stay in that safe middle space where we don't ask much of God and he doesn't ask much of us. What if, like my mentor says, "I set no expectations for myself or others; but I set high expectations for God"?

One of the ways we show our confidence in the Spirit is by praying. I'm excited about this homeless ministry Christmas opportunity, but I also want to cover it in prayer. If you can't be there for it, would you sign up to pray for it? It's about two hours long. Maybe we can get four people to sign up for 30 minute time slots so we're constantly covering it in prayer. The third mark of a faithful mission is humility in selves but confidence in the Spirit. The fourth is...

### **4. Seeking the kingdom, not the three B's.**

What matters most is the kingdom of God, not bigger buildings, budgets, or more bodies. Paul and Barnabas plant churches then they move. They're not interested in building their empires, but God's kingdom.

I've been joining in some pastor group discussions lately where we talk about the greater need in our region. The Pew Research Center reports that about 9% of people in Massachusetts are Protestant Evangelicals. There are about 1,612,000 people living in Middlesex County (12/3/20). If only 9% of them have a saving relationship in Jesus, that's 150,000 people. That means an estimated 1,500,000 people don't know Jesus. A million and a half people need Jesus in our county. How can we make sure they have an opportunity to hear the gospel, at least once? It's going to take working with other churches and ministries to make it happen.

If we narrow our focus to Westford, 9% of 22,000 is about 2,000 people. That means about 20,000 people need to hear about Jesus here. We could invite another twenty churches and ministries to come plant in Westford, and still have plenty of room to breathe. Let's focus on building the kingdom of God.

### **5. Discipleship and leadership development.**

Before Paul and Barnabas head home on their missionary journey they risk seeing some of the churches they just planted one more time. They go back through the cities that rejected them, even the ones that tried to stone him. But it's worth it because they want to do discipleship and raise up leaders.

**Acts 14:21-23** When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, 22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. 23 And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (ESV)

This doesn't mean it will be easy. They say how they've suffered during their mission, but then they rejoice. They raise up other disciples and God does amazing things. If we're feeling nervous about our building, our budget, or our bodies, let's put extra effort into our discipleship and leadership development. One pastor asked this question recently:

What's our definition of a disciple? What's our plan for making one of those? Is our plan working? How would we know?"

We made a discipleship pathway. Are we using it? Is it working? Are we making disciples? Really, discipleship and leadership development needs to be a part of everything we do in our church. The Elders need to be raising up the next generation of Elders. The Deacons need to be raising up the next generation of Deacons. Our worship team, youth team, and children's teams need to be raising up the next generation of leaders within those ministries. I really want us to commit to praying about that and seeking out opportunities. Who might your team raise up? So what are the **five principles of a faithful mission**?

1. **Bold sharing of the gospel message.** Share Jesus on your frontline. Let's preach Jesus on the common.
2. **Enduring on mission despite opposition.** When things get hard, keep going.
3. **Humility in selves but confidence in Spirit.** Let's saturate it all in prayer.
4. **Seeking the kingdom, not the three B's.** Let's have a greater vision for our town and county. Let's not collect but commit to growing the kingdom.
5. **Discipleship and leadership development.** What's our definition of a disciple? What's our plan for making one of those? Is our plan working? How would we know?

As we look at these principles, it redefines trying to be successful to trying to be faithful, and trusting God with the results. Let's pray.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;  
Praise Him all creatures here below  
Praise Him above ye heavenly host;  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.  
Amen.

Pastor [Jonathan Romig](#) preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes endnotes and references. You can also listen on [Apple podcasts](#). Read the [story of our church here](#).

## Discussion Questions

1. What makes a ministry or our mission appear like a success or failure?
2. How is appearance different than being faithful to the mission?
3. What ways can you be faithful to where God has placed you?
4. How does the gospel help us be faithful?