

The Parable of the Four Soils

Luke 8:4-15

In Billy Graham's early days as an evangelist, he became good friends with a young evangelist named Charles Templeton. Graham and Templeton were both gifted preachers, but many considered Templeton the better preacher of the two. In 1945 Templeton co-founded an organization called Youth for Christ, and the next year Templeton and Billy Graham went on an evangelistic tour of Western Europe together.

A few years later, however, Templeton began to question his belief in the Bible. After a long struggle with doubt, Templeton finally declared himself an agnostic and denied the Christian faith he had once preached. He tried to convince Billy Graham to stop believing the Bible: "Billy," he said, "you're 50 years out of date. People no longer accept the Bible as being inspired the way you do. Your faith is too simple."

His words got to Billy Graham and for the first time in his life, his confidence in God's Word was shaken and he began to struggle with doubts about his Christian faith. With his largest crusade yet approaching, it was a bad time to have a crisis of faith. Haunted by doubt, Billy Graham made his way into the foothills of the San Bernardino Mountains one evening and began to pour out his heart - and his fears - to God.

After hours of roaming the hills, Billy finally felt the burden of his doubts lifted. With the moon shining down on him, he opened his Bible on a tree stump and with tears streaming down his face he prayed: "*Father, I am going to accept this as thy Word – by faith! I'm going to allow faith to go beyond my intellectual questions and doubts and I will believe this to be Your inspired Word.*"

In that critical moment of doubt, Billy Graham tightened his grip on God's Word by choosing to *believe* it with all his heart.

In Luke 8 Jesus is traveling from town to town, and large crowds were coming out to hear him. And he tells this large crowd a parable about a sower sowing seed. He sows seed on a path, but it gets eaten up by birds. He sows seed on some rock, and it grew for a short time but withered quickly. He sowed seed in a field full of thorns, and the seed got choked. And he sowed seed on some good soil where it grew and yielded abundant fruit. Then Jesus called out, *He who has ears to hear, let him hear.*

I think as Jesus looked at the great crowd surrounding him, he knew that many would hear his words but not hear. Not really. Not in a way that bears fruit. He says as much when his disciples come to him privately and ask him what the parable meant. That's when Jesus said the parables have a double purpose: to reveal the secrets of the kingdom to some so that they see and comprehend, and to conceal the secrets of the kingdom to others so that they see but don't see, hear but don't hear. To illustrate how this can be so, he explains the parable of the four soils.

The seed is the word of God (verse 11). The four soils represent four types of people. We could say four types of *hearers* because the one thing they all have in common is that they all hear the word of God. They all *hear* God's word, but only the fourth soil is said, upon hearing it, to *hold it fast*. So when Jesus calls out *he who has ears to hear, let him hear*, he's calling for the kind of hearing that holds fast to what it hears.

Hearing God's word isn't the same as holding fast to God's word

We might think that it's enough that we hear God's word regularly. "I go to church, I listen to the message, I read my Bible." But in this parable, 100% of the people hear God's word. And for 75% of

them that hearing doesn't do them any good. Let's look at each soil in this parable. The first soil is...

a. *The soil of a hard heart*

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. (vs. 12)

Paths get hard-packed from a lot of traffic, and that's what this symbolizes: the heart that's so hard it doesn't allow God's word to penetrate their hearts. That hardness might come in the form of outright rejection of God's word or it could come in the form of indifference.

It's the heart that says, "I want nothing to do with that", and it's the heart that says, "I just don't care about that."

When I worked for a landscaping crew, we were sent to a beautiful home in the Hamptons to plant bulbs in a field near the home. We had dozens of bulbs that we needed to plant maybe 10-12 inches in the ground. Doesn't sound too hard...except the ground was like rock! There were three of us working and we'd put everything we had into getting the shovel to penetrate the ground, but it would just scrape off maybe a half inch of ground. We got those bulbs planted but it took a long time and a lot of work.

The seed doesn't penetrate the hard heart, but Jesus says it doesn't just sit there either. The devil comes and snatches away the word from their hearts *so that they may not believe and be saved*. That's why God's word says, *Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts... (Heb. 3:15)* The enemy is going to do everything to make sure the seed doesn't sit there where it may germinate at a later date. **So don't just hear God's word, hold fast to it!**

b. *The soil of a shallow heart*

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. (Luke 8:13)

The second ground has a layer of good soil, but it's shallow so God's word can't get much of a grip on them. There's a quick and joyful reception of the word, but when "times of testing" come, the seed dies and they fall away. These are fair-weather Christians. As long as everything is blessing and fun and good times, they enjoy following Jesus. But when trials come they bail.

Peter writes about these trials, *In this you rejoice, though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been **grieved** by various trials, ⁷ so that the tested genuineness of your faith—more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire—may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ. 1 Peter 1:6-7*

The trials grieve us. Peter is talking primarily about persecution, but various trials include cancer, the loss of a loved one, a difficult marriage, unemployment. These trials grieve us but they are necessary to test our faith so that when our faith is proven genuine, it results in praise and glory and honor on the day we stand before Jesus Christ. When I read this, it seemed to me that the praise and glory and honor on that day is praise, honor, and glory that will be given to us by Jesus Christ. He will praise our faith; we will experience glory for believing God through the trial. This sounded so questionable that I had to see what a guy I trust, John Piper, thought and he agreed with me! (Maybe I agreed with him). That day when Jesus says "well done, good and faithful servant" will be a day when His glory and praise and honor will overflow to those who, by God's keeping power, held fast to their faith.

The shallow heart will never experience this. Never see it. Because when things get tough, they let go of their faith. Rather than that day being a day of praise and honor and glory, it will be a day of regret and shame because they didn't hold fast to their faith. For the sake of temporary relief they gave it up.

Times of testing don't destroy faith. Just the opposite, for the believer, times of testing is often when our faith grows and strengthens and deepens the most. Because in those times shallow roots won't cut it, our tap root of faith has to go deep into Christ to endure. ***Don't just hear God's word, hold fast to it!***

c. *The soil of a crowded heart*

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. (Luke 8:14)

Jesus says there's an unholy trinity of distractions: worries, riches, and pleasures of life that crowd out God's word from maturing and bearing fruit. This might be the most prevalent struggle for many believers in America today. I'm sure it's my biggest struggle. The cares of life, the riches of life, and the pleasures of life all try to convince us that life is about what we have and what we get and what we do here. The picture is of a life so crowded with temporary things like pleasures and riches and worries that the word of God has no room to take root.

For me, that's screens. I forgot my phone the other day as I went to pick up Janice from work to take her to the orthopedics and I could feel withdrawals. I told myself that my concern was I could miss an important phone call, but the truth is I am used to filling blank time with news or games or emails or facebook. At the end of a long day, one of the things I enjoy is chilling with a decent show.

The problem comes in when these things choke out God's word in our lives. Years ago I read in the news about a man who dropped his cell phone in a sewer and to retrieve it, he took the grate off and was reaching for it when he got stuck with his head and shoulders under water. People nearby tried to pull him up but he was a heavy man and really wedged. By the time firefighters were able to pull him out, he had drowned. There's a warning for us in this story. We are reaching for our cell phones and computers and TVs and radios and drowning in noise and distractions. The very thing we think we need is choking out what our souls need most: the word of God.

And when we're not reaching for stuff, we're worrying about stuff. The cares of life, anxieties about what might happen, or what we want, or what we might lose, weigh on our minds and clutter up our souls.

One thing I've found helpful and needed is to get up early enough to get quiet time in God's word. Maybe a little soft instrumental music, definitely a cup of coffee, and time to read the Bible and pray. We need that so much brothers and sisters. In the crowdedness of life, ***hold fast to God's word!***

d. *The soil of a soft heart*

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. (Luke 8:15 ESV)

They are those who, hearing the word do something more: they hold it fast in an honest and good heart. The question I immediately think of is, how did that fourth soil get a good and honest heart? Is it of their doing or is it God who gave it to them? The answer is...yes.

We need God to soften our hearts, we need God to take our sinful hearts and give us a new heart, a good and honest heart. We can't do that on our own anymore than we could give ourselves a physical

heart transplant.

But if we stop there, we miss the imperatives that God's word gives us: *He who has ears to hear, let him hear*. Do this! Hear! Or Heb. 3:15, *Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts... don't harden your heart, soften your heart! Can we do any of that apart from God? No. But God is ready to meet us with heart-softening, ear-opening, soul-enriching truth if we posture our heart to receive it.*

Jesus says that person bears fruit "with patience". Fruit isn't immediate, it takes time; it takes patience. But God's word working in us will bear fruit. And one of the things fruit does is it carries seeds that then reproduce more fruit. We become sowers of the seed, that bears more fruit in other people's lives. God doesn't just bless our lives with salvation and love and goodness. He uses our lives to bless others with His salvation and love and goodness. How good is that?

Back to Billy and Charles

Templeton never returned to the faith he had known as a youth. In 1995, six years before his death he published a book entitled *Farewell to God: My Reasons for Rejecting the Christian Faith*. Just two years before his death, Lee Strobel was interviewing Templeton for his book *The Case for Christ*, and when Strobel asked Templeton about Jesus, he was unprepared for his response.

"In my view," Templeton declared, *"he is the most important human being who has ever existed."* His voice beginning to crack he went on, *"And if I may put it this way, I . . . miss . . . him!"*

Strobel goes on to write, *"He turned his head and looked downward, raising his left hand to shield his face from me. His shoulders bobbed as he wept...[finally] he sighed deeply and wiped away a tear. After a few more awkward moments, he [said]: "Enough of that."*

I believe at the point Strobel interviewed him, he knew that Jesus is the Savior his soul so desperately needed, and his heart was softened enough to miss the Jesus he once knew, but his heart was beyond really softening to believe again. He had spent his life hardening his heart and it was hardened beyond changing. We can't just soften our hearts at will. That's why the Bible warns us not to harden it today – because tomorrow we may not be able to soften our hard hearts even if we long to do so. Templeton died in 2001 at the age of 86.

For Billy Graham, just a few months after he knelt in the moonlight and proclaimed his determination to believe God's Word, he saw God move in an extraordinary way in the Los Angeles crusade and Billy Graham became a household name. Today there is a simple bronze plaque that marks the spot where Graham determined to hold fast to God's Word. But more importantly there is fruit from a life that glorified Jesus. James Dobson once asked Billy Graham if he fear death, and he answered, "O Jim, I can't wait to see Jesus!" Billy Graham went to be with Jesus just five days shy of two years ago.

At some point in our lives, we all struggle with doubt. Our faith will go through the furnace and be tested. Doubt and questions and fear will often be a part of that. It's ok. But don't give in to them. Wrestle through those doubts to the other side: a faith tested and genuine, more precious than gold tested by fire. May the Lord give us good and honest hearts to hold fast to the word of God all the days of our lives. And if our hearts are hard, or shallow, or crowded, may the Lord grant us repentance and a new heart to turn back to Him. There may never be a bronze plaque marking the spot where we chose to hold fast, but there will be praise, honor, and glory on that day when we see Jesus. And it will be more precious to us than gold.