**Why Some Fall Away**

Based on [Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23](https://biblia.com/books/esv/Mt13.1-9)

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Pastor Nathan Fuehrer

Today’s Gospel lesson is a parable about why it is that some who hear the word of God eventually fall away. It gives answer and therefore comfort to all of us who have known someone who once believed God’s Word, but doesn’t anymore. Jesus has told you that people who have faith can lose it, and if that didn’t happen, Jesus would be a liar. But it does happen, he has told us beforehand. If people didn’t fall away, God’s Word would be in error. But as it is you know people who once had faith, but do no longer. And Jesus explains why that is. It’s not because the seed was bad. After all, God’s Word never returns to Him void (Isaiah 55:11). It’s not because the sower was careless with the seed, in fact the sower sows liberally. The reason people fall away from the faith is on account of the three evil forces at work in the world: the devil, the world, and the sinful flesh. An unholy trinity, always working together in this fallen world to undermine God’s will for your life, which is to repent and believe the Gospel, and consecrate your life to Jesus Christ. And Satan snatches the seed from trodden soil, sin kills in rocky soil, and the world chokes in the briar patch.

First, the devil. Jesus says, “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path.” The reason you till soil in a garden before you sow is so that the soil is loose and can easily receive a good seed. A path is soil that has been well trod, packed down and the seed remains on the surface, easy to spot and for a bird to steal. Trodden soil

Trodden soil gives us an especially good image of liberal mainline protestant Christianity today. It is a Christianity that has become decadent and irrelevant, and made up primarily of members who had forgotten why their church exists. And so many of their church traditions, originally meant to till the soil so that the word of God may be received, instead become empty rites of passage, and a checklist sort of Christianity from which Satan has no problem thieving. Anyone who think that if they make sure they are baptized in the church, physically go to church every Sunday even, get confirmed in the church, married in the church, die in the church that that automatically (apart from the understanding of true faith) makes them believers is under a delusion. These things are a well trodden path, and when a word of God is sown in their heart it does not easily take purchase, because they have no understanding.

Let me be clear, this is not to say that Holy Baptism and the Lord ’s Supper are empty rituals. This is not to say that getting married in the church or having your funeral before a congregation of believers means nothing or does nothing. It does. Baptism washes away sins and gives the Holy Spirit, even to infants who can give no sign of understanding the mysteries of God. The Lord’s Supper is the true body and blood of Christ, which gives eternal life and forgiveness to those who eat and drink in faith. These things are visible seeds, the visible word of God applied in the way Christ instituted for his church. But apart from the understanding of faith they do not take purchase in the heart when sown. That is not the fault of the Sacrament or of the Holy Spirit who sows it in the person, the devil snatches it away without understanding.

The Roman Catholic church teaches that Baptism and the Lord’s Supper work without the understanding of faith; that a person may receive some degree of grace from God, “*ex opere operato,*”by the mere act itself…apart from personal faith. We must maintain, as Jesus does here, that (even though the sacraments can create faith where there is none and strengthen a weak faith)…apart from faith that is the word finding purchase in the heart, the sacraments avail no more than does a seed sown on tamped down dirt remains dormant. And it will remain dormant unless and until the Holy Spirit tills the soil by giving faith through the word.

Second Jesus says, “**As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away**.” Seeds do not sprout into living enduring plants if their roots cannot penetrate deep into the soil. A seed can germinate and sprout upon a rock with only a thin layer of dirt, but it won’t mature. And when harsh weather comes will not endure but die.

Rocky soil gives us a good image of any lowest-common denominator Christianity. “Reductionist” Christianity. In our Lutheran Church, we have always taught and recognized that Jesus Christ is the heart and center of the bible. Jesus said to the Jews, “**You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me” (John 5:39).**  Jesus is the heart and center of the bible. But a couple of generations ago, there was a movement in our Lutheran Church of mostly seminary professors, students and liberal pastors who began to teach that confessing Jesus is the *only* message of the bible. That if you confess Jesus is Lord, but don’t believe that Jonah was really swallowed by a big fish, or that Adam and Eve were real people who existed as the bible says, that is irrelevant to faith. This was called Gospel reductionism, and it treated God’s Word like a thin layer of dirt atop a dead rock, rather than thoroughly rich soil through and through.

There are many Lutherans today who have done the same thing with the Law of God. The bible surely teaches that for the sinner, the central purpose of God’s Law, His commandments, is to show us that we are sinners and have not kept it, and need a savior. However, there are pastors today who teach that this is the *only* purpose of the Law. That God’s Law does not give us fixed rules to instruct us how to lead holy lives. Such an omission robs believers from truckloads of good soil given in the scriptures to let our roots grow in holiness and sanctification before God and Men. Though no one can keep God’s Law perfectly, it does instruct us in righteousness.

As opposed to all forms of rootless reductionism, St. Paul writes in Acts 20:27, “**I am innocent of the blood of all, for I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God**.” It is true that all that is required for salvation is faith in Jesus Christ, apart from any keeping of the Law or believing in Jonah, Adam and Eve. And perhaps some will sprout faith in little soil with small roots who will be taken to glory before any severe tribulation and persecution arise to test them. But for those who will weather a whole life with Christ must grow deep roots, because of the persecution that Jesus guarantees for his disciples. And it is not within the power of human striving to overcome temptation, but in the power of the Spirit who comes to us in the Word of God. “**All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness,that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work**” (2 Tim 3:16-17). The Rocky Ground of our sinful flesh will not endure the whole counsel of God, but when it falls on Good Soil its roots will grow deep and its fruit will be abundant.

Finally Jesus teaches, “**As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful.”** This is the most obvious picture Jesus gives. A garden filled with weeds will not produce a good crop, but the weeds will choke the good seed, crowd it out, hog the water and nutrients from the soil, even steal the full sunlight.

The Briar patch a thicket of thorny weeds gives us a good image of neutral lukewarm Christianity, which is no Christianity at all. “**So, because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of my mouth**” (Rev 3:16). Jesus says if you are not for me you are against me (Matt. 12:30). When Jesus calls his disciples, the first instruction he gives them is to deny themselves before presuming to follow him (Matt. 16:24).

There is much in this life that a disciple can keep, money, house, possessions, children, job, etc…that god allows believers to have and to enjoy. But there may be a time that God will put these things at odds with your faith, and you have to be willing to surrender your worldly treasures for heavenly treasures. And that will be easier for those who have less to begin with, which is why Jesus warns about the love of money (Luke 16:13). Which is why Jesus says about the fall of Jerusalem and indeed the Last Days before he comes, “For behold, the days are coming when they will say, ‘Blessed are the barren and the wombs that never bore and the breasts that never nursed” (Luke 23:30). Blessed are those who do not have children, because of the destruction that will threaten them.

Jesus says, Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you (Matt. 6:33). And the way we seek heavenly treasures on earth is through the ministry of reconciliation--that is, rebuking sin and forgiving those who repent (Luke 17:3, Matt. 6:15, 18:35). When you are at odds with a brother in the faith Jesus says, “**Leave your gift at the altar and go, *first* be reconciled to your brother**” (Matt. 5:24). The world, however says “jobs, money, house, family, friends, society, peace, health, safety, all of these things are what we must give priority here and now, and leave reconciliation to God. If I tell my brother his fault he will hate me in the world; if I ask for forgiveness and admit I’m wrong, no one will trust me in the world. No earth is for earthly things, reconciliation is for heaven and I’ll look forward to it when I get there.” And in this way, the word is choked when it lands in a heart filled with weeds and briars.

This parable would have us take note of the environment wherein the seed of God’s Word is cast, but realize too that the Word of God produces nothing if it is not received by faith. And that faith is not the result of the works of man, but a free gift of the Spirit given where and when He wills. And when he wills, that faith in the free forgiveness of sins won by Christ will produce grain, good works some a hundred-fold, some sixty, some thirty; any quantity of which your heavenly Father will say to you “well done Good and faithful servant.”