



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermon Notes

Being Accepting People

Mark 4.1-9, 13-20

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Is Christianity Dying?

I recently saw again some pessimistic numbers about the state of Christianity in our culture. Ed Stetzer, President of LifeWay Research, revisited two well publicized religious surveys.¹

- 2009 - the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS): the percentage of self-identified Christians in America had fallen from 86 to 76 since 1990; the “Nones” - those claiming no religious affiliation - had risen from 8 to 15% in the same period.
- 2012 - Pew Research Study: “Nones” increased more than 5% in the previous five years.

Analysis has been prolific and generally consistent since the ARIS survey in 2009.

- *Newsweek* followed up with a cover story entitled, “The End of Christian America.”
- Earlier in 2009, Michael Spencer, the “Internet Monk”, wrote a piece entitled, “My Prediction: The Coming Evangelical Collapse” that *Christian Science Monitor* reprinted.
- “The settled narrative became that Christianity was in precipitous decline” (Stetzer).

Most consider this to be beyond dispute. We should take the problem seriously, but we can take heart from Stetzer’s affirmation that “no serious researcher believes Christianity in America is dying.” But we should not be naive. Christianity may not be dying, but a major transition continues. Hold that thought.

The Clearest Parable (Mark 4.1-9, 13-20)

Most Bible students consider the parable of the sower (or soils) easy of interpretation. It helps, of course, that the disciples didn’t find it so easy to understand (4.13), so Jesus explained it and the interpretation was recorded. It is straightforward, but a few details may require clarification.

1. The ancient Palestinian method of sowing was different. The sower scattered seed across the ground which was then plowed to bury it. The seed was not put in neatly prepared furrows, but went everywhere. That’s why it fell on so many kinds of soil: hard path (4.4), rocky ground (4.5), among thorn bushes (4.7), in good soil (4.8).
2. Details of the harvest (4.8, 20) are quite positive. Studies of yields in ancient Palestine show that a tenfold harvest was extraordinary; about seven and a half was average.
 - a. All three numbers in the parable (thirty, sixty, one hundred) are vastly superior to what was typical. Jesus envisioned a miraculously abundant harvest.

- b. The emphasis is not on the seed lost, on failure, but on the possibilities of divine activity and success when the seed of his word is sown.²
3. There are just two kinds of soils: unproductive and productive.

We learn that our receptivity to God's word is the key to our faith, growth, and productivity.

Another Look at the Trends

What has the parable to do with Stetzer's article? From what I've told you, you're probably ahead of me, thinking one or both of the following. (And there's merit to either or both.)

1. In a world with 10-15% fewer who self-identify as Christians than there were twenty-five years ago, we now have more unproductive soil.
2. People of faith need not despair, for God's word will not return void (Isa. 55:10-11), but will have a return of thirtyfold, sixtyfold, or a hundredfold.

Those would be *the* lessons to learn, if I had told you everything in the article and parable. But, I didn't. For example, Stetzer challenges the accepted interpretation of the surveys.

- "...the sky is not falling. Christians are not leaving the faith in droves, even though some people are screaming that loudly. In many cases, *people who once called themselves Christians are simply no longer doing that*" (Stetzer's emphasis).
- "... though 86 percent of Americans checked the 'Christian' box on a survey in 1990, the population was not made up of that many genuine followers of Jesus. For many, the idea of being Christian and being American are one-in-the-same. But the church defines 'Christian' differently than culture at large, and the distinction is an important one to make."
- "*The Church is not dying. It is just being more clearly defined*" (Stetzer's emphasis).

To help his reader see this, Stetzer proposes that the 75% of Americans who call themselves Christians can in fact be separated into three categories.

1. **Cultural Christians** - people who believe themselves to be Christians simply because their culture tells them they are.
2. **Congregational Christians** - similar to the first group except these people at least have some connection to congregational life. They have a "home church," attend periodically or sporadically. But they are not practicing real, vibrant faith.
3. **Convictional Christians** - people who actually live their faith and have a relationship with and are growing in their knowledge of Jesus; their lives are continuing to change, and are oriented around their faith in Christ.

Stetzer's categories effectively re-state Jesus' parable.

1. Cultural Christians are practically equivalent to the hard and some rocky soils.
 - a. Many "Nones" were once considered Christian only in the broadest sense: their neighborhood was Irish Catholic, they were born Methodist, etc. They never embraced the faith. In today's culture, they don't have to claim to.
 - a. Others were slightly more involved, but had no depth.
2. Congregational Christians are practically equivalent to some rocky and thorny soils.
 - a. They may attend twice a year, or several times a year. They may declare allegiance to a home church. But, that's about all the evidence there is of real church involvement.

- b. Some attend most, if not all Sundays. Monday through Saturday, however, they show no real difference from the world around them, being just as devoted to this world's cares, riches, and desires. They will call on the church for support in major life events, but expend practically no effort in its work. They may be on the membership roll, but are "unfruitful" (Mark 4.19; or "do not mature" [Luke 8.14]).
3. Convictional Christians are those who understand that their receptivity to God's word is the key to faith, growth, and productivity

Things Are Better Than We Might Think

Stetzer contends, and I would agree, that, "we will see ... the church lose more of its traditional cultural influence. Christians will likely lose the culture wars, leading to difficult times ahead for us. But we do not need to lose hope. This is not cause for despair. *It is a time to regroup and re-engage*" (his emphasis).

Whether we contribute to the good that will result as convictional Christians engage the world or look on as cultural or congregational Christians while others carry the load depends on how accepting we are of Jesus' message.

1. The parable is about how we respond to Jesus' teaching.
 - a. Will we "understand" (4.13)?
 - b. Will we "receive it with joy," (4.16), hearing, accepting, and bearing fruit (4.20)?
2. The true test will depend on which of Jesus' soils we are.³
 - a. Sinking deep roots takes commitment and effort (Mark 4.16-17).
 - b. Staying out of thorny soil demands active resistance of other priorities while we seek God's reign first (Matt 6.33). It means going to the trouble of participating in the heavy lifting that authentically engages the world as it is, not just doing church as usual (Mark 4.17-19).

Exhortation

Our receptivity to God's word is the key to our faith, growth, and productivity.

"He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark 4.9).

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Notes

¹ Ed Stetzer, "Is the Church Dying in the U. S.? Redefining Christians as Cultural, Congregational, & Convictional," visionroom.com/church-dying-u-s-redefining-christians-cultural-congregational-convictional/ Accessed April 24, 2014.

² The above is summarized from Larry Hurtado, *Mark*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1983, 1989), 71-72.

³ It is important to see that Jesus' parable is not about Christians on one side (the good soil) and non-Christians on the other (the three unproductive soils). Three of the four soils accepted the word at some level. Two didn't mature (cf. Luke 8.14), and so proved unproductive (unfruitful).

We should take note of Francis Chan's observation: "*Do not assume you are the good soil. I think most American churchgoers are the soil that chokes the seed because of all the thorns. Thorns are anything that distracts us from God. When we want God and a bunch of other stuff, then that means we have thorns in our soil. A relationship with God simply cannot grow when money, sins, activities, favorite sports teams, addictions, or commitments are piled on top of it.*" (Francis Chan, with Danae Yankoski, *Crazy Love: Overwhelmed by a Relentless God* [Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2008], 67. Emphasis is Chan's.)