

“A Long Obedience”

Luke 8:15
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On this second Sunday of January, I want to draw your attention to another important perspective on the Christian life. It's a perspective that addresses one of the cultural diseases that infects our thinking. This cultural disease that flows free in our culture is *the need*, or dare I say the *demand*, for instantaneous results. That demand for immediate results is intensified by technology's ability to deliver results within seconds. Do you remember the days when to rent a movie you had to get into your car, drive several miles away, peruse the aisles of Blockbuster Video—49er video in my hometown—find your movie, stand in line, rent the movie, get back into your car, drive home and (if the person who had it before you was “kind to rewind”) you got to watch your movie. Now it's click, click, scroll, scroll, click-to-buy and within three minutes and the Planet of the Apes is on. I bought a book last week. Clicked once and within 2 seconds it was on my Kindle. And you know what? It doesn't really amaze us anymore. Instant results are the expected norm in business, education, investments and relationships.

Unfortunately, this same expectation (demand?) for immediate results, that courses through the veins of our culture, courses through our expectations of growth and fruitfulness in the Christian life. Eugene Peterson, whom many of you have heard of (pastor, scholar, poet and author), sees this as a major hindrance to the Christian life. In his updated version of one of his older books he addresses the issue. I love the title of the book, “A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society.” That's such a great title (taken from Nietzsche). In it he comments, “One aspect of the world that I have been able to identify as harmful to Christians is the assumption that anything worthwhile can be acquired at once. We assume that if something can be done at all, it can be done quickly and efficiently.” He goes on to say, “There is a great market for religious experience in our world; there is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue, little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness.”¹ I think Peterson hits the nail on the head!

Jesus dealt with the same issue. Jesus left us a parable that addresses it. It's a parable that many of us are familiar with yet provides a necessary corrective to our impatient culture. The Gospel of Luke, chapter 8, records the parable. It opens with:

¹ Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him... ⁴ And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable. ⁵ “A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. ⁶ And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. ⁷ And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. ⁸ And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.” As he said these things, he called out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.” (Luke 8:1-8 ESV)

According to verses 1-4, massive crowds were gathering around Jesus as he was preaching. The sheer size of the crowd suggests instant and extraordinary success. The parable goes on to indicate that instant success isn't always eternal success. So he tells the story of the

¹ Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction—Discipleship in an Instant Society*, © 2000

farmer who scatters seed—some on the walking path, some on rocky soil, some among the thorn bushes and some on good soil. Then Jesus supplies the interpretation in verses 11-15.

¹¹ Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. ¹² The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. ¹³ And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. ¹⁴ And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. ¹⁵ As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience. (Luke 8:11-15 ESV)

The parable reveals the difference between what is merely observable versus what is real, superficial change versus holistic transformation, temporary success versus eternal success, initial response versus enduring response to the word.

The seed, as Jesus interprets, is the Word of God. It's the gospel of the kingdom, the good news that the life-giving reign of God has broken into this world to deliver people from sin, separation and death and bring them into his loving and eternal rule. It was a message that they couldn't fully understand until Easter morning when they realized that the kingdom of Jesus was built on the cornerstone of his atoning death and his new-creation resurrection. Apart from that work of redemption, the coming of the kingdom of God meant only judgment and wrath. But God's grace provided everything necessary for us to be fit and acceptable citizens of his kingdom through his own payment. That's why it's good news. God's power and wisdom have conquered our greatest enemies of sin and death! And all who hear and submit in faith become citizens of his new creation—his kingdom. That, in short, is the good news, the seed.

Some people would hear it and refuse to respond. They are like the seeds that fall upon the path. Others would hear and joyfully respond. Immediate success! But because of the shallow rocky soil, they had no root to sustain them in the heat of the sun. And they would die. Others responded to the message and grew up. But they were suffocated by the strangling effects of wealth, pleasure and affliction.

The point of these first three types of responses is to say that with all of the crowds and all of the obvious and immediate "success," most of it is superficial and therefore bogus. You can tell that Jesus is not impressed with the "success" of either size or numerical response.

What does matter, however, is the last response in the parable. What matters is this—and here I'm going to switch-hit and use the NIV (as I think it presents a slightly clearer translation). There's only one response to the gospel that matters, and that is this, ¹⁵ "But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop" (Luke 8:15 NIV).

Luke offers us three things that characterize a response to the gospel that is fruitful, successful, and eternal.

1. A receptive heart: "A noble and good heart."

There are two sides to a receptive heart. On the one hand, Jesus is pretty clear in the preceding verses that the knowledge of the kingdom is a *gift*. He says in verse 10 that, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been *given* to you" (Luke 8:10 italics added). That means that a person can only truly respond to Jesus' message in a saving way because they have been given ears to hear by the Holy Spirit. The ability to receive the good news of Jesus in a saving, life-changing way, is a gift of sovereign grace.

But the whole point of the parable is to get us to think about how we're responding to the Word of God. That is, we also bear a personal responsibility to listen to his message with receptive and ready ears. Do we read the Scriptures and listen to messages of the gospel with hearts prepared and ready to receive it without justification or redefinition? Or do we come unprepared and hard of hearing? It's a good question for all of us to ponder.

2. A relentless grasp: they "retain it"

Secondly, the good heart holds onto the gospel. Why? Because it's treasured, precious, loved, beautiful and wonderful. It's the source of life itself. It's the revelation of God's heart! The good news of what the Savior-King has done to include us into his eternal kingdom is too magnificent to let go.

The image that comes to mind is a young mother holding her newborn infant. She holds it close to her chest in treasured love and wonder. One of the greatest mistakes we make in our understanding of the gospel is thinking that we *move on* from it—like how we move on from elementary school to high school and college. The fruitful and successful life, as it relates to God and eternity, is only experienced as we hold the gospel in all of its endless wonder close to our chests and hearts and we KEEP IT THERE! The moment we try to move on from the good news of the Savior-King, or we lose the wonder of it, is the moment the green leaves of our lives begin to wither and turn brown.

3. A persevering life: "and by persevering produce a crop"

The third thing that marks a fruitful and successful life, in terms of the kingdom, is *perseverance*. Perseverance implies both time and resolve in a single direction—or a "long obedience in the same direction." But it's a long obedience in the direction of the gospel. Only a life that is resolved in a single direction over a lifetime will experience the maturing result of eternal fruit. As we all know from nature, fruit doesn't arrive overnight. Apples don't form in a single month. The fruit that matters, the success that remains eternal, is the product of a life long perseverance in holding onto and living out the gospel.

Notice that there are no immediate results in this parable. The results are formed over a lifetime of faith and perseverance in the gospel. Yet what we often see around us is people who give up when it gets hard, grow tired when the results aren't forth coming or lose interest when apples don't grow in a day! Yet we're implicitly trained by our culture that the only success that matters is the immediate and observable success. That, of course, is the farthest from the truth.

By the time Jesus—the perfect example of one who persevered—accomplished his mission, his torrent of followers was reduced to a trickle. There was no immediate or grandiose success at the cross. He actually died a loser in the world's eyes—a failure of monumental proportions. He would die before the fruit blossomed. But it would blossom. And it would change the world. His life is an example of a long obedience in the same direction.

So here's the point, if you've missed it thus far. Life is a struggle—that's a fact. Marriages are hard sometimes—that's a reality. Ministry and service to others can be draining and exhausting. Don't think for a moment that change will be easy or immediate. It will be hard and it will be long. If you think for a moment that there is a quick fix for your marriage, you're deeply mistaken. There are no immediate or easy answers. The answer, as in all of the Christian life, is to persevere in living out the implications of the gospel. Change will come in time. Fruit will ripen in time.

And we only find the strength and power to continue in that long obedience in the same direction as we hold fast, cling with a relentless grip of faith, to the atoning conquest of our Savior-King. It is the gospel that is the power of God for a persevering salvation.

Take the long view, brothers and sisters. We're not in this for the short haul. We're in this to the end. And the fruit will come in time.