

What Happens when we Share the Gospel?

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[0 : 00] Well, over the summer, I've been listening to a book about marriage, and the book is titled What Did You Expect?

What Did You Expect? And the big point of the book is by Paul Tripp. It's a really good and a helpful book. I'd really commend it to you to read if you've got marriage on your mind.

The point of the book is that our responses in life aren't only responses to what happens, but responses to what we expect to happen. So in marriage, he says, what should we expect when two flawed and imperfect and sinful people promise to spend their lives together?

If we expect an easy and blissful union, our hearts are quickly going to be broken. If we expect that union to be hard work, lots of saying sorry and forgiving, daily sacrifice, then, he says, we can find a deeper joy in showing that kind of faithful covenant love to another person.

Or think of the national stage. There were three by-elections in England last month. Previously, all three constituencies were held by the conservatives. You may know they lost two.

[1 : 22] They held one. Most people would consider that a loss. But the government considered it a win because they expected to lose all three.

Expectations. Could be the difference between winning and losing. Joy and frustration. The facts don't change, but our responses to what happens do change.

Well, in this parable we've just read, Jesus is applying that same truth to the most important thing that goes on in our lives and in our world, the spreading of the gospel.

What should we expect when we share the gospel? Jesus tells us this story to illustrate the farmer sows the word. And the results are not straightforward.

It's not one thing or two things that happen, but four things happen, four different responses to the gospel going out. Jesus himself has experienced varied responses.

[2 : 27] So far in this gospel, some have received his forgiveness and are now following him. But some have got only what they came for and gone away again.

But others already by this point want him dead. And now Jesus teaches the crowds, but crucially his disciples, that that's not by accident, but by design.

There's not a flaw in the system. It's what we should expect when the gospel goes out. Now I come back to this parable often in life and ministry.

It's one of Jesus' best known parables, isn't it? But it never, ever grows old because it helps me, it helps us to understand what we see in our own lives and in our church.

Do we see a spectrum of responses to the gospel? We do, don't we? As I read this parable, I can put names to the different soils that Jesus describes.

[3 : 32] I can remember times people connecting and responding like this, even over the last year in the life of our church family.

When we do evangelism, brothers and sisters, we don't need to be convinced that what Jesus is teaching is true. We see it. This is what happens week by week. I live in this field.

And increasingly, encouragingly, I think we as a church family live in this field too. Almost every week, there's someone who comes for the first time into this church family, someone who maybe has never heard the good news or doesn't yet know how to respond to it.

What a brilliant thing. It's a great thing. If that's you here today, we're so, so glad that you're here, that you've come. It'd be great to meet you afterwards. You talking to some of you, I know that we're keen to share what we've received, to go out and share the good news with others, that the evangelistic temperature is rising in this church.

But as it has risen, the other thing that I have heard is, well, that was really disappointing. I didn't think it would go like that.

[4 : 53] We get an opportunity to share the gospel. We spend time walking people through it, introducing them to Jesus. And sometimes it doesn't end with that person becoming a Christian or even taking the next step towards Jesus.

Sometimes people just stop where they are. They're happy with where they are. They don't want to go any further. Sometimes people turn back and say, I don't want this, at least not right now. Well, let me say, I'm glad if we are disappointed in our evangelism because it means that it is happening. If we were not out sowing the word, we wouldn't be seeing results and we wouldn't be sad when it's not what we hoped for.

Disappointment means that we are invested in people becoming Christians. It's good if we feel invested in the lives of other people. But if the first step is finding the courage to share the gospel and the next step is being disappointed by what we see when we do that, then the next step that we need to take together and individually is to not lose heart when we see varied outcomes.

The next step is learning not to give up, not losing our courage and conviction in the gospel. It is so important that we have this parable in our bloodstream, friends, so that we do not lose our confidence in sharing the gospel and holding it out to others.

[6 : 31] Because here, the Lord of the harvest himself is giving us a realistic expectation of what happens when we share the gospel. And it is more complicated, isn't it, than we often assume.

So what does Jesus teach us that we need to know? Well, it's not a hard parable for us to understand, is it? He tells a story about a farmer sowing seeds in a field.

Now, back then, farmers didn't drill seeds, they didn't plant them one by one. The farmer scattered the seeds, just threw them into the field. And the seeds land in different places.

Some land on the path where the soil is trodden down and hard. Some land in stony ground that hasn't been cleared of the stones. Some land in weedy and thorny ground where other things are growing.

And some lands in the good, rich, clear soil. And how the seeds then grow or don't grow depends on what kind of soil it is that they have landed in.

[7 : 36] Now, this week, me and Caleb had the privilege of riding on a farm in a combine harvester. Alistair and Diane's great big combine.

It was brilliant. We pretended it was for Caleb. And this is what we saw. I can testify, and these guys much more so, that this is still how it works.

There were patches of the field where not much was growing because, I was told, they had been underwater and the seed had gone into it and had just drowned in the waterlogged soil.

And nothing had grown. It was nothing to do with the seed or the way that it had been put there. It was to do with the soil where they landed that affected the outcome.

So, in Jesus' parable, it is where the seed lands that makes the difference, not the seed or the way it is sown. Now, that's obvious, you say. But is it?

[8 : 34] What's the first thing we do after we've had a gospel conversation? Did I say the right thing? Did I say it in the right way?

Those are good questions to ask, aren't they? Have I faithfully communicated the gospel? It's vital that we do. But Jesus says, listen, even if you did say the right thing and you did say it in the right way, it is the heart of the hearer that is the biggest factor in their response.

Understand, it is not the seed and it is not the way it is sown. It is the soil. So, the first thing to do when we have a conversation like that is what?

Pray. Pray that the gospel would land on that good soil. Pray for the heart of whoever it is that we have spoken to, that they would respond. That the heart would be good and soft and ready.

Paul planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. That's the first big lesson, isn't it? If someone hasn't responded rightly to Jesus, it doesn't mean that you've done it wrong.

[9 : 45] That's really good for us to know, isn't it? It's encouraging for us to know. But once we've done that, we've spread the word, we've had a conversation like that. Well, how does that translate into spiritual realities?

The disciples come, don't they? They say, we don't understand. What do you want us to get from this story of the field? Jesus says in verse 13, don't you understand this parable?

How then will you understand any parable? Did you see he's saying, this is the key to understanding it all. This is a story about the word that Jesus is sharing, the good news that he is broadcasting.

If you don't understand this parable, you won't understand any of it, he says. Because this parable is about the inner workings of Jesus' ministry. Quite literally, how Jesus' words work in the hearts of those who hear him.

He is sowing the word. And here are different types of people. Different soil where the word lands. Different groups of people who hear the word.

[10:55] And we know these people all too well, don't we? We can identify with them. Perhaps we see ourselves in this field today as we heard the story.

Some people says Jesus is like seed along the path where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. So sometimes he says, the gospel doesn't get anywhere.

There's no interest. There might even be hostility, pushback, but the message of Jesus doesn't get in. We've all had conversations like that, haven't we? Where there is resistance, a closeness.

And notice that that hardness of heart gives opportunity for something else to happen. Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.

So there's no seeds left lying on the surface. There's no residual effect of the word. The devil makes sure to clean up what is left so that it can't grow.

[11:57] Now that should make us pause and reflect suspiciously on the idea that somebody might only hear the gospel once.

Or come briefly into contact with Christians or with the church. And one day it could all fall into place and change their lives forever. Very occasionally that happens.

Sometimes it does. But if that is our evangelistic strategy, if we take that to be the rule, well, listen to Jesus and see what goes wrong with that.

As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them. As soon as we've said it, it's gone. Have we forgotten that we have an unseen enemy who will lie, cheat, and steal the gospel away from people's hearts?

This makes our evangelism reflected on it a bit like that game that maybe you've played with cones. That game, I think sometimes it's called Volcanoes and Craters or Mountains and Valleys.

[13:06] The game where one team is trying to turn all the cones the right way up while the other team is trying to turn all the cones the wrong way up. And you know how that game goes. You have to play it with a timer because nobody wins, do they?

As soon as you've turned over one cone the right way up, somebody else is coming to turn it the wrong way up. That is like sharing the gospel. So normally, we have to be willing to turn over the same cone more than once, to sow the same seed in the same place more than once.

Because Satan comes to undo what we have done, to take away the word that was sown.

Remember, we are not fighting against flesh and blood.

That's what Paul says. We're not kind of reasoning with human logic. We are fighting against the rulers and authorities in heavenly places.

So do you know, says Jesus, when you go to introduce somebody to him, you are engaging in spiritual warfare. Do you know that?

[14:16] We have to be prepared for spiritual opposition. That's one reason for our disappointment, isn't it? Because we forget who we're really playing against. We trust in our own human reasons and strategies and therefore don't understand why it isn't working and why our friend isn't getting it.

Now, sometimes that doesn't happen. And there is an interest. There is a pulse, a response. But when that happens, well, what do we think?

I think that we are prone to see anything more than a kind of flat refusal as gold. This person gets it. But Jesus says, doesn't he, not all that glitters is gold.

The human heart is more complicated than that. Because there are still two outcomes that stop short of the gospel bearing fruit in somebody's life. What next?

Others, he says, like seeds sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time.

[15:23] When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.

Sometimes people hear the gospel and they're really excited. They can't get enough.

But it turns out to be a short-lived reaction. They burn bright and then they burn out. And haven't we all seen it? People who come to church and they're so glad that they're here.

And they love hearing the word. They love spending time. And then they disappear. Where did they go? We say, what happened? They received it with so much joy. But Jesus says there was no root. Perhaps it was all superficial. As soon as the gospel brings trouble or persecution, it doesn't seem so exciting anymore. Perhaps they realize to take Jesus seriously would mean believing things or living in a certain way that would cost them socially.

Maybe a friend said, you're not serious, are you, about this God stuff? And they thought, well, no, not really. And it lost its appeal. Not worth it.

[16:32] Again, it challenges our instinct that as soon as someone shows a positive interest in the gospel, they're pretty much home. Jesus cautions us that an emotional high is not the same as lasting heart change.

If our hearts are not properly rooted in the gospel. If our hearts are not properly rooted in the gospel, then how we feel about the gospel is only superficial. It's changeable. And so when somebody is excited about the gospel, that is a good thing.

But what should we do? Invest. Take time. This person doesn't need to be left on their own, do they? They need somebody alongside of them to help them to count the cost.

This is what life looks like living with Jesus. Let me show you. Let me tell you. Let me help you.

Work through it with them.

Jesus never hides the costs, does he? There's no small print in the gospel. It's all out on the table. He makes it clear from the start, doesn't he? So should we. We have no right to hide from people what it might cost them to follow him.

[17:38] Let's help people figure out what life looks like with Jesus. Because the real test of heart change is whether that joy in the gospel survives when the first challenge comes.

Or when the cost goes up. What else happens? Thirdly, still others, says Jesus, like seeds sown among thorns hear the word. But the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.

So this seed gets a bit further, doesn't it? It grows a bit more. The gospel does grow. But this time the seed has competition. There are competing desires in the heart of the person who hears that choke the life out of the word.

And it could be anything, says Jesus, the worries of this life, hard things. But not only hard things. What does he say? The deceitfulness of wealth.

Good things that convince us that they are ultimate things. It could be the desire for other things.

Jesus leaves it open-ended, doesn't he? Fill in the blank.

[18:52] Having a boyfriend or girlfriend who isn't interested in knowing about Jesus. Playing sport on a Sunday and sidelining church.

Investing so much time and energy in your children's opportunities and futures that the Bible gathers dust on a shelf. And following Jesus is never spoken about in the home.

Those, I think, are big weeds. Big thorns. In the day that we live in, in the church. Maybe you know others.

I'd love to hear what you think. What are the big weeds that we might have in our hearts? That we might have the seeds of in our hearts? That compete with the word. That compete with Jesus.

Because again, we've all seen it, haven't we? Other stuff in life crowds out the gospel so that it doesn't bear fruit in us. And there's plenty of that that goes unseen too.

[19:50] Because if you notice, unlike the first two seeds, this seed doesn't die. It keeps growing. The gospel is just unfruitful.

The gospel is present, but it's not preeminent. Jesus is something, but he's not everything. And friends, if that is you today, Jesus is clear that that is not a sufficient response to his word.

He cannot be one among many. He is all in all. And if we have put him in competition with other things in our lives, then perhaps we have not yet fully understood who he is and what it is he came for.

If we have Jesus as Savior, we must have him as Lord. Another way to put it is that if we won't have him as Lord, then we can't have him as Savior.

Now, that is not the same as saying that Jesus is only our Savior if we never sin. Rather, Jesus is our Savior. If Jesus is our Savior, then our allegiance is to him as Lord.

[21:01] And when we sin and when we are drawn away by other things and other things have a tug on our hearts, what do we do? We turn back to him. And we turn away from whatever it is and

we say, Lord, help me love you.

Put to death the desire for other things that might draw me away from you. That is what it is to have Jesus as our Lord, our King, and our Savior. And again, we might assume in a church family like this that we have all understood that and that we're all there.

But in any field where the gospel is sown, Jesus says, there is a real possibility that some of us might have a divided heart. And so, let us be having gospel conversations here with one another. There is no point, is there, in life where the gospel is not relevant, not least in the church and among Christians. If we can't talk about Jesus with each other, how are we going to speak about him to anyone else?

Be willing for somebody to ask you, how are you finding being a Christian? Be honest when you think, perhaps my heart has other things competing with Jesus.

[22 : 22] Be willing to speak about that. It's a possibility for all of us. It's not just you. Hebrews chapter 2, chapter 3 tells us, It's sad, isn't it, to see people reject the gospel outright, but how much sadder would it be to find out on the last day that the gospel never, in fact, bore fruit in those that we've sat next to year after year, and we've never asked, how's your heart doing?

What is the gospel doing in your life right now? Because the outcome that we want for ourselves, for everyone, is the last one, isn't it? Others like seeds sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop.

Some 30, some 60, some 100 times what was sown. See, for the disappointment of the first three responses, Jesus says sometimes the gospel lands in a heart that is ready and prepared and soft to receive it.

It's easy to think in the time that we live in that that doesn't ever happen, but Jesus says it will happen. And here's the great thing. We have seen it happen. It's happened in the time that we have been here, in the last year even.

It's happened for many of us here in this church family where the gospel has been shared and someone has said, tell me more. Read the Bible with me.

[23 : 55] Show me. We're faced with the choice and the cost of following Jesus. Someone said, yes, it has to be him. Where else should I go? He has the words of eternal life.

I will accept him. I'll trust in his death to cover my sins. I will follow him, whatever it costs me in this life, because he promises eternal satisfaction.

Perhaps you still need to do that today. But do we think, do we imagine that this field is bare and struggling and empty?

This field is fruitful. It is growing. It is producing fruits. Jesus said, the fields are ripe and ready for harvest.

Do we believe in? The right response is only one of four responses, isn't it? It's disappointing. It's confusing. But Jesus doesn't say what proportion of the seed will fall on what kind of soil.

[24 : 56] It's not a one in four chance. It could be higher. It could be lower. The promise is that it will be some. Do we believe in? Do we believe that some of the seed will fall on good soil?

Not all of our efforts will be lost. Some will result in lasting heart change in somebody's life. Doesn't that encourage you?

That is Jesus' promise. But how do we know where the good soil is? How do we know who the gospel will transform? Well, we don't.

So where does that leave us with an evangelistic strategy as we go from here into our week?

Where does that leave us? Well, here's the thing. Jesus did know, didn't he?

He did know where the good soil was. He did know whose heart would respond in faith to hearing the gospel. He looked at the bustling crowds that surrounded the lake, and he could see the heart of each person.

[26 : 02] So then did he go to them one by one and kind of secretly share the news of God's kingdom with those that he knew would respond in faith?

Well, no. Just look at verse 1. It says, The crowd gathered around him was so large he got into a boat and sat on it in the lake, while the people were along the shore at the water's edge. Picture that. He taught them many things by parables.

There's everyone. And he speaks to them. Or verse 9. How many people does he want to hear it? Whoever has ears, let them hear.

Whoever has ears? Who's the farmer in the story? It's Jesus, isn't it? The farmer broadcasts the word. Jesus broadcasts the gospel, doesn't he?

He didn't pick and choose. He shared the gospel with everyone, knowing that some would believe and be saved. So, knowing less than Jesus, then, about who will be saved.

[27 : 06] How can we pick and choose? Should we not share his strategy? Trust him. Share the gospel freely with everyone, indiscriminately.

But you say, well, isn't it God's work to draw people to him? But yes. But because it is God's work, that is why we should share the gospel so freely.

Because if God is in charge of the outcome, then his word can never fail. What Jesus says in the middle to his disciples tells us, even when the results are disappointing to us, they are still in God's hands.

Some will hear the word, and they will be hardened by it. Seeing, but never perceiving. Hearing, but never understanding. But to some, the mystery or the secret of God's kingdom is given, disclosed. We are not in charge of the outcome, but those verses tell us it's not chance. God is in control. That is a deep mystery to us.

[28 : 11] We can't probe the heart and the mind of God. Fair than that. But Jesus assures us that the results depend completely on him.

Which gives us all the more courage to take his word out. Because God's word will fulfill God's purposes in the lives of those who hear it.

We might be disappointed. But God is never disappointed. His word always succeeds in what he sends it for. Which means that his word will always give life to some.

To some, his word will be like snow and rain falling on the ground, watering the earth, and bringing forth new life. To some, his word will be good seed falling on good, rich, and clear soil that grows deep roots and grows great fruits.

Even a hundred times more what was put in. Which should give us courage and confidence, shouldn't it? To sow that seed. To take that good word of the gospel out and to plant it in the lives of everyone we know.

[29 : 24] Who we come into contact with as we have opportunity. So let me ask you, who are you sharing the good news of Jesus with?

Who in your life could you be speaking to about the gospel? Who could you ask to read a gospel with you perhaps over lunch? Or in the park?

Or in an evening? Or even simply praying, Lord, will you give me an opportunity this week to speak about your goodness to somebody else? You know, it's scary how often God responds in the affirmative to that prayer.

And he will give us opportunity. Because the world is God's field. And he has given us the seed of his gospel to spread widely.

And to watch him work as it falls on the hearts of those who hear it. So brothers and sisters, don't lose heart. Don't give up.

[30 : 25] Don't give in to disappointment. But let us go from here today ready to share the good news again. For Jesus' name. Let's pray for that together now.

Our Father, we thank you that you are the Lord of the harvest. We trust in your control. And we rest in your good purposes.

And Father, we pray by your spirit that you'd help us to take hold of your promises. Lord, your promise that your word will indeed never fail. Lord, we pray that you'd help us to share boldly and wisely and widely, Lord, what we've received and what we've heard.

Lord, Jesus alone does have the words of eternal life. And we pray, Lord, that you would go before us and prepare the hearts of those who we share with.

Lord, we thank you that you are able to turn a heart of stone into a heart of flesh. That you are able to turn a hard path heart into a soft heart of good soil.

[31 : 42] Lord, we pray, Lord, as you have done for us, we pray that you would do for others in our lives. That as we share the gospel, that it would bear great fruit for eternity.

This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.