

The Sower, the Seed, and the Soil

Luke 8:4-18

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Read Luke 8:4-18

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." (Isaiah 40:8)

Introduction

I don't know if you've followed some of the recent stories about well-known Christians who have renounced their faith. Josh Harris, who wrote the best-selling book, *I Kissed Dating Goodbye* and several others, and was the Sr. Pastor of Covenant Life Church in Gaithersburg, MD, moved to Vancouver a few years ago to go to seminary. But rather than emerge from seminary with a stronger faith, he has announced that he's getting divorced and that he does not consider himself a Christian anymore. Another man, a worship leader named Marty Sampson, who wrote songs like "All I Need is You" and "God Is Great" and was part of Hillsong United, has also announced that he is losing his faith because of many of the problems with Christians and theology, concluding that "it's not for me" and "it's just another religion at this point."

I'm sure that you've known people who seemed to be following Jesus who have turned away and decided that the Christian faith was no longer for them. I have known people who taught Sunday School, who brought others to faith in Christ, who volunteered or were on staff with parachurch ministries who now consider themselves atheists. There was a young man in my youth group who I prayed with as he committed his life to Christ in our conference room. Within a couple of years, though, I could tell that he was drifting, had had some trouble at school, was backing away from church. I had a chance to take him out to lunch, we still had a great relationship. I'll never forget as we were pulling up to his house, I pulled out a Bible and read Luke 8 and the parable of the sower and the soils, and I said, "Which soil are you? Are you going to fall away or will you cling to faith in Christ and thrive?" He assured me that he would not fall away, but his life since then has not shown any spiritual fruit or evidence of God that I can tell. His story isn't over, God's not done with him yet, so I continue to pray for him. And he's certainly not alone in the estimated 60% of kids who grow up in the church but end up leaving it.

There's a very insightful book called *You Lost Me* by David Kinnaman, that's been out for a decade, so some of its examples are older. He talks about kids who grew up in the church but left the Christian faith as falling into three categories: nomads, prodigals, and exiles.

-Nomads are people who have distanced themselves from the church but haven't completely chucked their faith, though it's certainly seen as a very optional thing and not at all exclusive to Biblical revealed truth. One of his example is the singer Katy Perry, who says that despite leaving Christianity, she still believes Jesus is the Son of God, but that she also believes in aliens.

-Prodigals have done more than disconnect, they have de-converted. This group is split into what Kinnaman calls "head prodigals," who intellectually stopped believing Christianity, and "heart prodigals," who are bitter or resentful towards the time they spent in the church.

-And the exiles are those who still pursue God and Christ, but outside of the established church.¹

¹ David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011), pp. 59-88.

How do we understand when people who claimed to be Christians decide that they're not anymore? Were they never Christians to begin with? Were they Christians for a while but then when they decided they didn't believe anymore, God removed their salvation from them? Are they still saved against their will? How do we understand the preservation of our salvation? Today's passage in Luke 8, while it won't perfectly answer all of those questions I just asked, will give us a good foundation from which to understand and answer the questions. It deals with 4 types of people who hear the word of salvation, and what effect it has on them.

Let's begin with the parable itself in the first 6 verses:

I. The Parable (vv. 4-9)

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."

Let's start by identifying what the seed is and who the sower is in the parable:

-**The Seed** is the message of the Gospel. It is the good news that while human beings have sinned against their holy Creator and justly deserve their eternal punishment and separation from Him, that God has provided a way for humans to be made right with Him. That way is through believing in Jesus' death on the cross in which He took the punishment that was ours and ransoming His people so that their sins are forgiven and their eternity in heaven is secured. That is the *kerygma* (the main message) or the *logos* (the word) - the good news that is sown in the world. Obviously, the message was a little different before Jesus actually died on the cross - before that, the message/the seed was that the kingdom had come with Jesus, so repent and believe.

-**The Sower** is anybody who spreads the message of the Gospel. It was first Jesus Himself. I'm sure that Jesus told this parable in some sense as a way for His disciples to make sense of what was happening around them. The people that should have been listening and responding to Jesus - the religious leaders, his hometown friends and family - they think he's insane or demon-possessed; they don't believe Him. It's the lepers, outcasts, fishermen, and notorious sinners who are hearing and responding. But the Sower can also be any Christian who acts as an evangelist, who takes forth the good news and shares it, sowing it in the world. This would be the apostles first, then all the Christians throughout church history, down to us. If you've been a believer for any length of time, congratulations, you're a sower.

One of the hardest things about this parable is that it sounds like people are losing their salvation, but we believe that once God saves you, He will complete His work in you. It is impossible to lose a true salvation. We have to consider the nature of what sown seed means. When the parable says that the sower sowed seed, it means that the Word of God went forth and was proclaimed, whether that's the preaching and teaching in a church, or a conversation explaining the faith to unbelievers. It does not mean that the Word was grasped and that someone came to faith in Christ; if that was so, the parable would have said, the seed sunk deep and produced fruit. Colossians 1:21-23a reminds us that, "**21** And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, **22** he has now reconciled in his body of flesh by his death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before him, **23** if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard..." Clearly, there is a strong emphasis in the NT on "continuing in the faith," "pressing on," and "persevering" - as evidence of salvation.

Now the main point of the parable is the description of the different types of soil. You have to understand that farmers didn't necessarily have neat rows that were perfectly plowed to sow their seed like they do now. In ancient Israel, they would spread seed anywhere on all types of different terrains, it was a difficult landscape with rocks and hills, hoping to get results in as many places as possible. Now, to those who didn't have "ears to hear" and didn't understand Jesus, this all just sounded like an unnecessary agricultural lesson. Thankfully, Jesus explained the spiritual application of the parable to the twelve:

II. The Explanation (vv. 9-15)

⁹ And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, ¹⁰ he said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.' 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.

Parables, of course, are stories that use everyday objects and events to illustrate deep spiritual truths. Or you could say they are earthly stories with heavenly meanings.² The parables both reveal truth as well as hide it. If you have ears to hear, you'll get what Jesus is explaining; if not, the meaning will be hidden. It's really fascinating that this parable of the soils brings out the truth that many people can hear truth but not really grasp it and be changed by it. The very point the parable is illustrating is proven by people's ability or inability to understand and apply it.

The first kind of soil is

A. The Hard Heart That Immediately Rejects The Word (v. 12)

The seed falls on the path that gives no chance for it to take root. Birds snatch the seed up; Satan swoops in and makes sure that the word does not connect. The message of the Gospel has no chance with this type of soil, this type of heart. There is "spiritual deafness," they dismiss the message without any serious contemplation of its legitimacy. I remember taking a young man out to lunch and shooting pool with him afterwards. He was in his early twenties, had had some substance and relationship issues, but was trying to get his life together and was going to church with his family. As we shot pool, I went over the basics of the Gospel, to which he nodded his head and seemed to follow what I was saying, somewhat agreeing with me. But when I asked him if he understood and wanted to commit his life to Jesus, he said, "Nah, I don't think that's for me." His heart was not ready to hear the word and change. I'm sure all of you have stories like that, of sharing your faith, trying to tell people about this amazing gift that we have in our hope in Jesus, but there is no receptivity. Yet. The thing about planting seeds is that you may plant and see no response, no growth, but another may plant after you and the seed could take root then.

The second soil represents the

B. The Shallow Heart That Falls Away After a Time (v. 13)

The seed falls on rocks where there are no roots, "*and in a time of testing fall away.*" These are a difficult group of people to watch. They seem to be responsive to the Gospel, they seem to "receive it with joy." But it doesn't last very long. Maybe these are the kids who make emotional decisions

² Philip Ryken, *Luke, Vol. 1* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), p. 357.

around the campfire at youth retreats or summer camp, but when they get back home they go back to their old lives. Rarely does someone come to faith in Christ as a teen or an adult, and everyone around them responds to the news with, "Oh yeah! We're so glad you've become a Christian! That's wonderful!" Unless their family and their social circle are mostly Christians who have been praying for them, it's more likely that friends and family will not be thrilled, and will try to talk them out of it, or ridicule their new faith. "Have you joined a cult? Been brainwashed? You're going to be so lame now."

We all have pushback like that, times where we have to choose the Lord or the world, and those are defining moments in our spiritual lives: will we crumble, give in to the world, and deny the faith? Or will we accept the difficulties, bear up under the hardships, and remain faithful through it? Persevering through trials produces all kinds of good fruit in our lives. Crumbling under it can show that we were never believers in the first place. Not always, we all doubt and waver. But the bottom line is that initial excitement is not a sign of true faith. Endurance is the sign of true faith.

The third soil represents

C. The Divided Heart That Eventually Falls Away (v. 14)

This third soil, this third group is the ones who hear it and seem to be ready to embrace it. But then the realities and hardships of the Christian life versus the ease and luxury that is available from the world comes into focus. And it's just a whole lot easier to love the world and riches and everything else than it is to make God and His kingdom the first priority in life. The enticing things of the world act as thorns choking people's faith out of them.

Our hearts are not made to be able to serve two masters, just as the soil cannot support seed and thorns in one spot. The thorns will win out, just as the pleasures of the world and the drive to be wealthy will win out over living your life to please God. Matthew 6:24 – *"No one can serve two masters, for 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 God and money."* You cannot serve God with a divided heart, both because you can't manage it and because God will not share His glory and allow His servants to serve other masters. You can't love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength when you are using them to pursue money and pleasure! If you are running after the desires that this world has to offer as the main motivation of your life, you might be totally rejecting the Lord, as the parable says.

So, three soils that do not receive the seed and produce no crop. Thankfully, Jesus says that there's one more kind:

D. The Fruitful Heart That Receives, Believes, and Grows (v. 15)

Good soil is the only place that the Gospel will land, take root, and produce a harvest. In John 15:5, Jesus promised that we will bear fruit: *"The one who remains in Me and I in him produces much fruit."* The good soil is not good because there are people who have achieved some level of righteousness and made their souls acceptable. No, every human being is fallen and undeserving and by nature bad soil. It becomes good soil because of the supernatural work on the soul by the Holy Spirit. That's not totally explained in the parable, but the rest of the Scriptures explain it: Titus 3:5, for instance, says, *"(God) saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to His own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit."*

Hardships and persecution don't deter these people that have been made into good soil. Worldly pleasures and sinful greed don't distract and derail them. The Word takes root and brings a harvest of results. What does the fruit that is produced look like? Mark's Gospel talks about a thirtyfold, sixtyfold, and hundredfold crop, so there is the sense that when one life is saved by faith, that others around it and through it will find salvation. But there is also the fruit of a changed life in action: every

time you show love to someone, every selfless act done for God's glory; every time that a Christian could have gotten impatient or mean; angry or rough, but they chose patience, gentleness, kindness, self-control, etc – those things produce reactions in other people and bear beautiful fruit in spreading the love of Jesus. It can also refer to the idea in Ephesians 2:10 that, *"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them."* Actions that we take in obedience to God, and the good that it spreads in this world. Everything from intense missions work to the little actions that bring shalom and healing to the world.

The parable and its explanation are followed by a few verses with

III. The Encouragement to Prioritize Faith (vv. 16-18)

16 "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. 18 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."

It's tempting to read the parable of the four soils and think that there's not a whole lot you can do about whether you hold onto your faith or not. If your heart is the wrong kind of soil, you're destined to fall away. You won't be able to keep discouragement or Satan's attacks away, so hopefully you're the good soil or else you're doomed. But as much as salvation is a sovereign work of God in our lives, that doesn't mean we are just passive when we receive it. We have to prioritize it, prize it, exercise our faith. The NT constantly exhorts us to *"walk in a manner worthy of the Lord"* (Colossians 1:10) and to *"run with endurance the race that is set before us"* (Hebrews 12:1b) and to *"work out your salvation with fear and trembling"* (Philippians 2:12b). Faith and godliness take work. You cannot rest on the Bible reading you used to do, the prayer times you once had, the worship you participated in years ago. You must press on, actively engaging in those things or you will lose what you had. Either God and faith in Christ are the way that you light your life, and your highest priority, or you neglect them and you lose your vitality. Jesus does not want to see your life become the rocky soil or the thorny path, He wants the soil of your life to thrive and produce fruit. And you do that by being actively engaged in growing your spiritual life, with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Conclusion:

So we come back to the question that I posed to my friend: "Which soil are you?" Please do not move on in the book of Luke without thinking about the nature of salvation, and making sure that you have experienced regeneration, the new birth. As a pastor, I never want to make the truly saved doubt their salvation (*"these things are written that you might believe"*). But I also don't want to falsely assure someone who has never experienced the new birth that they are saved when they really aren't. It's not enough to just pray a prayer or tell people that you're a Christian. And people can sit in church and go through the motions for decades without realizing the call of Jesus to be born again. Your life changes radically as a result of coming to faith in Christ and your life is marked over time by obedience to Him.

If you know that you have been given eternal life and a new self, praise God that He has made your soul into good soil! Look for ways that your life is producing fruit. If you are not sure whether you have received the new life in Christ, please come to me or John, or any of the leaders or members of this church that you feel comfortable talking to. Sometimes churches give off the vibe that "you are not allowed to talk about your doubts here." We don't want to be that kind of church. Please don't let your doubts go unspoken or unasked.

To those who already believe: the one thing that I don't want you to come away with from this parable is excuses not to sow the word: We can't think things like "He is just hard soil and will never hear the

Gospel” or “She is only worried about money and worldly things and would just never become a follower of Jesus.” 1) We don’t get to make those judgments, 2) God works miracles in the hardest of hearts. Criminals, people on the verge of suicide, murderers, terrorists, and addicts have all come to faith in Jesus Christ, having their hearts renewed by the Holy Spirit. Additionally, what we see on the outside is never the full picture – we don’t know how far someone is from believing in God and coming into the kingdom. A self-righteous person that is an upstanding pillar of the community can be far away from the kingdom because they don’t think they have a sin problem; whereas a drug addict or convicted felon gets the whole depravity thing. I’ve always said that atheists and people who seem hostile to the gospel could be closer to the kingdom than people who have a little bit of religion and think that’s enough. Our obligation is to sow the seed and leave the harvest to God.

This parable should be a huge encouragement to us in our witnessing and Gospel-sharing endeavors; our sowing! If we know ahead of time that more people do not have a soul, or a soil, that will accept the message of the Gospel, then we will not be discouraged when people are not persuaded, or it seems to take hold but later drops away. But if we know that every once in a while, we find that the message that we speak finds good soil, it is exciting to think that that soil will multiply and produce great fruit. If you save one person, you may have brought Christ to his or her family and made Gospel inroads for their family for generations to come, not to mention their neighbors and friends. That is a truly exciting thought. Amen.

Benediction

Jude 24-25 – “Now to Him who is able to keep you from stumbling and to present you blameless before the presence of His glory with great joy, to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and forever. Amen.”