

The Anatomy of Apostasy (2)

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[0 : 0 0] The Anatomy of Apostasy Number Two. Apostasy is a fairly scary word. It involves a denial and renunciation of all that once you believed to be true.

It comes from a compound Greek word apostasis, from equilibrium. Apostates, in our minds, of course, belong to the Middle Ages and to the Spanish Inquisition.

But whenever a Christian denies and renounces his or her faith in Jesus Christ, by definition, he or she is guilty of apostasy. Nowadays, we don't call it apostasy, you understand, but most of us are painfully familiar with those who once called themselves Christians but have now turned their backs on the faith.

Apostasy, or turning away from one's faith in Jesus, isn't a new thing. Judas Iscariot, one of Jesus' disciples, was in many ways the first apostate.

His apostasy led to the crucifixion of our Lord. But there are other examples. So, for example, in 2 Timothy 4 verse 10, we're told that Demas, one of the Apostle Paul's disciples, deserted him.

[1 : 1 9] The history of the early church is filled with those who, under the threat of persecution, renounced their faith in Jesus. There's nothing new about those who once called themselves Christians, renouncing their faith.

It is just as common now as it was in the early church. In Jesus' parable of the sword and the seed, he goes even further. Not only is apostasy common in the church, it is to be expected in the church.

Out of the four types of soil, one is infertile, one produces a harvest, but two show initial promise only to prove themselves incapable of providing growth.

It's a very painful parable, but it's true to life. We can expect apostasy in the church. We've all shed tears over friends who once called themselves Christians and showed much promise, but have since turned away.

It's a painful apostasy, but it is to be expected. It's common to every church. One week a month for these first four months of the year, I'm taking us on a dive into the anatomy of apostasy.

[2 : 3 9] This time last month, we considered Joshua 24, verse 15, with the call to choose this day who you will serve. This week, we want to learn what to expect from Jesus' parable of the sword and the seed here in Luke chapter 8.

Now, my aim is not to depress anyone, but to inspire us to a deeper self-examination, fruitfulness, faithfulness, and watchfulness, and to a level of devotion to the Lord that we have not had before.

So, in our passage here in Luke 8, we have four things we are to expect. Response, growth, problems, and a harvest.

First, we are to expect a response. A response. Jesus is the sower, and the gospel is the seed. Whenever the gospel is proclaimed, Jesus is sowing seed.

It may be from the pulpit through a preacher like me, or it may be through our conversations with a non-Christian friend. Whatever the setting, and through whomever Jesus is speaking, he is sowing the seed of the gospel.

[3 : 56] The parable of the sower and the seed really should be called the parable of the soils, because it's the different kinds of soils into which the seed is sown which is the deciding factor in fertility.

In every type of soil on which the seed is sown, there is a response. In every type of soil. It is the same seed which is sown.

The four types of soil hear the same gospel. The way people respond isn't because the gospel they heard is different from the gospel others hear. We may have very gifted preachers, but the responses our gifted preachers will receive will be the same as those among us who are not quite as gifted as they.

The response has to do with the soil, and there will always be a response. For some, the seed falls on hard ground.

Their hearts are hardened to the gospel. They might be listening with their ears, but they're not listening with their minds and hearts. They're not affected by what they hear. The devil comes away and plucks the word from their hearts.

[5 : 09] Yet, even though there does not seem to be a response, there is. The response is negative, entirely negative. The heart which was already hard to the gospel becomes even harder.

It's a vicious cycle of negative response. So, the word is preached. The hearer isn't listening because of his hard heart. His heart becomes even harder.

So, the next time the word is preached, the hearer listens even less until finally he is altogether deaf to the word and his heart has turned into a spiritual stone.

He has been immunized by the gospel so that he cannot and will not respond. It is a response, but just not the response we pray and long for.

However, how many over the years have we known who have had this type of hard soil in their hearts, whereby even though the gospel is preached with clarity and power, they will not and they cannot respond in faith.

[6 : 21] They can't tell you why they're not listening. This kind of person cannot turn away from Christ because they never turned toward him in the first place. There may be some among us who are like this today.

I was. Until I was 15. And Christ opened my heart to hear him and respond to him in faith. And that is the key to how the person with a hard heart can respond in faith.

It is the doing of the risen Christ. As God's people pray for the Spirit of Christ to work in the hearts of the spiritually hard, God listens and answers in power.

That's why we have such a priority set on our prayer meetings in this church. Even so, even so, the person with a hardened heart to the gospel is still accountable for their spiritual hardness.

For every time the gospel is preached, God invites them to come to Christ. God offers them life in Him. Their rejection of God is theirs and theirs alone.

[7 : 32] They are accountable. The point is, there will always be a response to the gospel when it's preached, even if that response is negative. What is our response to the good news of Jesus preached here today?

Are we listening? Not just with our ears, but with our minds and our hearts. Are we praying that God would give us spiritual ears to hear and softened hearts to respond?

Every time the gospel is preached, there will be a response, either for good or for ill. What will it be for you today?

Second, we cannot merely expect growth. We can also expect a response. We cannot merely expect a response.

We can expect growth. Growth. Of the four types of soil, three show promise. There is germination of the seed. There is growth. We can expect this.

[8 : 37] That as the gospel is preached, there will be many who show promise. They may testify to a conversion experience. They may tell others they have become Christians. They may become members of the church, even.

There will be growth among those who receive the gospel positively. For some, the growth will be swift and dramatic. For others, the growth will be slower and almost unnoticeable.

Before he became a Christian, our friend in Nepal, Sudash Kasula, was a violent young man. He was a gang member, always in trouble with the police, as the scars on his forehead tell.

Well, one night, a Christian evangelist was sent to preach in his hometown, and Sudash went along with the intention of beating up this Christian evangelist. But on that night, as he was listening from outside the tent, Sudash met with Jesus and was savingly converted.

He is now one of the gentlest men I know. The growth was swift and dramatic. Before I became a Christian, I wasn't a bad person.

[9 : 51] I was never in trouble with the law, and went to church twice every Sunday. I had memorized a shorter catechism and passed all the scripture exams, my name on the back of the instructor, every month.

But one Sunday afternoon, having been invited to an older Christian's house for lunch, through what that older Christian said, I realized I was a Pharisee who thought that I could earn my salvation by my religious attendance at church, rather than a sinner lost because of my rebellious nature.

I took the step of faith that day, and I committed my life to Jesus. The change in me was not dramatic.

I'd like to think that I'm now a better person and a nicer guy than I was then, but some people disagree. For still others, they can't point to a conversion experience.

They were brought up as Christians, and they've always loved Jesus. And, you know, this is the ideal, really. So, to talk of a change in their lives doesn't really compute.

[11 : 01] They've been growing as Christians since the day they were born. That doesn't mean they don't have to consciously decide to follow Jesus for themselves, but it does mean that we'll not notice any swift, dramatic growth.

But growth there is, nonetheless. So, the seed that falls on rocky soil receives the word with joy. This is every preacher's dream.

When the gospel he receives, when the gospel he preaches is received with joy, there may be tears of joy. There may be an obvious relief and an initial zeal. The seed that Sonam and Thorns produces initial results, it shows promise.

The seed germinates and sends its shoots upwards. It's an altogether quieter thing, but growth there is, nonetheless.

The seed sown in good soil seems to show little initial growth, but give it time, and a harvest is forthcoming.

[12 : 03] We can expect growth when the seed is sown on these three types of soil. Perhaps the message for us is this.

We must not assume that just because a person shows initial signs of growth, that they are truly, savingly converted.

For a while they may show great interest in the gospel, but over time that interest will wane and finally disappear, regrettably showing that they weren't really Christians at all.

Our hopes for them were raised only to be dashed. Their external growth was deceptive. It hid a heart which hasn't been changed by the grace of Christ.

It's painful, very painful. But as we'll see in our last point, only time will tell the genuineness of one's faith in Jesus.

[13 : 15] We can expect growth. Third, we can expect problems. Problems. The preacher who says that if you become a Christian, your life will become like a bed of roses, and God will solve all your problems, is lying.

Often life gets harder when you become a follower of Jesus. You don't believe me? Read Psalm 73. The Christian life is a rollercoaster of highs and lows. There will be problems.

The average non-Christian's life is filled with problems, and as Christians, we're no different. In our passage, we're told about the seed that's sown on rocky soil, that it receives the message with joy, grows quickly, but then in times of testing, it falls away.

Now, the testing here, spoken of in verse 13, isn't so much troubles as temptations. Not troubles, but temptations.

The temptations arise because of the troubles of life, but temptations they are nonetheless. In time of temptation, this person falls away.

[14 : 30] Their faith withers. Other Christians face similar troubles, but they do not fall to the temptations such troubles present.

But for this person, the temptation proves more powerful than their faith in Christ. Now, recognizing that all these examples are close to the bone, and that even though I've got no particular person in mind when I use them, we will all know someone who fits into one of these categories, let me suggest one such.

A single Christian feels desperately lonely. He longs for female companionship, but there are no eligible Christian females in the church.

The trouble is his circumstance. He feels lonely because he's single. But then along comes the temptation.

There's a non-Christian girl at his work, until their personalities just seem to chime with each other. They hit it off. He reasons to himself, well, there's no harm in pursuing this friendship.

[15 : 46] Before long, they're an item. They're dating. He is besotted with her, and she is besotted with him. But she's got no interest in his faith.

As time goes on, he becomes more passionate about her than he does about Jesus. Never mind the impropriety of the physical relationship, his faith begins to falter.

He no longer prays or reads his Bible like he used to because he knows that he's not living in a God-honoring way. He knows that he should marry in the Lord, marry another Christian.

But he loves this girl, and she offers some love and companionship. Before long, he makes his choice. He cuts his connection with the church.

He's fallen away, not because he was in a lonely situation, but because he succumbed to the temptation. Now, we've all known people like that or people in a similar situation.

[16 : 50] So, we're then told about the seed sown in thorny ground, verse 14. Having sprung up, as they go on their way, they are choked in their faith, and whatever fruit they may have shown doesn't mature.

What chokes them are the cares and riches and pleasures of life. Life gets in the way of God rather than doing life with God.

These cares, these riches, these pleasures, they're weeds which choke any spiritual interest and their previous zeal for the gospel. Now, every Christian has cares in life.

Every Christian has to deal with riches, or in my case, a lack thereof. And every Christian has to cope with pleasures. But for this person, they prove too much.

Let me give you two examples of this again, and close to the bone. I have no one in mind, but we will all have someone like this, and I sympathize deeply with them. First, there's a young Christian studying in university.

[17 : 59] She goes to church. She is deeply involved in Christian union in university. When she graduates, she gets a cracking job, and her career kickstarts. It's a satisfying career.

She is greatly fulfilled, and it pays her very well. But it costs her more than she can pay. She is so involved with her career that she begins to neglect the church and her faith.

She begins to measure her worth and status, not in relation to her faith in the Lord Jesus, but in relation to how high up in the organization she is rising.

Over time, her attendance at and involvement in church wanes. Finally, she makes the choice to cut the connection altogether. The cares and wealth and pleasures of this world have choked her.

She didn't see it coming. Others saw it coming and may have warned her, but she's fallen away. Second example, a young couple are blessed with children.

[19 : 06] These children become the apple of their parents' eye. Our children are the apple of our eye, are they not? They become the center of family life as the children grow and go to school.

They get involved in sports clubs as all children do and shoot. They show aptitude in a particular sport, be it football or hockey or rugby or something else.

Eventually, they get into the best team in their school or in their area, which requires them to play on a Sunday. Rather than take a stand, the Christian parents bend to what they think their children want and start taking them to their sport on a Sunday.

After all, what child wants to be different, right? Church is sacrificed on the altar of children's sport. The faith of the parents is choked by their expectation from their child to play for Scotland one day.

The tail wags the dog and the children get to tell their parents what to do. As time goes on, the faith of the parents wanes until finally they make their choice.

[20 : 24] They cut their connection with the church and with their faith. Others may have warned them but they didn't see it coming. What's the harm in sport anyway?

But they've fallen away. Every Christian family is faced by the same dilemma. We were faced by the same dilemma with our parents. But this family dealt with it the wrong way.

The point is that every Christian is subject to the problems of this life, its temptations, cares, and pleasures, and wealth. But it's precisely in these problems the genuineness of a person's faith is tested and proved genuine.

Just as no one was ever forced to become a Christian, so no one is ever forced to stop being a Christian. It may be a process but it always begins somewhere.

This is the anatomy of apostasy and it's painfully relevant in our setting and context. Last, we can expect a response, we can expect growth, we can expect problems, we can expect a harvest, a harvest, a harvest.

[21 : 39] Whenever the gospel is preached as it is today, there will be those who reject it straight off, there will be those who's falling away as a long time coming, but there will be others who produce a harvest.

Their heart is good soil to receive the seed and over time it produces a remarkable harvest. The harvest is measured in terms of spiritual fruit, the fruit of Christ-likeness and faith.

Before we go deeper into this, I want you to notice that by definition this harvest is only harvested at harvest time. This harvest is only harvested at harvest time. I take that harvest time as meaning not during harvest.

our lives, for even older people like Solomon can fall away from the faith. I take the harvest time as meaning judgment day. To give each of us hope, falling away is not final.

A Christian may spend many, many years having fallen away from the Lord, but may return before the end of their lives. just because they're playing the prodigal son and living in a far-off country at the moment doesn't mean that they will not come to their senses and turn back to their heavenly Father.

[22 : 58] Turning away is often temporary. If they were true Christians, they will return. God will lose none of the sheep for which His Son gave His life on the cross.

there will be no wasted blood. So, we make it our prayer for our family and our friends who are temporarily away from the Lord in a far-off country that He would bring them back to Himself.

This image of a harvest, it takes a longer-term view of things. It's about a lifetime's patient discipleship.

A lifetime's patient discipleship. Just the same as everybody else, this person hears the Word of the Gospel, but it all begins with how they hear the Word of the Gospel. They listen with an honest and good heart, verse 15, perhaps more literally, a good and pure heart, *katharos, kikalos*.

There are no hidden agendas behind why they respond positively to the Gospel. They're not being carried along with the flow or simply want to belong to a group. They hear the Gospel and the Holy Spirit drives it deep into their hearts.

[24 : 12] They know they need forgiveness for their sin. They know they need hope for the future and they know they need God's love fill in their hearts and they know they can only find it in Jesus and the Gospel of His cross.

But then you'll notice there in verse 15, they hold it fast. They hold that message fast. They hold it tight in their minds and hearts. They go through the same problems as every other Christian, but they grip tight to the Gospel.

If we're climbing a mountain, we grip tight to the rope and the ledges on which our hands find a hold. We hold our loved ones tight into our hearts and no matter how many things get in the way of our relationship with them, we will not let our loved ones go.

We hold them fast that our whole life's through. What's important for us to notice here, you can't see it in English, but you can see it in the original language, is the tense Jesus uses.

It's a present tense. It's a continuous action which lasts the whole of life through. They continue to hold it fast.

[25 : 22] They continue to hold it fast. Their Christian faith is not a matter of a one-off decision to follow Jesus. It's a lifelong determination to hold fast to Him.

No parable is designed to say everything that can be said, and without a doubt, there are many times in a genuine Christian's life when their grip on Jesus grows guy faint. But the general pattern is that of holding tight to the gospel.

That from the first moment we believed to the end of our natural lives, we embed the good news of Jesus into our hearts, and we will not, by God's grace, let it go.

They bear fruit, furthermore, with patience. The fruit is that of becoming more like Jesus in His love and His grace and His peace.

But the operative word at the end of verse 15, patience, endurance, perseverance, they keep going to the end. They don't look back on past fruit and rest on their laurels.

[26 : 33] They don't promise future fruit not achieve them, but day by day, week by week, month by month, year by year, decade by decade, they keep producing fruit.

Sometimes, because of the troubles of this life, they keep going through gritted teeth, but keep going, they do. Sometimes, they're clinging on to Christ by their fingertips, but they're still holding on.

As I said, no parable is designed to tell every truth that can be told. This parable does not establish the doctrine of God's gracious, persevering work in our lives, nor does it refer to a one-off decision to follow Christ for ourselves, nor even the doctrine of assurance.

But it does tell us that ultimately, ultimately, following Jesus is a lifetime's patient discipleship. following Jesus is a lifetime's patient discipleship.

The only way we know that we are not apostates, or that our friends and family who once professed to be Christians, but have for the moment fallen away, are not apostates, is that ultimately, we are pursuing lifelong discipleship and the patient bearing of the fruit of the Spirit.

[27 : 58] man in this conlegation, I'm not going to tell you who it is, some of you will know, was a believer for decades, very faithful believer, beautiful, mature Christian.

And on his deathbed, suffering with problems with his mind that meant he couldn't really think straight, or he wasn't erudite in what he said the way he used to be, the last words I ever heard him say, Jesus, you know I love you.

Jesus, you know I love you. Now that's a life of patient discipleship in Jesus. The anatomy of apostasy isn't a cold examination of the spiritual disasters of others.

The anatomy of apostasy is a challenge to each of us here today, myself included, more than any other. The aim of all of us must be this, to keep going right to the end.

keep going right to the end, to sweat blood and shed tears, but to grow in Christ and to grow into Christ-likeness.

[29 : 11] By way of challenge, I close with the words of Jesus in another place. when the Son of Man returns, the Son of Man returns, Thank you.