

*The Covenant Pulpit*



***“Grace with a Backbone”***

**Dr. Robert Petterson**

March 1, 2009

**Covenant Presbyterian Church**

6926 Trail Boulevard, Naples, Florida 34108

(239) 597-3464

[www.covenantnaples.com](http://www.covenantnaples.com)

Little Willie came from a dirt poor village, the ragged son of a poor weaver of cloth. He was unattractive and clumsy, a slow plodder who stuttered when he spoke. His prospects were so poor that he could do no better than become an apprentice shoemaker in a village cobbler's shop. Worse than that, he married Dorothy, whose severe bouts with mental illness would plague him for 26 long years.

Then, at age 22, everything changed for Willie. He read a bestselling thriller that was taking 18<sup>th</sup> Century England by storm: *The Last Voyage of Captain Cook*. Most of those who read Cook's journal were caught up in the thrilling adventures of a daring navigator and explorer. But Willie saw in this journal a revelation of vast human needs in faraway places. So he took scraps of leather from the floor of the cobbler shop and fashioned a world globe. As he sat looking at his globe, this thought began to stab at his soul:

"If it is the duty of all men to believe the gospel, then it is the duty of those entrusted with the gospel to make it known among all nations."

Finally, Willie sobbed out, "Here am I Lord, send me!" You need to understand that at this time there was not a single foreign missionary being sent out by any Protestant churches. Willie's idea that a European could take the gospel to a distant world was revolutionary. He went to a meeting of Calvinistic Baptists with his new passion, stood up and began to stammer out his vision. An old pastor angrily interrupted him with these words that have become infamous:

"Young man, sit down. When God pleases to convert the heathen, he will do it without you or me."

After the meeting, other pastors tried to dissuade Willie. They reminded him that he was just a poor cobbler, a bad speaker, uneducated and saddled with a disturbed wife. One pastor cruelly said, "Face it William, you're unfit for such an impossible cause." Willie stubbornly replied, "But I *can* plod."

Over the next eleven years he plodded until he learned to read the Bible in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Dutch, and French. He became a preacher in a small Baptist church. He wrote a book entitled, *Enquiry into the Obligations of the Christian to use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen*. It was a masterpiece of logic, arguing why Christians have to spread the word of God in the whole world. He crisscrossed England preaching the same message: "Expect great things from God. Attempt great things for God." On October 2, 1792, he gathered a small group of likeminded pastors to found the Western world's

first mission organization: The Baptist Mission Society. Ironically, Willie was so poor that he couldn't contribute a single penny to his own mission.

But William *did* finally get together a handful of people and some pitifully small resources to go to India. In 1793 they might as well have been going to another planet. His wife sat on the dock, clutching their four small children while refusing to leave. Twice William went to her in front of everyone and begged her to get on the ship. Finally he was able to coax her aboard.

When this disparate band of poverty stricken missionaries arrived in India, Hindu radicals threatened to kill them. The British East Indies Company that occupied India saw them as a nuisance and refused to let them travel inland. Then his five-year-old son died and Dorothy completely lost her mind. Still William plodded on, stubbornly spreading the seed of the gospel. He labored for seven long years before he saw his first convert. After twenty years of missionary work, he only had a meager handful of converts. His first wife died, and then his second. But William continued to plod, "attempting great things for God, and expecting great things from God." He never lost hope in the seed he was spreading.

When he died in 1834 at age 73, this plodding cobbler from England had translated the Scriptures into 40 Indian languages, founded one of the first colleges in India, got the doors opened for other missionaries to establish 45 teaching centers across the subcontinent, and managed to get a law passed banning the practice of *Sati*: the burning alive of widows on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands. Inspired by William, the first foreign missionary in American history, Adoniram Judson joined him in India before moving on to Burma. Who would have known that poor Willie, who history remembers as William Carey, would be "The Father of Modern Missions"? Who would have guessed that, some 200 years later, there would be 350 million Christians in Asia, 450 million in Africa, or 200 million in Latin America? William Carey, the plodding sower of seed, would have been amazed to know that more than 2 billion people now claim Christ as Savior, more than four times the entire population of the world in his day.

I believe that the greatest crises facing the Evangelical Church in America today is whether or not we *really* believe that Christian plodders, spreading the truth of God's word, can still change the world. This is the challenge of Christ's *Parable of the Sower* in the eighth chapter of Luke's gospel. Here's the principle he wants to teach us in this powerful parable:

***The Father's House is a community of grace,  
confidently rooted in truth.***

Verse one says, "After this, Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God." Jesus is on the rise. If you read the previous chapters of Luke's gospel, you will see that he's taking Israel by storm. People are being healed, and demons are being cast out. He's moving in awesome supernatural power. He has become a cultural phenomenon, an instant celebrity, and even a superstar. Hundreds of thousands of people are flocking to him. Verse four says, "While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable." Matthew's gospel tells us that Jesus has to go out from the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee in a boat to tell this parable. This crowd is so massive that he has to use the water as a natural amplifying system so that he can be heard far away.

But, if you continue in Luke's gospel you discover that everything soon starts to unravel. The religious authorities will turn against him. According to John 6, within weeks he will tell the crowds that *he* is the bread of heaven, and that they will have to eat *his* body and drink *his* blood to live. People will be so scandalized that, according to John 6:60, "Many of his disciples began to desert him." As the crowds dwindle, he will turn to the twelve remaining disciples and ask, "Will you desert me too?" Before it is over, he will be thrown out of his boyhood synagogue and rejected by his nation. The cheers will turn to jeers; the "Hosannas" to "Crucify him!" Only a meager handful of women will follow him to his cross. Those disillusioned disciples who are left will wonder, "Does the word of God have the power to change anything?" William Carey wondered that after he had preached for seven years without a single conversion. At times like that, we can lose confidence in the transforming power of God's word.

Jesus gives this parable to let us know that success will be mixed when we sow the seed of truth. This is a job for prodders. In verse nine the disciples ask him, "What does this parable mean?" Jesus replies in verse ten, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables..." Then he quotes from the prophet Isaiah, "...though seeing, they may never see; though hearing, they may never understand." He wants them to see that it isn't God's will that everyone come to the truth. So he wraps his most precious teaching in parables.

This is a powerful principle: God's word can only be grasped by those whose eyes have been supernaturally opened. It's not the intellectuals, the philosophers, or the theologians who grasp God's truth, but those who have the simple faith of a child energized by work of the Holy Spirit. Don't ever count your success in how many people respond to your message. You may

share the gospel without a single person coming to Christ. You may die at age 73, like William Carey, wondering if your Christian life ever made a difference in this world. But you keep on plodding, and throwing out the seed, with confidence that it will have an effect. A lot of people won't respond, or be changed by your words or life. But some will, and that will change the whole world. Christ wants you to understand the following:

### **Sowers, Seeds, and Soils**

Verse five begins, "A farmer went out to sow his seeds. As he was scattering his seed, some fell..." Jesus goes on to describe different kinds of soil where the seed falls: a hard path, rocky soil, soil filled with thistles and thorns that crowd out the crops, and fertile soil that brings in a great harvest. The key to the parable is in verse eleven: "This is the meaning of the parable: the seed is the word of God." It's the truth you speak. It's the words of Scripture you share. It's the life of Jesus you live out before others because he *is* the One who is called *the Word of God*.

The soils are the different kinds of people who receive the word of God from you. They show who they truly are by the way they respond. Some will be hard like a beaten-down path. The word of God will never penetrate them. Others will be like rocky soil. The word of God will spring up, but not take root. You will be excited to see the quick, enthusiastic response, only to watch faith wither and die before your disappointed eyes. Others will be like soil filled with weeds. They too will respond, and seem to grow, only to have God's word choked out by the pleasures and cares of life. But some of the seed will fall on good soil. There your seed scattering will bear a harvest. But Jesus wants you to notice: this is tough and uncertain work. Only one-fourth of the seed lands in productive hearts. This is tough work. It's not for the faint of heart, or those who need to see quick results. This is for plodders like William Carey who won't give up quickly.

Notice another thing: the sower is never identified in this parable. This is Christ's way of asking, "Will you be the sower? Will you finish the story I have begun?" This is the sower: a mother who teaches her children the truth; a dad who mentors his son; the person who will not stand quietly by while lies are being told; a person who lives out his faith even when it forces her to swim against the tide of popular culture. You are the sower, if you will take up the challenge to speak and live the truth of God's word. But you need to remember these things:

#### **1) The sower has to get out of the house.**

Verse five begins with a simple but profound truth: "The farmer went out..." No farmer ever sowed seed unless he went into the fields. He has to get out of the house. We have been talking about the *Father's House*. Most of us spend too much time in the church house, and not enough out in the "far country" where people are desperate for the truth. When I was in Oklahoma the farmers had a saying: "The money is in the fields, not in the barns." The contemporary church is too busy thinking up ways to make sure we keep our ecclesiastical barns full of church folks by designing all kinds of in-house programs to keep them contented and happy. Instead, we need to get out of the barns and into the fields. Often we measure our success by church attendance. We should measure it by how many of our folks are out there in the fields, involved during the week in the PTA, civic organizations, tutoring kids with learning disabilities, visiting nursing homes and hospitals, and getting involved in the lives of our neighbors, as we scatter the seed of God's word and Christ's life.

## **2) The seed has to be in the bag.**

Verse five says, "A farmer went out to sow his seed..." Another simple but profoundly practical truth: there has to be seed in the bag, if there is to be seed for the soil. No one ever scattered seed from an empty bag. Before the sower goes out, he has to fill his sack with seed. If there is a problem with some church folks never getting out to the fields, there are others who don't come regularly back to the *Father's House*. And when they do come, they want an hour-long drive-through service, quick, to-the-point and painless. But, if the seed is the word of God, this is where we come to fill up our sacks again. That's the rhythm we need to establish: go out during the week and give away all the seed we have, and then come back here with bags that are empty, desperate to fill them up again from preaching on Sunday morning, teaching at Sunday School, Through the Bible on Sunday evening, personal quiet times with the Lord every morning, and a small group Bible study during the week. Then our seed bags are full again, so that we will have more to share as we go out there to share our lives with others.

## **3) The seed has to get into the soil.**

Verse five goes on: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering his seed..." Another elementary truth: The seed will never get into the soil unless we take it out of the bag and scatter it. This requires that

we have the courage to open our mouths. Sometimes we do good deeds and think that it is enough. But if we never share *why* we are doing “good” for others—if we never give them the gospel in words—they will never know the One who motivates our lives. D. James Kennedy shares this as the supreme irony of good deeds: “People look at the good things we do for them and they say, ‘Isn’t he or she a wonderful person.’ We get all the praise. But if we say, ‘Let me tell you about the One who has motivated me to love and serve you. Let me tell you about Jesus Christ...’ then He gets all the praise and glory. Words without deeds are hollow. Deeds without words are self-serving. Only when we share the gospel of salvation will we give the greatest gift of all: eternal salvation!”

#### **4) The Sower has to toss it into the wind.**

Jesus goes on in verse five, “As he was scattering the seed, *some fell along the path.*” Verse six says, “Some fell on *rocky soil.*” Verse seven says, “Other seed fell *among thorns...*” And verse eight says, “Still other seed fell on *good soil...*” The sower does not go out and kick around in the soil to inspect it. Nor does he find the rich, deep soil, and then carefully lay each seed down, lest he waste his seed on the wrong soils. He simply aims his throw (the best he can) toward what he thinks is the most promising soil. He’s not a fool. He doesn’t dump the sack on the hard-beaten path, or in among the thorns or rocks. To use the words of Jesus, he doesn’t cast his pearls before pigs or throw what is precious to the dogs. But, on the other hand, he doesn’t waste his time carefully putting each seed in the good soil. He throws it into the air. The wind picks it up and carries it. This is a picture of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:8, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.”

Our job is simply to scatter the truth. Sometimes it will fall on deaf ears and lay on hard hearts until, in the words of verse twelve, “...the Devil (swoops down like a bird) and takes the word from them...” For seven years William Carey scattered the word in India and it fell on hard hearts. Sometimes people will listen and even get enthused about what we say. People come to Covenant all the time, and get inspired by the preaching of the word. But after a while they lose interest and fade away. They are like the rocky soil in verse thirteen. The seed explodes with life below the soil, but it hits a shelf of rock below. It doesn’t get its roots into the water of life below. When the sun comes out, the new plant withers and dies. And it breaks our heart. Some of it falls among the thorns. It too takes off growing with life, only to be choked out, says verse fourteen, with “...life’s worries,

riches and pleasures..." Jesus planted God's word into Judas for three years only to watch him betray him with a kiss. He shared the word with the rich young ruler, only to watch him walk away. He preached to thousands, only to see them disappear. If you want to measure Jesus by today's success standards, he was a failure. He started with crowds numbering into the multiple thousands, and three years later only a 120 people were huddled in the Upper Room in Jerusalem. But that was good soil. Within months the church had exploded to more than 50,000 people that now numbers more than 2.1 billion people. Our job is not to count the numbers, but to scatter the seed. We leave the success to him. But we must have the confidence that he will have his success, if only we will commit ourselves to the job of spreading the truth, no matter what the results seem today.

Dear friend, don't give up even though it seems that the whole world is going mad. Mom and dad, keep on planting the word in the lives of your children, even when they don't seem to be listening. When you are tempted to make compromises in your business, keep on living and speaking the truth. Young person, when your friends say that your ideas are old-fashioned and bogus, keep on standing on your principles. Scatter the seed no matter what the results. God uses plodders who attempt great things for him because they expect great things from him.

Robert Reed did exactly that. He was born with severe cerebral palsy. His hands and feet are twisted and useless. He can't bathe himself, feed himself, brush his teeth, comb his hair, or put on his underwear. His clothes are held together by Velcro. You can hardly understand him when he speaks. His disease keeps him from driving a car, riding a bike, or going for a walk. But it didn't keep him from graduating from college with a degree in Latin. It didn't keep him from going to Portugal as a fulltime missionary. In 1972 he rented an apartment across from a Lisbon park. A restaurant owner feed him after work every night. And during the day, Robert Reed somehow got his wheelchair across the road to the park. All day, he smiled a crooked smile and silently handed out gospel tracts. That's all he could do. But he managed to scatter seed the only way he could. A lot of people laughed at this pathetic cripple, and threw their tracts away in disgust. But after six years, those tracts led 70 people to Christ, including Rosa who became his wife. There is power in seed, if only we will have the faith and courage to scatter it—leaving the results to the One who will bring in a harvest!