

Luke 8:4-15
The Parable of the Soils

The choice of blessing instead of punishment seems simple. Why would someone choose eternal pain over eternal pleasure? Yet, the choice only seems simple to those who believe. To the unregenerate the choice can seem oddly confusing. We are reminded by Scripture that “a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised (1 Corinthians 2:14). Sadly, we all know from experience that some willingly, deliberately, intentionally choose damnation.

This story is told by the three synoptic writers. Matthew’s account gives the details that set the stage. Jesus had left a house where He had been teaching and went to the shores of the Sea of Galilee. As usual a large crowd gathered, so Jesus “got into a boat and sat down, and the whole crowd was standing on the beach.” (Matthew 13:2). The large crowd included many who had been following Jesus for some time, but likely also some newcomers who had journeyed to hear this great prophet and teacher.

Jesus taught through a parable. This was not uncommon for a rabbi; such illustrative devices were regularly used in teaching. They were a convenient means of offering comparisons (the word itself means to put one thing alongside another). They were used to teach both spiritual and practical truths, and challenged the listener to work out the correct meaning for himself. In this case, though, Jesus, Himself, supplied the explanation.

As an aside, this passage also offers us an excellent picture of how verbal plenary inspiration works. Compare Matthew 13:1-9. Mark 4:1-9 with Luke. While it is true that the details offered by each writer differ, none contradicts the other. They each wrote under the superintending power of the Holy Spirit, yet each was allowed to impart his own particular perspective to the events they recorded.

The Parable

Luke begins his narrative by simply stating, “when a large crowd was coming together, and those from the various cities were journeying to Him, He spoke by way of a parable” (v. 4). This passage seems to mark a turning point in the way Jesus instructed the crowds. He began from now on to teach more in parables than in straightforward presentations of spiritual truths. It is as if He had determined that those who would follow Him had done so, and He would focus His efforts on them specifically. Others, who simply remained on the fringes looking for excitement or entertainment, would not be given the explanations of the teaching Jesus offered in parables. Jesus affirmed this in Mark’s account when He told His disciples “to you has been given the mystery of the kingdom of God, but those who are outside get everything in parables” (Mark 4:12).

The story itself would have been easy to relate to in the agricultural region of Palestine. Most people farmed. The act of plowing and sowing seed was very unsophisticated. Once the soil had been turned over as best it could, the farmer simply walked along scattering seed by hand as he went. This was called ‘broadcasting’ and was very inefficient. As the parable implies, only one seed in four actually bore fruit, though clearly the point Jesus was making is not about agricultural productivity.

As the sower went, some of the seed he cast “fell beside the road, and it was trampled under foot and the birds of the air ate it up” (v. 5). This was not the highway or a main road but rather the paths between the plowed furrows that the farmer walked on to avoid trampling his own crop. Since this soil had not been plowed, the seed simply laid on top until it was either stepped on by the farmer himself or became food for the local birds.

Jesus then said that “other seed fell on rocky soil, and as soon as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture” (v. 6). Palestine in general has a topography of shallow arable soil on top of rock. Many farmers in the crowd must have nodded approvingly as they remembered the frustrations of trying to produce a crop in such unfavorable conditions. In this case the seed entered the soil and began to grow, but because the plant’s roots could not penetrate the hard rocky area beneath the shallow topsoil, it quickly ceased to flourish.

A third batch of seed fell “among the thorns; and the thorns grew up with it and choked it out” (v. 7) Jesus said. The word for thorns is the same word later used to describe the crown of thorns worn by Jesus at His crucifixion. These weeds had not been uprooted by the plowing and grew up along with the seed. Over time, they took the nutrients from the soil, absorbed the water, and blocked the sunlight that the seed needed to grow. Consequently, the seed died.

Finally, though, Jesus said, some seed “fell into the good soil, and grew up, and produced a crop a hundred times as great” (v. 8). Such reproduction was miraculous. One remembers the blessing Isaac received from the Lord that made him a wealthy man (Genesis 26:12). It recalls the catch of fish Peter and the others experienced. It is a reminder that the Lord is capable of blessing in any magnitude of His choosing.

The Explanation

Not for Everyone

We can learn that there are many kinds of hearts to be found everywhere the gospel is preached. We ought not to assume that all who attend church are believers. Two immediate cautions to take away from a general overview of the parable. First, we ought not to put too much into immediate results from preaching and, second, we ought not to get lax in hearing the gospel message.

Luke says that “as He said these things, He would call out, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear’” (v. 8). This is a very frequent exhortation from Jesus as He distinguished between those who wanted to understand the truth and those who did not. Jesus also indicated the source of this desire to understand. It was not good judgment on the part of the disciples and others, nor was it a sense of seeing a higher purpose. Quite simply their decision to stay and understand the meaning of the parable was a gift from God. Jesus continued, “to you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables” (v. 10). It “has been granted” means it is neither earned nor deserved. Let us never forget that we have been chosen; our eternal destiny is not a matter of our volition, but His.

We are given grace to understand the ‘mysteries’ (v. 10). The ancient world had many “mystery cults” in which special knowledge or action gave the initiate entrance into the society. That is not what is referred to here. A Christian interpretation of ‘mystery’ would be a truth that would have remained unknown had

God not chosen to reveal it. The parable teaches clearly that the character of the hearer determined the effect of the Word, and that character is supplied and shaped by the grace of God.

The 'rest' of the people refers to the scribes, Pharisees, and others who had not accepted Jesus as the Messiah. But why did these others not understand? Matthew, elaborating in a passage from Isaiah, seems to indicate that Jesus spoke in parables *because* people's hearts were hardened. Mark and Luke suggest that He spoke in parables *in order that* people's hearts would be hardened. There is really no contradiction here. Both are true. Because the people chose not to receive Jesus as Messiah their hearts were allowed to become hardened to the truth. God's sovereign will is to remove what people will not improve. Romans 1:18-26 is a good illustration of this.

The Sower

Who exactly is the sower? If "the seed is the word of God" (v. 11), then all who spread the word are sowers. As Peter reminds us using the same analogy, this is how we came to faith, "for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God." (1 Peter 1:23).

There are two things to take away from this. First, fruit-bearing is a time consuming process. No doubt this puzzled the disciples who wanted immediate results. But we, too, must remember that this is God's work and He will do it in His time. We ought not to press for false results, nor ought we to be disappointed if our attempts at sharing the gospel do not produce immediate fruit.

Second, we cannot alter the gospel to make it more palatable. To stay within the analogy, we cannot offer a GMO gospel. To modify the gospel message to produce more apparent fruit will not work. The fruit will not be genuine, and those who profess faith under such circumstances are often worse of that before.

The Unyielding Heart (v.12)

Jesus began His interpretation of the parable by stating that "those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they will not believe and be saved" (v. 12). Though this was Satan's work, there is no sense that Jesus excused people from their responsibility when they heard the gospel.

This first group did nothing with what they heard. They were hard-hearted. They were indifferent and callous. Immediately after hearing the message they lost interest. Why? Perhaps they were distracted. Perhaps they understood that this would inconvenience them if they had to give up a particular sin. Perhaps they feared for their reputation. In any case, they chose to reject the gospel straight away. It never penetrated their heart. They were stillborn.

This did not mean they are atheists. Many had their own religious/spiritual beliefs. The Pharisees were a fine example. They had so closed their minds to the anything beyond their own expectations of a Messiah, that they refused to see Him when He came. Even today, many base their beliefs on their own opinions or feelings, to their eternal regret.

The Impulsive Heart (v. 13)

The second group was quite opposite from the first. Jesus tells us that this group “when they hear, receive the word with joy” (v. 13). They were not only receptive, but actually made a profession of faith in Jesus. Every indication was that they have received Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Unfortunately, since “these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away” (v. 13).

It is good to be emotional, but that is not all of it. Superficial emotion has no weight. It is not conviction. James 1:12 emphasizes that true faith endures, “blessed is a man who perseveres under trial; for once he has been approved, he will receive the crown of life which the Lord has promised to those who love Him.” We must remember that we can feel great comfort or great fear when hearing the gospel without receiving saving faith.

It is this perseverance that truly marks genuine faith. The problem, though, is for how long must one endure? The answer is, until the end. That means that we can never be complacent about our faith. We can never presume upon the grace of God to sustain us. We must do our part in the process of sanctification.

Paul reminded the Colossians that “²²He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach - ²³if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard” (Colossians 1:22-23). The writer to the Hebrews echoed this truth, “we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end” (Hebrews 3:14).

It is obvious that someone would rejoice when they came to faith in Jesus Christ. Recognition of our sinful nature, requiring eternal punishment by a just and holy God, being forgiven, and that punishment being transferred to Jesus on our behalf would fill any reasonable person with unspeakable joy. But if instead our faith is based on temporary needs (health, financial, or other personal issues) then once those needs have been met our need of a Savior is met as well. Expectation of a “quick fix” might bring joy for the short-term, but it will never be able to sustain itself.

Evidence of saving faith is endurance during temptation. The word means trial or testing. Such challenges faced as a result of our faith in Christ are often not worth the trouble to people who have had only an emotional response to the gospel message. Upon further reflection, they realize that the cost of discipleship is just too high.

When Jesus miraculously fed thousands of people, many followed. Soon after, Jesus told His disciples of His impending sacrifice and said that they, too, were required to have total commitment to Him. As a result of this exhortation, “many of His disciples withdrew and were not walking with Him anymore” (John 6:66). These disciples wanted a conquering king, not a suffering servant. Though they followed for a time, they did not persevere.

True believers can remember the purpose of suffering. James 1:2-4 puts it clearly, “²consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, ³knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. ⁴And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.” True believers know that “all discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful;

yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (Hebrews 12:11).

The Preoccupied Heart (v. 14)

Jesus then told of the third seed that “fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity” (v. 14). The heart described here suffered not from too much persecution, but from too much pleasure.

Three dangers were warned of. First, the cares of life. We all have obligations. Duties to family, to work, to maintaining our physical bodies, etc. Yet when relationships, or career, or personal needs outweigh our commitment to Jesus Christ, we ought to be concerned. These things, even good things, can impede our ability to bear good fruit. We need to remember to “seek first His kingdom” (Matthew 6:33).

The second warning regarded riches. Immediately one recalls the peril of the rich young ruler whose plight is described in Luke 18:18-23:

“¹⁸A ruler questioned Him, saying, ‘Good Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?’ ¹⁹And Jesus said to him, ‘Why do you call Me good? No one is good except God alone. ²⁰You know the commandments, “Do not commit adultery, Do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honor your father and mother.”’ ²¹And he said, ‘All these things I have kept from my youth.’ ²²When Jesus heard this, He said to him, ‘One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.’ ²³But when he had heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich.”

Third, we are warned of the pleasures of life. These entanglements could include alcohol, sex, gambling or even things like food, exercise, or entertainment. In themselves there is no harm, but they cannot be allowed to overwhelm us. One is reminded of Demas, who “having loved this present world, has deserted me [Paul] and gone to Thessalonica” (2 Timothy 4:10). 1 John 2:15 offers the most direct admonition, “do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.” We must eradicate the weeds in our garden so they do not choke us out.

The Redeemed Heart (v. 15)

The final heart Jesus described was “the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance” (v. 15). Notice the description. First, the heart was honest and good. The word for honest means “good disposition” and that for good means “virtuous or upright.” Since none of this would be true of fallen man, we must conclude that these traits are given by God to those whom He has called to hear His message.

Second, these “hold it fast” in obedience. John 14:21, “he who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves Me.” True, saving faith is always characterized by obedience. Finally, these “bear fruit” because they have persevered. They have never abandoned their faith, and at the end of their lives, be they many years or few, they leave behind a testimony of good works. These are both attitudes (Galatians 5:22-23) and actions “please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work” (Colossians 1:10).

There may be varying degrees of fruitfulness. Luke mentions only the hundredfold reproduction, but the Matthew and Mark mention thirtyfold and sixtyfold. Still, there is fruit that is borne. There are good works done. Just as every true believer has a spiritual gift, every true believer bears good fruit. And all of this is the work of God.

Take Aways

Since bearing fruit is the only outward profession that marks saving faith, we ought to examine our fruit. We are not however, soil experts, so let us not be influenced by the perceived potential quality of the soil when we share the gospel.