



Luke 8:1-21
“The Seed That Wins”

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“Following Christ from City Center”

VB': LUKE 8:1-21 "THE SEED THAT WINS"

1) vv.1-3 HEARING AND DOING THE KINGDOM: JESUS' TRAVEL COMPANIONS (L).

1 *Soon afterward he (i.e. Jesus) went on through cities and villages,* **Discipleship As Journey, Summary**
PREACHING and **PROCLAIMING** the good news of **THE KINGDOM OF GOD.** **4:18, 40-44, 6:20**
*And **THE TWELVE** were with him,* **New Family, Eyewitnesses Guarantee Facts, New Israel**
2 *and also **SOME WOMEN** who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities:* **7:21, 6:18-19, 11:14-26**
Mary, called "Magdalene," from whom seven demons had gone out, **Death/ Burial (23:49, 55)**
3 *and Jo-anna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward.* **Resurrection (24:10, 22, Acts 1:11-14, 13:31)**
and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means. **\$ Financial (Acts 6:2)**

Divided Response, Word (vv.11, 13, 15, 21)

2) vv.4-8 PARABLE OF THE SEED (vv.4-8a), THE CALL TO HEAR (v.8b).

How He Sees

4 a) *And when a great crowd came together and people from town after town came to him,* **Magnetic**
he said in a parable: **Sower/Seed/Soil/Troubles, (Mk. 4:1-20, Mt. 13:19, G.T. 9)**
5 *"A sower went out to sow his seed;* **Jer. 31:27-28, Teacher: Jesus The Realist!**
and as he sowed, some fell along the path, **1) Path: Trodden/Devoured**
and was trodden under foot, and the birds of the air devoured it. **12:1, //2 Esd. 8:41**
6 *And some fell on the rock;* **2) Rock: Withered**
and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. **Sir. 23:25, 40:15**
7 *And some fell among thorns;* **3) Thorns: Choked**
and the thorns grew with it and choked it. (3 Failures!)
8 *And some fell into good soil* **4) Good Soil: Matured**
and grew, and yielded a hundredfold." (1 Enormous Success!) Normal = 7-15 fold, Gen. 26:12
Purpose = Counter Disappointment
b) *As he said this, he called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear."* **5) That We Hear Matters**
7:29, Hear (8: 8b (2x) , 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 21)

3) vv.9-10 THE PRIVILEGE OF DISCIPLESHIP: THE KINGDOM & THE WORD.

9 *And when **HIS DISCIPLES** asked him what this parable meant,* **Not In Private, This One Only**
10 *he said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of **THE KINGDOM OF GOD**;*
but for others they are in parables, **Secrets Clarified In Divine Revelation, p.v.**
*so that seeing they may not see, and **HEARING** they may not understand.* **Is. 6:9-10**
11 *Now the parable is this: The seed is **THE WORD OF GOD.*** **Key To The Code/Allegory**

Parable + Question + Explanation = Exek. 17:1-24, Zech 4:1-14

Growth **2') vv.12-18 ALLEGORY OF THE SOILS (vv. 12-16), THE CALL TO HEAR (vv.16-18).**
12 a) *The ones along the path are those who have heard;* **1) Path: Immediate Loss (22:3)**
None *then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts,* **Constant Spiritual Warfare**
that they may not believe and be saved. **7:50, Satan's Goal**
13 *And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy; but these have no root,*
Some *they believe for a while and in a season of temptation fall away.* **4:2, 2) Rock: Temptation (22:40)**
14 *And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear,* **3) Thorns: Distraction (Acts 5:1-11)**
More *but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life,* **Distracts**
and their fruit does not mature. **Dt. 6:4-5, Virtues: Deep, Patient, Obedient Hearing**
15 *And as for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart,*
Fruit *and bring forth fruit with patience.* **6:45, 21:19, Only In Retrospect 4) Good Soil → Mature Fruit**
Faith Needs Faithfulness, Hear/See, 7:22
16 b) *"No one after lighting a lamp/ covers it with a vessel, or puts it under a bed,/ 11:33, Let Your Light Shine*
See *but puts it on a stand,/ that those who enter may see the light.* **Illumine Way For Newcomers (v.16);**
17 *For nothing is hid that shall not be made manifest, 12:2, No Secrets At The End*
nor anything secret that shall not be known and come to light. **Live In The Light Now (v.17).**
18 *Take heed (look) then how you hear; for to him who has will more be given, To Hear = Welcome More*
Hear *and from him who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away."* **5) How We Hear Matters**

1') vv.19-21 HEARING AND DOING THE WORD: JESUS' OLD AND NEW FAMILIES.

19 *Then **HIS MOTHER AND HIS BROTHERS** came to him, but they could not reach him for the crowd.*
20 *And he was told, "Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you."* **11:28**
21 *But he said to them, "My mother and my brothers are those who **HEAR** the **WORD OF GOD** and **DO IT**."*

A Brief Treatment Of 8:1-21

There are four link words that set this thought unit (VB' 8:1-21) in parallel to the earlier unit on discipleship (VB: 7:18-35). They are *see and hear* (7:21-22, 24-27 // 8:8b-21), the *kingdom of God* (7:28 // 8:1, 10), use of parables (7:31-32 // 8:4-8), and *demon* (7:33) // *demon, devil* (8:2, 12). Luke's source is Mark 4:1-20 which he freely modifies with the addition of an introductory summary (vv.1-3) and other editorial changes. The unit is a 5:1 concentric pattern (1-2-3-2'-1'). The contrast between Jesus' new family (disciples + women) in vv.1-3 contrasts with Jesus' family of origin (mother + brothers) in vv.19-21 as an inclusion. *Kingdom of God* is found in parts 1 & 3 and the parallel phrase *word of God* in parts 3 & 1' to form an overlap in the middle (vv.9-10). The parable of the sower (2. vv.4-8) is fleshed out in the allegory of the soils (2' vv.12-18) with a question of the disciples and Jesus' answer at the center (3. vv.9-10). The word *hear/heard* is scattered throughout vv.8-21 as a link word (vv. 8b [2x], 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 18, 21) as is *the word* (vv.11, 13, 15, 21). The thought unit is carefully and artfully constructed.

Luke's summary (vv.1-3) demonstrates the scope and content of Jesus' general ministry. He did not wait for people to come but takes God's immediate rule (*the kingdom*) and its effects to large and small settlements. The eyewitnesses who could fill in the details fall into an appointed male group (*the twelve* as Israel reconstituted) and a female group who followed out of gratitude for healings. Mary was exorcised; Joanna was from the household of Antipas; Susanna was among *many others who provided for them out of their means*. Their gifts kept the show on the road. Jesus created a new community about which many likely gossiped because it broke with conventional gender behavior as a social experiment.

Where Jesus was found, people came (v.4). As a window into the kingdom, Rabbi Jesus offered an extended farming metaphor. The sight of a sower broadcasting before the fall plowing was common. In the off-season, footpaths formed across small plots; under thin topsoil was a layer of limestone, and quick-growing thorns were present. Seed along the path meets two frustrations: human feet and hungry birds. Seed on thin topsoil quickly germinated and just as quickly withered under the sun's intensity. Seed among thorns initially thrived but was choked out before bearing fruit. Jesus' view of the world was realistic about multiple layers of opposition and loss. The language is violent; precious seed is *stomped, devoured, withered and choked*. Despair is an option. But the harvest from good soil vindicates the sowing with a huge return. Jesus faces a hostile world and marches forth in hope. Those with ears should listen deeply (v.8c) and obey (v.21). Ultimately, Jesus himself is the hundredfold harvest gathered by God and the Spirit in resurrection after he was devoured by hatred, withered by violence, and choked in death.

At the center is an inquiry and answer. The request for explanation has two purposes: 1) it shows the twelve lacking in full comprehension, 2) it prepares the way for the allegory. The secrets of the kingdom of God are revealed to followers who've hooked their futures to Jesus. For those not-yet-committed, the parable remains opaque, and so they remain blind and deaf. Following Jesus is the doorway to divine revelation, to seeing what happens as they accompany Jesus round the countryside. In v.11 Jesus unlocks the parable with the key to its meaning: *the seed is the Word of God*. The allegory follows the parable at each point. The birds are the devil; the shallow ones are those who quickly fail; the thorns that choke are pleasant diversions, and those who bear fruit are good soil that nourishes the seed with patience till the harvest comes. They also bear light to novices and grow in revelation (vv.16-18). The controlling claims of family are secondary to the new family which hears and obeys Jesus as the word.

THE SEED THAT WINS

“He who has ears to hear, let him hear”

Jesus’ exclamation point to everyone with ears!

L U K E 8 : 8 b

Cheraw Hardware was a wonderful place. Dark-oiled, wide-planked floors. Rolling ladders down both walls to reach the upper bins of plumbing fittings. And in the back, two steps up to the left, a magical place. Rawlings baseballs packed in tissue paper, stiff new Spaulding gloves begging for a rubbing in Neat’s-foot oil and hours of fielding grounders, a rack of bats bearing the names of heroes burned into ash: Mantle, Marris, and Mays. Hold one in your hand, feel the heft of the balance and imagine the glory of hardwood cracking against fast-ball-rawhide. Full count, ninth inning, runner on third, Thrailkill at the bat! A swing and a prayer from a ten year old; it was for me a field of dreams. Jesus touched some of that same deep place when he called men and women to follow him in a caravan from town to village across Galilee. Why else would they have left family and jobs and the trappings of familiarity to strike out behind him on the road to who knows where? It was a major break; life scripts were rewritten by Jesus at the crossroads of life.

There was another place I always stopped at the back of Cheraw Hardware, and that was the wooden seed bins. Even today I can feel my skinny arms plunging into a square bin of tiny purple seeds and the sensation of seeds cascading between fingers by the hundreds. There were pictures over each bin, and I wondered how you got from what I held to what I saw. Something marvelous was in my hands, each seed a little packet of energy waiting for a covering of sod and the gifts of warmth and moisture to explode into life, pushing upwards towards a destiny. Jesus loved seeds,¹ “The sower went out to sow his seed.... The seed is the word of God.” Jesus stirred visions of glory in the hearts of women and men and painted pictures with words. People followed him and found themselves as characters in God’s garden.

¹ His seed stories include Mk. 4:1-20, 4:26-29, 4:30-32, Mt. 13:24-30.

While speaking in a church on the West Coast Dr. Howard Hendricks found a sign on the pulpit, “What in the world are you trying to do to these people?”² My aim today is to lift up the adventure of following Jesus and give an understanding why it’s so demanding, why so many start and end poorly. I want us to be good soil, “who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bring forth fruit with patience.” I want us to be Jesus’ family who “hear the word of God and do it.”

The Mob Around The Man (vv.1-3)

Did you know you can only follow Jesus Christ *if first* he’s done something for you? It’s never *I found him* but always *He found me*. Each of the twelve was personally called. “Peter and Andrew, leave your nets and follow me. Time to fish for people.”

“You, Mary of Magdala, jewel hidden ‘neath a layer of grime, I can rid you of the voices in your head that scream at night and make you feel defiled. Seven of them in all. I see them. Out, every one of you! It’s freedom time!”

“And you Joanna, your husband’s a powerful man, but you are weary of soul. I can heal the boredom of being one of the *ladies of leisure* and having to be beautiful every day. Leave the endless redecorating of your home and follow me. Become downwardly mobile.” That’s what she did, and it’s why her name is remembered in the list of Jesus’ leading ladies who served on the finance committee.

Some who were healthy Jesus called from their work; others he healed and delivered.³ Some he met at their strong point, others where the pain was greatest. For each he did what was needed to jar them loose from one life into an alternative life with him. Jesus was the one who held the new movement together, and without him they had no reason to be together. He was the divide between the *before* and the *after* in each of their lives. It was a blend of affection and curiosity, hope and fascination that glued them to Rabbi Jesus. He stirred something deep, a passion to be a player in what God was doing in the world, a field of dreams in a world grown cynical. And somewhere along the way it dawned on each of them, “For this I was born and *born*

² Raymond McHenry, *The Best of “In Other Words”* (Houston, TX: Raymond McHenry, 1996), 197-198.

³ For an introduction to Jesus’ power ministry, see Andrew Dauntion-Fear, *Healing in the Early Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), Chapter 1, “Jesus and His Contemporaries, 1-16; also Graham Twelftree, *In the Name of Jesus: Exorcism Among Early Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2007), Chapter 6, “Luke-Acts,” 129-156.

again.” There was a certain wild and unpredictable freedom about being on the road with the man from Nazareth. Wake up in a strange village or under the stars and think to yourself, “What am I doing here? Where did my life go, and who are all these people?” Then you remember, “Jesus touched my life, and it’s worth it.”

Episcopal priest Robert Capon is right, “We are in a war between dullness and astonishment.” Mike Yaconelli turns it into a tirade:

“The most critical issue facing Christians today is not abortion, porn, the disintegration of the family, moral absolutes, MTV, drugs, racism, sexuality or school prayer. *The critical issue today is dullness.* We’ve lost our astonishment. The Good New is no longer good news; it’s okay news. Christianity is no longer *life changing*; it is *life enhancing*. Jesus doesn’t change people into wild-eyed radicals anymore; He changes them into ‘nice people.’ If Christianity is simply about being nice,” writes Yaconelli, “I’m not interested.”⁴

“Follow me,” said Jesus to Peter, “and I will make you nice and nicer and nicest.” I don’t think so. Loving, courageous, honest, adventuresome? Yes, but not *nice*. That’s what your grandmother wants, not what Jesus has in mind. Jesus adds *edge* to life. They didn’t string him up for being *nice*; he was a threat, and still is.

Part of Luke’s brilliance is that he’s able to pack so much into the brief summaries he sprinkles throughout his gospel. Chapter 8, verses 1-3 is one of those and a close reading of these three verses might rearrange how we think about church.

We in the church are largely passive, waiting for people to come our way to hear our message, but Jesus was aggressive, taking it to village after village in a campaign more like the US Army liberating concentration camps. In Jesus’ word and works the active rule of his Father was breaking in upon people to set things right. Verse 1, “Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, *preaching and proclaiming the kingdom of God.*” Jesus was a man on the move with a message that mattered and a mob that marveled at the mystery that manifested wherever he moved. How many *m*’s is that? I count nine! I want you to sense the dynamism of it all.

Whereas we expect the pastor to act as a kind of paid soloist and not to teach

⁴ *Dangerous Wonder* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1998), 23.

us to sing, Jesus never went anywhere without his squad of trainees. It was a floating school in which they watched him preach and do the kingdom stuff, and then later he sent them out to do the same.⁵ On-the-job training. Hand-to-hand combat. Learning in community with Jesus as the living curriculum. Surely they got tired, but I don't think boredom was much of a problem. They were in the thick of it.

And what an odd bunch of misfits. Fishermen, tax collectors, political radicals, twelve of them so the symbol was clear. Jesus and his bunch is the seed of the new Israel: twelve ancient tribes, twelve Jewish men. God is reclaiming his people under new leadership. And no self-respecting rabbi allowed women in his band of disciples. But Jesus did, which no doubt stirred lots of dirty rumors. Men like Peter, away from his wife, on the road with other women. Gossip at the Capernaum beauty shop, "Why Rebecca, have you ever seen such a thing? I wouldn't let my Aaron run around with that bunch. But you know, this Jesus' fella's doing lots of good, or so they say."

And the women were from one end of the social spectrum to the other. Mary from the fishing village of Magdala, was *the demon lady*, "the one from whom seven demons had gone out." Jesus had to fumigate her of spiritual vermin before she was much good to anyone. Seven demons says Luke and Mark.⁶ Probably had the number seven tattooed on her body somewhere. Joanna's husband was King Herod's trusted manager. It was the demon lady meets Martha Stewart. Of one other, Susanna, we have nothing but a name, then a report about "many others (also nameless), who provided for them out of their means." Who picked up the tab to keep the kingdom movement on the road? The women! They received kingdom blessings and responded with generous service. In this model the men learned interdependence and respect; the women learned to live as equals. If you sat them down, each had a story of *getting busted* by Jesus; he'd broken in with various forms of love: a call, a healing, a deliverance, a word of forgiveness, a challenge. It was his love for them that bound them to him and one another. Jesus traveled; Jesus announced the kingdom; Jesus collected followers; Jesus told seed stories; powerful stuff happened as the Holy Spirit confirmed the preaching; people's hearts were laid bare to the love and demand of God, and each day was a new adventure.

Jesus and his band were risk takers. We've become caretakers and undertakers.

⁵ 9:1-6, 10:-16, Acts 1:1-14.

⁶ 16:9

John Wesley and the early Methodists were risk takers, preaching in fields, reaching the poor, believing ordinary people could live holy lives, but we their children have become caretakers and undertakers. What happened? The three verses that open chapter eight lead me to think that somewhere along the way we lost the adventuresome side of the faith. In the words of Mike Yaconelli, “We’ve forgotten what it’s like to stand speechless in the presence of Jesus, hearts beating wildly, staggered and stunned by what God is doing in the world.”⁷ Jesus is simply the most attractive, winsome, soul-stirring, brain-scrambling, totally annoying person who ever drew breath. To follow him remains as messy and as exhilarating as then. If Christianity feels safe and cozy, something essential has died. When we tame it, we kill it. And how tame we have become. How predictable.

A.W. Tozer wrote, “That this world is a playground instead of a battleground has now been accepted in practice by the vast majority of Christians.”⁸ But to Jesus our world is more battleground than playground. His was a campaign of liberation as much as D-Day. Who will take it to the streets and neighborhoods of this village? Who will announce the kingdom, pray for the sick and set free the bound? Who will model a community of men and women in partnership? What if God gives us the grace to quit being caretakers and undertakers and become risk takers again. They’re called *disciples*; Jesus is not ashamed to call them *family*; they *hear the word of God and do it!* We have a God-saturated history, a God-given mission, a God-ordained destiny. We follow Christ from city-center, and this corner is our base of operations.

Parable Of The Victorious Seed (vv.4-8)

I used to think the *Parable of the Sower* was simply an agricultural analogy for a spiritual truth, helpful, but not absolutely necessary. But No. It’s a window into the mind of Jesus, a clue to how he sees.⁹

⁷ *Dangerous Wonder*, 29.

⁸ McHenry, *The Best of...*, 242.

⁹ For scholarly readings, see Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 145-177; Arland Hultgren, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 181-201, Bernard Scott, *Hear Then the Parable* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1989), 343-362.

Verse 4 tells us *a great crowd* was there, and here Jesus began with a scene they knew well. It happened every fall, sow and then plow.¹⁰ In the off-season, footpaths make the soil hard in long winding strips. Underneath thin topsoil are plates of limestone invisible on the surface. Weeds and thorns grow as much as six feet tall. But the sower sows in hope, striding across the field with a seed bag slung over his shoulder, broadcasting in large arcs, knowing not all the seed will make it.

Some seed falls on a path. It never germinates; it's trodden under foot and devoured by birds. Failure No. 1. Other seed lands where topsoil is thin. It sends down shallow roots and springs up quickly. There's rock underneath and no humus to hold moisture like a sponge. The Mediterranean sun curls the tiny shoots to a brown crisp. No flower, no fruit, some progress over the first seed but still failure No. 2. Some fell among thorns. Deeper soil, room for roots, reaching up, flowering, then choked out in the competition. Almost, but not quite. Failure No. 3. So far it's a tale of frustration and failure. Was the sower only wasting seed?

Where did we get the idea that Jesus was some positive-thinking-Polyanna who lived in a spiritual na-na-land thinking elevated, heavenly thoughts? Probably from some of the sentimental art that hangs around our churches. Jesus was the most realistic man who ever lived, in fact the only one who saw truth through eyes unclouded by cataracts of sin. What Jesus saw was brutal and violent and mean and unfair. Listen to the verbs he used to describe the fate of the precious seed: *stomped, devoured, withered away, choked!* Little bundles of energy, destined to be golden and heavy with grain, all destroyed! A holocaust! That is how Jesus sees this world. It's a battlefield strewn with casualties: *stomped on, devoured, withered away, choked!* A tough neighborhood! Frustration and failure and death and violence and unfruitfulness are everywhere; no one escapes it. It's how it is in a beautiful fallen world now infected with evil and soggy with sin and marked by rebellion at every level. I'm sorry; it's just the way things are this side of heaven. Heaven's doing quite well I'm told; the problems are all down below where genetics misfire and natural disasters consume thousands, drunk drivers murder mothers and their unborn children, tires blow out and church buses collide with road rigs, lives that wither under poverty and ignorance, infections that spread, children are abused by their own parents, and some are more vulnerable to addictions than others. Here wars never cease, and for every breakthrough of hope there's a corresponding slide into

¹⁰ Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York, NY: Scribner's Sons, 1963), 11-12, note 3.

barbarism. Planet earth is a mess and will be till God says *Enough of that!* So if at times you feel stomped on, devoured, blistered or choked, welcome to the world as Jesus saw it, the world he loved and came to save, the world in which he planted his church. And if, in the face of tragedy, you ask, Why did this happen? I understand the question. But the answer is not easy to process. Life is not a playground but a battleground.¹¹ Joy and goodness and innocence and peace are still present as a witness to God's vision, but never in such power as to do away with the ugly realities, that people are *stomped on, devoured, withered away, and choked!* Both are real now, but in the future only one will be, and that's our hope. Jesus was a realist; what was meant to bear fruit was *stomped on, devoured, withered away, and choked!*

But the story goes on, "And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold." This is a kingdom parable that breaks out of the natural into the possibilities of God. It's a call to confidence in God who brings a harvest in spite of failure. Repeated failure and the learning that comes from it is the path to the hundredfold harvest. If I keep broadcasting the seed of God's Word, at some point something's going to spring up and grow and bear fruit wildly out of proportion with our input. Jesus said this was an important story for any who want to hang out with him; I know because he said it was for *everyone with ears*, "After he said this, *he called out*, 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear!'"

The Privilege (vv.9-10)

I've heard variations on the story at least a hundred times. "Pastor, before I came to Christ I couldn't make sense out of the Bible, but now that I know the Lord I find the most amazing things in this book. I read it, and then all of a sudden it's reading me!" We need not minimize that in the economy of the kingdom of God there are insiders and there are outsiders. There are those who have access to the mysteries and insights of God's rule; then there are those who even when they see- don't, and even when they hear- don't. Something within them is blocked; there are blinders behind their eyes and earplugs *inside their heads*. Sit in church beside one of them. God is speaking to you, and they're daydreaming about work or golf or the pot roast. Divine revelation in one seat, spiritual blindness in the next. Happens every Sunday.

God is not in the business of revealing his best stuff to the disinterested and

¹¹ On the issue I have been helped by Gregory Boyd, *Is God To Blame?* (Downer's Grove, ILL: IVP, 2003),

merely curious. Obedience, the willingness to trust and follow Jesus in the details of life, is the prerequisite for divine revelation. What's clear to the disciple is a riddle for the uncommitted. It was *his disciples* who were curious enough to ask in verse 9, and it was to those who were *already following him* that Jesus gave the answer, "To you (who now follow me) it's been given to know the secrets (plural) of the kingdom of God; but for others they are in *riddles*. They can't and don't get it. They stay blind and deaf because they've never trust me enough to follow.

This principle is this: Commit yourself to obeying whatever God shows you, and God will show you more. Quit obeying at any point and you do not stay spiritually level; you lose ground. It is a law of the kingdom of God as much as gravity is a law of this world. Verse 18, "Take heed then *how* you hear; for to him who has will more be given, and from him who has not, even *what he thinks he has* will be taken away." Some of you have less Christian truth than you did five years ago because you quit obeying five years ago and went into spiritual hibernation. God showed you something you didn't like, and you said *No*. When you quit using a muscle it doesn't stay at that level of fitness; it deteriorates. We are either moving deeper into obedience and revelation or we are backsliding. There is no neutral place in the kingdom of God, no place to stop and say, "This far and no further. I've got about all I want of God." The day you no longer obey is the day you begin to decay. I'm not here to make you feel good about not obeying God; no novocaine from this pulpit. If you want the sweetness of your relationship with Jesus restored, go back to where you said *No* and say *Yes*. It's called repentance. Then watch what happens. It will be painful at first and hard to mentally review years of no progress, but not nearly as painful as spending the rest of your life getting stomped and devoured and withered and choked by your own conscience with no hope of a harvest.

The Allegory Of The Soils (vv.12-18).

A unique feature of this section of Luke is that it not only contains a parable of Jesus but a detailed unfolding of that parable in the life of the early church which used Jesus' story to make sense of its own experience because the pattern was the same: failure, failure, failure, surprising harvest. Why are some not converted, and why do many never mature? Why do some move on to lives of service whereas others stay deaf and blind to God all their lives? Good questions. Jesus lived in a tough neighborhood; so did the church, but in verse 11 we are given the key to the allegory, "The seed is the Word of God."

The first reason for failure in the church is that we face real spiritual opposition

in the devil who delights in spoiling and aborting the work of God in the hearts of people.¹² Get it straight, church. Jesus believed in the devil and took this fallen angel with supreme seriousness.¹³ Many of us don't. We think ourselves more sophisticated than him, which for those who claim to be his modern day followers is a big problem of cognitive dissonance. Human stubbornness and ignorance and meanness explains much of the pain of this world, but behind it all is an organizing intellect who has access to our thoughts and hearts. He doesn't want people to trust Christ and be saved; he wants to keep them in his camp in this life and in the life to come, and he is at work here every Sunday plucking up what I sling out. The apostles knew they faced invisible opposition: verse 12, "The ones along the path are those *who have heard*; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, *that they may not believed and be saved.*" Some of the devil's best work is done in church, and we aren't even aware of it. Let me tell you a little secret. Every Sunday morning when it's still dark, I come into this empty sanctuary. I pray over every pew, and I shout out loud, "Come, Holy Spirit! Let your people hear, starting with me!" It's my way of plowing before I scatter the seed of the Word. I also repent of every possible sin I can think of. When the sun rises on Sunday I want to be in full battle gear.

Disguise has always been one of our enemy's effective strategies. Andrew Delbanco, author of the book *The Death of Satan*, laments the loss of the sense of radical evil that the devil embodies. Although twentieth century atrocities occur: the Nazi holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Stalin's death camps, the *killing fields* of

¹² "First century Jews understood that birds such as crows and blackbirds symbolized Satan and his demons. For example in the apocryphal Jubilees (11:9-24) the demon Mastema send crows and birds to eat seeds on the ground in order to impoverish the earth" (Sharon Beekman, Peter Bolt, *Silencing Satan* [Eugene, Oregon, Wipf & Stock, 2012], 99.) The parallel to vv. 5, 12 are impossible to miss. For a introduction, see Dennis McCallum, *Satan And His Kingdom* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany, 2009).

¹³ A clear reference to the *devil* is found in the U.M. Confession of Faith, Article XI, *Sanctification and Christian Perfection*: "...The Christian must continue on guard against spiritual pride and seek to gain victory over every temptation to sin. He must respond wholly to the will of God so that sin will lose its power over him; and the world, the flesh, *and the devil* are put under his feet. Thus he rules over these enemies with watchfulness through the power of the Holy Spirit" (*BOD* 2012: 73). This statement is a gift of the EUB heritage (See J. Steven O'Malley, Jason E. Vickers, *Methodist and Pietist: Reviving The Evangelical United Brethren Tradition* [Nashville, TN: Kingswood, 2011], Chapter 7, "The Confession of Faith: A Theological Commentary," 109-138).

Cambodia, mass graves in Rwanda and *ethnic cleansing* in Bosnia and Kosova, Sarin gas in Syria and bombs outside Pakistani churches on Sunday mornings, Delbanco argues that “we have *no language* for connecting our inner lives with the horrors that pass before us.” And though the social sciences try to explain it, Delbanco contends that “The idea of evil (and to that I would add the notion of *personalized evil*) is something on which the health of society depends. We have an obligation to name evil and oppose it, in ourselves as well as in others.”¹⁴ That is the intellectual issue: what we cannot name we cannot resist. Now let me sear your brain with a picture.

A missionary once returned to Africa to find a huge python had taken up residence in his absence. He walked to the truck, took out his .45 pistol, walked back in and put a slug in the snake’s head. It was a mortal wound, but the snake didn’t die instantly. It thrashed about in the throes of death, and the tremendous power of the snake’s body trashed much of the house. When the noise stopped the man went in to find the snake dead, his home his own again, but much of it destroyed. Satan received a fatal shot to the head in the death and resurrection of Jesus. He now writhes in the pain of his defeat and destroys as much as he can in the process. His ultimate fate is sealed, but for the time being he’s extremely dangerous.¹⁵ He has many methods but a single goal, in the words of Luke, “...that they may not believe and be saved.” If he can distract people from hearing and trusting, they remain lost.

There are others, the church learned early on, who make a quick start, a good beginning, but later show themselves shallow. Our technological, media-saturated and standardized pop culture is creating them by the droves. They don’t think, or else think in clichés. The Word of God has never gone deep enough to transform their minds. God and church are just items on the entertainment menu. They are trapped in the therapeutic mind set, see no further than themselves and have little appreciation for the inner toughness that must be developed to follow Jesus Christ across a lifetime. “So,” writes Luke in verse 13, “in a season of temptation they fall away.” There’s no inner power of resistance equal to the pressure of temptation, so they fold. Spiritual pushovers. When discipleship get in the way of the easy way, they fall away. I’ve met many such people; I hope not to become one myself because that is the constant pressure of the culture. We live in a world that discourages the development of a rich inner life of reflection and meditation and depth. And if you

¹⁴ Adapted from G. Curtis Jones & Paul H. Jones, *500 Illustrations* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1998), 92-93.

¹⁵ Adapted from McHenry, *The Best of*, 220.

do not constantly swim against the tide, it will carry you away. God is calling us to go deep. Anything we do that combats the triumph of the trivial is for the good. *Trivial Pursuit* is a great game and a poor lifestyle. It's one reason I'm always giving out good Christian books and articles to people with promise; I don't want their minds and souls to turn to mush!

But it is the third failure that traps most Christians in America. These are people with promise. They've made serious commitments to Christ. They are growing, flowering, and bearing little green fruit, but then something happens. "They are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life." The fruit never matures to the point it could serve as a source of nourishment for someone else. That is the purpose of fruit- to feed others. My observation is that it's hard for people with resources to stay faithful; they have so many options: travel, cruises, recreation, all the menu that makes up *the good life* as defined by American culture. It's hard for them to remain focused. At some point pastors consign them to the category of *people-I-once-had-hope-in-but-now-I-know-not-to-count-on-ever-because something-else-always-comes-first*. You smile at them and are polite, go to their soirees, eat their filets, play the church game, bury their dead and marry their children, but you know that unless God raises the pain level they will always be *disciple wanna-be's*. The fruit of effective service just never matures in their life. Little green fruit dries up and falls off year after year. In the end they are spiritual consumers and not producers, and in the process use up many resources. Enormous reserves of grace are wasted on them, like a child who goes to college year and after year and never gets a job. They use up the golden eggs of others and never produce any of their own.

Over the years I've buried some folk for whom v.15 would be a fitting epitaph, "And as for that in the good soil, they are those, who hearing the word of God, hold it fast in a good and honest heart, and bring forth fruit with patience." Notice how Luke piles up *virtue* words: *good, honest, patient*. Every church has some of these people, and I'd embarrass them this morning if I called their names. The mature fruit of a life that pleases God and nourishes others is what Christ is after. No one is fated to be any one of the soils that fails. You are not fated; it is what you become depending on what you do with God's grace, the seed he's sowing into your life. It is only at life's end that we look back and see what soil we've become: the devil's fools, shallow believers, distracted wanna-be's, or fruit-bearers. And by the grace of God we are given points along the way for a fresh assessment and mid-course correction, and for some of us that might be today. And so my question for each of us is this: What kind of soil am I becoming by the details of daily life? The Lord is sowing his Word into my heart in hopes of a harvest. Christ has hope in me; he is

striding across the fields of my years casting his seed. How am I responding? Have I opened a door within for the Evil One to abort the Word of God and it's work in my heart? Am I a spiritual marshmallow with no toughness and staying power against temptation? Is my dream of *the good life* getting in the way of a full and mature harvest? Do I take my own life as seriously as he does?

Is verse 17 good or bad news? It depends on what your life has become by the power of God's grace. "For nothing is hid that shall not be made manifest, nor anything secret than shall not be known and come to light." If there's anything in your life you'd be ashamed to be shown on a screen, deal with it today. Don't leave this church with something that could make you cringe in shame at the Last Judgment when it pops up on the screen. Confess it to God; ask forgiveness. Have it wiped off heaven's hard disk. Then clear out the weeds, dig deep for the roots, dare the devil to mess with you again. Fling your heart open to God's seed. Christ is our farmer; we are his field. Plow us deep, Lord, plow us deep.¹⁶

Conclusion

People in an African village purchased a television set. For weeks all the children and adults gathered round it morning, afternoon, and night watching the programs. After a couple of months, the set was turned off and never used again. A visitor to the village asked the chief, "Why do you no longer watch television?"

"We have decided to listen to the storytellers," he replied.

"Doesn't the television know more stories?" the visitor asked.

"Yes," the chief replied, "but the storyteller knows me."¹⁷

Jesus know us, and he told us a story, "A sower went out to sow his seed...." Failure is real and ever-present, but Jesus Christ has hope in us and great things for us. He's still sowing, and I have more confidence in him than in me or in you. He will have his harvest. The only question is, Will it be here? Will it be us? To say Yes, we must hear and obey with perseverance the Word of God in Jesus. No more spectators. No more passivity. No more coasting, only hearing and obeying together.

¹⁶ "God's Word demands a radical openness our part, our most serious and thoughtful consideration, and our most trusting response" R. Alan Culpepper, *Luke* [Nashville, TN: Abington, 1995], 181).

¹⁷ William White, *Stories for the Journey* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1988), 32-33.

Essay V: Luke 7:1-8:56
Surface Structure (a-b-c // b'-c'-a'), Power Ministry (*, 7 miracles)

- A. 7:1-17 Two Miracle Stories: One A Resuscitation** **Power Over Disease/Death**
 * 1. vv. 1-10 Healing Of The Centurion's Slave At A Distance **Gentile/Male**
 * 2. vv. 11-17 Raising Of The Widow Of Nain's Only Son **Jew/Female**

Link words between the two stories: *Lord* (v.6, v.13), *word* (v.7, v.17)

Link words to the larger unit: *faith* (7:9/ 7:50, 8:25, 48), *prophet* (7:16/ 7:27, 7:39)

- B. 7:18-35 Unit On Discipleship: John The Baptist And The New Kingdom** **Prophet Greater Than John**
 * 1. vv.18-23 John's Double Question And Jesus' Double Answer
 2. vv.24-27 Jesus Evaluates John's Ministry: Part 1, The Prophet
 2' vv.28-30 Jesus Evaluates John's Ministry, Part 2, The Kingdom
 1' vv.29-35 Jesus' Double Question And Answer Concerning Himself And John

Link between units A-B, "told him all these things" (i.e. two miracle stories).

Link to unit C, "a friend of tax collectors *and sinners*" (v.34)

- C. 7:36-50 Identity: Jesus As The Prophet Who Forgives Sin** **Forgives Sin**
 Question, "Who then is this who forgives sins?
Sin (vv.37, 39, 47, 48, 49)

Link between units C-B': Women in community with Jesus (7:50, 8:1-3)

- B' 8:1-21 Unit On Discipleship: The New And Inclusive Family Of Jesus**
 1. vv.1-3 Hearing And Doing The Kingdom **Redefines God's People Around Himself**
 2. vv.4-8 Parable Of The Seed And The Call To Hear
 3. vv.9-10 The Privilege Of Discipleship: Kingdom And Word
 2' vv.12-18 Allegory Of The Soils And The Call To See And Hear
 1' vv.19-21 Hearing And Doing The Word: Jesus' Old And New Families

- * **C. 8:22-25 Identity: Jesus As Lord Over Nature, Danger, Demons**
 Question, "Who then is this that he commands even wind and water...?"
Shares God's Power Over Chaos
A' 8:26-56 Two Miracle Stories: One A Resuscitation **Power Over Demons, Death**
 * 1. 8:26-29 Gerasene Demoniac (2 Stanzas: vv.26-33, vv.34-39) **Gentile/Male**
 ** 2. 8:40-56 Healing Of Two Women **Jew/Female**

Parable Of Jesus, vv.4-8	Early Christian Allegory, vv.12-18
Sower	Christian Preacher
Sowing	Christian Witness
Seed	Christian Message, God's Word
Path	Type Of Hearer: No Attention Span
Birds (pl.)	Satan (sg.)
Hot Sun	Tribulation Or Persecution
Rocky Ground	Type Of Hearer: Shallow Person/ No Root
Thorns	Type Of Worldly Hearer: Cares, Riches, Other Things
Good Soil	Type Of Virtuous Hearer: Hear, Accept, Bear Fruit
Fruit	Personal Virtues, Continued Witness

Luke 8:1-21	17
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