

The Sower and the Soils (Luke 8:1–15)

Many Are Called, Few Are Chosen

Our church has been taking mission trips to Cuba for thirteen years. These trips are predominantly evangelistic in nature. We train a team of ten church members who are equipped to give a thorough presentation of the gospel from creation to the cross to the consummation of all things in Christ, emphasizing the necessity of conversion, calling those who hear to repent and believe the gospel, and directing those who respond positively to begin a life of faithfulness to Christ through baptism and membership in a faithful local church. In recent years, we have begun to add pastoral training to our mission agenda, but the core of these trips is evangelistic. Why Cuba, one might ask? The short version is that many years ago, Larry Lewis was invited to go with a mission team to Cuba, and he found the Cuban people incredibly receptive to the gospel relative to the many other places on the globe where Larry has attempted to proclaim the gospel. Whether it is the hospitable Hispanic culture, or the political and economic conditions, or a door opened by the Holy Spirit, or some combination of all three factors, it is simply easier to gather a family into a home and preach Christ to them in Cuba than it is in other places around the globe. And in thirteen years, we have developed close relationships with a handful of local churches, and we have more than a handful of Cuban brothers and sisters in Christ who have become dear friends of our church.

We do keep records on these trips, although every year we emphasize that the only number that really matters is the number of people who heard the gospel. We always remind ourselves that the responses are in the hands of our sovereign God. We cannot convert anyone; neither are we able to discern the sincerity and authenticity of responses. Our job is to faithfully sow the seed of the gospel, to model responsible evangelism for our host churches, and to pray to the Lord of the harvest. The data is somewhere in Marsha Lewis' notebooks, and I did not want to trouble her this week with trying to locate and tabulate them. But experience (I have been on about ten of these trips) tells me that somewhere between sixty and seventy-five percent of those who hear the gospel in Cuba respond positively. These results are at the same time both encouraging and disconcerting to the members of our team. They are encouraging because if we have faithfully, responsibly, and thoroughly proclaimed the gospel, it is exciting when that gospel

to be received rather than rejected. Yet these results are disconcerting because our church understands the dreadful reality of false conversion; we know that it is very possible to profess faith yet not possess faith, and furthermore, we know that it happens frequently. The last thing we want to do is go to Cuba and leave thousands of false converts in our wake. A seventy-five percent success rate of evangelism seems too good to be true. And it is. Nowhere near seventy-five percent of those who hear the gospel give biblical evidence of genuine conversion even a year later upon our return. If that were the case, the churches we work with would be filled to overflowing, but they are not. Yet some do give biblical evidence of conversion a year... two years... five years later. And that is why we keep going.

This is why the Parable of the Sower and the Soils is so critical for a church—and a mission team—to grasp. And every year, with every team, at some point during the week we have occasion to talk about this parable. For it explains the gap between those who profess faith and those who possess faith, and it informs how we view evangelism, conversion, and missions. This morning, we will unpack Jesus’ parable, which Philip Ryken refers to as “the parable of parables” because of its explanatory power.¹ Indeed, Jesus Himself seemed to grant this parable preeminent status among His parables, for (according to Mark’s Gospel) when His disciples came and asked Him to explain this parable, Jesus responded, “Do you not understand this parable? How then will you understand all the parables?” (Mk 4:13). We will look at the purpose for which Jesus told parables, then we will look at the parable itself, and then I will conclude by providing several points of application that flow from this parable.

The People of the Parables

First, however, let’s take a brief look at vv. 1–3, where Luke succinctly describes those who were following Jesus.

Soon afterward he went on through the cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means. (8:1–3)

¹ Philip Ryken, *Luke, Volume 1: Luke 1–12*, REC (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2009), 353.

It is not entirely clear to me why Luke included these verses, which do not appear in any other gospel.² The best explanation I have come across is that they provide a glimpse into the small band of followers who, at this later point in Jesus' ministry, are represented by the fourth soil, "those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience" (8:15).³ There were massive crowds attending Jesus' ministry, but few Christians. It is telling that when the Gospels describe the crowds during the height of Jesus' Galilean ministry, they speak in the thousands (Mt 14:21; 15:38), yet when the early church is gathered in the upper room prior to the day of Pentecost, there were only one-hundred twenty believers (Acts 1:15). Now, clearly those one-hundred twenty do not represent the entirety of authentic disciples in Israel at the conclusion of Jesus' ministry, but it cannot be denied that the majority of those who followed Jesus eventually fell away:

*When many of his disciples heard it, they said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it"? . . . After this many of his disciples turned back and no longer walked with him.
(Jn 6:60, 66)*

But not this group, for those mentioned in these verses (with the exception of Judas, who betrayed Christ, and Susanna, about whom nothing more is known) were with Jesus to the end, momentary lapses notwithstanding. In other words, this small group mentioned in vv. 1–3 functions as a prototypical church, and for that reason there are a few lessons that we can glean.

First, we notice that the church is *coeducational*. It was not at all strange in first-century Israel for men to follow a Jewish rabbi; it was unheard of for women to do so.⁴ This fact should not be quickly overlooked. Leon Morris notes, "The rabbis refused to teach women and generally

² "The mention of women in 8:1–3 is unique among the Gospels. All four Gospels report named women at the crucifixion (23:49; Matt 27:55–56; Mark 15:40–41; John 19:25) and resurrection (24:1–12; Matt 28:1–8; Mark 16:1–8; John 20:1–18), and Matt 27:55 and Mark 15:41 declare in retrospect that women had followed Jesus from Galilee. But 8:1–3 is the only prepassion reference to a sorority of women as Jesus' disciples"; James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Luke*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 232.

³ "In the present context the woman who anointed Jesus' feet (7:36–50) and the women who followed hi in discipleship (8:1–3) are the most immediate examples of 'good soil'; Edwards, 240.

⁴ "It was not uncommon for women to support Jewish rabbis (e.g., Josephus, *Ant.* 17.33–45), but it was virtually unknown for women to travel with rabbis. The presence of sizable numbers of women in Jesus' retinue must be regarded as a critically assured fact, for it was not a practice the Evangelists would invent (Jn 4:27)"; Edwards, 233.

assigned them a very inferior place. But Jesus freely admitted them into fellowship, and on this occasion, accepted their service.”⁵ Philip Ryken writes,

The miracles that Jesus performed for these women were only the beginning of his work in their lives. He also invited them to learn from his teaching ministry. This was remarkable, because in those days rabbis generally did not teach women; theology was only for men. But Jesus wanted to do more for these women than forgive their sins: he wanted to disciple their minds. To this end, he instructed them in his Word.⁶

Women occupy an important role in Luke’s Gospel. Mary believed the angelic announcement (1:26–38) and sang the first song of praise to God for the gift of the Messiah (1:46–55). Elizabeth exhibited steadfast faith while both her husband and her son succumbed to doubts (1:39–45). Anna the prophetess became one of the earliest witnesses to the Messiah’s arrival (2:36–38). Jesus showed compassion to both Peter’s mother-in-law (4:38–39) and to the widow of Nain (7:11–17). And throughout the passion narratives, the women come across as more steadfast than the disciples. J. C. Ryle noted, “It was *not* a woman who sold the Lord for thirty pieces of silver. They were *not* women who forsook the Lord in the garden and fled. It was *not* a woman who denied him three times in the high priest’s house. —But they *were* women who wailed and lamented when Jesus was led forth to be crucified. They *were* women who stood to the last by the cross. And they *were* women who were the first to visit the grave ‘where the Lord lay.’”⁷ And it was women to whom was granted the privilege of first seeing the Lord alive from the dead.⁸ Jesus did not sideline women; He made them integral to His ministry, and named them coheirs of His kingdom (Gal 3:28). And yet...

Second, we notice that the church is *complementarian*. While women were clearly an integral part of this prototypical church, they just as clearly were not in positions of authority. When Jesus prayerfully chose from among the larger crowd of disciples (the prototypical

⁵ Morris, 169.

⁶ Ryken, 355.

⁷ J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on Luke, Volume I* (1858; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2012), 187.

⁸ “The chief responsibility of the early church was to ‘be my witnesses’ (Acts 1:8), and women, as Nolland notes insightfully, constitute the only group to witness all four essential components of the early church’s confession of 1 Cor 15:3–5: the death, burial, empty tomb, and resurrection of Jesus”; Edwards, 232, citing John Nolland, *Luke 1:1–9:20*, WBC 35A (Dallas: Word, 1993), 366.

church), which included women, twelve whom He named apostles, to whom He gave authority to cast out demons and heal diseases, and whom He sent out to proclaim the gospel of the kingdom, it is not coincidental that He chose twelve men (6:12–16; 9:1–6).⁹ Neither is it merely a cultural accommodation, as is so often suggested today. When the New Testament establishes complementarian leadership in the church, it grounds this command not in cultural sensitivities, but in the order of creation (e.g. 1 Tm 2:12–14). It bears mentioning at this point that at the Southern Baptist Convention, which meets in just a few weeks, SBC messengers will have an opportunity to settle this issue once-and-for-all by adopting an amendment that specifies that a cooperating Southern Baptist Church is one that “does not act to affirm, appoint, or endorse a woman serving in the office or function of a pastor/elder/overseer, such as preaching to the assembled congregation.”¹⁰ I will be watching closely to see whether this amendment passes.

Third, we notice that the church is *converted*. Luke made a point of noting that the women who followed Jesus and were part of His entourage “had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod’s household manager, and Susanna, and many others” (vv. 2–3). Now, it would seem that thousands of people were the beneficiaries of Jesus’ messianic works of healing and exorcism, and not all of them were converted (cf. Mt 12:43–45; Lk 17:11–19). But the fact that these women followed Jesus after receiving healing suggests that their encounter with Jesus was transformative.¹¹ From this we may glean that a church, the entourage of Jesus, the community of Christ, is a converted community.

Fourth, we notice that the church is *comprehensive*. Luke mentions three women by name. Though he says nothing about Susanna (either here or in the rest of the Gospel), he notes that Jesus had cast seven demons out of Mary Magdalene and that Joanna was the wife of Chuza, who was Herod’s household manager. These women could scarcely have been more different. While Mary Magdalene has historically been linked with prostitution, there is no biblical

⁹ The same is true of the seventy-two whom Jesus sent out in Luke 10:1–12. Edwards notes, “It is doubtful that the seventy-two missionaries in 10:1, though unidentified, include women, for gender stratification in first-c. Judaism would scarcely allow women to travel two-by-two with men who were not their husbands”; Edwards, 233n83. Edwards makes it seem as though this was an accommodation to a gender-stratified culture, yet in 1 Timothy 2:12–14, the apostle Paul grounded his prohibition of women teaching or exercising authority over men in the order of creation, not in the sensitivities of culture.

¹⁰ R. Albert Mohler, “Truth and Unity Amendment,” May 18, 2026; <https://albertmohler.com/2026/05/18/truth-and-unity-amendment/>.

¹¹ “All of these women had experienced the saving power of Jesus Christ”; Ryken, 354.

evidence for this.¹² That said, it is difficult to believe that she could be possessed by seven demons and *not* speak and act in ways that would make her an outcast from society. On the other end of the social spectrum was Joanna, whose husband was a high official in the court of Herod Antipas.¹³ In addition to Joanna, who was undoubtedly a woman of means, Luke writes that there were “many others, who provided for them out of their means.” The church is a comprehensive community, comprised of men and women, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile, black and white, and everyone in between. Again, this is not meant to be a comprehensive ecclesiology, only a glimpse at the earliest community of Christians, and community that is coeducational, complementarian, converted, and comprehensive.

The Purpose of Parables

We come now to the main event of today’s text, the Parable of the Sower and the Soils. The following twelve verses contain three sections—the parable itself (vv. 4–8), a brief statement on the purpose of parables (vv. 9–10), and then Jesus’ interpretation of the parable (vv. 11–15). We will put the first and third together, and begin with the second—that is, Jesus’ explanation for why He spoke in parables. Look with me at vv. 9–10:

And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, 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.’” (8:9–10)

This is a massively important statement, and not often understood. Let me break it into two parts.

First, let’s look at the context of Jesus’ statement. It is not as clear in Luke’s Gospel as in the parallel accounts of Matthew (13:10–17) or Mark (4:10–12), where Jesus’ response is given in its fullest form, but in v. 10 Jesus quotes from Isaiah 6:9. Knowing the context of the Isaiah

¹² “The Christian imagination has made free with Mary Magdalene, mostly seeing her as a beautiful woman whom Jesus had saved from an immoral life. There is nothing whatever in the sources to indicate this”; Morris, 169. “Mary Magdalene, who according to all four Gospels was the first witness and herald of the resurrection, probably came from Magdal Nunaja (‘Fishtower’) on the west coast of Lake Gennesaret between Tiberias and Capernaum”; Edwards, 233.

¹³ “The word translated *steward* [] may mean the manager of Herod’s estates, or it may point to a political office. Godet conjectures that this man may have been the officer whose son Jesus healed (John 4:46ff.)”; Morris, 169. “The Jesus movement has thus infiltrated the highest echelons of society and influenced a wife to travel without her husband”; Edwards, 233–34.

passage sheds light upon Jesus' meaning. Isaiah 6 records the conversion and commission of the Isaiah to the prophetic ministry. It begins with Isaiah's famous vision of Lord seated upon his throne in majesty with seraphim calling out in antiphonal praise, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!" Upon seeing the Lord in His glory, Isaiah was painfully confronted with his own sin, and he cried out, "Woe is me! For I am lost [ruined]; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" But one of the seraphim flew to Isaiah with a burning coal from the altar, touched his lips with the coal, and declared, "Behold, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away, and your sin is atoned for." Then comes Isaiah's famous commission:

*And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?"
Then I said, "Here I am! Send me." And he said, "Go, and say to this people:*

*'Keep on hearing, but do not understand;
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.'
Make the heart of this people dull,
and their ears heavy,
and blind their eyes;
lest they see with their eyes,
and hear with their ears,
and understand with their hearts,
and turn and be healed.'* (6:8–10)

Isaiah then asked, "How long, O Lord?" And the LORD responded that this ministry of judgment would occur until Israel was a desolate wasteland, a burned over forest with nothing left but a single stump, which the LORD identified as "the holy seed" (6:11–13).

With this context in mind, what is Jesus' meaning? By quoting from Isaiah 6 and applying it to His own ministry, Jesus was identifying His own ministry as the fulfillment of Isaiah's ministry. Jesus, too, will conduct a ministry of reprobation, a ministry of judgment—meaning, His ministry will bring judgment upon the majority of His hearers, all but the "holy seed." And the instrument of this judgment, the instrument by which He will blind eyes, dull

hearts, and deafen ears is His parables. This is in line with other statements Jesus made during His ministry. For instance, in John 9:39:

Jesus said, “For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind.” (Jn 9:39)

And in Matthew 10:34:

“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law. And a person’s enemies will be those of his own household.” (Mt 10:34–36)

Jesus’ parables (indeed, all of Jesus’ teaching) have a dual function. To the elect, to those to whom it has been given to know the secrets (mysteries [μυστήρια]) of the kingdom, the parables reveal these mysteries. A “mystery” (μυστήριον) is a truth that cannot be discovered by human reasoning, but can be known only by divine revelation.¹⁴ It is a favorite word of the apostle Paul, who accounts for twenty-one of its twenty-eight uses in the New Testament. For Paul, the “mystery” of the gospel/kingdom includes: the partial hardening of the Jews in order that the Gentiles may be brought into the kingdom (Rom 11:25); the gospel of Christ crucified (1 Cor 2:1, 7); the resurrection and glorification of the bodies of the saints on the last day (1 Cor 15:51–52); the consummation of all things in Christ (Eph 1:9–10); the full inclusion of the Gentiles as fellow heirs of the kingdom of Christ (Eph 3:1–6, 9); that marriage exists as a parable of the gospel (Eph 5:32); that Christ indwells His saints by His Spirit (Col 1:27); the coming of the man of lawlessness (2 Thes 2:7). Often for Paul, “mystery” acts as a synonym for the gospel (Rom 16:25; 1 Cor 4:1; Eph 6:19; Col 2:2; 4:3; 1 Tm 3:9, 16). Thus, what Jesus is saying is that to His elect, the parables reveal truths about the gospel of the kingdom; but to the non-elect, those to whom knowledge of these mysteries has not been given, they actually function as instruments of

¹⁴ “The secrets, or ‘mysteries’ (Gk. *mystēria*), refer to knowledge of God that cannot be attained by natural means (Dan 2:27–28; Wis 2:22). The mystery is ‘given,’ but it cannot be earned or merited. No amount of research can unlock the mystery of God, for in the NT, as in Judaism, the mystery must be revealed from heaven in order to be known, and hence it is received by faith as a result of *hearing*”; Edwards, 238.

judgment, for they conceal the gospel of the kingdom; and the hearing of them without faith adds to their blindness, their dullness, their deafness, their condemnation. This does not mean that the parables are always incomprehensible to the non-elect; many of them are easy enough to understand. Rather, for the non-elect the parables have no explanatory power, no compelling meaning, for they address concerns the non-elect do not share and answer questions the non-elect are not asking. Yet some parables, like this one, were not comprehensible apart from Jesus' own interpretation, for the disciples had to ask Jesus what it meant, and Jesus had to interpret its meaning.¹⁵

So the purpose of parables is at one and the same time to reveal the mysteries of the kingdom to the elect, and to conceal the mysteries of the kingdom from the non-elect. Let no one in this church utter the ignorant allegation that John Calvin invented the doctrine of divine election. For no one spoke more clearly of the sovereignty of God in the salvation of men than did the Son of God Himself.

The Parable of Parables

Let's look, then, at the Parable of the Sower and the Soils, the "parable of parables." We will read the parable itself, followed by Jesus' interpretation.

And when a great crowd of people was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable, "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. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. 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." (8:4–8)

Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. 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. 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

¹⁵ For a good discussion of Jesus' use of parables, see Ryken, 357–58.

time of testing fall away. And as for what fell among thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked out by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. 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.”
(8:11–15)

At this point, many commentators enter upon discussions of farming techniques in first-century Palestine, exploring questions of whether first-century Palestinians plowed before sowing or sowed before plowing; but I don't think that is necessary and actually distracts from the point and the power of this parable, which lies in its universal relevance. Every culture in every age in every place sows seed in the ground in hopes of reaping a harvest.¹⁶ It doesn't matter if the seed is sown by huge industrial machines, or (as in Jesus' day) by a farmer with a grain bag slung over his shoulder; the principle is the same. When seed is indiscriminately sown, it falls upon different kinds of soil and yields different kinds of results.

Jesus provides us with three interpretive keys to understanding the parable: the seed is the word of God, which means that the sower is one who proclaims the word of God, and the various soils represent various kinds of responses to the word of God.¹⁷ The seed sown “along the path,” referring to the hard-packed footpaths around or through fields, does not penetrate into the soil, but rather remains on top, and birds of the air come and devour it.¹⁸ This represents those who hear the word of God and reject it; it does not penetrate into the mind or heart or soul, and “the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved” (v. 12). Anyone who has any experience in evangelism is familiar with this response. The word of the gospel is rejected as foolishness, or more often, as irrelevant. The hearer rejects the gospel and does not give it a second thought. And it is not merely a hard heart and indwelling sin that prevents the penetration and germination of the gospel seed; according to Jesus, Satan is

¹⁶ “The original parable in the gospel tradition is about a sower scattering seed on the ground, something with which all people in all times are familiar”; Edwards, 235.

¹⁷ Technically, it is the seed sown in the soil that represents the hearer, but the sense is the same. Edwards writes, “The transition from seed to hearers' responses is expressed awkwardly in vv 12–13 where ‘those along the path/rock refer not to seeds, as we should expect, but to hearers. . . . Parables, by nature, are similes, i.e., they establish likenesses, and likenesses are rarely exact. Parables do not follow strict rules of logic”; Edwards, 239.

¹⁸ “Here Jesus draws on a common experience for farmers in those days, when footpaths often cut right through their fields. Inevitably, some of their seed fell on hard pathways, where it never had a chance to germinate. Before long, it was trampled by passersby or became easy prey for hungry birds”; Ryken, 359.

actively at work to pluck the seed of the gospel away before it has the chance to penetrate and germinate (2 Cor 4:3–4). J. C. Ryle commented that nowhere is the devil more active than “in a congregation of gospel-hearers” —i.e. a church. He wrote,

Nowhere does he labour so hard to stop the progress of that which is good, and to prevent men and women being saved. From him come wandering thoughts and roving imaginations, —listless minds and dull memories, —sleepy eyes and fidgety nerves, —weary ears and distracted attention. In all these things Satan has a great hand. People wonder where they come from, and marvel how it is that they find sermons so dull, and remember the so badly. They forget the parable of the sower. They forget the devil.¹⁹

Now, sometimes sermons are dull because they are poorly written or poorly delivered. But when someone has a chronic case of sermonic narcolepsy or sermon-induced ADHD, I doubt this is the fault of the preacher.

The seed sown “on the rock,” that did penetrate and did germinate, but withered away because it had no moisture, represents “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” (v. 13). The tradition in which I was raised interpreted this parable as teaching that only the first soil was unsaved; the last three were saved, though only the fourth was fruitful and pleasing to God. That interpretation is totally false, and utterly dangerous. The second and third soils do not represent authentic Christian responses. *But Jesus says they “received [the word] with joy,” and that they “believed for awhile.”* That’s true, but let me give you four reasons why the second and third soils do not represent authentic Christian responses.

- First, the New Testament is abundantly clear about the reality of false conversion. The Gospels themselves are clear that not everyone who “believes” is saved. Nowhere is this more evident than in the Gospel of John. Let me give you a quick survey to show you what I mean:
 - In John 2:23–25, John writes that many in Jerusalem at the Passover Feast “believed (ἐπίστευσαν) in his name when they saw the signs that he was doing. But Jesus on his part did not entrust (ἐπίστευεν) himself to them,

¹⁹ Ryle, 191–92.

because he knew all people and needed no one to bear witness about man, for he himself knew what was in man.” Why did Jesus not “believe” in those who “believed” in Him? Because their “belief” was fraudulent and false.

- In John 6, Jesus tells the crowds in Galilee that He is bread that comes down from heaven and gives life to the world, and that unless they eat His flesh and drink His blood they will not have eternal life, and that salvation depends entirely upon divine election. By the end of the chapter, the vast majority of His “disciples” (those who believed in Him) turn away from Him and follow Him no more.
- In John 8, Jesus proclaims to the crowds in Jerusalem that He is the light of the world, and that unless they believe that He is God in the flesh they will die in their sins. John then reports that “as he was saying these things, many believed in him” (8:30). But then Jesus says “to the Jews who had believed in him, ‘If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free’” (8:31–32). At this they took offense, declaring that they were children of Abraham and not slaves. Jesus informed them that they were slaves of sin and children of the devil; and by the end of the chapter, these “believers” tried to stone Him to death.

Within the context of the Gospels, to say that someone “receives [the word] with joy and “believe[s] for a while” does not yet provide sufficient information to determine that person’s spiritual state.

- Second, the New Testament is equally clear about the necessity of perseverance. The problem with the second soil is that “in time of testing” (ἐν καιρῷ πειρασμοῦ) it “falls away” (ἀφίστημι). Matthew’s version says “when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word” (Mt 13:21). Yet, it is precisely in the context of predicting tribulation and persecution that Jesus told His disciples, “But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Mt 10:22; 24:13). It does not matter that this particular hearer received the word with joy and believed for a while, for there are all manner of reasons why unregenerate people begin to follow Christ. But it is the one who perseveres to the end who proves himself genuinely converted. Paul told the Romans,

The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him. (Rom 8:16–17)

If we don't suffer with Christ (persevere through tribulations and persecutions), we will not be glorified with Christ. Paul told the Corinthians,

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. (1 Cor 15:1–2)

If we don't hold fast to the word of the gospel (in context, Paul is speaking of the doctrine of resurrection), we will not be saved, for we will have “believed” in vain. Finally, Paul wrote the Colossians,

And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, 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, if indeed you continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, not shifting from the hope of the gospel that you heard... (Col 1:21–23)

If we do not continue in the faith, stable and steadfast, if we shift from the hope of the gospel that we have heard, we are not reconciled to God by the death of Christ and we will not be presented holy and blameless and above reproach before Him. It could not be clearer. The response to the gospel represented by the second soil, the one who hears the word, receives it with joy, believes for awhile, but then falls away under temptation, tribulation, or persecution, is not a saving response.

- Third, it is not only perseverance in the face of tribulation and persecution, but perseverance in the face of “the cares and riches and pleasures of life” that is essential to saving faith. The one who falls away under the temptations of the world is just as lost as the one who falls away under the threat of persecution. Was this not the point of Jesus' interaction with the rich young ruler? Was this not why Jesus said that it was

easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God (Lk 18:25)? Does not Paul warn Timothy that “those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction” (1 Tm 6:9). Does Paul not say that “the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil,” and that “through this craving . . . some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs” (1 Tm 6:10)? Have we not established that saving faith is treasuring Christ more than all the treasures and pleasures of the world? How then could we think that the third soil represents an authentic Christian?

- Fourth, fruitfulness is not an optional add-on to faith, but is a necessary by-product of faith. In John 15, Jesus told His disciples,

“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.” (Jn 15:5–8)

Fruitful branches prove by their fruitfulness that they are truly Christ’s disciples. Fruitless branches are cut down, thrown away, gathered up, and burned. Therefore, only the fruitful soil—the fourth soil—represents a genuine, saving response to the gospel of Christ.

Therefore, as it relates to the second soil response, if a person initially receives the gospel, even with joy, and believes for a time, but falls away or becomes unfruitful due to tribulation (physical, emotional, relational, marital, parental, vocational, financial suffering) or persecution, that individual has not manifested a saving response to the gospel of Christ; that person is not in the kingdom of God.

The seed sown “among the thorns,” which again did penetrate and did germinate, but was eventually choked out by the thorns, these represent those who again appear to receive the word with joy and believe for a time, but their devotion is eventually “choked by the cares and riches

and pleasures of life” such that their “fruit did not mature” (οὐ τελεσφοροῦσιν). Again, if saving faith is treasuring Christ above all the treasures and pleasures of this world (Mt 13:44), then how can we say that an individual who loves “the cares and riches and pleasures of this life” more than Christ is an authentic follower of Christ?

The seed sown “into good soil,” which “grew and yielded a hundredfold,” represent those who, “hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.” This is the saving response, for it combines both perseverance (“hold it fast”) and enduring fruitfulness (“bear fruit with patience [perseverance (ὑπομονῆ)”), both of which, as we have seen, are essential to saving faith. Thus, the “mystery of the kingdom” revealed to the disciples in the Parable of the Sower and the Soils is that *while many respond positively to the gospel of the kingdom, only those who are faithful and fruitful to the end will enter the kingdom.*

The Point of the Parable

The Parable of the Sower and the Soils has several critical applications for the church, and we will conclude by mentioning four that speak directly to the responsible practice of evangelism in the church.

- First, responsible evangelism will sow the seed of the gospel indiscriminately. Likely, the sower does not intentionally throw the seed upon the hard path; the seed seems to fall upon the hard path in the process of sowing the field. But it does not appear that the sower discriminated between the rocky soil, the thorny soil, or the good soil. It could be that the sower could not tell which soil was which on the surface. The rock seems have been under the surface, for there was some soil there in which the seed could germinate. Likewise, Jesus says the thorns “grew up with” (συμφυεῖσαι) the seed, suggesting that weeds and brambles had not yet broken through the soil when the seed was sown. The point is, the soil apparently looked the same to the sower, and it does not appear that he troubled himself with preparing the soil. The sower simply sows the seed. So it is in the church. We do not concern ourselves with soil types. The preparation of the soil is not our responsibility. We cannot make soil “good” (v. 8); we cannot make a heart “honest and good” (v. 15). Heart-work is the Holy Spirit’s domain. Our job is simple—sow the seed. Proclaim the gospel, and do not worry

about whether the seed is falling on hard or rocky or thorny ground. Some of it will find good soil.

- Second, responsible evangelism will be honest and upfront about the reality of trials, tribulations, and temptations.²⁰ If we are not honest and upfront about the certainty of suffering and sin, then we may be guilty of selling a false bill of goods. False conversions will happen, but we do not need to add to the number by preaching a truncated, sterilized gospel. The certainty of tribulation is not something that comes later, after we've got them in the door. Evangelism must never involve a bait-and-switch. How can people count the cost of following Christ, which is something Jesus says they must do *before they begin* (Lk 14:28; cf. 1 Thes 3:1–5), if we do not tell them what the cost is? My great aggravation with modern evangelistic methods, programs, presentations, and tracts, is that they don't resemble the way Jesus and His apostles evangelized. I will never forget my first trip to Cuba when I was gently rebuked by my translator for emphasizing repentance in my proclamation of the gospel. "The Cuban people need to hear that salvation is a free gift," he told me. Evidently, nobody informed Jesus that repentance was not central to the proclamation of the gospel (Mk 1:14–15).
- Third, responsible evangelism will emphasize the necessity of perseverance in faith and obedience through those trials, tribulations, and temptations. As I demonstrated earlier from the preaching of both Jesus and the apostle Paul, perseverance is essential to salvation; therefore, the preaching of perseverance is essential to the preaching of the gospel. Does your gospel presentation include informing those who wish to follow Christ of the certainty of suffering, the certainty of trials and tribulations and temptations, and the necessity of persevering in faith and hope and obedience—not perfect, but really and truly—through such sufferings? If not, then you are not accurately proclaiming the gospel, and your gospel bears little resemblance to that of Jesus and the apostles.
- Fourth, responsible evangelism will not grant unconditional assurance of salvation. It is irresponsible and unbiblical to tell someone who has just "received the word with joy" that they are now forgiven of their sin and an heir of everlasting life without

²⁰ Ryken, 361.

making it clear—like the apostle Paul—that they are being saved only *if they hold fast to the gospel*. If they don't, then they have believed in vain (1 Cor 15:1–2). Contrary to the rebuke I received from that Cuban translator, this does not turn salvation into a work. Rather, it simply acknowledges that there is such a thing as false conversion, as a temporary and superficial kind of faith (Jas 2:14–26), and that the only sure evidence that our faith is real, and therefore that our salvation is real, is if we persevere in a fruit-bearing faith through trials, tribulations, and temptations. To use Jesus' own illustration, a good tree does not become a good tree by bearing good fruit; a good tree bears good fruit because it is a good tree (Mt 7:16–20). Clearly, this parable is intended to show that receiving the word with joy and believing for a while is no sure evidence of saving faith. So we ought not to give assurance (or base our own assurance) on an emotional reception of the gospel or an initial, untested faith.

We have considered what this parable has to say to our church and our practice of evangelism. But what does it have to say to you, the individual hearer? Each of the four soil types speaks a word for us today:

- The first soil reminds us to receive the word. Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your heart (Ps 95:7–8; Heb 3:7–8). Do not turn away from the word of Christ. Hear it and receive it and act upon it.
- The second soil reminds us to prepare for tribulation. Settle your mind about the certainty of suffering, and remind yourself that your faith is only as authentic as your perseverance.
- The third soil reminds us to tend the soil of our heart. Do not allow weeds and thorns and brambles—the cares and riches and pleasures of life—to grow up alongside your faith; such things will surely choke it out. Be diligent to remove the stalk of sin as soon as it emerges from the soil of your heart.
- The fourth soil reminds us to bear fruit. On the one hand, fruit-bearing is natural to true faith (Mt 7:16–20); on the other hand, fruit-bearing is not passive, but active. It requires that you abide in Christ (John 15:5). On the one hand, fruit-bearing requires willing and working out your salvation (Phil 2:12); on the other hand, if the Holy Spirit dwells in you, He is willing and working for His good pleasure (Phil 2:13).

William Cowper, the great eighteenth-century poet and hymnwriter, wrote a poem entitled “The Sower” that captures the four soils of the human heart:

The seed that finds a stony soil,
 Shoots forth a hasty blade;
But ill repays the sower’s toil,
 Soon withered, scorched, and dead.

The thorny ground is sure to balk
 All hopes of harvest there;
We find a tall and sickly stalk,
 But not the fruitful ear.

The beaten path and high-way side
 Receive the trust in vain;
The watchful birds the spoil divide,
 And pick up all the grain.

But where the Lord of grace and power
 Has blessed the happy field;
How plenteous is the golden store
 The deep-wrought furrows yield!²¹

²¹ William Cowper, “The Sower,” in *Chapters into Verse: Poetry in English Inspired by the Bible*, vol. 2: *Gospels to Revelation*, ed. Robert Atwan and Laurance Wieder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 94; quoted in Ryken, 364–65.