

HOW DEEP ARE YOUR SPIRITUAL ROOTS? Luke 8:11-15

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I. Introduction

Have you ever tried to grow a potted plant? I have and frankly I haven't done very well. It can be very tricky to keep them growing. Don't give them too much water. Don't give them too little water. Watch the light. Too much will kill them. Too little will too. Make sure you have the right kind of soil. Make sure the pot is big enough for the roots. When the roots get too big for the pot, transplant it so that it doesn't become root bound.

You don't just leave a plant alone and expect it to do well. Without care, plants will suffer and ultimately die.

I grew up in Southern California. Along with Florida, California is the leading producer of fruits in the United States. Down the street from us a family had an avocado tree which produced literally thousands of huge, beautiful avocados. We ourselves had lemon and pomegranate trees which produced excellent fruit.

We also had some other fruit trees which bore some fruit, but never mature fruit. For example, we had a banana tree, and it only grew small, green immature bananas about the size of your pinkie. We had a peach tree, and it bore fruit, but it was small and hard and never came to maturity.

Even in California, there was variation in the productivity of fruit trees. Some didn't produce any fruit. They simply withered and died. Some produced fruit each year, but not mature fruit. And some produced good, mature fruit.

In a sense, this is also true with people. People need care if they are to grow to the point where they are mature and act like it. If you are a parent, you know this quite well. Children don't raise themselves. If left to their own devices, they will be very immature.

This is especially true in the spiritual realm. Baby Christians don't automatically grow into mature, spiritual believers. If you are a church leader, you know that it takes considerable care to help new believers grow to maturity. The church exists, in part, to oversee the spiritual growth and development of the believers in the church. "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, *for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account*" (Heb 13:17). "I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able" (1 Cor 3:2).

Believers can only bear fruit if they continue to walk in the faith. And they can only bear mature fruit if they become mature. Since each believer should be concerned about his or her fruitfulness, and, since our faith is crucial to fruit bearing, we should all be concerned about our faith in Christ.

The Parable of the Sower makes this point well:

"Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the wayside are those ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away. Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity. But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience."

—Luke 8:11-15

II. Overview of the Parable: Luke 8:11-15

The seed is the Word of God, including especially Jesus' guarantee of eternal life to all who simply believe in Him for it (see v 12). The soils represent the hearts of four different types of people and show how they respond to the Word of God.

This parable is four snapshots, not a video. It gives snapshots of four types of people we see in ministry. Obviously, we all encounter unbelievers who reject the good news of Jesus Christ. If you have ever led anyone to faith in Christ, or if you have watched the progress of new believers in your church, you quickly notice that not all grow at the same speed. Some grow slowly but steadily. Some grow slowly, then backslide. Some grow quickly at first, and then settle into slow steady growth.

The Lord divides the responsiveness of people in four categories. One group rejects Christ and never comes to faith. A second group comes to faith and then later falls away from Christ. A third group comes to faith and maintains their Christian profession till the end, but have limited fruitfulness in their Christian life. And a fourth group maintains their Christian profession to the end and bring forth much mature fruit.

Obviously the fourth soil is most desirable. Bringing forth fruit to maturity is the result that pleases God the most. There is an evident progression from least desirable to most desirable in the four soils.

It is important to recognize that there are two different issues involved in this parable: salvation and approval. The ultimate concern of the parable is over Christ's approval. However, in order to have approval, a person must also have salvation. Unsaved people will never be approved. So as we consider these soils we will consider their spiritual condition, saved or lost, and their quality of service, approved or disapproved.

Let's begin by considering the first soil.

III. The Wayside Soil: No Salvation or Approval Luke 8:12

All commentators recognize that the first soil represents unbelievers.

This is not surprising since the Lord specifically identifies them as such: “Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, *lest they should believe and be saved*” (Luke 8:12, emphasis added).

One thing commentators often *fail* to notice about these people; however, is that they *never* believe. The Lord makes it clear here that whoever believes is saved. Satan snatches away the seed before it can germinate since once it germinates a person has eternal life and is secure forever. There would be no need for Satan to snatch away the seed to keep people from being saved if he could also later snatch it away and take away that salvation. Since Jesus gives *eternal* life, once a person has it, no power in heaven or anywhere in the universe can take away that gift. Not even Satan.

Those who fail to come to faith in Christ do not have eternal life and will not have Christ’s approval at His Judgment Seat, for they won’t even be at that judgment. The Judgment Seat of Christ is reserved for believers only (2 Cor 5:9-10; compare Rev 20:11-15).

IV. The Rocky Soil: Salvation, But No Approval Luke 8:6, 13

“A sower went out to sow his seed...some fell on rock; and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture” (Luke 8:6). “But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away” (Luke 8:13). A shallow root system meant the plant lacked sufficient strength to survive in tough conditions.

That this person is a believer is clear. “It sprang up” refers to germination of the seed. Germination symbolizes the start of life. This is one who has received eternal life. This is confirmed by the fact that these type of people “believe for a while.”

A. Temporary Faith

Unfortunately, this very verse has led to an odd theological postulation. Some suggest that there is such a thing as *temporary faith*. Well, the text is clear that some believe only for a while and later fall away. So if that is what theologians meant by *temporary faith*, there would be no problem. However, by *temporary faith* some theologians mean a *substandard type of faith* that is really not faith at all. Referring to the heart of the rocky-soil person, one author states:

This kind of heart is enthusiastic but shallow. It responds positively *but not with saving faith*. There is no thought involved, no counting the cost. It is quick, emotional, euphoric, instant excitement without any understanding of the actual significance of discipleship. *This is not genuine faith.*¹

How can this be squared with the text? The Lord Jesus says they believed. The fact that it was “for a while” does not negate the fact that they believed. Of course, one might argue that what they believed was not the saving message. That argument is unsupportable, however, in light of verse 12. Remember why Satan snatched away the seed? “Lest they should believe and be saved.” The Lord Jesus made it clear that if they believed, they were saved, or born again, at the moment of faith. When He says in verse 13 that this second group “believed for a while,” we are forced to conclude that they believed the saving message for a while.

So there are only two possibilities here, and both include the fact that these are people who were saved at the moment of faith. First, they were saved as long as they believed, but once they fell away, they lost their salvation. Second, they were saved forever at the moment of faith, and once they fell away, they remained saved (but lost out on things like present joy, approval at the Judgment Seat of Christ, eternal rewards, etc.).

¹ John F. MacArthur, Jr., *The Gospel According to Jesus*, Revised & Expanded Edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998, 1994), p. 129, italics supplied.

² Possibly I am overstating the case here somewhat. I suppose some well meaning but confused people would say something like this, “Well, I hope he *really*

The first possibility is actually an impossibility, for eternal life is eternal. Compare John 6:35-40. Once anyone eats the bread of life or drinks the water of life, he will never hunger or thirst again. Jesus will never cast out anyone who comes to Him. He loses none of those whom the Father has given Him.

There is no time requirement on saving faith. That is, at the very moment of faith a person is born again. Even if he only believes for a short time, he is secure forever.

Say a person hears and believes the gospel while driving and listening to Christian radio. Then, moments later, that new believer dies in a car crash. He would go directly into God's presence. No one questions that.²

Well, what if that person lived instead of died and months or years later stopped believing? Would he then go to hell? If so, wouldn't that mean he would have been better off dying in the crash? That, of course, is a ridiculous conclusion. While we are surely grieved when we hear of believers who fall away from the faith, we cannot change the gospel in order to eliminate such defections.

Even *temporary* faith results in *eternal* salvation.³

B. Falling Away in Time of Temptation

The reference to "time of temptation" is vague. We can envision many different types of temptations that might cause a person to fall away from the faith, to cast off their Christian profession and stop going to church. These could include the influence of agnostic or atheistic college professors or friends, illnesses, accidents, family problems, etc.

in Christ, one is born again and eternally secure. Those who say that faith which later fails never really was faith in the first place are playing a dangerous game in which they read their theology into the text, rather than allowing the text to determine their theology.

⁴ Compare 1 Tim 1:18-20 ("some...concerning the faith have suffered shipwreck") and 2 Tim 2:17-18 ("they overthrow the faith of some").

⁵ From other Scriptures—and I'm thinking here of passages like 2 Cor 5:9-10, Heb 10: 23-25, 2 Tim 2:12, and Matt 6:19-21—we can learn the following: Here

Withering away refers to loss of spiritual vitality. The believer with shallow roots is one who is spiritually anemic. When tough times come and people or circumstances challenge their beliefs, they wither under the pressure. They aren't strong enough to handle it. They fall away from the faith. That is, they stop believing in Christ. This is why the text says, "they believe *for a time*...and in time of temptation *fall away*."

The word used for *falling away* is *aphistemi*. It is used 14 other times in the NT. Anna didn't "*depart*" from the temple (Luke 2:37). After he tempted Jesus, the devil "*departed* from Him until an opportune time" (Luke 4:13). Jesus will say to unsaved legalists at the Great White Throne Judgment, "*Depart* from Me, all you workers of iniquity" (Luke 13:27). Paul spoke in 1 Tim 4:1 of the fact that in the latter times "some *will depart* from the faith, giving heed to deceiving spirits and doctrine of demons..." In this context it refers to departing from previously held beliefs and practices.

We are probably not thinking here of someone who continues to go to church and who adopts a false gospel (e.g., a person who comes to believe in Lordship Salvation and still professes to believe in Christ). Such people still profess to be Christians. And they have not completely withered. They would most likely fall in the third soil category.

This is an apostate—one who has renounced what he once believed and who has stopped going to church. He has fallen away from the Christian faith.⁴

The passage does not tell us what negative things happen to these apostate believers. That is beyond the point of the parable.⁵ The point is, we should certainly strive to be the good soil and to avoid being rocky soil.

The second soil fails to bring fruit to maturity because the plant that

believed before he died. But we can't know for sure, since he didn't have time to produce enough good works to show us that he probably really did believe. In fact, even if he had lived and produced what seemed like good works for years and then died, we still couldn't be sure, because God alone knows what are truly good works and what are not."

³To conclude otherwise is to change the promise Jesus made. "He who believes in me *has* everlasting life" is a promise that at the very moment of faith

germinates has very shallow roots⁶ and it withers and falls away when tough conditions come. Since the plant has withered away, there obviously can be no fruit. And since Christ will only approve of those believers who are professing Him and who are bearing some fruit, these believers will miss out on Christ's approval.

V. The Thorny Soil: Salvation Plus Partial Approval Luke 8:7, 14

Here we have a snapshot of a plant that does much better than the rocky soil plant, and much worse than the good soil plant. This soil does endure to the end. It does not depart from the faith. The problem here is that the person's vitality is sapped by inferior things that grab its attention: cares, riches, and pleasures. As a result, it fails to bring forth mature fruit.

"And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it" (Luke 8:7). "Now the ones that fell among thorns are those

and now the apostate loses the joy he had when he received the word; here and now he falls under God's judgment; forever he will miss out on the privilege of ruling with Christ (Heb 10:23-25; 2 Tim 2:12); and he will only gain treasure in heaven for any treasure laid up prior to the time when he fell away (Matt 6:19-21). Thus, since he only believed for a short time, he will be a relatively poor person forever in eternity. He will be unable to give a lot to others and to serve the Lord as fully as he would certainly like.

⁶The NKJV's translation, "and these have no root," is technically accurate, but this is a place where supplying words like "depth of" would have been good, since that is surely implied in the context. "These have no [depth of] root" is clearly the point since the seed sprang up (v 6) and the only way that could happen is if there were some roots below the ground. The rocky soil envisions the situation where the plow missed a rock layer several inches below the soil. Compare the Matthean parallel: "Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth

who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity” (Luke 8:14).

The Lord said that this type of person fails to bring “fruit to maturity.” He didn’t say that they fail to bring forth fruit of any kind. This type of believer does bring forth fruit; hence he will be rewarded for that at the Judgment Seat of Christ. The problem is that the fruit is stunted and immature, just as would be the case with a fruit-bearing plant hindered by weeds.

We are probably thinking here of someone like the second servant in the parable of the minas. See Luke 19:13-19. That parable concerns the believer’s service until Christ returns. All servants in this parable receive the same amount of money, a mina, to invest until their Lord returns. This suggests that they each had the same amount of giftedness and opportunity.

The first servant invests his one mina and when the Lord returns, he has ten minas to give to his Lord. Here is what he hears from his Lord: “Well done, good servant; because you were faithful in very little, have authority over ten cities” (19:17). This surely represents the good soil type of believer. Note that he receives strong commendation, “Well done, good servant,” and maximum reward, “have authority over ten cities.”

The second servant does not maximize his gifts and opportunities. He falls far short of the servant who gained ten minas. The second servant gains only half as much. Yet, he does endure in his Christian profession and he works for his Lord and brings about an increase. This is akin to the thorny-soil believer who fails to bring forth fruit *to maturity*. Here is what

of earth” (Matt 13:5).

⁷Compare 2 Tim 2:12 and Heb 10:23-25. Enduring in our profession of faith in Christ, both verbally and in terms of assembling together with other believers as a public expression of faith, is rewarded with rulership. Nothing is said in those or other passages of the need to maximize one’s life in order to rule with Christ. Note, however, that willful departure into the far country of sinful rebellion disqualifies one for rulership even if he were to somehow maintain his profession,

he hears from his Lord: “You also be over five cities.” Note that he did not receive the strong commendation that the first servant did. There is no “Well done, good servant.” He also doesn’t receive maximum reward. He will not rule over ten cities. Instead, he will reign over five cities.

Surely there is a lot of grace here. The Lord could have chosen to exclude from rulership all but the good soil type of believer. Yet He recognizes accomplishment, even if it is far less than that which the person was capable.⁷

VI. The Good Soil: Salvation Plus Full Approval Luke 8:8, 15

This soil is clearly the ideal. Unlike the second soil, this soil *endures* in faith. Unlike the third soil, this one brings forth *fruit to maturity*.

As just discussed, this person is surely to be likened to the first servant in the parable of the minas (see Luke 19:12-17). There even appears to be a “bonus” for this type of servant. Not only does he get what he earned, but he gets even more. He is given the one mina from the faithless, rocky-soil, servant (see Luke 19:24-26).

Some have tried to support the interpretation that only the good soil represents believers by appealing to the fact that the good soil yielded different results, “some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty” (Matt 13:23). They argue that “true believers” all endure and yield mature fruit, though at varying degrees of productivity.

That suggestion is fatally flawed. First, in the Lukan parable we are told that *all* plants in the good soil yielded a hundredfold (Luke 8:8). When the Lord told this parable in the way Luke records,⁸ He did not focus on different amounts of ability or production in the good soil.⁹ Second, the context makes it crystal clear (see above) that soils 2, 3, and 4 all contain which is unlikely (compare Luke 15:11-32; Gal 5:19-21).

¹⁰My second year at Dallas Theological Seminary I was working construc-

actual plants. The seeds have germinated. Life has begun.

It seems quite likely that James was thinking of this passage when he wrote James 5:7-9.

Therefore be *patient*, brethren, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious *fruit* of the earth, waiting patiently for it until it receives the early and latter rain. You also be *patient*. Establish your *hearts*, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. Do not grumble against one another, brethren, lest you be condemned. Behold the Judge is standing at the door! (emphasis supplied).

There is repetition of the three main elements found in Luke 8:15, patience (*hypomone* in Luke 8 versus *makrothumeo* in James 5), fruit (*karpos*, 8:8 and Jas 5:7), and heart (*kardia*). The parable of the four soils has everything to do with the coming of the Lord. First, a person needs to come to faith in Christ. However, that is not the end of the matter. That is merely the beginning. Second, once a person is born again, he needs to cultivate or *establish* his heart so that he is responsive to the Word of God and ready for the soon return of his Savior—and *Judge!*

VII. Why Lordship Salvation Says That All Christians Are the Good Soil

One of the main reasons why Lordship Salvation exists is because for

tion with another seminary student. I found out he had gone to Illinois State University. He told me an odd story how the previous year, his senior year, he had gone to witness to one of his philosophy professors. The man was an agnostic, but he quoted the Bible a lot. So my friend started his witness by saying, "I've been accepted for seminary next year." "Oh, really," the professor said, "where will you be attending?" "The Metropolitan Bible School," my friend said. "That's a hard theological seminary, and I'm slightly different totally surprised with these words, "Really. I am a Th.M. graduate of

⁹The same difference in emphasis can be seen by comparing the Parable of the Minas (Luke 19:11-27), where all servants get the same amount to invest, and

many it is inconceivable that the work of God in regeneration does not always result in perseverance and the production of much mature fruit.

Nearly everyone in the world, including unbelievers, would like all people to be good and loving. Surely pastors and theologians wish that all believers were mature and productive. Lordship Salvation is able to bring this about by labeling all believers who either fail to persevere or to produce mature fruit as *false professors*. Thus the production of mature fruit at the coming of the Lord becomes the test of whether one is truly saved or not.

This leads advocates of Lordship Salvation to misinterpret the parable of the four soils. Though the text indicates that the seed germinated in all but the first soil, they only see the fourth soil as possessing life.

Lordship Salvation arrives at its faulty interpretation of this passage because one of its premises is unbiblical:

- Major premise: All true believers endure and produce much mature fruit.
- Minor premise: The middle soils don't endure and produce much mature fruit.
- Conclusion: The middle soils do not represent true believers.

Now if the major premise is correct, then the conclusion is as well, for the minor premise is taken directly from the text. However, the text itself makes it very clear that the major premise is wrong. When we see that, the Word of God should cause us to change our syllogism.

- Major premise: All who believe in Christ have God's life.
- Minor premise: The middle soils have God's life.
- Conclusion: The middle soils represent believers in Christ.

the Parable of the Talents (Matt 25:14-30), where the servants receive differing amounts to invest.

We need to realize that believers may not endure; and, if they do, they may not produce mature fruit. Anyone who has been involved in pastoral ministry knows this. It should not cause us to consider leaving the ministry, or to change our view of the gospel. It should motivate us to urge all in our flocks to be attentive to God's Word so that they can be good soil and ready for the Lord's soon return.

There are lots of ways the falling away represented by the second soil could happen: agnostic professors in college or graduate school.¹⁰ Agnostic friends. Ceasing to walk in fellowship and gradually drifting away from church and Christian friends.

There are also many ways the stunted fruit of the third soil can occur: focusing too much on making money, retirement accounts, stock prices, pleasures, riches, cares. One certainly need not be wrapped up in overt sin to fail to bring forth fruit to maturity.¹¹

So, we should accept the Lord's teaching even if we find it unpleasant. Whether we like it or not, all Christians aren't good soil. This should drive us to our knees, and to the Word of God. Since perseverance and the production of mature fruit is far from automatic, we are responsible for how we respond to God's Word.

VIII. How Can We Put Our Roots Down Deep And Keep the Weeds from Choking Us?

Following this parable is another one that sheds more light on the application of this parable.

¹⁶“No one, when he has lit a lamp, covers it with a vessel or puts it under a bed, but sets it on a lampstand, that those who enter may see the light. ¹⁷For nothing is secret that will not be revealed, nor anything hidden that will not be known and come to light. ¹⁸*Therefore take heed how you hear.* For whoever has, to him more will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he seems to have will be taken from him.”

—Luke 8:16-18, italics added

Note verse 18: “Therefore, take heed how you hear.”¹² We do have a role to play in receiving and assimilating the Word of God. We are to “take heed how [we] hear” the Word of God.

Roots are receptors that take in water. They symbolize the heart of the believer which is to take in God’s Word. We should all pray regularly for God to enlighten us as to the meaning of His Word. We should pray for His strength and help in carrying out His commands.

We should also pray for other Christians to take heed how they hear God’s Word. If we see a Christian whom we think may be a rocky soil type of believer, one whom we fear is in danger of falling away from the faith, what can we do? Well, their “root problem” is that their heart is flawed before God. They need a transformation of their heart/mind (Rom 12:1-2).¹³ Thus we can pray for them and encourage them to pray,

Dallas Theological Seminary.” Somewhere along the line after his seminary days that man lost his faith. While I don’t know the particulars, I imagine his secular philosophy education led to his falling away from the faith.

¹¹“Pleasures of life” might include watching morally acceptable television, playing softball or bowling in leagues, surfing the internet, reading the classics, attending operas and symphonies, hunting, fishing, boating, skiing, running, swimming, hiking, etc. These things, while not sinful, can drain one’s time and lead to a diminution of one’s service for Christ.

¹² Of course, if all “true” believers automatically heed God’s Word, then there would be no need for this exhortation.

¹³ Those who say that believing in the heart is good and believing in the mind or head is bad overlook passages like this one. Paul urged the Roman believers to “be transformed by the renewing of *your mind*.” The Bible does not distinguish between believing with the heart or mind. All belief is *internal*. See my discussion of “Head Faith, Heart Faith, and Mind Games” in *Confident in Christ: Living by Faith Really Works* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), pp. 12-14.

¹⁴ Compare 1 John 2:28; 4:17-19. The purpose of eschatology is to motivate

asking God to change their heart and to give them a heart that seeks God and delights in pleasing Him.

We might encourage them to read God's word prayerfully, asking God to open their eyes to it as they read. We should encourage them to go to a solid Bible teaching church (Heb 10:23-25), to be honest and open with God (1 John 1:9), and to avoid false teachers (Gal 1:8-9).

If we see a believer whose productivity is being choked by cares, riches, and pleasures, we might remind them of Christ's return, and of the Judgment Seat of Christ,¹⁴ and encourage them to pray for a good heart, for insight, and for strength to carry out God's commands.

The key to maximizing our lives and bearing mature fruit at harvest time, if there is such a thing as a *key*, is found in Gal 2:20, "living by faith in the Son of God." The more we walk in faith, the stronger we become spiritually.

This is not the place for an extended discussion of the faith walk. Suffice it to say that the faith walk has the Lord Jesus Christ as its constant focus. The person walking by faith in Christ is convinced (i.e., believes) that Jesus Christ will guide him into greater and greater holiness as long as he looks to Him in prayer, confessing his sins, and asking for help to understand and deal with his shortcomings.

The faith walk is not lived by focusing on the commands.¹⁵ It is not a matter of gutting it out. While there is effort involved, the effort must be channeled God's way, through faith in Christ. The focus must be on our loving Lord. To please God in our Christian lives we must fall more and more in love with Jesus Christ who loved us and gave Himself for us.

IX. Conclusion

Could this withering and falling away happen in people to whom you minister? Absolutely. Could it happen to one of your children? Yes.

godly behavior in light of Christ's soon return.

¹⁵ See, for example, Rom 7:13-25.

Could it even happen to you? Yes. No Christian this side of glory is immune from this danger. We must all “take heed how [we] hear” until we go to be with Him.

Could the productivity of people to whom you minister, or even your own productivity, be choked out by cares, riches, and pleasures? You bet.

Can the people to whom you minister, and you yourself, endure in faith and overcome the dangers and bring forth fruit to maturity? Yes, sure.

The key is our heart, our responsiveness to God’s Word. If we are concerned about behavior and bringing forth fruit to maturity—and we should be, then our goal should be to cultivate our hearts to the Word of God. With a good heart, the fruit will follow. Without a good heart, mature fruit will never come.

