

The Devilish Barrier of Bad Religion, part 2

Luke 8:10-12

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. Now the parable is this. The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard, and the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so they may not believe and be saved.

"And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root. They believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. As for that in the good soil. They are those who, hearing the word, hold it

fast with an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.”

Now as you look at the text, the distinctively religious nature of the hard-heartedness may not jump off the page at you, but if you look back at verse 5, let's remind ourselves of the elements in the parable. Jesus tells us that the seed was trampled under foot, and second, he tells us that the devouring birds came from the air. Then, verse 12, we read, “The ones along the path are those who have heard, and then the devil comes and takes away the word,” or snatches away, you could translate that, “the word from their hearts so that they may not believe and be saved.” So the ones along the path, that has fallen from the sower's hand instead of making it into the field, it bounces off that impenetrable surface of a sunbaked, hard-packed footpath.

So since the seed is unable to penetrate in through the surface, it's unable to find protection from the heat. It's actually treated rather roughly, here. Foot traffic comes along, and the seed gets trampled underfoot and smashed. And then, as it's spotted by hungry birds flying around up in the air, the

birds swoop down out of there. They land on the hard-packed path, and they devour the seed.

Now, while it is true that the irreligious may manifest those characteristics, there would have been very few, if any, irreligious people in the multitudes who came to hear Jesus on this day. First-century Palestine was a highly religious environment. Even the foreigners who inhabited the land were religious, even if they were polytheistic and pagan, very religious.

But for the Jews in particular, their religion was part of their cultural identity. Their religion is what distinguished them from the Romans, from the Samaritans, from all kinds of other religions, isms and schisms, and all the rest. Jews were theocentric in their thinking, you know what I mean by that, it means God-centered. They had God, even if it was the wrong understanding of God, but they still had a conception of God in the middle of their minds. It's really like going to the Middle East today, talking with a Muslim. They have a totally wrong concept of God, but the way they think about life is always in

connection, never apart from their religious ideas. That's beyond question.

These people here this day, listening to Jesus, they are not irreligious. They are extremely religious. Still, even though highly religious, we can agree with that commentator when he says that "the people represented by the hard-packed soil are conscious of no need. They have no fear of condemnation, and consequently they have no affinity with the Gospel of Christ."

That may be true of the irreligious, as he said, but it was profoundly true of the religious in Jesus' day. God told Isaiah, Isaiah 29:13, "Because this people draws near me with their mouth and honors me with their lips while their hearts are far from me, their fear of me is merely a commandment taught by men." It's just something they even inherited, memorized. They don't have in their hearts. Essentially, he said to Isaiah, "I'm going to judge them with blindness, with hardness of heart."

Jesus recognized that about the crowds who drew near to him. He realized they had been instructed by their religious

leaders, the same religious leaders that he indicted with those same words from Isaiah. In Matthew 15:7 to 9, he rebuked the Pharisees, saying, "You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophecy of you when he said this people honors me with their lips but their heart is far from me. In vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men." How could that happen? How do they do that? They had no love of the truth.

Back to Deuteronomy, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord your God, the Lord is one, and you shall love the Lord your God." First Commandment: Love him. If you don't deal with the love issue first, you'll never understand the truth.

Remember, it's these hard-hearted Pharisees who just prior to the telling of this parable, Matthew 12:14, they went out and conspired against Jesus, how to destroy him. They hated him, they wanted him dead. Why? Because he'd healed a man with a withered hand. They want to kill him. They eventually led all the people here into crucifying the one they'd come out to see.

How does this happen? Because the people had been continuously flattered by their religious leaders. Flattered. Nobody looked these people directly in the eye and said, "You were a sinner and need to repent." No one took the truth that they preached and then worked it into individual lives and called people to repentance. They were flattered by the religious leaders. They were told they were great. They were told they were doing awesome. They were told, You're God's people. We have the temple. We have the law. We have Abraham. We're good to go. They were flattered.

So many churches today are flattering their people. They're insulated, then, by that false doctrine. They're insulated, inoculated by smooth-sounding words, false religious teachers teaching the people what they themselves knew, all that they knew, that it's enough to honor God with their lips, even if their heart is far from him. They pass on to the common people mere commandments of men, calling it biblical doctrine, and say, You're good.

And the people, most of them anyway, they accepted it. Who doesn't like to be told they're great? Who doesn't like to be

told they're wonderful? Their false religion, though it was enslaving, though it's eternally damning in the short run, it's light and easy on the ears. No demands, no difficulties, no need for unpleasant personal confrontation. That's the kind of religion that creates very, very hard hearts.

As John MacArthur put it, quote, "This heart is never plowed by conviction, it is never cultivated with any kind of self-searching, self-examination, contrition, honest assessment of guilt, or true repentance. This heart is as hardened against the sweet beckoning of grace as it is against the dreadful terrors of judgment. Indifference, insensibility and a love for sin have made this person's heart dense, dry, and impenetrable."

Indifference, insensibility, and a love for sin? Does that description really fit religious people? Absolutely it does. Religious pride is one of the ugliest sins in the entire world. We all sense it. We all see it. We hate religious pride. But how often are we guilty of it? We can sometimes identify in others what we struggle with the most, can't we? This religious pride describes most of the scribes and the Pharisees perfectly, along

with the priests and the Sadducees too. Highly religious and wickedly hard-hearted.

Scribes and the Pharisees of Jesus Day weren't satisfied until the rest of the Jewish people followed them down into the same pit, turning them into twice as sons of Hell as they themselves were, right, teaching as doctrines the precepts of men. They were inoculating these people against the truth. People were self-satisfied. They're falsely assured. They landed on the self-deceptive judgment that they're doing just fine. Like the hard-baked footpath, the hearts of the Jewish people had become crusted over, thick, thick crust with a hard religious shell virtually impervious to the good seed of God's word. Their malady was the religious condition of their hearts, bent on unbelief and idolatry.

Some of the seed bounces off. You know who comes trampling that seed? They're teachers. You know who comes swooping down to pluck that seed, to make sure they never hear it or consider it?

Demons. Demon-inspired teaching. That's what false religion is. It's bad religion, folks.

What does a hard heart look like? How do those of the hard heart react to the sower and the seed he sows? Number one: Sometimes they demonstrate hard-heartedness by just bypassing the message and resenting the messenger. They just don't even listen the message. They just look at the messenger and they judge. They criticize. They're just like the Pharisees, who refused to reckon with Jesus' actual teaching, and instead they try to find cause to discredit him. If they can poison the well, they can be sure that no one will drink from it. Hard heart ignores the word, places blame on the one who preaches and teaches the word. Look, it's not the vessel. It's what's in the vessel. It's the content. Deal with that.

Second reaction. Hard-hearted reaction to the sower, the seed he sows, second. At other times, though they failed to find fault with the messenger, because they failed to find fault with Jesus, eventually they demonstrate their hard-heartedness by reacting with hostility to the message itself. If they consider

it, they consider it through, through darkened understanding through a precommitment to criticism and hatred.

It's like the legalists of our own day, who misunderstand the law, and they condemn the innocent for rejoicing in God's grace. Or it's like the antinomians of our day, who misunderstand grace altogether, and they condemn the righteous for doing works of grace. Both of them respond with hatred to a message they've misjudged through deaf ears, blind eyes, a dead heart of unbelief. They misjudge and misinterpret a message because they are predisposed and precommitted to hating it.

Third reaction of a hard heart. A hard heart can be demonstrated by a cold indifference, turning away, ignoring. Many refuse to listen because they don't want the hassle of thinking; Don't make me think, look. They're just well-satisfied with the simple things, well-satisfied with the headline, well-satisfied with the summary. The Cliffs Notes version, that's all I want.

They're satisfied with their religious position. They're too far gone in their religious, false religious understanding. They feel, sadly, feel a sense of self-assurance and peace. And so they don't want to think about these things any further. To do so is to disrupt their sense of assurance and peace. And they gather around them teachers who say, Peace, peace. There is no peace.

We might add a fourth reaction, generally, among those who are so involved in false religion that they actually make their living through it. Here's a fourth reaction. They react in hatred and hostility, and all you need to do is look at the scribes and the Pharisees. They've got a lot invested, a lot to gain, and very much to lose.

So considering the claims of Christ, engaging in self-examination, for anybody who's invested in false religion, that means the loss of money and power, and people and prestige. Or worse, just simply this. They might have to admit they're wrong. That's what makes Nicodemus so remarkable. He repented, he came to Christ, along with Joseph of Arimathea. Incredible grace of God. When it's a religious pride, there's nothing more blinding.

There's no condition more dire than that, a religious blindness.
Grace Church, take note and beware.

So the reactions of resentment, hostility, indifference, hatred, those reactions demonstrate hard-hearted unbelief. Those reactions are a trampling underfoot by religious people. They're religiously devoted but hard-hearted. They do not know God at all. God warned Ezekiel about false religionists in his own day. Same variety of people about whom Jesus was speaking.

They exist in our day as well. Their orthodoxy is just a mask for their idolatry, and that's revealed in Ezekiel 33. "They come to you," God tells Ezekiel, "they come to you, Ezekiel, as people come. They sit before you as my people, they hear what, they hear what you say, but they will not do it." Ezekiel 33:31 and 32: "With lustful talk their mouths, in their mouths, they act, their heart is set on their gain, and behold, you are to them like one who sings lustful songs with a beautiful voice, and plays well on an instrument. For they hear what you say, but they will not do it."

You see that? They say one thing, they pretend to love the truth, but their hearts are revealed as hard because they will not obey and practice the truth. They're fully responsible, aren't they? Entirely culpable for that hard-heartedness calloused by a love of gain.

There's a chilling reality though, about the condition of the hard-hearted, and that's point three in your outline. We noted the divine condemnation of the hard-hearted, the religious condition of the hard heart. The condition is virtually incurable when you consider the involvement of satanic forces, which is point three: the devil's attention to a hard heart. The devil's attention to a hard heart.

Look again at verse 12. It says, the hard-hearted, "they are the ones along the path and they are those who have heard. And then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts." Jesus hasn't been explicit about the connection, here, but the devil and his demons are pictured by the birds of the air. They're like devouring birds that swoop down, land on that hard, impenetrable heart, and completely consume the seed that's sown. And when they're done, there's going to be nothing left of

the word of God. Sown on that hardened sunbaked, dry, hard-packed soil, nothing left.

Fascinating, that it is here with, with false religion, which inoculates the hearer with an impenetrable barrier of this hard heart, it's here that we find, we find here the involvement of spiritual forces. Jesus refers to this spiritual enemy of God's word in several ways. Matthew records him as the "evil one." Jesus calls him "the evil one" in Matthew 13:19. Mark records Jesus calling him by his name, Satan, Mark 4:15, and then he's here called "the devil." And we need to realize, as Jesus makes very clear to us, that the enemy of God's word is not an impersonal temptation or an impersonal world system. The enemy is a personal devil, whose name is Satan, and who is characterized by evil.

The devil despises the word of God, and that's why he has spread this false religion to mask the truth. He does not want any of the good seed going in through false religion, so he plucks it out, devours it, eats it. He hates the word of God. He is opposed to the original sower of the seed, Jesus Christ, all through his ministry with murderous intent.

The devil attempted to destroy Jesus at his birth, inspiring King Herod to kill all the babies in and around Bethlehem. The devil tempted Jesus in the wilderness, attempting to thwart his messianic mission before it even began. The devil attempted to turn Jesus' own disciples against him, including Peter, influencing Peter to turn Jesus away from the cross. He was even successful in tempting Peter to abandon Christ in the hour of darkness. The devil fully turned Judas Iscariot through selfish ambition and greed, eventually inhabiting him personally.

All along the way, the Devil and his demonic hordes are always flocking around the religious leaders. Whenever you read in the text, scribes and Pharisees, think demons hovering over, over them. You can hear their wings fluttering like bat wings over the scribes and the Pharisees. They hated Jesus. They wanted him dead.

In fact, turn over just quickly to John 8. John 8. I want to show you this. Such a powerful scene here as Jesus is

preaching. Notice how Jesus identified in the scribes and the Pharisees and in the Jewish leaders, the satanic source of their ire and hatred against Jesus.

There in John 8:37 and following, he says, “‘I know that you are offspring of Abraham;’” that is, your physical offspring of Abraham. Verse 37 chapter 8 of John. “‘Yet you seek to kill me because my word finds no place in you. I speak of what I have seen with my father, and you do what you have heard from your father.’ They answered him, ‘Abraham is our father.’ So Jesus said to them, ’” Oh no, no, no. “‘If you were Abraham's children, you'd be doing the works Abraham did, but now you seek to kill me, a man who has told you the truth that I heard from God. This is not what Abraham did. You're doing the works your father did.’

“They said to him, ‘We were not born of sexual immorality. We have one Father - even God.’ Jesus said to them, ‘If God were your Father, you would love me, for I came from God and I am here. I came not of my own accord, but he sent me. Why do you not understand what I say? It is because you cannot bear to hear my word. You are of your father the devil, and your will is to

do your father's desires. He was a murderer from the beginning, and has nothing to do with the truth, because there's no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks out of his own character, for he is a liar and the father of lies.'"

Keep that in mind and go back to Luke 8:12. Consider how the devil and his demonic hosts are always hovering around the hard-hearted, and not just among the religious leaders, but among the common people, too.

Somewhat chilling to think about that, isn't it? The devil is so eager to look after the religious, to keep them religious, to keep them attending church, doing good things, listening to easy-sounding teaching. He looks after the religious, even those who self-identify and check on all the surveys Protestant, Evangelical. If they have no interest in obeying the word of Christ, then they're numbered among the hard-hearted. The devil is always with them. He's always hovering around them. He's always attending to strengthening the protective barrier that they have in their hearts against the power of God's word. They can't obey what Jesus says in Luke 9:23, "If anyone would come

after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross daily and follow me.”

So beloved, don't be fooled by church attendance. Look at your loved ones. Look at your coworkers, your friends, and don't be satisfied just because they go to a church. Ask questions. See if they react well to the conviction that comes from God's word. Don't be fooled by enthusiasm, eagerness, emotion, religious activity. Those are not certain signs of conversion. What matters is a transformed life, one that is demonstrating increasing growth of Spirit-produced fruit, which cannot be counterfeited. Only the Holy Spirit can produce “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control,” as defined by Scripture.

Those who claim to follow Christ, those who attend church even attend regularly, they may identify outwardly with the church and with Christians, but if they are at the same time proud and unteachable, if they are unwilling to serve Christ, if they're unwilling to obey God's word, no matter what they say, no matter what they profess, they are hard-hearted idolaters. That's just, that's under the just condemnation of God.

As we close, let's listen to, consider a warning from J.C. Ryle. J.C. Ryle wrote about the influence of the devil, and he wrote about it where it's most uncomfortable to us, in the midst of our church. He writes and warns this, quote, "The devil's influence, no doubt, is everywhere. That malicious spirit is unwearied in his efforts to do us harm. He is always watching for our halting and seeks any occasion to destroy our souls. But nowhere, perhaps, is the devil so active as in the congregation of Gospel hearers. Nowhere does he work so hard to stop the progress of what is good and to prevent men and women from being saved. From him come wandering thoughts, sleeping eyes, fidgety nerves, wearied eyes, and distracted attention.

"In all these things, Satan has a great hand. People wonder where they come from and marvel how it is they find sermons so dull and hardly remember them. They forget the parable of the sower. They forget the devil. Let us take heed that we are not wayside hearers. Let us beware of the devil." End quote.

Let us beware, indeed. As we enter into our time of fellowship and communion together with Christ around the Lord's table, would you prepare your hearts and bow with me for a word of prayer?

Our God and our Father, we pray that by your Holy Spirit and with the interests of the great name of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in mind, we ask that you would cast Satan from our midst, that you would keep him from pecking away the seed from any hard heart here. We pray that you would remove the rocky bedrock in any heart here with, that creates a shallow heart, one that seems eager at first and grows up quickly, but really has no roots. We pray that you would destroy that barrier, that bedrock.

We, we pray that you would remove all thorns and all distractions and worries and cares and pleasures and ambitions, that you would remove all that from the soil of our hearts.

Help us to have a love and a joy in you and a gratitude that we have been saved, that our hearts are not hard, that our

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hearts are not shallow, that our hearts are not impure, mixed with distractions and cares and pleasures and worries. As we come before the table, heavenly Father, I pray that you help us to ask good questions of ourselves and that we would come as a congregation assembly in worship and praise of our Lord Jesus Christ, whose atonement has saved us, reconciling us to you. In Jesus' name, amen.