

The Soils

Luke 8:1-15 | Bryce Beale | June 23, 2019

I am amazed by how little the Scriptures instruct us in *how* to share the gospel with others.

Nowhere are we told the ideal place for evangelism; no epistle of the New Testament reveals what outline we should use, or what point should follow what point. The many wonderful resources we have today which summarize the gospel so we can share more easily—tools like the Bridge Diagram or the Romans Road or the Four Spiritual Laws or the Wordless Book—are blessings to the church, but not one of them was used by the apostles.

We do generally find on the tongue of the first Christians a pointing out of sin, an explanation of the cross and empty tomb, and an appeal to participate in God’s salvation by repentance and faith. But rarely are these wrapped up in a neat little box and handed out in mass.

Instead, we are told what the gospel is over and over and over again, and then we are told to tell that gospel to others. Little is conveyed except our obligation actually to do it!

One former leader in Campus Outreach, Bob McNabb, after making disciples on the college campus for several years, and then in Thailand for several more, moved back to the United States and spent a good deal of time trying to understand why some groups of Christians consistently saw their friends come to the Lord, while others did not.

There is much more to the story, but here was his conclusion: “the key to winning a lot of people to Christ was not having more training, but sharing more frequently.”¹

In other words, our methods matter much less than our message. And it will be freedom to embrace the fact. You do not have to be the best evangelist imparting wisdom with the fairest words; you only have to say something.

Consider the great evangelists of Scripture—who led that rock, Peter the Apostle, to the Lord? Peter the impetuous fisherman,

¹ *Spiritual Multiplication in the Real World: Why some disciple-makers reproduce when others fail* (Multiplication Press, 2013), Kindle, 185.

we would think, no doubt required a mighty evangelist to win him over. But do you know what sermon secured his attention? This one, spoken by his brother Andrew in the first chapter of John's gospel: "We have found the Messiah"; followed by this action: "He brought him to Jesus."

Or consider the woman in John chapter 4 who summoned a whole city out to see Christ. We imagine that we have here a mighty evangelist, well-versed in the Scriptures and well-trained in how to bring the gospel to her culture with sensitivity and tact. Yet what we have instead is an immoral outcast, but one willing to leave her jar at the well with Jesus and enter her city and say, "Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?" Not even, "This is the Christ," but only her own question, "Could this be him?"

Training is good, and methods are great—but greater than all is the simple doing of the task.

Because as we will see today, your success depends not on how you phrase the gospel, but on what sort of ear your gospel reaches. Some hearts are prepared, and they will greedily gobble up even the most poorly presented message of Christ you can give; others cannot hear the best presented gospel you've ever contrived. The key therefore is to cast your gospel seed out broadly, however well or poorly thrown, and to believe that God will, in whichever cases he should choose, give the increase.

Consider this insight into the mysteries of the gospel and of gospel work granted us by our Savior in our text today.

LUKE 8:1-15

No doubt Jesus thinks first of himself as the sower in this parable. He is sowing in verse 8: "Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God." But even here we find a hint that the work which Jesus began will be carried on by his followers after him, for Luke adds, "And the twelve were with him."

Jesus proclaimed the gospel of the kingdom; his twelve who learned it from him proclaimed it; and we who have learned it from the twelve in the Scriptures now proclaim it too. Jesus threw seed; the disciples took his bag of seed and cast its contents

abroad; and we have been given this very same bag of seed to sow ourselves.

And we must sow as Jesus did—broadly. See his audience in verse 4: “And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him,” he spoke. You may never have so many gathered at one time to cast your seeds at, but this earth was not made a desolate waste—it is full of these crowds, and you encounter them one-by-one or two-by-two each day. How many people do you work with? Enough to be a small or large crowd perhaps? Or the lost members of your extended family or friend group, could they not be considered a crowd?

But why must we sow broadly? This is why: because probably most everyone you share with will reject your message. There are four sorts of soil in Jesus’ parable—three reject his message. That is a seventy-five percent fail rate, and that’s when Jesus is evangelizing!

Yet there is a great encouragement in this parable, not just a prodding to our obligation. The encouragement is that the power of the gospel is not in the sower, but in the seed. As Paul would say, “We have this treasure [of a gospel] in jars of clay [us!], to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us.”² Or as he said of his own evangelistic work, “I planted, [another] watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”³ We who sow are nothing; only God is something, for he makes the seed grow. We just throw the seed out there, that is it.

And that is the very thing Jesus means to teach many of us by his parable.

Bad soils

We will therefore return to the idea of God’s sovereignty in salvation soon, but let us start by considering the surface of the soils which do not bear fruit, before we dig any deeper down into them. What are the immediate, lower-level reasons that most people reject the message of the gospel of the glory of God and of his kingdom?

² 2 Corinthians 4:7 (ESV).

³ 1 Corinthians 3:6-7.

The path

We know from verse 11 that “the seed is the word of God”—it is the gospel we proclaim, contained within our Bibles. What happens when this word reaches the ears of our first category of person, in verse 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.”

Now enter with the twelve into Jesus’ confidence, and hear his own explanation of this sort of ground, down in verse 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.”

My soul nearly trembles when I consider that some of you may be this very ground. You cannot say you have not “heard” God’s message of salvation—for hearing is the only action common to every type of soil. Jesus’ words pass through the twelve and through the Scriptures and through my voice: you know at least as data that your greatest problem in all of life is that your sin has separated you from God.

Jesus’ very words reach you from John 3: “whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him.”⁴

You know as well that God so loved this world that he gave his Son, Jesus, to suffer hell upon the cross of Calvary. You know that every Easter we remember how he rose after three days, and now from heaven offers a full forgiveness to every soul that turns from sin and trusts in him alone.

The data is simple. Yet you do not understand it. Matthew says as much in his record of this same parable: “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom *and does not understand it,*” writes Matthew, “the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart.”⁵

The seed is there in your heart this moment, but already the birds are circling about outside. You have not taken hold the message you have heard, so it sits exposed upon the path; you have

⁴ John 3:36; emphasis mine.

⁵ Matthew 13:19.

thought, “It’s enough that I’ve heard it and I consent to it. I think it true and right, and I will try to remember it and do better at following Jesus.” But you haven’t really taken it in, and this you yourself can discover by acknowledging that no great, substantial change has occurred within you. You are basically what you have always been, but with more data in your head.

So the birds are circling, circling—the devil waits just outside, his cruel and piercing raven-eye is set upon that seed and he has subtle schemes to snatch it. He will offer you something else more interesting in the moment, or will entice by other lures. One way or another he will have your seed, and thus your soul.

The rock

Or again we must tremble to think that you may be, not the path, but the rocky ground, verse 6: “And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture.” Jesus explains you in this way, verse 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.”

In Palestine there are places where a thin layer of topsoil covers a slab of limestone. The ground will look like any other ground, but when seeds start to sprout within it, their roots have nowhere to go—they are blocked by the stone beneath them. They will grow just as much as the thin soil allows, but when the sun beats down upon them their lack of roots will show. Unable to draw up enough water from the soil, these sprouts will wither up and die.

And who knows whether you are such a sprout? You may think, “I am not the path, for I really have grabbed onto the gospel—I am excited about it! I love coming to church and being around God’s people; I enjoy debating various points of theology and Scripture. Others have noticed my enthusiasm for church and the Bible.”

These are of course all good—but they are not enough. Simon the Magician had them all, we may presume. He saw the apostles performing great signs in Samaria and he believed, joining himself to them and their message. But soon it was obvious that he was following the miracles, and not the Savior that they pointed toward.

Many have joined themselves to a church for the sake of comradery, friendship, a sense of purpose, freedom from a

burdened conscience, or a fear of death. These are not bad motives, but they are all too small. If your joy as a Christian comes primarily from your joy in friendships in the church, what will happen when those friendships sour? If you became a Christian for the sake of a sense of purpose only, what will you do when God's purposes for your life are hidden from you and you can no longer sense them? Or again, if you claim the title of Christian for yourself only because you felt embarrassed not to, what will you do with that title when it itself becomes embarrassing to those around you?

These are all tiny roots—they are not the deep, firm root of love for Christ and of a full surrender to him. They cannot hydrate your joy when trials come.

The thorns

But there is yet one soil among the fruitless three, and perhaps it best describes you. Verse 7: "And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it." The explanation is in verse 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."

Is this you? Do not say, "Well, no one is perfect." That is perfectly true, but do not empty Jesus' words of their force. There is a sort of person—a real sort of person who walks this very earth today—who is consumed by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and consequently bears no fruit.

I have seen a young man who seemed a follower of Jesus—and then as he went his way, the thorns of worry about this life surrounded him. His apparent devotion to the Lord, whatever it may have been, was suffocated. And now he bears no fruit at all, but lives the same as any unbeliever would.

And I have seen a young woman who associated quite closely with the people of God—until an unbelieving boyfriend entered her life. She had no choice but to choose between Christ's call on her right and her boyfriend's voice on her left, and she went left. She left the fellowship, cut her previous ties, and moved in with him.

Repent

I speak to you whose lives resemble one of these three soils. I must very soon go with God's people into the secret counsel of

Christ in verse 9 and hear mysteries from him that will only confuse you at the present. So let me step aside and address you first, that Satan may not snatch away what you hear by stirring up your confusion.

I will speak with what clarity I can.

This parable of Jesus is recorded in the Scriptures for you as a warning. I will soon speak of God's sovereign rule in softening and hardening hearts, for Jesus speaks of it—but he does so privately to his own followers for good reason, so that you outside of Christ would never say, "Well, if God softens and hardens the heart, why should he blame me if my heart is hardened against his message. If he and he alone can produce a good soil, if only God can make his word effective in the heart, then I have no part in the matter and I cannot be judged."

But the biggest problem with your objection is that God has already raised and answered it in the Scriptures. Here is Romans 9:18-20:

So then [God] has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills.

You will say to me then, "Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?" But who are you, O man, to answer back to God?

If you have not embraced Christ, but instead resemble one of the soils just discussed, the Bible is as clear as the day on this point: you must believe in Christ now. "Believe," writes God, "in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." You cannot answer back to God on this word—you cannot comment on his statement and say, "But you must save, I cannot save myself; I cannot change my heart. How can you judge me?"

The Bible holds two facts in perfect harmony: that God alone can save, and that you are responsible to believe and be saved. You cannot understand the first—you do not need to right now. But the second is not strange or unclear: it is simply, believe! No longer cling to your sin as though it were your Savior; put away your immorality and your lust for this world, and receive a kingdom from another world. Let the blood of Christ wash over you and purge you of your guilt. Believe—simply believe.

And if you believe this moment, you will not be a bad soil, but the only sort of good one.

Good soil

To that good soil we must now turn.

You can see its description in verse 8: “And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.” You can see the explanation in verse 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.”

If you desire a living example of good soil, you need only observe the women at the start of our text:

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.⁶

Some of these women will be present at the cross, and some at the empty tomb as its very first witnesses. But here they are offered as examples of good soil—they had believed and now they were bearing fruit, serving the Savior out of their own means.

But I wish most in closing to direct you to that verse of secret counsel, verse 9, which holds the mystery of God’s sovereignty in salvation. Here is the reason that we who believe can have confidence when we cast our seeds, and confidence even in the face of seeming failure.

Begin at the end of 8:

As he said these things, he called out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

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

⁶ Verses 2 and 3.

parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.'"

The gospel call is, "Hear!" but as Jesus says, only those who have ears to hear can hear. And how does one get such ears that hear the mysteries of the kingdom, when others' ears do not? "To you it *has been given* to know the secrets of the kingdom of God."

We are back at John chapter 3, where an unchangeable constant is declared: "A person," we read, "cannot receive even one thing unless it is given him from heaven."⁷

Why when we broadcast our message do so many trample it under their feet, fling it behind their back, or drop it from their minds, while a few take hold of it with an honest and good heart and refuse to let it go all their lives? It is the same message in the same language, spoken at a similar time in a similar place. Why do so many fulfill that prophecy of Isaiah recorded in our text: seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not understand.⁸ And then, why do some few really see it, and some few really hear it and get it?

The answer lies not in our clever presentation. We ought to speak plainly and well if we can when we utter the truths of God; yet if we cannot, or if we do not, we have not forfeited all hope of success. The key for us is simply to sow the seed, not to save the soul; salvation is of the Lord. We share, we plead, we beg, we pray—God saves.

What a comfort!

Remember how God saved Charles Spurgeon, who would become the greatest preacher in the world. The young Spurgeon, prevented by a snowstorm from attending his own church turned aside to a small chapel one Sunday morning.

The minister [said Spurgeon afterward] did not come that morning: snowed up, I suppose. A poor man, a shoemaker, a tailor, or something of that sort, went up into the pulpit to preach. He was obliged to stick to his text, for the simple reason that he had nothing else to say. The text was, "Look unto Me, and be ye saved, all the ends of the

⁷ John 3:27.

⁸ Isaiah 6:9.

earth.” He did not even pronounce the words rightly, but that did not matter.

[For, says Spurgeon, as the sermon was being preached, there] and then the cloud was gone, the darkness had rolled away, and that moment I saw the sun; and I could have risen that moment and sung with the most enthusiastic of them of the Precious Blood of Christ.⁹

The shoemaker carried that bag of seed handed down to him from the Savior himself; he cast it to the small crowd that morning; and then God did what only God can do. He gave the increase. And he will do the same through us.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

⁹ Quoted in Justin Taylor, “How the Snowpocalypse of 1850 Led to Spurgeon’s Conversion 164 Years Ago Today,” *thegospelcoalition.org*, The Gospel Coalition (Jan. 6, 2014; accessed June 22, 2019).