

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

I have some riddles or jokes for you today:

- 1) How many auto mechanics does it take to change a light bulb? One, but he thinks he'll have to replace the whole socket.
- 2) How many government bureaucrats does it take to change a light bulb? Two: one to assure everyone that everything possible is being done, while the other screws the bulb into the water faucet.
- 3) How many psychotherapists does it take to change a light bulb? Only one, but they really need to desire the change.

Which leads into our parable today...So, let me ask you a real question: Is the Holy Gospel enough to change a life? According to Jesus, it depends. It depends on a particular life and how the gospel is received. Now let me ask a personal question: Do you really want to change?

Those of us who preach operate under the assumption that the answer to that question for most of us most of the time is yes—that I desire to see growth and change in my life; I want to always be better and more like Christ. So maybe what I need from God's Word today is some new information, an insight, or some encouragement. But this parable gives me pause, so I need to ask: Do you really want the Word of God to change you? To keep on changing you? Do we really want the gospel to make a significant, lasting, noticeable difference in our lives?

Today we'll examine some factors that thwart lasting change in our lives. In this story Jesus told, I have always read it in the context of spiritual rebirth, and rightly so. But in meditating on this parable, I came to wonder why its principles wouldn't apply beyond just the point of salvation. Isn't it true from the first type of soil that the biggest reason people don't experience change in their lives is this: Sometimes, change isn't wanted (Luke 8:11-12) Crops won't grow in compacted soil. It lacks air, moisture, and other nutrients that crops need to take root. The seed on the path never has a chance, since Satan comes along and picks up whatever hasn't already been trampled.

At first glance some don't experience change because the instrument of change is snatched away by the devil or another force acting on his behalf. But the devil is actually only the secondary problem. The primary problem is the type of soil the seed lands on: It's compacted, hard, impenetrable. It is unable to receive the change agent, which is the seed. What's the seed? Jesus says it's the word of God. (In Matthew it's "the message of the kingdom.") Which means by implication that "the sower" is Jesus, coming with a word from God as the Living Word of God.

But who farms like that? Ancient farmers farmed like that, via broadcast sowing—scattering seeds in all directions by hand as they walked the stony paths that divided their fields. And Jesus the sower farms like that, spreading His word widely among all kinds of people because He is merciful and gracious and wants everyone to be saved and bear fruit. But to receive the Word requires us to have attention of mind and intention of will. If any couple goes to marriage therapy but one or both don't want to stay married—no matter how skilled or dedicated the therapist, if the couple doesn't want to work on the relationship, there won't be any change.

A few years ago, there was a cell phone ringtone that high school kids used to keep teachers from discovering that they were using their cell phones in school. The pitch of this ringtone, called the "mosquito tone," is too high for people over 25 to hear. So, the kids would send and receive text messages during class without the teacher hearing them.

How does the mosquito tone go undetected by adults older than 25? Inside our ears we have tiny, microscopic hairs that move with the impulses of incoming sound waves, and those hair movements send electrical signals to our brain. As we age, those hairs get worn down, and are damaged, so our hearing becomes less sensitive. We first lose the ability to detect the sounds of high frequencies. People over 25 can't hear sounds above 16 kilohertz. (The highest note on a piano is 4 Khz; the mosquito tone is 17 Khz.) There's a parallel here to help us understand the common difficulty of detecting communication from God. The Bible says the reality of God can be perceived in the wonders of creation, and all people—including nonbelievers—can detect this information.

But if they fail to respond, they gradually lose the ability to sense God altogether ... they lose their “spiritual ear hairs” so to speak. The same principle holds true even for Christians. Just as unbelievers can lose their ability to perceive God in the macro-messages of nature if they don't respond appropriately to what they detect, we can lose our sensitivity to God if we don't respond appropriately to His promptings. “Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”

So, I encourage you to take a personal "soil sample," and ask yourself: Do I really value spiritual growth? Even if it's uncomfortable? Am I willing to change or do I expect others around me to change instead? Have I accepted what God is telling me to do? The first factor that thwarts life change is that sometimes change isn't wanted. But sometimes change is wanted, but there's another problem: Sometimes, change isn't deep (Luke 8:13)

Crops can start in rocky soil but don't last in it, because it impedes root growth. Rocky soil in Palestine is easy to find, since in the hill country most of the topsoil is set thinly over a limestone rock base. The seed in the shallow soil starts well, as the seed is allowed to germinate. Yet there is no deep root, and when pressures come, what looked like growth proves superficial and temporary. Some may never see change because the instrument of change does not penetrate into the deep parts of their hearts and only touches superficial aspects of their need. The illusion of change occurs rapidly, but it fades when the pressure is back on. The goal goes unmet; the bad habit returns; we lose heart.

How many of you have a Fitbit, Apple Watch or Samsung Gear? The colorful, wristwatch-like smart fitness trackers that count your steps, give you stats on your sleeping habits, and more. Sounds like a great way to get healthier and maybe lose weight in the process, right? Well, maybe not. A 2016 study claims that the wearers of these popular pieces of wristwear lost less weight than people who didn't wear them. And, even more surprising, it turns out the problem might be the wearers themselves. The lead author of the study put it this way: "These technologies are focused on physical activity, like taking steps and getting your heart rate up. But then the wearers of these devices would say, 'Oh, I exercised a lot today, now I can eat more.' And they might eat more than they otherwise would have." As a result, the researcher concluded, "It doesn't look like assigning someone wearable technology will make that big of a difference." "Ultimately these devices are most effective when the people using them are already dedicated to tracking their fitness. People who are less motivated might not get the same results." Just "wearing" spiritual practices (like participating in worship, listening to a sermon, or reading Scripture, etc.) won't make us more spiritually fit. It also requires our heart motivation and inner attitude.

If you aren't seeing the change you'd hoped to see, take a soil sample, and ask: How am I trying to change? Am I just changing my behavior or is there spiritual work to be done? How do I respond under pressure? Am I persevering? Am I putting down deep roots? Am I obeying God's word with the help of God's Holy Spirit? There's a third factor that thwarts life change, and in some ways it's the most tragic: Sometimes, change isn't cultivated (Luke 8:14)

Crops can be overtaken in poor soil by undesirable species of plants. The seed must fight the thorns for nutrients, and the thorns choke them. Jesus here pictures life's worries, riches, and pleasures. I think of thorns as worries & hardships, but Jesus says wealth & comfort can choke our growth as well. This is a life that hasn't prioritized spiritual growth in Christ and as a result hasn't cultivated spiritual growth in Christ. Some may never see change because they become entangled in other areas and concerns that divert much needed energy away from change. Too much comfort is dangerous. Literally! Researchers at the University of California at Berkeley did an experiment some time ago that involved introducing an amoeba into a perfectly stress-free environment: ideal temperature, optimal concentration of moisture, constant food supply. The amoeba had an environment to which it had to make no adjustment whatsoever. So, you would guess this was one happy little amoeba. Yet, oddly enough, it died. Apparently, there is something about all living creatures, even amoebas, that demands challenge. We require change, adaptation, and challenge the way we require food and air. Comfort alone will kill us.

Again, take a soil sample: What good things have the potential to choke your growth in Christ? What worries about bad things could choke your growth? What do you need to do to free your life from these? How are you cultivating God's word in your life? Jesus illustrates the kinds of faiths that fail. But there is a kind of faith that doesn't. Sometimes, change is real, lasting, and fruitful (Luke 8:15) The most unusual feature of the story is the extraordinary crop produced by the seed that fell on good soil. A tenfold to twentyfold yield was often considered

“Soil Samples” Luke 8:4-15 Sexagesima 2025

superior--a hundredfold would have been astonishing. The climax of Jesus' story is this incredible impact of those who are faithful.

The first three kinds of soil are all inadequate. None of them stands for people who were ever true believers, despite outward appearances. For farmers, only plants that produce a crop count for anything. True believers are thus only those who bear proper spiritual fruit. Of the rest, Jesus says, “I never knew you.” What counts is not profession of faith, but perseverance in faith. To be sure, all true Christians will persevere, but only by observing who perseveres can we determine who those true Christians are.

Jesus' climactic focus, however, remains on the astonishing impact of those who are faithful. Jesus provides his followers with an important reminder of God's continued blessings on our work. Some will see change in their lives: dramatic change, lasting change, fruitful change.

There are no perfect Christians; there aren't any sinless disciples. There's no one whose heart is always pure or anyone who produces good fruit every moment. But people who have noble hearts are honest about how sometimes their hearts get tangled, superficial, or maybe even cold. They know they need God's grace to keep their hearts open to Jesus and his Word. They regularly go to the Lord for a heart realignment and rely on his grace to help them live out what he says. So be encouraged—seed can germinate after being in storage for centuries. It's not too late! “Lord, let me make a difference for you that is utterly disproportionate to who I am.”

So how does it happen? Real change comes from responding to Christ with acceptance, obedience and perseverance. That's the point of this parable. A fruitful faith is a product of process. It's not overnight; agriculture takes time. Change is a process. I hope you're encouraged by that. We haven't yet arrived; we're here to become the people God has created and called us to be.

Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear. Amen.