

A couple of weeks ago, three people stopped by the church to request some food. Before going to the food pantry, I asked the middle age woman the following question, "Have you ever thought much about spiritual things?" She replied quickly, "Oh, yes! Why just last week I read a verse from the Bible!" And as the discussion continued, no matter what I said, she and the others agreed with me.

I probed, "Did you know that the Bible says that God is perfect, and sinners cannot stand sin in His presence?" They replied, "Yes, that's right."

Then I questioned, "Do you realize that Jesus Christ is our only hope?" Their reply, "Oh, yes! He's the only One!" As I listened, something gnawed at me. I was hearing the right words, but I had a strange sense they were just telling me what they thought I wanted to hear--so they could get what they really wanted. A free lunch.

Did you realize that in the first century people actually came to Jesus with the same motivation? Galilee was full of "free-lunch-seekers" (don't we all love a something for nothing deal?), and when word got around about a teacher who could turn water into wine, and five loaves and two fish into a feast for 5,000, the crowds flocked to Him.

But you know something--Jesus wasn't into attracting crowds. His aim was to make disciples. I find it interesting to see what He did with the crowds when they came. True, He loved them. But that means He loved them enough to speak the truth to them--even if it meant they left Him--the truth about the *cost* of being His disciple.

This morning, we are beginning what I consider to be a crucial, new series entitled, "The Cost of Discipleship." In the weeks ahead, we're going to be examining several texts from Luke's gospel to see what Jesus had to say to the curious crowds. The truth is, salvation is free, but it's not cheap. It costs us everything to be a follower of Jesus Christ, a truth we seem to have forgotten in our age of easy-believism, yet a truth which we'll see over and over as we ponder Jesus' words.

To begin our study, I want to take you to familiar ground. It's known as the parable of the sower--more accurately, the parable of the four soils. Before those with good memories speak up, yes, I preached this parable back in 1989. "Why repeat a message?" you ask. For three reasons. First, because we tend to forget what we hear anyway! Second, because it's message is so relevant. And third, because God repeated it. We find the same parable in Matthew 13, again in Mark 4, and also in Luke 8. In fact, our study this morning will not be a "repeat" message, for the last time we looked at Matthew's account, and this time we want to probe the parable from Luke's perspective.

**Proposition: In order to understand Jesus' parable in Luke 8:1-15, we want to consider three things.**

- I. Consider the setting (1-3).
  - A. There's an atmosphere of confrontation.
  - B. There's an atmosphere of curiosity.
- II. Consider the story (4-8).
  - A. Some seed fell on the path (5).
    1. It was trampled.
    2. The birds ate it.

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\*\*\* Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

- B. Some seed fell on rock (6).
    - 1. It looked good for awhile.
    - 2. It withered for lack of moisture.
  - C. Some seed fell among thorns (7).
    - 1. It grew well at first.
    - 2. It was choked in the end.
  - D. Some seed fell on good soil (8).
    - 1. It grew well at first.
    - 2. It produced a good harvest in the end.
- III. Consider the significance (9-15).
- A. Why did Jesus give this parable? (9-10)
    - 1. He wanted to reveal truth.
    - 2. He wanted to conceal truth.
  - B. What does the parable mean?
    - 1. Some hear with hard hearts.
    - 2. Some hear with shallow hearts.
    - 3. Some hear with crowded hearts.
    - 4. Some hear with good hearts.

Implication: What is my response to the Word of God?

I. Consider the setting (1-3).

Notice verse 1, "And it came to pass, afterward." Stop there. After what? Jesus' story of the four soils didn't pop up out of thin air, but fit a context. What was happening that prompted the Lord to tell this story (which begins in verse 5)?

**A. There's an atmosphere of confrontation.** Jesus had just had a confrontation, Luke tells us in chapter 7, with a Pharisee. It was not His first confrontation, nor would it be His last. Throughout His ministry, Jesus dealt with religious people who naively believed they were okay with God. Jesus knew they weren't, and told them so.

**B. There's an atmosphere of curiosity.** The crowds were curious about Jesus. Notice Luke's description of what happened in Jesus' early, public ministry. "And it came to pass, afterward, that He went throughout every city and village, preaching and showing the glad tidings of the kingdom of God; and the twelve were with Him." Verses 2-3 inform us that a group of women were also present, in addition to the twelve disciples, as part of Jesus' ministry "team."

Verse 4 provides the immediate context. "And when *many people* [notice this fact] were gathered together, and were come to Him out of every city, He spoke by a parable." Jesus' popularity was spreading, so much so that *many* came to Him. Why did they come? For various reasons--some came to hear Him and His message of hope; others came for healing or to see healing; still others came, no doubt, just to be with the "in" crowd.

It's no different today. Recently Kent Hughes wrote a book entitled, *Are Evangelicals Born Again?*. In it, Hughes makes the timely observation (16), "Evangelical Christianity has 'arrived,' though its arrival may be no more than an Indian summer. Despite scandals, its preachers still dominate the religious media. Its recording artists sell big. A billion dollars is spent annually on its publications. Sometimes it even makes and breaks politicians. Being 'born again' can be profitable. Jesus saves, but Jesus also sells. Evangelicalism is big business." Frankly, it's become the "in" thing to come to Jesus.

But why are people coming? Why have *you* come to worship Jesus this morning? Have you come to worship a Jesus who saves or a Jesus who sells? Out of a setting of both controversy and curiosity, Jesus told a parable, a story we desperately need to hear.

## II. Consider the story (4-8).

The first thing that stands out to me about this particular story is that it's familiar. It's familiar to us, and it was to them. A familiar story with a forceful punch line. It's a story about a farmer, a story that speaks to us about how we listen to God's Word. Some of you are seekers, and you've been seeking for quite awhile. You've been intrigued by Jesus and Christianity. This parable is for you. Some of you have been in the church for years. You've heard hundreds, even thousands of sermons. This story is for you, too.

The story begins in verse 5, "A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell by the wayside." As the crowd listened, Jesus began to paint a picture of a farmer out in his field, planting his crop. No, the farmer didn't use a four-wheel-drive tractor and John Deere planter. He broadcasted his seed. He draped a bag full of seed over his shoulder, and while walking along the furrow, scooped out handfuls of seed, and scattered them over the field. And as he did, the seed landed in four different locations, with four different results.

**A. Some seed fell on the path (5).** That's what is meant by the KJV's "wayside." The farmland in Israel was split into long, narrow strips, and between the strips were paths which were right of ways. The dirt on these paths was packed as hard as the road, and whatever seed landed on it had no chance of getting in. So here's what happened to it.

1. *It was trampled.* The seed was trodden down by people, by animals, and by carts. It never had a chance to penetrate the earth and germinate. So...

2. *The birds ate it.* In the language of the AV, "The fowls of the air devoured it."

**B. Some seed fell on rock (6).** Verse 6 records that some of the seed landed on rocky soil. Jesus isn't talking about soil with rocks in it, since any farmer who tilled a field would make sure all the rocks were out. The land in Israel has strains of limestone bedrock running through it (MacArthur, 35), and in many places this bedrock comes up to within inches of the soil surface. What did Jesus say would happen to this seed?

1. *It looked good for awhile.* According to Jesus, the seed germinated and sprang up. For a time, it looked great, but looks can be deceiving. Unseen to the farmer's eye, the germinated seed had no place for its roots to go. Actually, those seeds would spring up higher than the other seeds (because they could only grow up and didn't use their energy to send roots downward, like the productive plants did). Eventually, however...

2. *It withered for lack of moisture.* The heat of the summer sun scorched the sap right out of these rootless plants.

**C. Some seed fell among thorns (7).** "And some fell among thorns." You say, "Why didn't the farmer pull the weeds *before* he planted the seed?" The answer is that the obnoxious thorns *weren't* there at the time of planting--at least he didn't see them. The weedy soil looked great--it was deep, rich, and ready for planting. What the farmer could not see were the fibrous weed roots hidden in the ground. Until later, as verse 7 continues, "and the thorns sprang up with it." Two things happened to the third seed.

1. *It grew well at first.* The fact is, it's possible to make practically any ground look good by merely turning it over. Have you ever planted a garden in virgin soil, in soil that had previously been a weed patch? When you till the soil in the spring, the weeds seem to go away as the rich soil glistens in the sun. But don't get your hopes up! True, if you drop seed in the ground, it will grow well at first. But what happens?

2. *It was choked in the end.* Jesus said the thorns took over and literally choked the life right out of the good plants.

By the way, was the problem with the seed? No, the seed was fine. The problem was the condition of the soil. Finally, Jesus informs us that some seed landed in a fourth spot.

**D. Some seed fell on good soil (8).** What happened to this seed?

1. *It grew well at first.* Like the seed that landed on the rock and in the thorns, this seed grew well at first, but unlike the previous seed...

2. *It produced a good harvest in the end.* "And other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bore fruit an hundredfold." May I remind you of the obvious? A farmer doesn't plant seed to grow a nice crop of foliage. His aim is what? A high crop yield.

So there's Jesus' story--it's very simple. One type of seed lands in four types of soil and produces four distinct results.

Notice something quite interesting. What did Jesus do right after telling this story? The text says (8), "And when he had said these things, he *cried*, He that hath ears to *hear*, let him *hear*." What's the point of this story? Here's a clue. This is a parable about *hearing*.

Remember the crowds? Many had come to *hear* Jesus. Does hearing Jesus save a person? Does coming to church to hear God's Word result in God's favor? Jesus shouts to us, "I want to talk to you about how you hear!"

What is the right way to listen to the Word of God? We find out right here in this story. This applies to non-Christian seekers as well as those who have known Christ for years. It is important how we hear, how we listen to God's Word.

III. Consider the significance (9-15).

Years ago, when I was in high school, three of my peers came to an evangelistic youth event. None of the three were Christians. That day, all three made a "decision" to receive Christ as Savior. The next day was Sunday, and of the three, only one (as I recall) was in church. Within a couple of months, he, too, was gone.

I wrestled with a question then. What happened?! What happened to my three friends? Were they truly saved? They prayed a prayer (I heard one of them with my own ears), so why didn't they "stick"? Frankly, I still wrestle with the same question.

In my nine years as a pastor here, I've watched this scenario reoccur time and time again: a person hears the Word of God, is convicted and expresses a desire to become a Christian, prays the sinner's prayer, goes through the waters of baptism, joins the church, and even gets involved in the church, for awhile. But then something happens. In time, the person stops coming to church--not only to our church, but to any church--and eventually, he or she resorts to the old ways of living for self instead of Christ. And that question crops up again in my mind: What happened?

The fact is, 20 centuries ago, Jesus told us what happened--in the parable of the soils.

**A. Why did Jesus give this parable? (9-10)** That's what the disciples wanted to know, so they asked Jesus in verse 9, "What might this parable be?" Jesus, why are you telling this story? Why don't you just tell us what you want us to know? Jesus' response is both eye-opening and shocking. This may not sit well with some of us, but Jesus said He told this parable for two reasons.

1. *He wanted to reveal truth.* He stated in verse 10, "Unto you [the disciples] it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God; but to others in parables." Jesus said He told this story to help His true followers to understand truth, kingdom truth. He was using this parable to reveal to them spiritual truth. But He had a second reason.

2. *He wanted to conceal truth.* (NIV, 10) "He said, 'The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables so that, though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.'"

You say, "That sounds like Jesus didn't want some of His hearers to understand Him." The fact is, He didn't. Jesus concealed truth by telling parables. Why? Because some who had

come to Him had indeed believed in Him--and were redeemed--but others had not believed Him. Oh, they were intrigued by Him. They liked being around Him. But they refused to repent and follow Him. So kingdom truth was off limits to them.

That's nothing new. In verse 10, Jesus is quoting the message given to Isaiah eight centuries earlier, when God told the prophet (Isa 6:9), in essence, "I want you to preach to the people, but I want you to know ahead of time, they will not listen. I won't let them because their hearts are hard. Your preaching will only make them harder. I will not reveal my truth to people who play games with Me." Isaiah faced a tough ministry!

We're facing a sticky problem in Christendom these days. John Piper, in his book *Desiring God*, surmises the situation as follows (54), "We are surrounded by unconverted people who think they *do* believe in Jesus. Drunks on the street say they believe. Unmarried couples sleeping together say they believe. Elderly people who haven't sought worship or fellowship for forty years say they believe. All kinds of lukewarm, world-loving church attenders say they believe. The world abounds with millions of unconverted people who say they believe in Jesus."

He's right. It's so easy to *say* we believe in Jesus. But *saying* we believe in Jesus is different from actually *believing* in Jesus. With that, let's consider the parable's meaning.

**B. What does the parable mean?** Jesus interprets the parable beginning in verse 11, "Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God." Just think of the power of a seed. A tiny acorn falls into the ground and grows with such force that it can crack a sidewalk that weighs hundreds of pounds. So God's Word is like seed. It falls into hard and stony hearts with the power to change. And it always changes the heart in which it lands. It breaks some, and hardens others. God said this in Jeremiah 23:29, "Is not my word like as a fire? saith the LORD; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?"

Did you ever wonder why, when the Word of God is preached, there is such a mixed response? Jesus here tells us why there was a mixed response to His message, and why there's a mixed response to our message. The problem isn't with the seed, but the soil. The problem isn't with the Word, but with the hearts of the hearers. Jesus identifies four kinds of hearts--one of the following describes each of us.

1. *Some hear with hard hearts.* Verse 12, "Those by the wayside are they that hear; then comes the devil, and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved." Here's the first kind of heart, the heart of a "path-hearer." Here is a person who is hard-hearted. The Old Testament would describe such a person as stiff-necked. He hears God's Word but is unresponsive and indifferent. The gospel message hits him and bounces right off. His heart is hard.

Do you know anyone like that? Such a person hears God's Word, but refuses to repent. Oh, he *hears*. All four groups hear, but his heart is so packed with the sins of his self-centered life that there's no place for the seed of God's Word to take root. He is blinded by Satan.

2. *Some hear with shallow hearts.* Verse 13 describes such (NIV), "Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away." Here we meet the "rocky-hearer." He hears God's Word and receive it quickly--too quickly, for he makes a commitment he doesn't understand. He's excited about Christ for a while, until the trials come. And listen. The trials of the Christian life *will* come. Then he fades away. The Christian life is too hard for him. His heart is shallow.

Did he lose his salvation? No. Profession is no guarantee of possession. You can't lose what you never possessed to begin with.

Tragically, many modern evangelistic efforts appeal to this kind of hearer: bright singing, attractive music, a preacher that appeals to the emotions, and the demand of churches for quick results, and boom! The guy walks the aisle and gets "saved"! Or does he? Time will tell.

3. *Some hear with crowded hearts.* Verse 14, "And that which fell among thorns are they who, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection." Here's the case of a person who hears the gospel, goes forth (that is, he leaves the altar and gets on with life), and is confronted by what the world has to offer. And the cares, riches, and pleasures of this life magnetize his heart. A new car becomes more important than the new birth. He'd rather have a bigger house than a bigger heart for God.

By the way, what distracts him is not necessarily bad things, but things that become bad because they take precedence over what matters most. Someone has said that the worst enemy of the best is the second best.

Frankly, there are lots of pew-sitters with crowded hearts this morning. Perhaps you are one of them. You are so locked into your schedule, you don't have time to get serious about living for Christ. You don't hate Christ, you just ignore Him--you take the overtime on Monday and Thursday evening, the kid's soccer on Wednesday evening, the family outing on Saturday, the house remodeling every other spare moment, you crash on Sundays, and where is Christ in all of this? Crowded right out.

During World War II, Adolph Hitler arrested a German pastor and theologian--his name was Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Bonhoeffer eventually lost his life, but before he did, he wrote the now classic book, *The Cost of Discipleship*. In it, Bonhoeffer warned of what he called "cheap grace" which he defined as follows (p. 47): "Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate."

The sad truth today is this. There are scores of Bible-carrying church-attenders who are not truly born again. It's an eye-brow-raising fact that in 1990 a whopping one-third of Americans claimed to be "born again" (acc. to David Wells).

We need to remember what Jesus said about people who listen with crowded hearts. Such a person may appear to be a genuine Christian for six weeks, for six months, for six years--especially in America where it's possible to be a "cultural" Christian, a person who goes to church, lives a moral life, and serves on a few church functions, BUT! In the end, Jesus says, he brings no fruit to perfection. He doesn't mature.

To this point, we've seen three hearers and three unacceptable responses. Thankfully,

4. *Some hear with good hearts.* Verse 15, "But that on the good ground are they who, in an honest and good heart, having heard the word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience." Like the first three, this fourth person hears God's Word, but what set him apart is that his heart is good and receptive. How do we know? Because he allows the Word to take root in his heart, change his life, and bring forth lasting fruit.

What kind of a hearer are you? What kind of a heart is your heart? Is it hard, shallow, crowded, or good? You say, "How can I tell?" Ponder the following.

Implication: What is my response to the Word of God?

Response: Faith comes by hearing the Word of the Lord (Rom 10:17). But we must *hear*, and the parable we've studied shows us that most of the people impressed by Jesus did not really *hear* the Word He preached. Faith isn't a matter of IQ or education. It's a matter of humbly preparing your heart to receive what God has to say (Wiersbe). Let's do this as we sing.

*Hymn of Response: #371 "Have Thine Own Way, Lord"*

One of the clearest ways to tell if Jesus Christ is Lord of your life is to look at your family relationships. The fruit of Christianity begins at home. If we have hard hearts, or shallow hearts, or especially crowded hearts, it will show up at home. We're going to listen to a song by Dan and Kevin which will be part of the coming family musical. This morning, it will help us to evaluate how we've been listening to God's Word.

*Ministry in Music: Dan Lodwick & Kevin Gulley*

Let's bow our heads for a time of reflection. We have heard God's Word this morning. The question is this. What are we going to do now that the seed of God's Word has landed in our hearts? We have four choices. 1) We can resist what we've heard, and be path-hearers. 2) We can commit to what we've heard without counting the cost, like seed on the rock. 3) We can be so distracted by worldly things that we not necessarily reject Jesus, we ignore Him, like the seed overtaken by the thorns. Or, 4) We can hear, obey, and bear fruit with perseverance.

Use this time to count the cost, as you spend time in prayer.

*Time for Response in Prayer*

We need hearts that are near to the heart of God. If that's what you desire, tell the Lord so by singing the following song. If your heart isn't right with God, be honest. Ask the Lord to give you a heart that will please Him.

*Song of Commitment: #497 "Near to the Heart of God"*