

The Sower

Luke 8:1-15

We are spending more than a year walking through Luke's Gospel, trying to allow it to have the effect it was intended to have, which is in **Luke 1:4** **"that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught."** This story of Jesus builds our faith and addresses our doubts.

And in today's passage, we get something of a vaccine for one source of doubt, the deconversion of many of our friends and former Christian leaders. We see so many who seemed like they were vibrant Christians, who give up on the faith altogether and often publicly announce (in our day when everything is publicly announced) that they no longer believe.

As Christians, these can shake our faith.

For me, the hardest of the deconversions was the deconversion of Derek Webb, who was a Christian songwriter who wrote all the songs that are the soundtrack of my college years and my 20s, who believed what I believe to be true about Christian doctrine and even shaped me by it. He then left his marriage, renounced his faith, and today promotes disbelief in Christianity.

In recent months, Joshua Harris who was a Christian pastor and thought leader renounced Christianity, and just last week, Rhett and Link, who were some of our kids favorite youtube stars and who had been campus ministers and seemingly devout Christians both shot videos telling of the new enlightenment that led them away from the faith.

And in our connected day, most of us could name any number of people who seemed all-in on Christianity, and who later renounced it. Even some of the people who influenced us to become Christians or helped us in our growth as Christians later say they've grown to a point where they don't believe.

And it's easy to feel like everybody's giving up on Christianity, which can do something negative to our faith as well.

We are more receptive to what we sense to be the momentum of a friend group than any of us would like to admit. If we have five close friends and they all come to believe something, there's a very good chance we will too. Even if they aren't our friends, if five people agree on something on Social Media, it's very easy to sense momentum behind that belief or to feel that everybody shares it.

And we can come to believe that everybody is deconverting, or that everybody eventually figures out that Jesus isn't real, because a few people that we know say they figured that out. And because our faith is often in part the product of our community, we can have doubts too.

And it is easy to feel like somehow Christianity is broken, when people who are so close to it, the real insiders, seem to leave the faith in droves. We didn't expect that when we were coming to Christ, it didn't seem like it should go this way if the things we believe are real.

A couple of weeks ago Cody pointed out that many of our doubts come from our false expectations of what the Christian life should be like, and the solution to those doubts is to go back to the Bible, adjust expectations, read truth, doubt toward Jesus instead of away from Him. Because Jesus taught us that yes, His kingdom is strong and will march on, making more converts, it won't all be straight up and to the right. We can expect losses, and for many that we thought loved Christ to deconvert.

So picking up in Luke 8:1

Luke 8 “1 Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, 2 and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, 3 and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.

So Jesus goes out as a traveling minister. As He goes, He preaches the good news of the kingdom of God. This is the good news that Jesus is the king, and those who believe in Him come to live under His reign.

We saw last week that Jesus was anointed by a woman that had a sinful past, but who had been forgiven by Jesus and loved Him in response to her forgiveness.

And this section tells us she is not unique among those who follow Jesus:

We meet here Mary Magdalene, who also had a past (Jesus had cast seven demons out of her). Those who know they need grace are flocking to Jesus and embracing the good news of his grace. Also you see here Joanna, who is married to a higher-up in society, King Herod's household manager. He managed a household that was not pro-Jesus - King Herod is the one who imprisoned and executed John the Baptist. And also someone named Susanna and many other women.

It seems that the 12 disciples, the men that Jesus appointed, traveled with him, and so did Mary and Joanna and Susanna and many other women. These women used their resources to fund the ministry of Jesus and the apostles, but also participated in their traveling ministry. It was normal in their day for women to fund a Rabbi's work - there was a patronage system in place that allowed them to help individual teachers because they believed in their message. But it was usually just the men who travelled with the Rabbi. So this is one of the places you see Jesus lift up the role of women, allowing them to be learners directly from Him, which was very counter-cultural.

And so despite growing opposition from the religious leaders and maybe a little political heat as well, Jesus is building his people by preaching His word in town after town.

So you might expect that to continue, uninterrupted, feeling unstoppable, all wins and no losses, when Jesus is at work people come to faith and there are no steps back. If you think that, any step back will so collide with your expectations that you can doubt the whole thing.

So Jesus, once again, in His kindness, tells us what we should really expect as his kingdom marches on.

Luke 8:4 And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable, 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. 6 And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. 7 And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. 8 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."

So Jesus here speaks in a parable. It was a common form of teaching for Him, one that He used more profoundly than any of the recorded teachers in their day. He would tell relatively simple stories as part of his teaching. Jesus told about 60 parables that we have preserved for us in Matthew, Mark, and Luke (none in John.)¹ You didn't need to know any special religious language to understand the parables - they used farming and water and salt and light as object lessons. He taps into familiar experiences: a son runs away from home, a boss mistreats his workers, a judge is so annoyed by a persistent widow that he just gives her what she wants. The language wasn't complex and the illustrations were familiar. You didn't have to be smart or educated or even a deep thinker to understand them.

In this particular parable, Jesus describes a sower, or a farmer, sowing his seed for the year. He would walk with a sack of grain over his shoulder, and liberally spread it everywhere in the field.

Some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot and eaten by birds.

Some fell on rocky soil and withered as soon as it grew a little because of a lack of moisture.

Some fell among the thorns that grew up next to it and choked it.

And some fell on good soil, and something we don't catch if we're not farmers, is that the seed on good soil produced a hundredfold yield - this would have been an amazing yield, miraculous even. In Genesis 26:12, Isaac experiences a special blessing from the Lord so his field produces a hundredfold yield.² This would be like buying a stock and getting a 100% return - that just doesn't happen (certainly not this week.)

And Jesus doesn't offer an explanation for the parable to the big crowd he tells it to. Which is strange to us - it's like telling the fable but not ever getting to the moral of the story. And Jesus just says here, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." If you're listening, you'll get it. If you get it you get it, if you don't, you don't.

And that's the end of the sermon.

¹ Edwards 235

² Ibid. 236.

So to multitudes of people, thousands maybe, Jesus tells that parable of the sower but never explains it. In big service, he tells the parable of the sower and doesn't explain it. Then Jesus meets in the small group with his disciples, and this happens:

Luke 8:9 And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, 10 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.'

They ask him what the parable meant, and Jesus tells them what all the parables are for. And it isn't what we might think.

Now if Jesus were to give the answer I would expect, he would have said what many books on teaching say about telling stories.

He would have said, "Because these concepts are complex, and if I tell a story alongside the concept, that makes them easier to understand." That is teaching 101, that is the reason I try to tell stories and use illustrations and references to movies and TV shows and songs – they make the complex understandable.

But that's not what Jesus says.

Jesus here divides his hearers into "you" and "others". "You" are the followers of his - his disciples - verse 9 says his followers came to ask the question.

And he says his disciples have been given by God the ability to really embrace the secrets of God's kingdom, but others are rejecting the meaning of the parables. God reveals truth in them, but He also conceals truth in them.

And I wish I could unpack this fully - we will probably come back to this verse before we get to the end of Luke - this could be a whole sermon.

But it seems Jesus is saying that he doesn't speak in very complex ways, because then the smart, hard-thinking people could find the truth and slower people, less educated, less-hard-thinking people couldn't. Then Christianity would be a faith for the smart and well-educated. You could get to God by being smart and thinking your way there, and you'd have something to boast and brag and become arrogant about.

Jesus teaches in this way so that if you do grasp the truth, you have to praise God for opening your eyes. And so many who are smart and hard thinkers, who think they must be able to get to God on their own, won't be able to, because to get to God you must become humble and trust God.

So much more to say about that. But for now, it's enough to say Jesus speaks in parables because God isn't known by being smarter than anyone, or better than anyone.

He is known when He opens our eyes to the beauty of Christ, we are humbled, and believe the Gospel. We believe the message that the best of our abilities couldn't get us to God, so Jesus came and died and was buried and rose to pay the price, so that we could receive that gift by faith and be forgiven and know the Father. There is one way to God, through the cross of Christ, not through being smart and working. And Jesus taught in a way that only the humble could believe and be saved.

But Jesus then moves on to give the answer key for this parable:

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

So in that parable, the seed that is being sown is God's word. It is the message of Christ. It is the message of the kingdom that Jesus has been traveling around and preaching. So Jesus is the sower, and He is planting his message like the sower in the parable. He is indiscriminately, generously, spreading the good news.

And while they might think in these early days of their young and dynamic and growing church that it will all be awesome and always getting awesomer as the kingdom does nothing but win, Jesus gives the real expectations we should have.

And first he tells us about three possible negative outcomes for those who hear the word, and then one positive outcome, so we'll get to end on that note.

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.

Jesus is spreading his message everywhere. But that doesn't happen without opposition. There is an enemy of the word of Jesus in the devil. There are many who hear the message of the Gospel, they know it, but never get around to bringing it into their hearts, into the core of their being. This is one tragic but realistic outcome, as we share the

gospel with neighbors and friends, and even our children. Not everyone that receives the word believes it - some not at all.

I've talked to plenty of parents of adult children who have left the house, gone out on their own, and left the faith. Some of them are close friends of mine, some are pastors, and I can't imagine that heartbreak. And usually they feel guilt or confusion. Guilt because, "I messed things up so badly that now my kids don't believe," or confusion, "I don't understand. I did all I could. I made sure they were in church. I taught them. I was a Christian at home and not just at church. I guarded them from sin and false belief. I was loving and kind. Why don't they believe? I planted the seed of God's word in them - what happened?"

If that's you as a parent, let me say a few things:

- 1) In most cases, God isn't done writing their story yet. You've planted a seed in their hearts that could very well still germinate someday. Water that through prayer.
- 2) Did you mess up? Of course you did. Don't we all? Weren't we all screwed up by our parents and don't all parents mess up our kids a little?

Can't we all find deficiencies in our kids and trace them to our sins, or our mistakes, or our neglect, or how overbearing we were? When we sense our deficiencies, confess them to those kids. Confess them to the Lord. And trust that Jesus died for them, Jesus lifts guilt, and often Jesus is so gracious that he gives us far better than we deserve in the lives of our kids. It's grace when our kids come to believe, and grace is always undeserved. Our failures can't ultimately keep them from grace.

If we're raising kids, let's nurture them to know Jesus and sow the seeds of God's word in them, let's teach them and shepherd them well. But let's remember that ultimately it takes a miracle of God's grace for them to believe.

- 3) Jesus is the sower here. Jesus does everything exactly right. And is without sin. And many of the seeds the he sows don't grow. And He isn't guilty. So even a parent who is Christian to the core, who loved their kids, who prays for them, who teaches them, who keeps them in church and youth group, sends them to camp, cares about their education, can see some of the seed not grow sometimes. That doesn't mean you're guilty.

So don't let the false expectation that if I follow Jesus and do everything right with my kids they will become wonderful Christians leave you so disillusioned and discouraged that you're wondering whether Christianity works.

And this applies everywhere. Don't let the lack of conversions among neighbors keep you from reaching out or leave you feeling like it all doesn't work. Don't allow the bitter rejection of the gospel by a friend or family member convince you that the Gospel isn't powerful to change lives.

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.

Jesus says that the seed sown among the rocks are people who hear the message and, at first, they are excited about it. This is good news! Sin can be lifted, eternity can be guaranteed, we can know our creator and be loved and accepted by Him.

But being a Christian is costly. In the grand scheme of things the rewards far outweigh the costs, but the math isn't as clear in this life. It costs friendships, it adds some stress, church in the scope of history is a tremendously positive thing, but sometimes in the day-to-day its a mixed bag.

Christianity teaches things that are easy to receive in our culture, and things that are hard to receive. Things that seem just right and things that seem like they don't fit our worldview. Testing comes.

And there are many who, at first, look just like any other new Christian, full of zeal and life. But the testing causes them to fall away.

So is Jesus saying here that true Christians can fall away and die apart from God?

Is that what He's describing? In a number of clear biblical texts, the Lord says things like:

John 10:27-29 27 My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. 28 I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. 29 My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand

The reason nobody truly falls away is because Jesus gives us faith, Jesus saves us, it's his work, and he hangs on to us. Real Christians can wander, we can have seasons where we don't look any different than anyone else, we can have doubts that are so severe we may not believe ourselves to be Christians.

But once you are a Christian, you will always, through all eternity be a Christian.

But how does that line up with Luke 8:13?

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.

I believe that this passage, and Hebrews 6, and other passages that describe this are describing people that didn't fully believe yet. They were excited about the message and have short term, shallow belief that never really grows into saving faith.

It's an emotional response only. It's a response that causes them to be faithful for awhile on the surface. But that has no root, and dies when tested.

The evidence of saving faith is perseverance in faith. You keep going. And the kind of belief that only gives you a short amount of time believing is not saving faith at all. Time tests whether our faith is saving faith, and when we fall away, it proves that it wasn't.

So Jesus warns that many who look like passionate believers will fall away from the faith, never having believed, and that will be proven by the trials of life.

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.

When you let your garden go without weeding it, the weeds become bigger than the vegetables, and they take the nutrients, they take the light, they suck up all the energy.

And there are some who hear the word of God, but allow other things to be the priority.

These are the people who have their faith choked by (1) cares, (2) riches, and (3) pleasures.

Cares - Other things become a bigger concern. They hear the gospel, but other things become bigger than the Gospel. It could be causes, it could be ideologies, it could just be a misprioritization of a lot of good things that we feel like we have to do in life, so things get so rearranged that the Gospel loses its priority.

Riches - Jesus will say a lot to warn us about how money and God both want to master our lives, drive our lives, own our lives. And we have to choose one:

Luke 16:13 “No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money.”

Money wants to be God and choke out the love of Jesus. Jesus wants to be God and choke out the love of money. We can't love and serve and follow both. But it's so easy for the love of riches to choke out faith.

It can happen if you're rich or poor. If you're poor and love money, you will envy those with money and cut yourself off from Christian community because you get so mad at who is driving what or who makes how much money. You might spend time daydreaming about it, and pursue foolish dreams that keep you from following Christ.

If you get rich, that's a risk for your heart. I've known a few Christians that have gotten big windfalls in their lives - sold companies and made millions in an instant. And of that whole group I know of one that faithfully followed Christ through it all. It can happen, there are plenty of examples in scripture, but so often money numbs us to our need for Jesus, it makes us feel we need so little in life that we don't need to be close to the Christian community. It's a threat to faith, and in our church we have so many smart, hard-working, well-educated people, there are many people becoming well-off and many that have the potential to be very wealthy. Which is a blessing from God, to be generously used for His glory, for the poor, and for the spread of His kingdom. So hold it loosely, don't let it define you, don't allow lifestyle to rise everytime the income does. Worship God with it first. Give it away in proportions that are so big that if anybody knew about it, they'd be able to see that it isn't your ultimate treasure.

Pleasures - Jesus also here says that the pleasures of this world choke off the faith.

There are some real pleasures we give up to follow Jesus. And if we let them, they can become more attractive to us than Christ. And we can be motivated to leave Jesus to run after pleasure.

Now it is rare that anybody says this is what is happening. Usually there will be pleasures that are tempting Christians. And they don't want to be hypocrites. So they seek out sources of unbelief - they look for the latest Dawkins book or Bart Ehrman book so they can dismiss the faith.

In Rhett's deconversion story, he said that he used to have doubts, and then look for the Christian answers to those doubts. But then he said he just read the books that caused him to doubt, and stopped reading the books that refuted them.

Now I'm all for studying the world, studying true science, taking doubts to God. But if I were his pastor, I would have asked him, "Why did you stop going back to Christian sources for answers?"

Something motivated that.

We often decide what we want to do, and then look for the reasons for doing it.

Not in Rhett's case, but so often a Christian wants to sleep with his girlfriend, but doesn't want to feel like a hypocrite, so looks for a reason to disbelieve. And if Dawkins gives an out, it sounds better to say "I left the faith because of science" than to say "I wanted to sleep with my girlfriend."

The pleasures of this life can choke out faith.

OK, this has been depressing. This poor sower. $\frac{3}{4}$ of His work seems to have been wasted. Birds are eating it, it grows a little and never produces fruit, the weeds run rampant.

And there are days following Jesus when that is all we can see.

I know in ministry there are days and weeks and even months when it seems like I'm trying to spread the words of Christ, but nobody's listening.

Birds come and eat up the seed. Sometimes in here it's actual birds, flying around, distracting everybody, so nobody hears the message.

There are people so excited about Jesus one moment and gone the next - people who share their testimonies only to renounce their faith. People who run after lovers other than Christ. And it's easy for any of us to give up.

There are the weeks when I think, "If I get one more email from someone destroying their marriage and leaving their faith, I don't know if I can handle it." It's easy to think the Gospel doesn't work anymore.

But remember

Luke 8:15 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.

When God's word does take root in good soil, which is when someone hears it and embraces it and keeps patiently embracing it, and then lives like it's true, bearing fruit, that harvest is miraculous.

This has been the case through history. Christianity never seemed like it was going to make it, let alone thrive. Great persecution broke out against the first church, they were getting killed, so even though they had 5000 people within the first few weeks, by 100AD, there were only about 18,000 Christians.

It was still a really small, insignificant minority. Their percentage of the Roman population was roughly the same as the number of Amish in the entire US. Most of us don't have any Amish friends, it is a safe bet that you don't have any amish friends on facebook.

But the kingdom grew. 80 years later, there were 110,000 believers.

By 250 AD, there were 2.1 million Christians.

By 300 AD, there were 6 million.

By 312 AD, there were 9 million.

By 350 AD, there were 31 million Christians – about 52% of the population of the globe is Christian in 350 years.

It did grow. And it is growing in our day. The church in Iran is booming, the church in China is growing, in the last 65 years the gospel swept through South Korea and changed the whole country. It's still marching on.

So as hard as it is in the moment. And as bleak as it might seem this month or this year, there is a hundredfold harvest being produced. Jesus through His people is still sowing that word. So let's be confident in the power of this message to still change lives and hearts and the world.

The message is a powerful seed that can produce more than enough to make up for all that is lost.

Jesus promised to build his church, and said the gates of hell won't prevail against it.

We're receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, Hebrews says.
Faith in Jesus will be vindicated.

Every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ Is LORD.

So two applications so far:

- 1) Trust in Jesus and the power of his message**
- 2) Align expectations with reality: there will be those who abandon the faith, but that shouldn't make us doubt the whole thing.**

And the third is:

- 3) Be Careful how you hear**

We'll unpack this more next week, because in next week's passage, Jesus will continue on a similar theme, and he'll say in

Luke 8:18 "Take care then how you hear."

Watch what you do with the word of God when you read it and hear it.

Look at 15 again:

Luke 8:15 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.

The good soil hears the word and holds it fast.

When we hear God's word spoken or read it on the page, we start by acknowledging we are hearing from God here. So with an honest heart we humble ourselves before it, submit to it, and live according to it - we bear fruit.

And we do so with patience, knowing that this is a marathon.

And we work it into our hearts continually. It can't just be an intellectual exercise.

Read it with prayer that God will send its roots down deep into your life. Pray that He'll use it to make you resilient. Pray that He'll remind you in your soul that he is a greater treasure than riches, knowing Him is a greater pleasure than satisfying any lust can give you.

And hold fast to the message.

In a moment we will be taking the Lord's supper, which is the word of God made visible.

It's an observance that Jesus gave us to remind us of God's word, to touch something, taste something, hold something that reminds us of the Gospel. To see something in all of our brothers and sisters eating and drinking the same reminder of the Gospel of Jesus.

The Heidelberg catechism says:

As surely as I see with my eyes the bread of the Lord broken for me and the cup shared with me, so surely his body was offered and broken for me and his blood poured out for me on the cross.

This preaches the word of God to our soul. Here we're reminded we are God's children, we are welcomed by God, because of His works, not our works. We're reminded of Christ's death for us, His grace toward us.

In taking this supper we are all together saying that we believe that word, that Jesus died so that we might be forgiven and live.

So soon we will invite Christians - those who believe those things and that have confessed their sins, to take this supper, as a means of holding fast to the word and being reminded of God's grace to us.

Now you might be tempted to think this is an observance for the perfect, or for those who never feel like they could lose their faith. That we're disqualified by doubt, or sin, or weakness, or failure.

Calvin wrote:

"Let us remember that this sacred feast is medicine to the sick, comfort to the sinner, and bounty to the poor. To the healthy, the righteous, and the rich (if any could be found) the Lord's Supper would be of no value. For Christ is given us for food in the Supper, and we perceive that without him we fail and waste away, just as hunger destroys the vigor of the body. As he is given to us for life, so we perceive that without him we are certainly dead. So, the best and only worthiness which we can bring to God, is to offer him our own vileness, and unworthiness, that his mercy may make us worthy:

to despond in ourselves, that we may be consoled in him

to humble ourselves, that we may be elevated by him

to accuse ourselves, that we may be justified by him.

The Gospel word that this symbolizes is medicine to the sick, forgiveness for the sinner, the remedy for our doubt and weakness. So we confess our sins, and boldly approach and take the supper, knowing his body was torn and his blood was spilled to cleanse us.

Sermon Notes

The Sower

Luke 8:1-15

Four Responses to Hearing the Message of Jesus:

- I. The Word Ignored (8:1-12)
- II. The Word Believed in Emotions Only (8:13)
- III. The Word Choked (8:14)
- IV. The Word Produces Miraculous Harvest (8:15)

Discussion Questions for Small Groups:

- 1) Read Luke 8:1-15. What does it say the result of spreading the message of Christ might be?
- 2) What kind of soil are you?
- 3) What cares, riches, and pleasures might threaten to choke out the message of God in your life?
- 4) In Luke 8:18, Jesus says “be careful how you hear.” How might we hear God’s word correctly?

Scriptures Cited:

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Luke 8:9-10

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Luke 8:12

Luke 8:13

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Luke 8:13

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Luke 16:13

Luke 8:15

Luke 8:18

Luke 8:15