

# Jesus' True Disciples

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Date: 28 January 2018

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[ 0 : 00 ] Father, give us eyes to see and ears to hear your word tonight. We pray that your word would transform our lives for the glory of your son, Jesus, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Looking back, 2017, last year was a really significant year for me. It was a big year of achievement, actually, because that's right. I finally cracked 1,000 Facebook friends.

I cracked the grand. No need for a round of applause, that's okay. Now, I'm not as popular as a Mr. Josh Tay Han Wen with 2,182 friends as of 4 p.m. today.

But I'm coming for you. Sure, I'm no Josh Tay Han Wen, but when I got that 1,000th friend, I thought, I've made it. I must be a really nice guy to have 1,000 friends.

Oh, Lord, who am I? Who am I that you would choose this servant to have over 1,000 Facebook friends? I was happy for a few minutes, but then I thought, how many of these people would I consider true friends?

[ 1 : 13 ] How many of these 1,000 people really love me? How many of them really care for me? How many would I trust to have my back through the hardest times of my life?

5%? Less? I soon realized that a Facebook crowd is a terrible marker of true friendship. Some of these people I haven't spoken to in years.

We don't care about each other at all. Some of them accidentally pressed the wrong button on their phones out of me by accident. But I took the friend. I accepted. So how on earth do you tell?

How do I decide who I would consider a true friend and who is not? One test I've heard is called the moving test. The moving test is where you're moving house and you need some help moving furniture, moving clothing, bulky items to your new place.

Who shows up to help? Oh, I'd love to, but I just remembered I have something on that day. I'm sorry I can't be there. Oh, I'd love to help, but oh, my back's no good.

[ 2 : 16 ] I just can't be there. I'm sorry. You might get all the excuses in the world. You may notice that people that you thought would come through for you just don't. Jesus too has a friendship test, but it's not moving day.

It's a parable. See, even more important than working out who your true friends are is to work out whether you are truly Jesus follower, whether you are truly a Christian, because it's exactly the same for Jesus.

Surface level popularity is never the mark of a true believer, of a true follower of Christ. So tonight we're going to explore what are the marks of a true Christian?

How can you really tell between a fake and a genuine? Because this parable shows us that we shouldn't simply presume that we are. That's me. That's including me.

Up to this point in the story, Jesus has been doing some incredible things. He's healed people from leprosy. He's healed people from demons. He's raised the dead. He's forgiven sins.

[ 3 : 23 ] And by showing you all of these miracles, Luke is building a case for the identity of Jesus so that you would have certainty. But not only that, Jesus is preaching about this plainly.

He goes to synagogues. He goes in front of Jewish leaders and teachers because he wants to show the world that he is not simply a healer, but he is God. In verse 1 of our passage, Jesus goes from village to village proclaiming the gospel, this good news that the Savior has finally arrived.

And as he does these things, his fame grows rapidly. But what I want you to notice here is that even though Jesus is incredibly popular with the crowds, he only really has a few true followers.

Verse 2 says that those who were with him were basically only his 12 disciples, a few women and many others who generously funded his ministry and put their money on the line for him.

You see, even though thousands of people came to see Jesus day after day, Luke only records a few people by name that truly stick with him.

[ 4 : 36 ] And even then, some of them go to disown him and betray him. Jesus has a lot of casual observers, but very few true disciples.

And that's what we need to get in our head before we look at this parable. Now, in this parable of Luke 8, it marks a major turning point in Jesus' ministry. Because up to this point, Jesus has spoken very plainly about the gospel.

But today would be different. As usual, a huge crowd is gathering around Jesus in verse 4. But this time, instead of speaking in plain, instead of speaking in simple terms, Jesus goes completely cryptic.

Imagine that you are hearing this parable for the first time at verse 4. While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable.

A farmer went out to sow his seed. And as he was scattering the seed, some fell among the path. It was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground.

[ 5 : 42 ] And when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil.

It came up and yielded a crop a hundred times more than was sown. As he said these things, he called out, he who has ears, let him hear. It's hard for us to imagine what it would have been like because we already know the ending.

We've already come across this parable before, so we can connect the dots. We know what's going on. But for the crowds that day, they hear this story called for the first time. They have no idea that this is an illustration.

They don't know that the sower, the seed, the soil represents things. They're probably thinking to themselves, what a stupid farmer. How could he just throw seed around? You place it properly.

I, on the other hand, I would have been taking notes because I'm a gardener. Just last week, I was in the garden and I saw this plant that was about to die. And I felt compassion on that plant.

[ 6 : 48 ] So I watered that plant every day. I nurtured it. I cared for it. And I eventually nursed this dying plant back to health. And when my mom came home from a holiday, I was so excited to show her this dying plant, which had resurrected.

And I showed it to her. And then she said to me, you realize that you've just resurrected a weed that I wanted to get rid of for months. So I need some tips about gardening because I can't recognize the difference between a curry plant and a weed.

See, Jesus' parable is not helpful at all unless you understand what's going on, unless you have ears to hear, is what Jesus would say. There probably would have been 20 different interpretations because that's what parables do.

Parables divide a crowd that doesn't understand and that do. Parables divide. So why on earth would Jesus do this? Why not just give it to them plain? It's because it has come time in Jesus' ministry now to divide the true followers from the pretenders.

Verse 9. And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that seeing they may not see and hearing they may not understand.

[ 8 : 14 ] It should shock you. Traditionally, we think of parables as cute little stories. We think of parables as earthly, as things that illustrate something nice.

You know, some say that these parables are earthly stories with a heavenly meaning. Kind of makes you feel a bit warm and fuzzy. But that's only half the story. Because Jesus uses parables not to reveal truth, but to conceal truth.

He's not trying to help the crowd understand here. He's trying to confuse their understanding.

Notice that even the disciples have no idea what Jesus is saying at first.

Because the parables expose people for who they are. The true followers, they pursue Jesus. They ask him what it meant. But the rest of the crowd, they just walk away confused.

In verse 10, Jesus is quoting from Isaiah chapter 6 that we read earlier. And this book of Isaiah in the Old Testament is a message of judgment on Israel, God's people.

[ 9 : 22 ] Because Israel had forsaken the Lord. They've gone on to serve other gods instead.

They've oppressed the vulnerable. So God sends this prophet Isaiah to bring a message of judgment and exile onto the nation.

And remarkably, Jesus is doing something very similar. Just as the Israelites had turned their backs on God, so now many of the crowd were turning their backs on Jesus.

Because the crowd comprised all sorts of different people. In the crowds were the Pharisees who try and trap him, who accuse Jesus of being a demon. Some of the crowd simply think that Jesus is a healer.

They don't want anything more than that. They are not interested in Jesus' real mission. Because Jesus is never about debates. Jesus was never about just healing.

Everything Jesus did was to point to the gospel. He is teaching, he is healing in such a way that he would declare to the world plainly that salvation had come.

[10:27] That forgiveness was being offered freely. But many of the crowd don't care at all. So Jesus is saying this.

He's saying, no longer will I keep preaching openly to a people that are going to accuse me of a demon. They're going to scoff at me. They're going to write me off as a fool. No longer will I throw my pearls before swine.

So Jesus speaks in a parable to confuse, to frustrate the hearers who are unwilling to submit to his word. Jesus never wanted to be popular.

It was never about big crowds. It was always about true followers who would sit humbly at his word. That's the purpose of parables. They expose people who are real and those who are fake.

So what does the parable mean? In verse 11, Jesus explains that the seed is the word of God. The seed is, yeah, sorry.

[11:30] The seed is the, yeah, the word of God. This gospel that Jesus has been preaching on from the very beginning. His identity as the Lord, his mission as the Savior. But what I want you to notice here is that the focus is not on the sower.

The focus is not on the seed. It's on the soil. And as you look at the soils, do you see what all these soils have in common? All the soils, they all hear the word.

See, this parable is all about hearing. It's not about preaching. It's about hearing and responding to Jesus' words. That's what distinguishes true followers from fake ones.

How you hear. All right, so on your sheets, you're going to find a table. Those handouts. And I want you to get into groups of about three or four people.

And I want you to think a little bit more about what this parable means. And I want you guys to discuss it for yourselves. And this is what you'll be asking. You'll be asking what characterizes each soil. What does each soil represent?

[12:29] And what are some examples you can see in your own life or maybe in what you've observed? So I'll give you guys about 10 minutes to go through it. So go for it now. Hopefully you guys found that time of discussion helpful.

So let's just run through it together briefly. So look on with me at our verse 12. The ones along the path are those who have heard. Then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts so that they may not believe and be saved.

Do you ever wonder why some people just don't care? You're so excited to share the gospel with them. You want to share how your life has been changed by God. You want to show them how the gospel has sustained you through the hardest times of your life.

And their response is, that's nice. Good for you. Good for you. Absolutely no interest at all. It's because the word is immediately taken away from their hearts.

The problem isn't necessarily the preaching. The problem is that their heart is hard. It is the heart so shut off from God that you never had a chance in the first place.

[13:41] Or maybe these are people who come to church. They're at church, but they have no interest in being there. Are we running over time today? Why is the guy at the front taking so long?

Doesn't he realize that it's 39 degrees outside? You see, they hear Jesus, but they make no effort to engage and they walk away.

The next type of soil is verse 13. Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root.

They believe for a while, but in the time of testing, they fall away. These are people who start well, but they don't seem to last.

Because in one sense, believing in Jesus is really easy. Want to go to heaven? Yes. Want forgiveness? Yes.

[14:38] No sex before marriage? Hmm. Hmm. Interesting. Get ridiculed for this faith that you will profess? Ugh. No.

No. That's why you see a lot of people start promisingly. You see enthusiasm. You see passion. You see euphoria. But it doesn't last. When things get difficult, I'm out. Maybe these are people who want to just take the nice things from the Bible, but they refuse to obey the things that are hard. The soil on rocky ground, it has no roots. After hearing Jesus, they follow for a while, but ultimately they fall away when trial comes, when temptation comes. Followers who don't last aren't real followers. But it's not just the hard things that cause people to fall away. It can also be the good things in life. The third type of soil is the one among the thorns, in verse 14. [15:37] The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way, they are choked by life's worries, riches, and pleasures, and they do not mature.

I'm sure a lot of you can relate. When you're at uni, it's easy to be a Christian. Lots of time, not much responsibility. And then you start full-time work.

No time, no energy, more money. And then some of you get married, and you'll be even more squeezed. Then it might happen again if you have kids, so on and so forth.

Suddenly, all these different things are pulling at your affections. And often what you see is that when these good things happen to people, these are good things, great jobs, families, holidays, relationships, you see that they start to fall away from God's Word.

They fall away from church community. They fall away from the Lord altogether. It's a subtle drift. It's a slow drift. But eventually, there's nothing left.

[16:40] You know, a lot of us have this attitude, this attitude of, once I'm done with this season of my life, then I'll really be able to devote some time to God. But that's not how it works.

Because the problem isn't time. The problem was never a season of life. It's the heart. That's what Jesus says. It's the heart that would rather do other things rather than spend time in God's Word. Such is the life among the thorns. It doesn't last because there is something else living in the soil. There is something else that threatens to steal your joy, steal your affections, asking you to put your hope elsewhere.

A good way to diagnose it that I found is to think about this question. What is the first thing that pops into your mind when you wake up in the morning?

What's that first thing? Because maybe that will reveal what is competing for your affections. And then finally, the good soil. Verse 15 says that the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart who hear the Word, retain it, and by persevering, produce a crop.

[17:54] Notice that the mark of a true believer is perseverance. Lasting the distance. See, sometimes we need to get out of our head this glamorous view of Christianity.

Because what is so deceptive about the soils, especially those two soils before, is that they look like true believers at the start. Sometimes they look even more impressive than the good soil.

But they just don't last. And so they prove themselves to be a pretender. See, this good soil might not look as exciting, might not look as passionate than the other types of soils at first.

But what looks like humble beginnings just grows and grows and grows, regardless of the seasons of life. A faith like this can persevere through grief.

It perseveres through relational breakdown, through bad health, through persecution. It holds through the best times of life. When you come into money, when you get that promotion, when you have power, you'll be still putting God first.

[19:02] The mark of a true Christian isn't necessarily the most vocal, the most outspoken or outwardly passionate person. The mark of a true Christian is simple faithfulness and obedience to God's word in the everyday ups and downs of life.

A humble heart which hears and retains the word. You know, sometimes we approach the Bible purely academically. But we fail to ask the basic question.

How do I apply what I have learned? How does this passage change my life, what I say, what I think, what I do? Good exegesis does not necessarily mean good soil.

Don't forget that. See, what distinguishes whether you are a true follower or not is how you hear.

Because just as a crowd has formed in Jesus' day, we sit together here now.

And we too are a crowd. And in this room may be many different types of soil. And just like then, we need to assess what soil we are now.

[20:13] But we also need to realize that we have it so much better than the crowd. Right now, in the Bible, you hold in your hands a treasure.

The Bible, Jesus says, to you has been given the secrets of the kingdom of God. In your hands are the words of life. You have the gospel that declares to you how much God has loved you by sending his son into the world for you.

The crowd didn't get answers that day. But you did. You have the explanation at your fingertips. You have the mind of God revealed. The gospel is so precious that Peter says that even angels long to look upon these things.

But that does not automatically mean we are good soil. Because remember that true discipleship is not hearing the word. But it's obeying the word.

So let me ask you. When was the last time you really obeyed the word? When you really, when the word really impacted how you lived?

[ 21 : 26 ] A month ago? A year ago? You know, we may come to church week after week. We may come to church Sunday after Sunday for years. What has changed?

How has the word shaped you over the last few years? If your answer is, I just don't think it has. Or I don't think there is a growing desire.

There is a growing hunger to know God in his word. If that's you, you should be concerned. We all need to ask God to grow in a desire for his word.

Because ultimately, we can only be good soil by God's grace. Just as the disciples had no idea what the parable meant until Jesus revealed it to them.

We can't understand. We cannot love God's word unless God enables us to. God is the one who permits understanding. So we need to pray. We need to ask God to open up our eyes to see his word for what it is.

[ 22 : 26 ] We need to pray for perseverance during testing. We need to pray to not get sidetracked when the anxieties and pressures come into your life. I remember a few years ago, my grandparents bought me an emperor's robe.

Like this one on the screen. An emperor's robe. I'm the guy on the right. It's the most ridiculous thing I've ever seen. Take it off the screen.

Please take it off the screen. It was ridiculous. Come on, man. But you know, as ridiculous as that looks, I treasured that thing.

You know why I treasured that thing? Because I love my grandparents. I realized how much it cost them to give it to me. I know they went rich, so they sacrificed so much to give that thing to me.

So in my eyes, it was precious. It was stupid, but it was precious. Friends, the gospel is precious to God.

[ 23 : 33 ] It's not stupid. It's able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ. What greater gift could God give you than his word?

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the treasure of your word.

That you have revealed yourself so intimately that we could experience and enjoy you through it.

Thank you that in your word are words of eternal life.

So give us ears to hear. Help us to understand and obey your word as true disciples. Give us perseverance, Lord, when things get tough. May your word constantly be searching and exposing our hearts to give you glory.

In Jesus' name. Amen.