

## **“The Seed Is the Word of God” (Luke 8:4–21)**

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How many resolutions have your broken so far in this new year? I’m not asking *if* you’ve broken any resolutions. It’s January 6, after all. I’m asking you *how many* resolutions you’ve broken.

Resolutions are made to be broken, or so it seems. That means that either we’re quitters, or we set our goals to high. I have a friend from college—I’ll call him Seth, because that’s his name—who said he only makes resolutions he knows he can keep. He said one year his resolution was to wear his bathrobe inside his house every day. Another year, he resolved to never say “oh” instead of the number “zero.” Maybe there’s something to be said for setting the bar low.

But no matter how high or how low we set the bar, we realize that most of us don’t achieve our goals. Only some people seem to cross the finish line. Many resolutions involve diet and exercise. We realize that some people never bother to do those things. Some people start out with the best of intentions, work hard for a week or a month, and then give up. Only some people will achieve their diet and exercise goals.

The same is true when it comes to pursuing a relationship with God. In the passage we’re going to look at today, we’re told that some people won’t bother with the things of God. Some people will seem to have a relationship with him—they may seem to become Christians and talk about Jesus, attend church, and read their Bible—but then trials come, or they get too busy with other things in life, and they change. Only some people will truly pursue a relationship with God. These people will have a life-long relationship with God and are part of God’s family.

Today, we continue our study of the Gospel of Luke, one of four biographies of Jesus found in the Bible. If you haven’t been with us so far, you can catch up by visiting [wbcommunity.org/luke](http://wbcommunity.org/luke). We’re still in the first half of the Gospel, so there’s a lot more to learn about Jesus, his teachings, and his death and resurrection.

Let’s begin by reading Luke 8:4–8:

<sup>4</sup> And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable, <sup>5</sup> “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. <sup>6</sup> And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away,

because it had no moisture. <sup>7</sup> And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. <sup>8</sup> 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.”<sup>1</sup>

Notice that Jesus is attracting a great crowd of people that have come from various towns. Jesus is still in Galilee, the region where he grew up. And perhaps because there’s a great crowd, he teaches in a parable. We’ve already seen a couple of short parables in Luke (Luke 5:36; 6:39), but we’re going to see many more of them, so it’s worth taking a moment to talk about them. A parable is a way of teaching that isn’t direct, or straightforward. Sometimes, parables are like proverbs, short, colorful statements that teach theological truths. Other times, parables are stories that teach a theological truth, but not in direct way. The word parable comes from a Greek word that literally means something cast alongside. A parable comes alongside a truth and communicates it in an indirect way.

There are a lot of ways to communicate something. If I wanted to tell you about God, I could tell you things in short, propositional statements. I could say that God is all powerful. That’s a direct way of teaching something about God. But I could also tell you that by telling a story about a king who has complete control of his kingdom. I could tell you that God is merciful. Or I could tell you a story about how a king forgave his dishonest servant. I could tell you that God is loving. Or I could tell you a story about a father who loves his rebellious son.

There’s a lot to be said for teaching things in a direct way. But parables are different. They get you from point A to point B, but not in a straight line. They get there in a roundabout way, kind of like the way parabolas are curved. Parables get us to think. They’re colorful and memorable. To those who understand, they’re clear as day. But those who don’t understand may be stumped and might scratch their heads. This is why Jesus teaches in parables.

This parable is pretty easy to understand on one level. In Jesus’ day, people were all familiar with the basics of agriculture. To grow crops, you had to sow seed. We hear of a sower who sows seeds. Some seed fall on the path, where they get trampled on and the birds eat them. The path would have been hard ground, so the seed would have no chance to get into good soil to grow. Some seed fell on rocky ground. There would be a thin layer of soil above limestone. This seed would grow up to a point, but it couldn’t develop deep roots and it couldn’t draw in enough

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

moisture to withstand the hot weather. Other seed grew up amidst thorns, which choked the plant and caused it to die. And some seed fell on good soil, where it grew and produced a large crop.

On one level, the story is easy to understand. But why is Jesus teaching about agriculture? What's the point of this story?

The disciples want to know, so they ask Jesus, and he answers. Let's read verses 9–15:

<sup>9</sup> And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, <sup>10</sup> 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.’ <sup>11</sup> Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. <sup>12</sup> 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. <sup>13</sup> 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. <sup>14</sup> 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. <sup>15</sup> 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.

There are a couple of things to see here. The first is what Jesus says about “the secrets of the kingdom of God.” The kingdom of God, to use a definition we studied recently in our Bible study, is “God’s people in God’s place under God’s rule and blessing.”<sup>2</sup> Not everyone is part of God’s people. Only those who turn to the King and come under his rule will find his blessing. Luke clearly presents Jesus as this King, the one who has come to establish his kingdom on Earth. And the secrets of this kingdom, or what we might call the ways of this kingdom, are not communicated clearly to everyone. To Jesus’ disciples, he gives them the clear meaning, but others will only hear in parables that are not interpreted.

Jesus then quotes a passage from the prophet Isaiah. The prophet Isaiah was sent to Israel, which was supposedly God’s people, to send them a message of warning about their sin, but also a message of hope for those who would hear. Israel had rebelled against God. They had worshiped false gods. They rejected the very reason why God made them, which was for his glory, so that they would know him, love him, and worship him. They rejected the true God and went after gods that seemed to please them, but who couldn’t help them. So, Isaiah was told to speak to them. But Isaiah was told that the people were hardhearted. They could see, but they couldn’t really see the truth. They could hear, but they wouldn’t hear God’s words and act on

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<sup>2</sup> This comes from Vaughan Roberts, *God’s Big Picture* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002).

them. Because they worshiped idols, they became like them. Idols have eyes that can't see and ears that can't hear.

In a way, that's our story. The Bible says that because we live in God's creation, and because we were designed by God, we know certain things about God. We all know there is a God who exists, who created everything, who is powerful and eternal (Rom. 1:20; cf. Eccl. 3:11). But though we know this, we don't pursue God. That's because we don't really want there to be a God who is both Creator and King. That kind of God tells us that he made things to function in a certain way. That kind of God is the ultimate authority. We tend to want to be the ultimate authority of our lives. We want to determine the course of our lives. We're going to set our own goals, our own resolutions, thank you very much.

Because of our rebellious nature, God lets us go our own way. But he graciously reveals himself more clearly to some of us, those whom he is calling into his kingdom. This is what Jesus means when he prays to God the Father. This is what he says in Matthew 11:25–27:

<sup>25</sup> At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; <sup>26</sup> yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. <sup>27</sup> All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.

It's God's gracious will to reveal himself. That means that knowing God is a gift. And so is salvation. Christianity teaches that we can be reconciled to God not because we deserve it, because we work hard or because we're good. No, Christianity teaches that we're so bad that the only way to be made right with God is if he gives us the gift of salvation. And if he has given us that gift, our lives will change forever.

The second thing we need to see is the meaning of the parable. For anyone who cares to read the Bible, the meaning is made clear. In the story about the sower and the seed, the seed is the word of God. Jesus has been sowing that seed, speaking God's words. Those words will fall on deaf ears, who hear but don't seem to understand (see Matt. 13:19), or perhaps who aren't interested at all. Jesus says the devil comes and snatches the word away from such people. Elsewhere in the Bible, we're told that "the god of this world" blinds "the minds of unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4).

The second type of soil is rocky, shallow soil. Jesus says these people appear to receive the word of God with joy. In other words, these people seem to believe for a while. But he says they have no root, and in a time of trial, and in that “time of testing” they fall away. The third type of soil is similar: this represents people who seem to believe for a while, but that faith is “choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life.” Does this mean that people can truly believe that God’s word is true and then later not believe?

I think that’s possible, but I also think that’s different from trusting in God himself. I believe that the Bible, in its totality, teaches that no one can truly understand who God is and what he requires of us, and then have a right relationship with him, unless God draws that person to himself and gives them eyes to see the truth. In other words, we can’t come to God unless we’re born again of the Holy Spirit, as Jesus says in John 3. We can’t come to God truly unless he transforms us. And if he changes our hearts, we will be changed forever. We will not fall away from that kind of faith.

But the Bible also teaches the possibility of false conversions. Some people say they believe in Jesus. Some people will act like it for a while. But then they experience difficult times, perhaps hardships or temptations, and they walk away from Jesus. Others will care more about things that seem to be pressing realities, the “cares . . . of life.” They may say, “I’ll read the Bible when life slows down, when my kids are off to college, when I have some extra time.” Others will be consumed with “the riches and pleasures of life.” And these people will walk away from Jesus, too. These people were never “born again,” or regenerated by God.

This seems easy to understand. It’s easy to say you believe. Anyone can do that. Anyone can take a few steps toward following Christ. They can go to church, get baptized, read their Bible. They can appear quite sincere. But it’s one thing to do this for a little while and quite another to do this for a long time, particularly when life is difficult and when so many other things compete for our attention, affection, energy, time, and money. It’s like New Year’s resolutions. It’s not that hard to get a gym membership, to show up to the gym for a while, and to eat a healthier diet. A lot of people can do that for a week. But how many can do that for a month, or a year? How many people make that a new lifestyle? You can’t realistically say, “I’m going to get really buff by working out for a week,” or, “I’m going to lower my cholesterol by 50 points in the next week.” To become healthy, your life needs to change permanently, not just for a little while. The same thing is true of pursuing a relationship with God.

Those people who appear to have faith but don't follow through in their relationship with God never had true faith. As the apostle John writes, "They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us" (1 John 2:19). These people who end up walking away from the church were never "of us," they were never transformed by God, they were never born again of the Holy Spirit, they were never saved.

Some people have a hard time accepting that. In my experience, those people are usually parents whose kids went to church, made a profession of faith while they were young, were baptized, and then went off into the world and didn't live as Christians. These parents are often in denial about the true spiritual state of their kids. If your kids abandon the church as adults, I am quite sure that they didn't have a real faith to begin with. Don't fool yourself and say, "Oh, they know the Lord, they're just not walking with him now."

Here's a quick story: the year that I came to this church, 2014, I had applied to a number of churches to be their pastor. One of these churches pursued me and was interested in calling me to be their pastor. We visited the church a couple of times and I preached one sermon for the congregation. I had preached on a passage from Colossians 2, where Paul urges Christians to stay rooted in Christ. And I mentioned that the Bible teaches about the possibility of false conversions. Those who aren't rooted in Christ fall away from him. They don't have real faith. They aren't really Christians. I was supposed to preach a second time before they offered me the job, but I didn't feel that it was a good fit, so I called the head of the search committee to let him down. When I did that, he mentioned that one man didn't like my sermon. I knew who this man was. He taught a Sunday school class. In it, he mentioned that his adult daughter wasn't "walking with the Lord" and didn't even want him to pray for her. But he also was quick to say he knew she was "born again," so she was okay with God. If the Spirit of God resides in a person, that person will never reject prayer. I think this man had fooled himself because he couldn't bear the thought that this daughter rejected Jesus.

The Bible calls those who don't walk with Jesus unbelievers, not "backsliding Christians." There are no perfect Christians in this life. And our faith can go through valleys, when we fall into sin. But a real Christian repents, again and again, and keeps turning to Jesus. If the Spirit of God dwells in you, he will bring you to Jesus. Your life will bear the fruit or the marks of a Christian.

And that's what Jesus says about the fourth type of soil. This soil represents those "who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience." These people are truly Christians. They hold fast to the word of God and they bear fruit "with patience." They are in it for the long haul. They're like the people who, seeking better health, stick with their diet and exercise program even when it's hard, doesn't seem like fun, or doesn't seem to produce great results in the moment. Elsewhere, Jesus says, "If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free" (John 8:31–32).

It seems clear that Jesus commends only this last group of people. They are the ones who are part of his kingdom, who are forgiven of their sins, and who will live forever with Jesus. Again, Jesus doesn't mean that these people earned those things. Salvation is a gift. But if it has been received, it will be put to use by those who have received it.

That's more or less what Jesus says in the next paragraph, verses 16–18:

<sup>16</sup>"No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a jar or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. <sup>17</sup>For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light. <sup>18</sup>Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away."

In John's Gospel, Jesus says that he is "the light of the world." He says, "Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John 8:12). Jesus comes to reveal things as they truly are. He reveals our true spiritual condition. He exposes our sin, our rebellion against God. But he also illuminates the path to forgiveness and reconciliation with God. He himself is that path. If you understand and believe that Jesus is the light of God, you would hang on to that light and shine it in all parts of your life. You wouldn't hide it in a box or stick it under the bed, like an unwanted Christmas gift. People do that, of course, but these are not the people who realize who Jesus truly is.

Jesus says that even if you do that, his light will be revealed. "Nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest." You can try to cover Jesus up, or shut him up, but in the end he will prevail. He is in heaven now, but when he comes to Earth a second time, everyone will see that he is Lord, the true King. And he will bring everyone into judgment. There will be no hiding him, no silencing him on that day. All will come to light, including our sins and whether we have

truly believed Jesus or not. If we do believe in Jesus, our sins will be covered. They have already been paid for when Jesus died on the cross almost two thousand years ago. But those who have rejected Jesus will have nowhere to hide. They will have to pay for their own sins.

Since that is so, Jesus says, “Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away.” If you receive God’s word and are faithful to what God has given you, he will entrust you with more. But the one who truly doesn’t have a relationship with God, “even what he thinks that he has will be taken away.” I believe there will be many people on that last day who will be surprised by the judgment that Jesus makes on their faith. There will be people who say, “But Lord, I made a confession of faith. I prayed that prayer I was told to say. I was baptized. I went to church.” And Jesus will say, “I never knew you; depart from me” (Matt. 7:23). Jesus is giving us a warning. We are hearing the word of God. What are we going to do with it?

Jesus makes it clear that hearing the word of God and believing that it is true leads to action. Those who belong to the family of God hear the word and do it. We see that in verses 19–21:

<sup>19</sup> Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. <sup>20</sup> And he was told, “Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you.” <sup>21</sup> But he answered them, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.”

Jesus’ biological family wanted to see him. Instead of saying, “Oh, thanks for telling me. I’ll be right there,” Jesus takes the opportunity to define his real family. His real family consists of people who hear and do the word of God. Again, we don’t earn our way into the family of God by doing his word. Did you earn your way into your family? No, you were born into it. But no one is born biologically into God’s family. We must be reborn, which is a work that only God can do. But once we’re in the family, we’re supposed to act like it. And Jesus says that the people who are in his family show themselves by their actions. It’s easy to say you believe something. Act like it, Jesus says.

Now that we’ve gone through this passage, how do we respond?

I simply ask three questions. One, is there room in your life for the word of God? Two, are you letting the light of Jesus shine into every area of your life? Three, are you acting according to God’s word?

Is there room in your life for God's word? Are you listening intently now? Are you reading the Bible? Are you studying it to make sure you understand what you've read? There are many things that will crowd your life so that you don't read the Bible. There are many concerns that we have. We're worried about our family, our health, our job. Don't let these things choke out the word of God. There are many pleasurable things to do, and not all of them are wrong. Don't let these things take up all your time so you have no room for God's word in your life. Trials will come, and you may doubt God's word, or temptations may come, and you may not want to hear from God because you know he will correct you. But this is a mistake. We need to run to the one who can correct us, forgive us, and heal us.

Make sure there is room for God's word in your life. You can do this in many ways. Reading the Bible regularly is the best way. I recommend getting a study Bible like the *ESV Study Bible* and reading systematically. We have Bible plans available here and on our website ([wbcommunity.org/bible](http://wbcommunity.org/bible)). You can read through the Bible in a year. But if that's too fast of a pace, do it in two years. You can also listen to the Bible. There are different apps you can use. [Christianaudio.com](http://christianaudio.com) has an app and you can find cheap recordings of the Bible to purchase. You can read alone or with your family. One of my only New Year's resolutions was to have a regular time of worship as a family. So, three times this week we read a Psalm, sang a song or hymn, read a question and answer out of a catechism, and prayed. It was quick—maybe 10 minutes—but over a long time, that practice will help mold and shape us as a family. Ten extra minutes of exercise every day adds up to big changes over a long period of time. Likewise, our daily diet affects our health. You are what you eat, and we cannot be better than what we put inside ourselves.

Jonathan Edwards, perhaps America's greatest theologian and a pastor in Massachusetts, made several resolutions when he was a young man. Most of them involved actions and attitudes. But one of them was this: "Resolved, to study the Scriptures so steadily, constantly and frequently, as that I may find, and plainly perceive myself to grow in the knowledge of the same."<sup>3</sup> Resolve to study the Bible.

Are you letting the light of Jesus shine into every area of your life? Do you let God speak into area of your life? Do you let him expose your sins, the ways you are not doing life according to his terms? Or do you try to silence God and cover up his light? You can do this for a time, but

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-resolutions-of-jonathan-edwards>.

in the end Jesus' light will shine. His voice will roar. It is better to respond now so that he can heal you. If you are not yet a Christian indeed, I would love to talk to you about what it would look like to follow Jesus. I urge you to let God's word and light into your life.

Are you acting according to God's word? We all fail to do perfectly according to God's word. But are you trying? Are you acting on what you know? It's not enough to be hearers of God's word. It's not enough to nod our heads and say, "Yes, that's right." We must act.

Jesus' brother, James provides a great commentary on today's passage. This is James 1:16–25:

<sup>16</sup> Do not be deceived, my beloved brothers. <sup>17</sup> Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. <sup>18</sup> Of his own will he brought us forth by the word of truth, that we should be a kind of firstfruits of his creatures.

<sup>19</sup> Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; <sup>20</sup> for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. <sup>21</sup> Therefore put away all filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls.

<sup>22</sup> But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. <sup>23</sup> For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. <sup>24</sup> For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. <sup>25</sup> But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.