

When I was in seminary, I met Pastor Wang, the pastor from the church I grew up in. He expressed discouragement and regret because the attendance at his church had been declining dramatically. Eventually the church dissolved because there were not enough members. If we evaluate the health of his church based on the number of members, as so naturally we tend to do, then it is easy to see why Pastor Wang would have felt so discouraged. It is natural for us to evaluate things based on what we can see. We pastors struggle with the temptation to size each other up by comparing attendance at our churches. This is the world's way of looking at the success of ministry. If we take this perspective to its logical conclusion then some megachurches that don't even preach the gospel would be considered the healthiest churches. However, the Lord's way is different. He sees past the numbers. Recall in the beginning of 2 Corinthians 10 Paul talked about the battlefield of the mind, where the world's values are pitted against the Lord's. This battle occurs even in the way we think about church and ministry.

In v. 12 Paul describes how his opponents in Corinth think like the world thinks. They judge their own work by comparing it with others and they commend themselves. They are puffed up, and their goal is only to attract the most followers. All of us pastors struggle with this temptation to compare and compete with each other. This is the world's way infiltrating the way we think. But if we think this way, then what do we make of my friend Pastor David, who pastors a church of six people in Los Altos? Do we consider him a failure? According to Paul, if one is faithful in serving in the sphere God has assigned to him, no matter how large that sphere may be, then he will be commended by the Lord.

In v. 13-16 Paul tells us that not all boasting is wrong, only boasting in the wrong things. We should not boast about the size of our congregations or the number of converts we have made. Instead we should focus on whether or not we are being faithful in whatever sphere God assigns us, even if it be only a few people. This church is the sphere God assigned me. That's why I limit myself to being absent no more than once every two months for outside speaking engagements. This is how I try to be faithful to the sphere God assigned me. And I believe that Pastor Wang was faithful to the sphere God assigned him also, even if the size of the

congregation diminished. It's not a matter of popularity or numbers. In the parable of the talents (Matthew 25:14-23) the two servants who were faithful with what the master gave them were given the same commendation, even though one doubled five talents and the other only doubled two talents. It doesn't matter the size of the sphere God assigns you to, only that you serve faithfully. What is your sphere? It may be your family, your children, your clique, your colleagues, your fellowship, or your Sunday school kids. And are you faithful in serving whatever sphere God assigns to you? In the end, our commendation will not be from others, nor from ourselves. So we shouldn't look at our service the way the world looks at it. Let us not look at or compare ourselves based on the external, on numbers, or on popularity. If we serve faithfully, our commendation will be from the Lord.