

Pastor Rico Tice writes: *“I’ll never forget the funeral at which an old lady said to me, ‘Rico, do you know what failure is?’... ‘No – tell me,’ I answered. ... ‘What she said next has stuck with me ever since: **‘Failure is being successful at the things that don’t matter.’**” ... [P A U S E] ...*

Please listen to these words of Chuck Swindoll:

In our day, size and success are synonyms. That’s certainly true in the business world. If you rise through the ranks of a large, profitable corporation, your competitors will envy and admire you. If you turn a huge profit, magazines will post your mug on their front covers and hail you as an economic messiah. Size means success. In the professional world, if you build a large practice with clients begging for your expertise, you’re a success. The size of your practice makes it so.

The formula is simple: Size = Success = Income.

Sadly, the same mentality has attached itself to the world of Christian ministry. Pastors of small churches often envy pastors of large churches. Leaders of small parachurch ministries feel outclassed by ministries that run on eight-figure budgets. People in ministry often try to keep their priorities straight and might work hard to push pride and shame out of the picture. They very much want to define success in terms of maturity—but the world’s paradigm is hard to shake.

Boy(!) I can REALLY identify with what Chuck Swindoll writes here. ...

The world’s paradigm that “size = success” is hard to shake. ... But we do need to (forever) put it away from our thinking... as the passage Scripture that we come to today will demonstrate.

As Jesus continued His ministry... traveling from town to town (no longer tied so much to His home base of Capernaum)... the multitudes of followers increased. Jesus’ miracle-strewn Galilean ministry began to attract a considerable entourage. ... At the core were the Twelve. (And)

around them was a large contingent of devoted followers... generally spoken of as disciples... (And) along with them was a band of women who gave of their own means to support the ministry. Jesus' human anonymity was gone forever.

Some believe this crowd was the greatest (yet) in His ministry. Vast assemblies of men... women... and children now clamored for His attention... (the miracle-working teaching rabbi.)

It was an impressive scene. But (as we have come to expect) Jesus was not impressed. ... Jesus never considered this a sign of "success." ... Quite the opposite! ... He became more concerned that the size of His following would allow superficial faith and unholy motives to fester undetected.

(You see) Some people followed Him to get their stomachs filled. ... Others followed Him to watch Him do wonderful works. ... Many attached themselves to Him to be part of a crowd that was following a famous personality.

Today too... large crowds do not mean that God's work is being done. Virtually any church in our country could be packed out every Sunday (morning and night)... if they simply offered the right pleasure or entertainment. ... Come and get! ... Come ...and not be bothered by any sense of commitment! ... People of the world love a gospel that is "good news" - as they define it.

But Jesus was concerned about His vast audience. He knew that many had not come to hear His word - but to sample it... just like so many church attenders today. ... In fact... some... by their repeated hearing but not

believing... were (actually) becoming hardened to the gospel. ... So Jesus delivered two brilliant parables that (if understood and applied)... would open His hearers to undreamed-of blessing.

The two parables recorded here are rooted in the increased popular attention that was coming to Jesus. He knew that it was superficial. ... The disciples (doubtless) thought this was all GREAT... but Jesus knew better. The time had come to sift the crowds. We will see this in our passage here in Luke... but it even more prominent in its parallel passage over in Matthew's gospel. ... Matthew reports that when Jesus was asked why He switched to speaking to the crowds only in parables... He answered:

Matthew 13:11-13 (ESV)

¹¹ "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been given. ¹² For to the one who has, more will be given, and he will have an abundance, but from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. ¹³ This is why I speak to them in parables, because seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear, nor do they understand.

... The time had come to sift the crowds. "*I will only teach those who want it!*" ... Jesus desires committed followers who *actively* listen and obey His teaching. ... [P A U S E] ...

As we open chapter 8 of Luke's gospel... we see a brief description of some who did want Jesus' teaching. The Lord continued His ministry throughout Galilee... assisted by His disciples and supported by some godly women... who had certainly benefited from Jesus' ministry.

Luke 8:1-3

The disciples had left everything... including their livelihood (their businesses) in order to devote themselves to exclusive training as apostles.

... These women gave out of their own financial means to support the practical needs of Jesus and the Twelve... as a tangible expression to their faith in the Messiah. They listened and responded.

Luke's gospel has been unofficially called (by several commentators) "the Gospel of Women"... as he highlights women and their roles all throughout. Luke specifically mentions certain women (here - naming three of them.) This was highly unusual! But (you see) Jesus had a different attitude towards women than the religious leaders and teachers of that day. "The rabbis refused to teach women and generally assigned them a very inferior place."

But Luke tells us that Jesus and His disciples were largely supported by women. ... Certainly (however) this was not because it was desperately **needed**. You'll remember... God provided the Israelites with manna for forty years in the wilderness. ... Jesus might have chosen to do miracles... and turn stones into bread. ... But unconditional love also knows how to receive. During His three years of ministry... our Lord received the generosity of those women who had been healed... liberated... and forgiven.

This short segment of three verses to open chapter 8... praises these genuine believers in Jesus... and demonstrates faith in action. ... (NEXT) what follows is a parable of Jesus... which He told to describe the different kinds of people who followed Him... and what would become of them. ... Not everyone in the crowds that gathered to Him were like these.

Luke 8:4

Of all the teaching tools available to a teacher... none has greater power to convey deep spiritual truths than the parable. ... And none has greater ability to confuse. ... That's why Jesus preferred the art of storytelling when teaching a mixed audience of disciples and detractors. Jesus used parables in mixed audiences because this unique form of story accomplished two important objectives: Parables **repelled hostile skeptics** and **equipped serious disciples**.

Luke 8:5-8

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear"

As Jesus taught in parables... He often chose not to explain the parable immediately to the broader audience. ... He merely punctuated this story with the exhortation: "*He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*" ... In other words: "*If you get the point, apply it!*" ... "Hearing" means listening with spiritual understanding and receptivity.

One of the greatest gifts that God can give us in life is the gift of listening. Listening is the key to success and perhaps even survival in most relationships. ... Marriages fail because two people do not know how to listen to each other. ... Every year there are parents and children who suffer awful estrangement because of not hearing each other. ... Family members speak past each other and a relationship diminishes.

I am told that the art of listening (also) leads to business success (or failure.) Every year many businesses will fail... not because their product is faulty... or their service poor... but because management and workers are not listening to each other.

Learning to listen to our friends... families... bosses... instructors... and (beyond that) - to God... is essential to any good relationship. ... And this parable shows us that there are FOUR ways to listen.

Jesus describes four kinds of soil... an analogy so basic and simple... and yet so hard for some to understand. ... There are those who have become like the asphalt or concrete of our highways. ... They see and experience something of the wonder of God. ... They hear the message and see it lived out and yet their cynicism results in a hardness of heart... and the Word cannot find a lodging place.

Then there are those impressionable ones who hear the Word and have an instant and positive response. They join all the Bible Studies... buy all the books... go to all the seminars. ... They never miss worship. ... But in a few years... where are they and what has happened to them? (A great beginning and no finish.) ... When the heat (or the pressure or the adversities) came... there was no power to finish.

And then there are the people who hear the Word gladly. They are sincere believers... and they make a solid beginning in the life of faith. God begins to bless them. They prosper. They have children and grandchildren. They succeed in their jobs... pursue many hobbies... acquire lands... summer homes... many friends. ... They join clubs and receive honors. The first thing you know... all these good things choke out their primary commitment. ... They are just too caught up in the good things of life to be concerned about the things of God.

And finally... there are those special ones who for some reason hear and respond... The Word of God (Jesus Himself) takes root in their lives. Spiritual life really opens up... and consistently grows. ... How do you

account for that? (Here is the answer!) ... They have hearts that are like prepared soil. They listen to God's Word with a prepared heart.

Luke 8:9-10

What did Jesus' mysterious pronouncement mean? The sixth chapter of Isaiah sheds some light on this because Jesus' words allude to it. There we find the record of Isaiah's great encounter with God in the temple:

Isaiah 6:1 (ESV)

¹ In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up; and the train of his robe filled the temple.

The result of this holy confrontation was Isaiah's call and his acceptance:

Isaiah 6:8 (ESV)

⁸ And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" Then I said, "Here I am! Send me."

This is then followed by the **oddest** commission ever given to a prophet (at least it appears that way on the surface) because Isaiah is told to charge the people not to understand and to make their hearts hard:

Isaiah 6:9-10 (ESV)

⁹ And he said, "Go, and say to this people: "Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' ¹⁰ Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."

How did Isaiah obey this strange commission? Well... here is what is so interesting... He did not fulfill this by preaching with obscure expressions and complex reasoning. ... No. Instead Isaiah's preaching was plain... simple... systematic... and reasoned. ... In fact... his critics scorned him for being too simple – like he was teaching kindergarteners.

Isaiah 28:9-10 (ESV)

⁹ “To whom will he teach knowledge, and to whom will he explain the message? Those who are weaned from the milk, those taken from the breast? ¹⁰ For it is precept upon precept, precept upon precept, line upon line, line upon line, here a little, there a little.”

They were saying: “*He is just too elementary / uncomplicated / straightforward...*” So Isaiah fulfilled his commission to blind and harden the people - by clearly preaching the truth... and when they rejected it... he preached it again in the clearest form possible... so that their repeated rejections effected an increased hardness of heart. ... Some hearts were so hardened that they went beyond the point of response.

Jesus took it the other direction. Rather than teaching plainly (like Isaiah) which resulted in hardened hearts... He began speaking in parables... which **also** resulted in hardened hearts. (You know what?!) It isn't the seed. It isn't the truth itself or the method by which it is taught. It is the listener's INITIAL condition of their heart.

Whenever I hear that #1 (most often heard) complaint about preachers by church-hoppers today (“*I’m just not getting fed by him...*” “*I’m not getting anything out of his sermons...*”) I don't think bad about the **preacher**. It is MOST LIKELY a bad heart in the **listener**. The soil is not prepared. Don't ever say that (unless you want to condemn yourself...)

The condition of one's heart determines whether there is any receptivity to the truth. ... Those who receive truth and act upon it... will receive more. ... But those who reject truth... will ultimately lose the little they have. ... The principle in hearing God's Word... then... is “*Use it or lose it*” (or more exactly: “**Do** it or lose it!”)

Falling asleep in church really does not concern me. It can happen for any number of reasons... both good and bad. ... (Oh... if you only knew what I see from up here...) ... But what does concern me are the people who warm a pew every Lord's Day with their bodies awake but their souls asleep.

If we consider ourselves to be Christ-followers... we need to be the right kind. Many people were beginning to follow Him (we see in today's passage) – but He saw it as a problem. We must listen to God's Word with a determination to obey it. The state of our heart as we listen will either bring increased dullness and ignorance... or certain blessing.

Luke 8:11

“Seed” was a proper and powerful symbol of the Word of God springing to life. ... Within every seed there is almost infinite potential for life... and God's Word is seed *par excellence*... because it can sprout forth in eternal life! ... The “farmer” is (of course) Christ... and anyone else who puts forth God's Word... whether in preaching... or personal conversation. ... The “soil” represents the varying conditions of the human hearts... on which the seed is tossed.

Luke 8:12

These hard (beaten) paths are emblematic of some people who hear God's Word. ... The footfalls of their own busy comings and goings... and the incessant traffic of life... have so hardened them that nothing in God's truth stirs them. ... If the thought regarding where they came from or where they are going even occurs to them... they dismiss it as “too hard” ... or “too convicting.” ... Scripture's declarations about death and eternity...? -

“Headache stuff!” ... Sin? - “Everybody does it. So why should I be concerned?”

Life for many is no more than a sports page and a beer... or a fishing pole... or a movie magazine and an hour at the beauty shop... or a spin in the car. ... There may be no obvious major sin... but there is no interest in God or his Word either. Life is crowded with other things.

*Into this world to eat and to sleep,
And to know no reason why he was born.
Save to consume the corn,
Devour the cattle, flock and fish,
And leave behind an empty dish.*

Some of the hard-hearted may be more sophisticated. They have drunk freely from a loose set of attitudes and ideas known as modernity. They are not interested in God’s Word... because they don’t believe that objective truth can be known. ... They worship technology-brilliance (or science) and substitute it for God. ... They rarely ever pursue the logical end of their presuppositions. They may be hostile... but very often they are simply uninterested. Their hearts are as hard as nails and dulled of all feeling... by the busyness of life. ... As the truth bounces on the hardened surface of their lives... Satan comes with a fluttering... chirping interest — some busy excitement perhaps...and flies away with the life-giving seed.

This ground needs to be broken up. Most often... the plowing that is needed is some pain or stress or trial . God sometimes allows it - to soften the hardness of our lives to the seed of God’s truth. (This is how God’s truth came to many of us.) Difficulties made us quit our spirit-dulling busyness... and only then did the Word of God fall powerfully into the

broken ground of our lives. ... Hard hearts often need to be plowed by sorrow and disappointment so God's Word can take root.

Luke 8:13

Next... our Lord explained about the seed sown on rock. In Palestine much of the land is a thin two- or three-inch veneer of soil over limestone bedrock. When seed fell there... the warm sun quickly heated the seed in the shallow soil... so that the seed sprouted with feverish growth. ... But then the sun continued to beat down... the seed's roots hit bedrock... and it withered and died. ... The same phenomenon occurs in the quick death of grass on the shallow shoulders of expressways.

Too many have emotionally tasted something of God's power... but not *true* conversion — “half-Christians” we might say. ... Falling away from their initial desire to follow Christ... at the first sign of hardship or trial... they become bitter and skeptical — and remain terribly lost. ... Affliction (like the sun) brings growth to roots in good soil... but withers all shallow profession of faith.

These partial followers of Christ have had an emotional response to God's Word (a temporary greening of the soul.) ... Certainly authentic faith involves great emotion. ... Last week we saw a very emotional woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears... and Jesus commended her. ... All through the book of Acts... and in his letters... we see the very emotional side of the Apostle Paul. ... An emotionless faith is crippled and may be bogus. ... However... the trouble with the people symbolized by seed that fell on rock... is that their emotions are superficial (not based on deep-seated convictions.) ... These people “have no root.”

Luke 8:14

The thorns... Jesus explained... represented “life’s worries... riches and pleasures.” ... This is a divided heart... infested by irreconcilable loyalties. This heart makes gestures toward Christ... but “life’s worries” draw it back... leaving no room for authentic spiritual concern.

These are corroding cares... that is... worries that eat away our soul – little by little. It is life’s “riches and pleasures”... which lure the soul away from life in Christ. ... “Keeping up with the Joneses” (buying things we do not need to impress people we do not like with money we do not have)...

This is a lost heart. ... A heart that is overcome with a love for “riches and pleasure” is not a believing heart. ... As Jesus explained in the Sermon on the Mount: “*No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other... or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money*” (Matthew 6:24).

The pleasures of life are of two kinds: (a) those that are wrong in themselves: drunkenness, drug addiction, gambling, sexual vice, etc.; (b) those that are wrong when a person over-indulges in them: games, sports, entertainments, etc.

Like a proliferating cancer gradually killing the body... or a destructive parasite... little by little destroying its host... so also these “thorns” slowly but surely choke the souls of those people who extend a welcome to them. Such individuals never mature. They never produce everlasting fruit for the kingdom of God.

Luke 8:15

The good soil describes those who have heard with honest, open, and willing hearts, ready to receive God's Word and then put it into action. Neither defensive nor resistant, these "good-soil" people eagerly seek truth and welcome reproof, even when it's painful. They "hold it firmly" and produce fruit with fortitude... patience... endurance... and steadfastness.

To make sure that we understand what a "good heart" is... Jesus told another parable.

Luke 8:16-18

If you have the truth of God... you have a solemn responsibility to spread that truth in whatever way God gives you opportunity. ... (LISTEN!) If you had the cure for cancer... you would have a moral responsibility to spread that cure (to make it available to those who need it.) You wouldn't THINK of hiding it! ... God didn't light your lamp so that it would be **hidden**. One must either spread the word itself... or spread the influence of God's word by bringing others to a place where they will hear it.

Again the principle is made clear to us – use it or lose it! Use the understanding that you have been given (in the way that God wants) – and you will be given more. Hide it... and what you think you have will be removed from you. ... Hearing the Word always involves doing! Spread the light.

Verse 17 informs us that failure to fulfill your responsibilities may be concealed from some... but eventually it will be revealed to many. Our failures will indeed become public. Sin cannot be concealed forever.

But hearing and obeying God's Word brings us into an intimate "family" relationship with Christ.

Luke 8:19-21

Without dishonoring His human family... Jesus elevated the status of those who receive the gospel and then put it into action... those "who hear the word of God and do it." ... He didn't rebuff His mother and brothers; He merely used the occasion to announce how *anyone* can gain access to Him.

Jesus indicated that His closest family *is made up of those who hear and obey God's word.* ... We draw close to Jesus by hearing His word and doing it. ... Whenever we do this... we gain a *closer* relationship with Him - than even a normally understood family relationship. ... *This is a startling statement!* ... You and I are Jesus' family if we *hear* and *do* his Word. ... This is the key to intimacy with God. ... We have the most intimate relationship with Him... if we hear and do his Word.

Reception of God's Word into our life is not merely about intellectual recognition and agreement. ... It expresses itself in *action*. Jesus does not want scribes... but servants. ... **[P A U S E]** ...

Jesus defined success in ministry by a very different standard from that of today's size-obsessed church culture. He broadcast the good news... knowing that many hearts — perhaps even the majority — would not receive the Word... grow to maturity... and bear fruit. ... For Jesus... ministry success meant having a relatively few "good-soil" people producing fruit.

God has painted a word picture that includes every one of us. ... Where are you in the parable? ... How are you hearing the Word of God...?

Your hearing is WORTHLESS – if it does not result in doing.

- Has God's Word impressed on you that you must forgive? Then do it!
- Has God's Word impressed on you that you must confess a wrongdoing? Do it!
- Has God's Word impressed on you that you must apologize? So do it!
- Has God's Word impressed on you that you must speak the truth regardless of the consequences? Then do it!
- Has God's Word impressed on you that you must discontinue a certain practice? Do it!
- Has God's Word impressed on you that you must make a gift? Do it!
- Has God's Word impressed on you that you must bear witness to an acquaintance? Do it today if you can!
- Has God's Word impressed on you that you must leave all to serve him? Do it!

Or if you realize that you are a soil other than the good soil... repent and believe without delay! ... Ask God to put eternal life in your soul today and to produce the fruit of the Spirit abundantly in your life.