

Progress in the Word or Regress with the World

Luke 8:16-21

There's a true story told in "The Incredible Series" from the 1970s titled, Glenda's Long Swim. As the story goes, Glenda and Robert Lennon were four miles off the coast of Florida in the Gulf of Mexico fishing in their yacht by themselves.

It was a beautiful afternoon, so Glenda decided that she would take a swim in the water with her snorkeling gear. All of the sudden she realizes she is 50 yards from the boat in a current taking her farther out. So, in a panic, she calls out to Robert. And Robert, without thinking, dives in after her. And when he reaches her, they both realize they are being quickly carried away from their boat.

Robert is a champion swimmer, but Glenda is not. As much as she tries, she can't make it to the boat against the strong currents. So, Robert tells Glenda, "stop swimming and just tread water. I will keep swimming against the tide and when it breaks, maybe I will make it to the boat. If I can swim hard enough, I can keep the boat in view."

He swims for hours.

And just as it's getting dark, the tide turns. He can still see the boat appearing above the waves. He turns, and swims to the boat. While he's searching for Glenda, he runs in to a couple of shrimp boats who also join in the search. But they're unable to locate her. As darkness settles in and fuel is running low, they decide to return to shore.

The next morning, the motel owner where they were staying said: "I know these currents well. Let's make one more attempt. Two hours later, they find her — twenty miles out!"

This harrowing story, which ends on a good note, illustrates a vital spiritual principle found in our text this morning:

“Christians who just float never stay in the same place.”¹ We can’t just come to church and hear a sermon. To make spiritual progress, and also keep from drifting away from the Lord, we must be hearers and doers of the word.

The currents of our corrupt world are going in the opposite direction of God’s will for our lives. If we do not strive with grace filled efforts to grow in faith against the currents of this sinful world, we will be carried away into dangerous waters.

“We have to strive just to stand still in the Christian life.” John Piper

Making spiritual progress does not happen automatically. If Robert had not strove against the tide, he would have drowned. The mark of spiritual maturity and growth in a believer’s life is not perfection, “but that you are striving against the tide, even if you are standing still, as it may feel sometimes.” Piper

Main idea: We must progress in the Word or we will regress with the World.

In today’s message, we will consider how the word of God keeps growing and maturing believers from being overtaken by the contrary currents of this world. Furthermore, we will see not only how to make spiritual progress but also how we can help keep others from being swept away in the tsunami of our perverse society.

1. **Growing believers receive the light to know the Lord**

First, growing believers, who can withstand the tsunami of this corrupt culture and make spiritual progress, receive the light to know the Lord. Having explained to His intimate disciples in private the deeper meaning of the parable He shared in public, Jesus continues:

¹ John Piper

“No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a jar or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. 17 For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light.” Luke 8:16-17

To understand the meaning of this mini-parable, it's important to review the explanation Jesus gave before it of the parable of the sower.

Jesus explained to His intimate disciples that the four different types of ground or soils, on which the seed of the word is sown, represent four types of listeners.

As we learned last week, some people are callous and indifferent to the word of God. Others appear to receive the word, but it's simply an emotional response. There's no spiritual depth. So, when their faith is tested, they fall away.

Still others also appear to receive the word but because of the competing cares and pleasures of life, they have no time for God. God's word gets choked and crowded out by the weeds and thorns of the allurements of this world.

Finally, Jesus describes the receptive heart that He desires His disciples to have. This is a sincere heart that clings to the word, and in which the word takes root and bears fruit with patience.

Now, when the seed of God's word takes root and is bearing fruit in our lives, what kind of disciples do we become? As Jesus explained in the following mini parable, when the word takes root, we become lamps, which are not meant to be hidden, but to be put on a stand so that others can see the light.

Before we unpack how believers shine as lights in the world, it's important to reiterate how the light of the word changes us. We can't be light that effects change in a godless world unless the light of the word of God is affecting us.

When exhorting believers not to live like the corrupt world, the Apostle Paul writes, *"for at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light."* Ephesians 5:8

If you've come to a saving knowledge of Jesus, if you've been born again through the incorruptible seed of the word of God, you're a child of light. Your life should no longer be characterized by the darkness of this world. The same light of the word that brings us to salvation, also sanctifies us so that we can walk as children of light.

Now, in contrast to the darkness that once characterized our lives before coming to Christ, what is it about the function of light that we as God's children are to emulate?

Light reveals things that would otherwise be hidden if we were in darkness. To be saved means that the light of God has been turned on in your life enabling you to see things for what they really are—to discern truth and error, right and wrong.

Notice that after exhorting believers to walk as children of light, the Apostle Paul also writes in Ephesians 5:10: *"and try to discern what is pleasing to the Lord."* As children of light, we must seek, with the ability and resources that God has provided, to discern what is pleasing to the Lord.

How do we sharpen our powers of discernment? We do so by developing a working knowledge of the bible and carefully applying its truths to our lives (Hebrews 5:14).

As the Psalmist testified: *"Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."* Psalm 119:105

One of the main reasons that believers struggle to discern the deeper things of God and His direction for their lives is because they fail to put into practice what God has already revealed to them.

But when we walk in the light, darkness will be exposed and cleansed from our lives, which allows us to enjoy communion with God and grow in spiritual discernment (John 1:8-9).

Moreover, when we are walking as children of light, the darkness around us will be exposed. Going back to our text, Jesus says to His intimate disciples whose hearts were seeking to know the light of truth:

“No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a jar or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. 17 For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light.” Luke 8:16-17

This brings us to our second point:

2. Growing believers reflect the light to help others know Christ and grow in Him.

In verses 16-18, Jesus depicts His followers, who hear and receive the Word, as lamps. “His point is that they must let the light in them shine forth to illumine others. They must shine the light in such a way that people can receive it and thus be prepared for judgment day when all [will] be revealed. This makes our present listening to the Word crucial.” Kent Hughes

Again, the Apostle Paul echoes Jesus’ words about the illuminating power that God’s word is to have in and through our lives in this dark world:

“Take no part in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead expose them. 12. For it is shameful even to speak of the things that they do in secret. 13. But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible,” Ephesians 5:11-13

How do we expose the unfruitful works of darkness? We expose them by the light that shines from our lives. We expose the darkness by illumination not isolation.

We expose darkness not by whispering into someone's ear, "Hey, did you hear what she did?" If we gossip, we're not contributing to the light, we're adding to the darkness.

As Christians, there are times when we must graciously seek to restore a brother or sister caught up in sin. But the primary way that we as Christians expose sin, especially in the lives of the unsaved around us, is by being the light that we are called to be.

Notice that just as Jesus refers to the effects of God's word on a receptive heart as **fruit**, Paul also refers to the transforming effects of the light of God as fruit. In Ephesians 5:9, he writes: "*(For the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true,)*"

Is the fruit of light evident in your life? In your area of influence, does your life reveal in a bright and shining way something of the goodness and glory of God?

As Philip Yancey explained, "The people of God are not merely to mark time, waiting for God to step in and set right all that is wrong. Rather, they are to model the New Heaven and New Earth, and by so doing awaken longings for what God will someday bring to pass."

Again, concerning how believers are to be lights in a dark world, Paul further explains: "*But when anything is exposed by the light, it becomes visible, 14 for anything that becomes visible is light.*"
Ephesians 5:13-14a

What Paul is saying here is that the light that is to shine from the lives of Christians, which includes sharing the gospel, will expose the darkness in the lives of those around us. And the light that exposes the darkness, and makes things visible, has the power to draw people to the light of Christ.

Paul is not saying that everyone exposed to the light of Christ in our lives will be drawn to Him. Some will not be. In fact, some people will

be offended and even hostile to the light. As Shane Pruitt put it, “The world is so in love with lies that the truth feels like hate.”

Nevertheless, as children of light, we are called to help others find their way to Christ so they too can become children of light (Matthew 5:16).

Propheying to the people of God, Isaiah shared this amazing exhortation and promise:

“Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. 2 For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. 3 And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.” Isaiah 60:1-3

Are people being drawn to your light? Are you shining the light of the gospel or contributing to the darkness?

This bring us to our final point:

3. Growing believers respond to the light in obedience to the Lord

Having explained that believers who take in the word of God are to be lights in this dark world, Jesus emphasizes: *“Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away.”* Luke 8:18

As Jesus taught, are we being careful how we hear the word of God? Are we listening to know and obey the Lord? Jesus says to be careful how we hear not only because of what we will fail to gain if we don't, but also because of what we will lose.

As William Barclay explained: “Verse eighteen lays down the universal law that the man who has will get more; and that the man who has not will lose what he has. If a man is physically fit and keeps himself so,

his body will be ready for ever greater efforts; if he lets himself go flabby, he will lose even the abilities he has. The more a student learns, the more he can learn; but if he refuses to go on learning, he will lose the knowledge he has. This is just another way of saying that there is no standing still in life. All the time we are either going forward or going back. The seeker will always find; but the man who stops seeking will lose even what he has.” William Barclay, Luke, The Daily Study Bible Series

Kent Hughes put it this way: “Do it or lose it! [Truly] hearing the Word always involves doing. Humanly speaking, the spread of the light of the gospel in this world is dependent upon Jesus’ hearers doing His Word. Happily, the more they do it, the more light they will receive.”

Sometime ago, I read an old story about a man returning from a journey who brought his wife a glow in the dark matchbox. After giving it to her, she turned off the light, but the matchbox could not be seen. Both thought that they were cheated. Then the wife noticed some French words on the box and asked a friend to translate them. The inscription said, "If you want me to shine in the night, keep me in the light."

To shine in the darkness of this world, we must walk in the light of Christ. We must not only expose ourselves to the light of His Word, but we must be doers of the Word. If we do sin, (and we will), we must confess it to the Lord, be cleansed, and seek His strength to overcome (1 John 1:9; John 15:7). We must keep a short account with God.

Like stars, the darker the world gets, the brighter we ought to shine for Christ as children of light.

Do you know what a black hole is? Black holes are created by stars that die and collapse on themselves. As they die, they shrink smaller and smaller and become heavier and heavier. Their gravitational force becomes so strong that they pull nearby objects into themselves. A black hole no longer gives off light. Rather it pulls things in and lets nothing out, not even light.

What characterizes the life of the unregenerate who walk in darkness? Like a black hole, their lives are characterized by self-centeredness and self-absorption. They pull everything into themselves and give nothing out.

In contrast, children of light, who walk in the light, bring hope and healing to the world. Their joy is found not in being served but in serving others and helping to make their lives better.

Notice that before exhorting believers to walk as children of light, Paul further wrote, *“Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”* Ephesians 5:1-2

Beloved, if we are walking in the light, we don’t live like a “black hole” that takes and takes. We don’t live to be consumers but to be contributors. We walk in the light which means that we know and display the self-giving love of Jesus.

As we learned last week, and again today, Jesus longs to be intimate with us and reveal His plans and purposes to us. He desires for us to understand His character and love in deep ways. But this level of relationship is not experienced in casual Christianity, it comes only to those who trust and obey His word as they daily rely upon the Holy Spirit.²

Notice that after sharing the principle that the one who has will be given more, referring to hearing and obeying God’s word, Luke records:

“Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. 20 And he was told, “Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you.” 21 But

² Troy Keaton

he answered them, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it." Luke 8:19-21

Who does Jesus explain are part of His family? Those who hear the word of God and do it.

When Jesus explains this to those who told Him that His family was standing outside desiring to see him, He was not rejecting His earthly mother and His younger siblings who were raised with Him in the same household.

He's making it clear to the crowd hearing His words and to us today, that His spiritual family, those who have a close relationship with Him, those who He reveals the secrets of the kingdom to are not only those who listen to His teachings but those who also obey them. And as a result, bear His fruit and shine His light in the world.

Let me be clear, Jesus is not teaching that entrance into His kingdom must be earned by obedience to His word. But that obedience to God's word is the fruit of a person who has not only come to saving faith in Jesus but who is progressing in faith and growing in deeper intimacy with Christ.

Remember that if we just hear the word, but don't do anything with it, don't apply it, don't obey it, we will not only be fruitless, we will not only cease to grow and progress in the Lord, but we will regress with the world. We will not only lack the power to be light in this world, we will be overtaken by the darkness.

When we don't obey the word, we don't just stay in the same place, we go backwards. We won't just stay at the same level of spiritual knowledge, we will lose what we have. We will not be transformed by the word, rather we will be conformed to the world.

As Kent Hughes elaborates:

"Attention to God's Word must be coupled with a willingness to do it, or the truth of it will fade.

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 [your comfort zone] to serve him? Do it!"

Conclusion

O let us daily seek and receive the light of God's word so that we know His transforming presence intimately. Let's not just be hearers of the word. Let's be doers of the word and follow Him wherever He leads.

When we obey His word, He will not only give us more light, we will be lights in the darkness. We will be able to bring others to Christ and help them grow in the Lord.

Beloved, if you want to keep shining in the night, stay in the light, receive the light, respond to the light, and reflect the light to the glory of Jesus!