

Luke 7:1-10:

7 When Jesus had finished saying all this to the people who were listening, he entered Capernaum. **2** There a centurion's servant, whom his master valued highly, was ill and about to die. **3** The centurion heard of Jesus and sent some elders of the Jews to him, asking him to come and heal his servant. **4** When they came to Jesus, they pleaded earnestly with him, 'This man deserves to have you do this, **5** because he loves our nation and has built our synagogue.' **6** So Jesus went with them.

He was not far from the house when the centurion sent friends to say to him: 'Lord, don't trouble yourself, for I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. **7** That is why I did not even consider myself worthy to come to you. But say the word, and my servant will be healed. **8** For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, 'Go', and he goes; and that one, 'Come', and he comes I say to my servant, 'Do this', and he does it.'

9 When Jesus heard this, he was amazed at him, and turning to the crowd following him, he said, 'I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel.' **10** Then the men who had been sent returned to the house and found the servant well.

I'd like to apply Jesus words by telling you two stories that have touched me. They're not my stories and I'm grateful FOR William Willamon's inspiration, but I hope I've made them mine. At the end my question to you is how does this apply Jesus words '**I tell you, I have not found such great faith even in Israel**'?

STORY I

A minister was asked to assist the team of chaplains at a maximum security prison in Alabama. Preparation for him included knowing what questions to ask and what topics to avoid.

One Wednesday he entered the dark prison from which few emerge. He was escorted to the cell of a man serving a life sentence who greeted him warmly. He told the man this was his first visit.

The inmate then said, 'Look, we don't have a lot of time. Would you mind if I asked you a question? What do you believe about the atonement? Do you believe it's really true that God became a man, a real man, without ceasing to be God?'

The chaplain writes: 'I was amazed. I told him that I spent my days wanting to talk theology but nobody in the church seemed interested in theology! We had a great, wide-ranging, wonderful discussion of various understandings of the atonement, some difficult to understand Bible passages, and we prayed together.

On my way out I commented to the prison chaplain that I'd just had one of the best discussions about the atonement I'd ever had.

'Typical,' he said. 'Sad to say, most church people aren't desperate enough to need much theology. The guys here need to know God redeems saves and resurrects, or they're lost. These guys are forced into theology.'

Amazing! I saw myself as taking the gospel to these imprisoned souls only to have them bring the gospel to me.

STORY II

A church had reached the stage where the congregation decided 'we'd-better-go-out-and-get some new-members-or-we'll-die.'

So they studied a programme about this – the programme said door-to-door visitation was the way to go. So they organized themselves into groups of two and on an appointed Sunday afternoon, they set out to visit, to invite people to the church (bit like we did some years ago with the Jesus film).

The teams went out, armed with pamphlets describing the congregation and their denomination; they carried fliers portraying the minister – you know the smiling, always-accessible pastor, and they invited people to the church. Each team was given a map with their assigned street.

Helen and Gladys were given a map. They were clearly told to go down Summit Drive and turn right. That's what they were told. The team leader told them, 'You go down Summit Drive and turn right. Do you hear me, Helen, that's down Summit Drive and turn right?'

But Helen and Gladys, both approaching eighty, after lifetimes of teaching, were better at giving than receiving directions. They turned left, venturing down into a government housing project to the west of Summit Drive. They were told to turn right; they turned left.

This meant that Helen and Gladys proceeded to evangelize the wrong neighbourhood. They were evangelizing the wrong people; they would get the wrong people to come to the church.

Late that afternoon, each team returned to make their report. Helen and Gladys had only one interested person to report to others, a woman named Verleen.

Nobody on their patch was interested in visiting the church, nobody but Verleen. She lived with her two children in a three-room apartment. Although she'd never been to a church in her life, Verleen wanted to visit.

The person telling the story said, 'that's what you get when you don't follow directions, when you won't do what the pastor tells you to do. This is what you get, a woman from the area named Verleen.'

The next Sunday, Helen and Gladys proudly presented Verleen at the eleven o'clock service, along with her two feral-looking children. Verleen liked it so much she said that she wanted to attend the women's Thursday morning Bible study. Ladies beware! Helen and Gladys said they'd pick her up on Thursday.

So, on Thursday, Verleen appeared, proudly clutching her new Bible, a gift from Helen's friends, the first Bible Verleen had ever seen, much less owned.

The minister continues, 'I was leading the study that morning on Luke 4, the story of Jesus' temptation in the wilderness.' I asked the group after presenting my material, 'have any of you ever been faced with temptation and, with Jesus' help, resisted?' 'Have any of you refused some temptation because of your Christian commitment?'

One woman told how just the week before, there was some confusion in the supermarket checkout line, and before she knew it, she was standing in the car park with a loaf of bread she hadn't paid for.

'At first I thought,' she confessed, 'why should I pay for it? They have enough money as it is.' But then I thought, 'No, you're a Christian.' So I went back in the store and paid them for that loaf of bread.'

I made some approving comment.

It was then Verleen spoke. 'A couple of years ago, I was into cocaine really big. You know what that's like! You know how that stuff makes you crazy. Well, anyway, my boyfriend, not the one I've got now by the way, we knocked over a petrol station one night— got two hundred dollars out of it. It was as simple as taking sweets from a baby.'

Well, my boyfriend, he says to me, 'Let's knock off that 7-Eleven down on the corner.' And something in me, it says, 'No, I've held up that petrol station with you, but I ain't going to hold up no convenience store.' He beat me really bad, but I still said no. It felt great to say no, 'cause that's the only time in my life I ever said no to anything - made me feel like I was somebody.'

Through the stunned silence I managed to mutter, 'Well, er, uh, that's resisting temptation. This is sort of what the text is about. And now it's time for our closing prayer.'

After I stumbled out of the church and was standing in the carpark, helping Helen into her car, she said to me, 'You know I can't wait to get home and get on the phone and invite people to come next Thursday! Your Bible studies used to be dull. I think I can get a good crowd for this!'

His final comment on what happened - the ever-present, almost but never quite irresistible, outreaching God laughed with delight.

And as Jesus did with parables I invite you to think about these stories this week.....

Hear what the Spirit is saying to his church!