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## SUPERFICIAL AND GENUINE BELIEVERS

Luke 8:4-15

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Luke Lesson 34

## Superficial and Genuine Believers Luke 8:4-15

If you have been a Christian for a while, you have ridden the roller coaster of great joy in seeing someone make a profession of faith in Jesus Christ, followed by awful disappointment as the same person later fell away from the faith. For a while he seemed to be dramatically changed. He got involved in the church. He was zealous for the things of God. But then a difficult trial hit. Perhaps he had a conflict with someone in the church. Or he had a personal health problem or he lost a loved one. His zeal cooled off and gradually he stopped coming to church. Every effort to restore him failed. Today he is back in the world.

Others don't fall away altogether, but their early enthusiasm wanes. They settle into a routine that includes going to church as long as there isn't something "better" to do for the weekend. But God is not central in their lives. They are more focused on their things and on having a good time in life. They profess to be Christians, but they have no burden for the lost and no desire to serve God. They are living basically for self and for pleasure. But they are not living in light of eternity.

How do you explain such people? Some would say that they have lost their salvation, but that clearly contradicts the many clear passages that teach that those whom God saves, He keeps for eternity. Others say that these folks are saved, but they are "carnal." They can go through life living in this carnal or worldly state and they will still go to heaven, but they won't have many rewards waiting for them. But this popular but false teaching contradicts Hebrews 12, which says that if a person is truly God's child, then God will discipline him. If a person lacks such discipline, he is not a true child of God at all.

In the familiar parable of the sower, we see that even Jesus saw people respond superficially to His message. The parable serves both as an encouragement to His followers and a warning to His hearers. The encouragement to His followers is that when we see people respond superficially to the gospel

and later fall away, we should not be discouraged in that even Jesus had the same response. The problem was certainly not in His preaching, but in the audience's hearing. The warning to those who hear the parable, of course, is to take it to heart so that we avoid a superficial faith. Whatever the current state of our hearts, we can appeal to God to grant us a new heart so that we will hold fast to Him and bear fruit with perseverance. Clearly, Jesus was not teaching some sort of fatalism, that the kinds of soils are fixed forever. By God's grace, a person can change.

- THE SETTING:

To understand this parable, we must see the context: Jesus' ministry was immensely popular (8:4). People were journeying from great distances to hear Him speak. Many confuse popularity with fruitfulness. When large crowds flock to a church, the preacher and the congregation think, "Look how God is blessing!" But, is He *truly* blessing? Jesus knew that large crowds did not equal God's blessing unless those in the crowd were truly responding to God's Word with saving faith. Jesus knew the selfish and fickle hearts of sinful men. He also knew the intensity of the spiritual conflict when the gospel is preached, that Satan waits to snatch the seed before it can take root in hearts. So He spoke this parable as a warning of the danger of a superficial response to the gospel.

Why did Jesus speak in a parable that even His disciples did not at first understand? Jesus explains in verse 10: "To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables, in order that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand." The latter half of that verse is a quotation from Isaiah 6:9, which is quoted no less than six times in the New Testament. Parables serve two functions: They *reveal* truth to those who are spiritually responsive; and they *conceal* truth from those who are spiritually superficial or scoffing.

Jesus' words and the quote from Isaiah plunge us into one of the deep mysteries that we cannot fully grasp, the fact that God sovereignly grants salvation to His elect, but that sinners are fully responsible for their persistence in sin and their ultimate condemnation. For the disciples, God sovereignly granted that they know the mysteries of the kingdom of God (8:10). No one can boast

that he discovered these mysteries by his own reasoning or investigation. Only God can reveal them and He does not reveal them to everyone. Is God then unfair? Not at all, because men are responsible for their selfishness, stubbornness, and sin. They have no one but themselves to blame for their own hardness of heart.

John Calvin (*Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists* [Baker], 2:108) uses the illustration of the effects of the sun on a person with weak eyes. When such a person steps out into bright sunlight, his eyes become dimmer than before, but the fault lies not with the sun but with the person's weak eyes. Even so, when the Word of God blinds the reprobate, it is not the fault of the Word, but of the person's own depravity. Thus by speaking in parables, Jesus was seeking to foster a genuine response from His elect who would apply the truth to their hearts. But He was also concealing the gospel from those who were merely curious but who were not willing to apply it to their hearts. They would continue in their spiritual blindness. But they would not thwart the sovereign purpose of God's kingdom.

- THE EXPLANATION:

Jesus explained this parable privately to His disciples. We need to make several correlations to grasp the meaning:

(1) *The seed is the Word of God (8:11)*. Of His own ministry, Jesus said, "For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me commandment, what to say and what to speak. And I know that His commandment is eternal life; therefore the things I speak, I speak just as the Father has told Me" (John 12:49-50). Also, as Paul stated, "All Scripture is God-breathed" (2 Tim. 3:16, literal translation). In other words, Jesus, the prophets, and the apostles were not religious geniuses who gave us their best ideas about God and man. Rather, they were inspired and moved by the Holy Spirit to record what God chose to reveal to us in His written Word (2 Pet. 1:21). God uses that word implanted to save our souls (James 1:18, 21).

Just as a seed has life in it, so the Word of God is alive and can impart life to those who are spiritually dead. Just as a seed has great power in it, so that it can sprout and grow to the point that eventually it cracks the foundation of a house, so the Word of God

can germinate in the human heart and do a mighty work of transformation. Just as a seed can produce a tree that bears much fruit which gives nourishment, sustains life, and in turn produces more seeds to produce more trees and fruit, so the Word of God can bear fruit in human lives.

This means that when we talk to people about Jesus Christ, we must share the content of the gospel from God's Word. So often in our day Jesus is presented as an emotional experience: "Believe in Jesus and you'll feel better and your problems will be solved." But many people know nothing of the Jesus in whom they are being encouraged to believe. To encourage a person who does not know what the Bible says about Christ to believe in Him is to encourage him to believe in a figment of his own imagination. Before you encourage such a person to make a decision for Christ, encourage him to read the Bible, especially the Gospels. He needs to know something about who God is, who man is, and who Jesus is as revealed in the Word before he can intelligently repent of his sin and believe in Jesus Christ.

(2) *The sower is the one who proclaims the gospel.* Jesus was speaking primarily of Himself as the sower. But His followers are also sowers of the Word as they proclaim the gospel to those who are lost. One purpose of this parable is to encourage Jesus' followers to sow the seed faithfully in spite of disappointing responses. Even Jesus knew that many would not respond rightly to His preaching, but He went on sowing the seed in obedience to the Father. The disappointing responses do not indicate a lack of power or effectiveness in the seed, but rather they point to the problem of the soil, the sinfulness of human hearts. But God is pleased by the foolishness of our proclaiming the gospel to save some (1 Cor. 1:21), and so we must faithfully sow the seed.

Sowers must be people of faith. They trust that by scattering the seed, some of it will yield a crop. The sower does not understand exactly how this happens, nor does he need to understand. He just knows that it does happen, so he expectantly throws out the seed. One reason that I have devoted hours every week for almost 22 years now to preparing biblical sermons is that I believe that God's Word will not return to Him empty without accomplishing the purpose for which He sent it forth (Isa. 55:10-11). So

whether you give people tapes or printed copies of biblical sermons or tracts or Gospels of John or New Testaments, scatter the seed of God's Word. In due time you will reap fruit for eternity.

By the way, are you sowing, watering, and nourishing the seed of God's Word in your own life? I sometimes wonder what would happen if Christians would spend as much time each week reading the Bible as they spend reading the newspaper and watching TV. If you feed your mind on the world, you won't grow in the things of God. If you sow God's Word in your heart repeatedly, some of it will sprout and bear fruit if you've got good soil. That leads to the third key to understanding this parable:

(3) *The soil is the human heart.* Although the seed is powerful, it must fall on good soil to bear fruit. The Lord outlines four soils, only one of which is fruitful. When Jesus says, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (8:8), He is exhorting each person to examine his own heart and take the appropriate action to become good soil. While only God can grant repentance and give good and honest hearts to those who are dead in their sins, we are responsible to seek Him for these things. That leads to ...

- THE APPLICATION:

Our response to God's Word should  
be genuine, not superficial.

When Jesus mentions four types of soils, He is not giving percentages. Rather, He is showing four general responses to the gospel. At various times there will be more in one category or another, according to the sovereign moving of God's Spirit. Also, we need to understand that the parable is not about momentary, immediate response, but rather about the response to the Word over the long haul. It takes time for the seed to sprout and wither, or be choked out by thorns, or to bear fruit. Thus we must continually examine ourselves to make sure that we are cultivating the seed of God's Word in our hearts. The Christian life is a marathon, not a 100-yard dash.

The four soils can be grouped into two categories: the unfruitful and the fruitful. All four soils hear the Word. The first soil is the only one not to accept it at all. The second soil accepts the

seed briefly and shows initial promise, but it soon dies out. The third soil seems to make even further progress, but eventually the thorns choke it out. Only the fourth soil eventually bears fruit.

Some would argue that since the last three soils accepted the seed, and since it is stated about the seed on the rocky soil that “they believe for a while” (8:13), these all are saved; only the first category is lost. But, clearly Jesus gives no encouragement or comfort to any except those in the fourth category. Darrel Bock explains (*Luke* [IVP], pp. 148-149),

Faith saves; the absence of faith does not. So to believe for a time is not to believe in a commendable way, since the end result is not faith. One cannot end up unbelieving and have a faith that saves, for then salvation comes in unbelief. Another way to say this is that genuine faith is permanent .... Our theological problems may emerge here because we tend to view faith as a response of the moment. The New Testament stresses that faith in Jesus is permanent, being established by a rebirth. Its permanence is suggested by its nature as the product of the regenerating work of God ....

Note, first, the three superficial responses to God’s Word:

1. A superficial response will hear God’s Word, but will not bear fruit.

A. The soil of the road represents a hard, unresponsive heart.

Some of the seed fell along footpaths near the edge of the field. Dirt that is continually trampled under foot gets as hard as pavement, so that seed cannot take root there. Besides, the birds (representing the devil) come and eat the seed “so that they may not believe and be saved” (8:12). Jesus isn’t just using a figure of speech when He mentions the devil. There is a real spiritual battle raging for the souls of men and women. Satan hardens people’s hearts by the traffic of worldly philosophies. People engage in worldly, man-centered thinking so often that their hearts grow callused to the truth of God. For example, many in our culture are so steeped in the postmodern ideas that spiritual truth is relative and that it doesn’t matter what you believe that they automatically reject the exclusive claims of the gospel because it runs counter to the ideas they have trafficked in for all their lives.

It is ironic that these are people who would scoff at the idea of a personal devil, and yet that very devil is the one who snatches away the seed of the gospel from them! In their hardness of heart, they feel no need for God. We need to pray that God will break up the hard ground of their hearts with the plow of trials so that they will be open to receive the truth of the gospel.

- B. The soil on rocky ground represents a shallow, impulsive heart.

This is not soil with rocks scattered in it, but rather a thin layer of soil over hard limestone. The warm, thin soil welcomes the seed, which seems at first to thrive more quickly than seed planted in deeper soil. But the roots cannot penetrate the limestone to find water, so when the hot sun rises, it withers and dies.

This represents the person who impulsively welcomes the gospel without counting the cost. Perhaps he heard that following Jesus would magically solve all his problems and that Jesus offers an abundant life, so he emotionally responds. At first, he seems to be zealous for the Lord. He seems to make rapid progress in the faith. But then, trials hit. Because his Christian experience was based more on emotion than on truth, he has no deep roots into the Word. He falls away. It's not that he lost his salvation; it's that he never truly was saved in the first place.

When we share the gospel, we need to be careful not to paint too rosy a picture. Yes, God freely forgives all a person's sins the moment he trusts in Christ. Yes, God's Word is sufficient for all the problems we face in this life. But, no, God usually does not solve our problems instantly or easily. The Christian life is a fight of faith, and while we are assured of final victory, the battle can get pretty tough in the meanwhile. We don't do people a favor to gloss over the reality of what it means to follow Jesus.

- C. The soil infested with thorns represents a divided, worldly heart.

The seed on the thorny ground lasts a bit longer than that on the rocky soil. But gradually the thorns take over and choke out the seed of the word so that it does not produce any fruit. Jesus identifies the thorns as "worries, riches, and pleasures of this life" (8:14). This is the person who wants the best of

both worlds. He professes to believe in Jesus, but his heart is divided. He is still drawn after what this world has to offer. He may be rich or he may be poor. Jesus is not talking about the amount we possess, but about our focus. This heart among the thorns is not fully committed to seeking first the kingdom of God and His righteousness. He is trying to serve two masters, but he really is serving mammon, not God.

The Bible does not condemn riches or pleasure per se, but it does condemn *living for* riches or pleasure (1 Tim. 5:6; 6:9-10). Even those who truly know Christ must continually pull out the weeds of greed and sensuality. We must constantly deny the lure of the world that falsely tells us to live for this life only. We must continually remember the exhortation, "Do not love the world, nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him." (1 John 2:15).

The common factor of these first three soils is that none of them bear fruit. Some look promising for a while, but there was no fruit because they were never truly saved. So we all must examine our own lives and ask, "Am I bearing fruit for God over the long haul? Is my faith superficial or genuine?"

## 2. A genuine response will hear God's Word and bear fruit.

The good soil represents "the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance" (8:15). The word translated "honest" means "good" in the sense of attractive or useful. It is often used to refer to good works. A person who does good works from the right motives is an attractive person. There is something beautiful and winsome about such a life.

The fact that Jesus calls this heart "honest and good" does not mean that He believed in the inherent goodness of some people. Jesus certainly agreed with the Hebrew Scriptures which repeatedly affirm the sinfulness of every human heart (Gen. 6:5; 8:21; Ps. 14:3; Jer. 17:9). Jesus Himself taught that the human heart is the source of all sorts of wickedness (Mark 7:21-23). He told even His disciples that they were evil (Luke 11:13) and He told the rich young ruler that none is good except God alone (Luke 18:19).

Any good heart is good because God graciously has wrought the miracle of regeneration in that heart. In response to God's grace, this person hears the Word, holds it fast, and bears fruit over the long haul with perseverance. Fruit is that which the life of God produces in and through a believer. It includes Christlike character, conduct, and converts. The fruitful Christian is not only a hearer of the Word, but also a doer of it. He feeds on it continually so that it confronts his sin, it challenges his wrong attitudes, and it shows him how to live in a manner pleasing to God. He is not being conformed to this world, but is being transformed by the renewing of his mind (Rom. 12:2).

### Conclusion

The popular preacher, Chuck Swindoll, tells of ministering at a family conference. There was a young couple there with several small children, and it was obvious that they had some serious problems in their marriage. But as the week progressed, Chuck watched this couple change as they sat under the teaching of God's Word. The husband seemed to hang on every word. The wife had her Bible open and followed carefully from passage to passage. On the last day, they both came up to Chuck and said, "We want you to know that this week has been a 180 degree turn around experience for us. When we came, we were ready to separate. We're going back now stronger than we have ever been in our marriage."

That's tremendous! But the sad thing, Chuck said, is that at the same conference with the same speakers, the same truths, and the same surroundings, another man was turned off. He wasn't open to God's Word. He attended the first few sessions, but his guilt became so great and his conviction so deep that he went home. His family left hurting, perhaps even more so than when they came. What was the difference between those two men at the same conference? The difference was the condition of the soil of their hearts.

In Jesus' audience that day were some who immediately shrugged off His teaching. Some welcomed His message but fell away as soon as persecution arose. Others, like Judas, allowed the thorns of greed to choke out the word. But many heard His word eagerly, held it fast, and brought forth fruit for eternity.

God wants each of us to check the soil of our hearts. Is it hard and resistant? Is it shallow and impulsive? Is it divided and worldly? Or, is it responsive to His Word over the long haul? Ask God for a responsive heart. Cultivate the seed of His Word every day. You will reap the fruit of eternal life in yourself and in others.

### Discussion Questions

1. In light of this parable, should we give assurance of salvation to new believers? Why/why not?
2. Do you agree that only one soil is truly saved? Could types two and three be “carnal” Christians? What difference does this make?
3. When we sow the seed of the gospel, to what extent should we try to be persuasive and to what extent should we fall back on the sovereignty of God (see 1 Cor. 9:19-23; 2 Cor. 5:11)?
4. How can we guard against worries, riches, and pleasures choking out the Word in our lives?

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