

DO YOU THINK OR DO YOU KNOW YOU ARE A CHRISTIAN?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

When the Philippines Islands suffered the recent 7.7 earthquake, I could not help but remember a ministry trip our staff took to that country several years ago. I was sent to the cool mountain town of Baguio, some 130 north of Manila. There, I was invited to be the guest of a Lutheran missionary couple from Missouri and their two children. A young Philippine man worked for them as cook and housekeeper, and we soon became good friends in spite of my busy schedule. One evening, I was free to have dinner with the family. After we said grace the cook served us a lovely dinner and then left. When I asked where he had gone, the family said he was out in the garage, eating his supper. I asked them why that was necessary, and they replied that it was the custom there. I looked at them for a long moment and then quietly stood up, took my plate, went out to the garage and sat down next to him. When we returned to the main house, we found the couple sitting at the dinner table, crying. We went into the living room and I began to ask them questions about their faith. I soon found out that they came out to the islands out of a sense of religious duty, and soon after they arrived they discovered they didn't even like the Philippine people. That evening I had the privilege of introducing this "missionary couple" to Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. Later, they wrote me saying they had left the islands and returned home to wait on their Lord for the next step in their new life.

This incident brings to mind the apostle Paul's admonition to his spiritual children in Corinth who were struggling with personal sin: "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves! Or do you not recognize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you-unless indeed you fail the test? (unless indeed you are counterfeits)" (2 Cor.13:5). Today, in our study in Luke 8:1-21, I hope all of us will allow the Lord through his word to test our faith to see if our Christianity is authentic or counterfeit. The question we want to ask is: Do you think or do you know you are a Christian? The Lord will help us answer that question by giving us a series of three test questions: (1) What is the condition of your heart? (2) What is the position of your light? (3) What is the rationale of your faith?

Last week, in our study in Luke 7, we again saw repeated the theme of Luke's gospel, our Lord's statement that he had come to this world "...not to call righteous men but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5: 32). This message was clearly demonstrated in verses 36 through 50 of chapter 7 in the acts of love poured out on Jesus by a woman whose sins had been forgiven. At the same time our Lord lovingly reached out to a self-righteous Pharisee who was testing him to see if he were the Prophet of Deut.18:15. The man, of course, did not realize that he himself was being tested by Jesus and found wanting. The testing now continues as our Lord moves from the home of the Pharisee to the small cities and villages of Galilee. Luke 8:1-4:

And it came about soon afterwards, that He began going about from one city and village to another, proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God; and the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and sicknesses, Mary who was called Magdalene, from whom seven spirits had gone out, and Joanna the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Susanna, and many others who were contributing to their support out of their private means. And when a great multitude were coming together, and those from the various cities were journeying to Him, He spoke by way of a parable.

Jesus continues to travel throughout Galilee, preaching the Kingdom of God. The Jews, of course, were hoping that, based on the many prophecies of the Old Testament, the Messiah would one day arrive in Israel, overthrow the hated Roman Empire, redeem God's people from their sins, restore the Kingdom of God on earth to the former glory of David and Solomon, and finally institute a kingdom in which he would rule in peace and righteousness. When Jesus, the true Messiah, arrived, he was anything but what the average Jew had in mind. Jesus, a carpenter from Nazareth, had no army. His message, which was accompanied by signs

and wonders, was that he was the "Expected One," and that the Kingdom of God for the moment was spiritual in nature-he would establish his kingdom in the hearts of all who invited him to become their Lord and Savior.

Many Jews in Galilee who had heard the Lord's message understood it and began to follow him. As he traveled, his twelve disciples followed him, and in time so did several grateful women. Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons were cast out, was a follower. She would later be present at the cross, and then at the empty tomb (Mark 16:1). Another follower was Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward. She also joined Mary to anoint the Lord's body at the tomb, only to be confronted by the two angels who said, "Why do you seek the living One among the dead? He is not here for He has risen" (Luke 24: 5-9). Susanna was another follower. There were many others who were supporting the ministry of Jesus and the twelve, including perhaps the former prostitute of Luke 7. All of these women had had their deepest spiritual and emotional needs met by Jesus. (At this point in the chronological history of our Lord's ministry in Galilee, Matthew 12:22-45 and Mark 3:22-30 record the incident where Jesus healed a blind and dumb demonic, only to be accused by some visiting Jerusalem Pharisees of casting out demons in the name of Beelzebul, the ruler of the demons. But Jesus answered, "If I by Beelzebul cast out demons, by whom do your sons cast them out? But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the Kingdom of God has come upon you." Matt 12:27-28.)

"...a great multitude were coming together," we read in verse 4, so Jesus and his followers moved toward the shore of the Sea of Galilee where he found a boat and sat down in it in order to teach the multitude as well as his disciples (Matt. 13:2, Mark 4). Following the confrontation with the Pharisees which we have just quoted from Matthew's gospel, from this point on our Lord decided to teach his disciples by means of parables. Parables speak to the hearts of those who want to understand spiritual truth, for once explained they reveal insight into what Jesus calls the "...mysteries of the kingdom of God..." (8: 10), but they close the hearts of those who are hardened in unbelief. Now, our Lord is ready to test the hearts of his listeners by means of a parable, but he will later explain only to his disciples the meaning behind the parable.

I. Test No.1: What is the Condition of Your Heart?, Luke 8:5-15

"The sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell beside the road; and it was trampled under foot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And other seed fell on rocky soil, and as soon as it grew up, it withered, because it had no moisture. And other seed fell among the thorns; and the thorns grew up with it, and choked it out. And other seed fell into the good ground, and grew up, and produced a crop a hundred times as great." As He said these things, He would call out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." And His disciples began questioning Him as to what this parable might be. And He said, "To you it is granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is in parables; in order that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand. Now the parable is this: the seed is the word of God. And those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they may not believe and be saved. And those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away. And the seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go on their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity. And the seed in the good ground, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance."

As he surveyed the crowd, Jesus knew that although all of them had eyes, ears and minds, many refused to use them (Matt. 13:13). But at the same time there were some, like his band of disciples, who were hungry for spiritual truth. He responded by telling the whole crowd the parable of the sower, later explaining it only to his disciples because, we read, "As He said these things, He would call out, 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear.' And his disciples began questioning Him as to what this parable might be. And He said, 'To you it is granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest in parables; in order that "Seeing they may not see and hearing they may not understand' ("Lest they return again and be forgiven," Mark 4:12, Isaiah 6:9.)

Our Lord goes on to explain the meaning of the symbols behind this parable. In Matt.13:38, he says that he is the sower, and the living seed is the word of God. Peter would later write "...for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, though the living and abiding word of God ...and this is the word which was preached to you" (1 Peter 23-25). Jesus will then explain that the different soils represent the hearts of men and women. He casts the seed on the ground, but only that soil that has been properly prepared can receive it and grow to full maturity.

First, we have the response of the callous heart: "Some fell beside the road; and it was trampled under foot, and the birds of the air ate it up." Jesus explained that the seeds that fell beside the road represent those who have heard, but then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart so that they may not believe and be saved. The issue is salvation. Last year, I was asked to speak some words of comfort at a memorial service for a man in midlife who was killed in an accident. I sowed the seeds of God's word from John 14, and then offered the gospel, eternal life and spiritual comfort to all in the room. Two friends of the deceased came up to me right after the service to let me know that "Charlie (the deceased) would not have agreed with anything I had said." Then they left.

Next, we have the impulsive heart: "other seed fell on rocky soil, and as soon as it grew up, it withered away because it had no moisture" (v.6). Jesus explained, "Those on the rocky soil are those who when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no firm root; and they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away." They received the word superficially into an impulsive heart, but it took no firm root. Matt 13:20-21 adds "...and when affliction or persecution arises because of the word, immediately he falls away." I have been saddened by a young single woman I know in whom were sown the seeds of the word of God. She accepted our Lord's invitation and was immediately ministered to by a host of born again single men and women. It appeared that she was growing spiritually until she met and later married a non-believer. Now she will have nothing to do with us.

And third, the worldly heart: "other seed fell among the thorns; and the thorns grew up with it, and choked it out (v.7)." Jesus explained, "And the seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go their way they are choked with worries and riches, and pleasures of this life and bring no fruit to maturity" (v.14). The third heart listened with a degree of seriousness, but before faith could become active the cares of this world choked it and it was unfruitful. John wrote: "Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If any one loves the world, the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. And the world is passing away, and also its lust, but the one who does the will of God abides forever" (1 John 2:15-17).

Based on the parable of the impulsive heart and worldly heart, both of which had a form of life, one could ask the question, is it possible for born again believers to lose their salvation because they have become so tempted by sin, or overwhelmed by affliction and persecution, or so choked with worries or riches or the pleasures of this life that they are "out" for the eternal count? This issue of "eternal security" has always been a hotly debated subject among Christians in every generation ever since the beginning of the church. Both sides can quote verses that prove to them, and hopefully to you, that their view of eternal security is biblical. But can both sides be right?

In our weekly staff studies we have been confronted many times with this issue. I think we have come up some clarity that may add new insight into the question. John in his gospel records that the Lord told Nicodemus that unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. When Nicodemus struggled with that spiritual concept on a physical level, our Lord further explained that "...unless one is born of water and the Spirit he cannot enter the kingdom of God; that which is born of the flesh is flesh and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit" (John 3).

In order to understand spiritual rebirth we must review some facts about our natural birth. A person is conceived in his mother's womb and remains there for nine months, during which time the mother's life sustains the fetus. Then, at birth and following, the baby depends for a time on its mother's milk for sustenance. Later, the baby is weaned, and begins to become a little more independent. He progresses into

adulthood, grows old, and dies. But Jesus said that once a person is "born of the spirit" he shall never perish (John 3).

Just as the physical fetus depends on its mother's blood for life within the womb, so also the spiritual fetus living within an impulsive and worldly person has his spiritual gestation period given to him by God-life, but not birth. "But as many as have received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name" (John 1:12). The fetus which draws its life from the life of its mother gives us a picture of how impulsive and worldly hearts draw their faith off the lives of others within the body of Christ. Once given the opportunity to be "born spiritually," or, as Christ said, "born again," they have no faith of their own, so that when temptation or crisis crosses their path they have no spiritual resource of their own. Thus they experience life, but no spiritual birth or spiritual growth. Therefore the question is not whether one can lose his salvation, for if he or she was truly born again that salvation is secure. The question is, "Were they ever born again in the first place?" I would submit, No!

This is not to say that once we sow the word of God in callous, impulsive or worldly hearts, and it does not take root and produce fruit, that we should never attempt to sow seed in those hearts again. No, because between the first sowing and the next sowing their hearts may have been properly prepared by the Spirit to accept the new seed. The lives of Nicodemus and Saul give us hope, for, after several sowings, both of these men eventually came to an understanding of the gospel of Jesus Christ

Now we come to the prepared heart: "And other seed fell into the good ground, and grew up, and produced a crop a hundred times as great." Jesus comments, "And the seed in the good ground, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance." This seed represents the good heart, for it not only hears the word of God and believes it, but the power of the word of God produces good fruit-becoming more and more like Jesus Christ and desiring, when motivated by his Holy Spirit, to participate with perseverance in the good works he has set before us (Ephesians 2:10). It is this heart that receives eternal life, never to lose it. But the bottom line is still 2 Tim. 2:26, "The Lord knows those who are his."

Talking about a fruitful life reminds me of Dr. John Mitchell, who died recently at age 97. Dr. Mitchell stood in this pulpit many times. Here is part of an obituary I read of this man:

Dr. John G. Mitchell, the man who asked, "Don't you people ever read your Bibles?", died in Portland, Oregon, on May 17 at the age of 97. He leaves a legacy of more than 70 years of ministry to the family of God and will be remembered not only for his vision as founder and chairman of the Board of Multnomah School of the Bible, but also for his deep devotion to the Scriptures and his Savior. ... Mitchell preached his first sermon in three minutes. "I told all I knew and no one knew what I had said," he recalled. To overcome his stuttering and his "shorthand English," he walked the Canadian prairies, reading his Bible and praying out loud...Dr. Mitchell [once] said, I have one passion. It is to have people know Jesus Christ and the Scriptures. The heart and center of Christianity is Christ. Remove Christ and you have mere religion."

This wonderful Christian man had a ministry lasting 70 years. I loved to listen to him, and I always wanted to be like him. What a productive life, preaching the word all those years. I can still hear him say, "My beloved, it's all in the Bible. Read your Bible."

Do you think or do you know that you are a Christian? Here is Test No.1: What is the condition of your heart?

II. Test No 2: What is the Position of your Light?, Luke 8:16-18

"Now no one after lighting a lamp covers it over with a container, or puts it under a bed; but he puts it on a lampstand, in order that those who come in may see the light. For nothing is hidden that shall not become evident, nor anything secret that shall not be known and come to light. Therefore take care how you listen; for whoever has, to him shall more be given; and whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has shall be taken away from him."

The Lord has just shed light on the mysteries of the kingdom of God for his faithful disciples. He shared with

them his ministry of sowing the word of God and the spiritual warfare that goes on after the seed is sown. Now he challenges them, not on the issue of salvation, but on their faithfulness to take the light of the mysteries of the kingdom into the dark world of unbelievers. They should not hide that light under a basket or a bed, but rather put it on a lampstand for all to see. When Jesus appeared on the stage of history he was called by the priest, Simeon, quoting Isaiah 42:6, "...a light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of Thy people Israel" (Luke 2:32). And so Jesus announced to all who would hear, "I am the light of the world; he who follows Me shall not walk in the darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12).

Our Lord once told the men who had placed their faith in him that they had become "the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. Nor do men light a lamp and put it under a peck-measure; but on a lampstand, and it gives light to all who are in the house. Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your Father who is in heaven." (Matt. 5:14-16). Later, Paul and Barnabas declared to the Jews in Antioch who rejected them and the gospel of Jesus Christ, "We are turning to the Gentiles. For thus the Lord has commanded us, I have placed you as a light for the Gentiles that you shall bring salvation to the end of the earth" (Isa. 49:6). If the good seed of salvation has come into your heart and has taken root, then your life will be spiritually fruitful. Once you become a follower of Christ you have come into a relationship with the light of the world. His light of truth and righteousness has been placed into your heart, and your life is to become a container of that light, which is truth leading to eternal life.

But Jesus issues a warning in verses 17, 18. In time, if you have a true relationship with Jesus, it will eventually come to light. And if you have received the truth of the gospel, more shall be given to you. Those who think they are a light container but hide their light (the truth they were given about the mysteries of the kingdom) under a bushel or under a bed, in time may find that the truth of Christ they think they have shall be taken away from them. One day when they reach out to others they will find they have no light.

Recently I was having dinner with an intern in our church and a man who had just come back into fellowship with the Lord after a season of sin. Because of his sin he had allowed the oil in his light to become so low that there was just a flicker left, and yet he and others thought that he was a bright light on a hill. The intern wanted to know what it was like to come back to the Lord. He used an illustration from his own background and asked, "Was it, in a sense, like you were a great basketball player who had not played for several years and the moment you arrived on the court someone threw you the basketball and all those years of practice and playing came back?" The man looked at the intern, paused for a moment, and said, "No. It was as if I stepped on the court and someone threw me the basketball and I said, 'What is this?'"

Do you think or do you know that you are a Christian:? Test No.1: What is the condition of your heart? Test No 2: What is the position of your light?

III. Test No 3: What is the Rationale of your Relationship?, Luke 8:19-21

And His mother came to Him and his brothers also, and they were unable to get to Him because of the crowd. And it was reported to Him, "Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, wishing to see You." But He answered and said to them, "My mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."

In the middle of this session of teaching the Lord's family, his mother, Mary, and his brothers, James, Joseph, Simon and Judas (Matt.13:55) (his sisters are not mentioned here, 13:56), come looking for Jesus. It is obvious that they had a special place in his life. As they approached the crowd, however, they found they could not get to him. Word was passed to him that his personal family members were outside and wished to see him, probably on some personal business since he had been away from Capernaum for a while. It was a natural request, but in light of what he had just been teaching, Jesus used the opportunity to teach a deeper spiritual truth. His kinfolk are not only those in his immediate family who had placed their faith in him as their Messiah, says Jesus, in effect, but all who placed their faith in him as Messiah and established a spiritual relationship with him as their Lord and Savior. Then, having heard the Word of God, they allowed the seed to take firm root, and the fruit of their lives is Christlike character and good works. If one claims to be a Christian and there is no visible fruit as to the existence of a spiritual relationship with Jesus as Lord and Savior, his

commitment is highly questionable. How many times when you asked people if they are Christians have you heard the response, "Well, my brother is a priest"? Or, "My sister is a nun"? Or, "My uncle is a missionary." But salvation comes by faith in Jesus Christ, not by being part of a religious family tree.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Test yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you-unless, of course, you fail the test?" (2 Cor.13:5). Unless your are a counterfeit, Paul is saying.

Do you think or do you know that you are a Christian? The Lord gave the crowd and the disciples three test questions to check out their relationship with him. We can do the same.

1. What is the condition of your heart? The seed which fell on the good ground are those who heard the word in an honest and good heart, held it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance (7:15). If this reflects your lifestyle, then you are a authentic Christian.
2. What is the position of your light? Is it on a lampstand, in order that those who come in may see the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ? (7:16). If this reflects your lifestyle, then you are a authentic Christian.
3. What is the rationale of your relationship? If your relationship is based on faith in Jesus as your Lord and Savior, and your heart is not only willing to listen to the word of God but you are willing to live out the word of God in a dark world, then you are an authentic Christian.

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