

Luke 8 Characteristics of Faith

As we progress through Luke and focus on the character of Jesus, we want to ask ourselves just what it is that Luke wants us to recognize in Jesus' character and in His faith. In this chapter, which contains a combination of lessons and events, Jesus demonstrated that, unlike Americans, He didn't schedule every second. Flexibility was built in so that He could respond to the needs of the moment without messing up something else. Further, in this chapter, He will point out that oftentimes the people who listened to Him and who followed Him neglected to account for the power of God, so those same followers often discounted options because they did not think some of the potential outcomes were possible. Making decisions based on who God is just did not figure in to their analysis of the situation. Their thinking was stuck on the abilities and expectations of people. And, Jesus dealt with people from multiple cultures and from all social and economic strata. People have a hard time with that. Learning the character of God makes us able to handle the diversity that exists in this world.

Since this is a very long chapter, I am not going to read the whole thing, but rather just key verses, and summarize the rest. However, I do recommend that you read the whole thing so that you can pick up on the details – which are often very important.

Here's the first section (verses 1 – 18), a familiar one, the parable of the sower. I will read just the explanation from Jesus, which cuts the reading in half. The first point is in verse 10,

And He said [to His disciples], "To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables, that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.'"

Jesus quoted a line from to Isaiah 6:9, which is a bit of sarcasm from when Isaiah was given his task as a prophet. God had His various messengers speak in parables and other figures of speech so that only those who cared about God, who were willing to devote some time to understanding, would be able to figure out what He was talking about. The same is true with the gospel unto this day. Those who care, who have godly faith, will be able to understand. Those without that faith, understanding is beyond their grasp (Romans 8:7, 1 Corinthians 2:14, those who think in physical terms cannot understand spiritual concepts).

Here's Jesus' explanation of the parable, picking up in verse 11:

Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. Those by the wayside [the hardpacked paths or roads] are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. But the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and these have no root, who believe for a while and in time of temptation fall away. Now the ones that fell among thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity. But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience.

Jesus was aiming at the good soil folks. The other types of soil are in there to help the faithful understand why there are so many people who just do not get it. Some people are just hardened. They encounter the gospel, but nothing happens. Assuming that the explanation they got made sense, the problem was not the seed, but the individual. People get that way due to a

variety of reasons. Sometimes they just have given up on anything good happening. Or, they have been knocked down so often, they have nothing left. Others are just so self-absorbed that they have no use for anything that focuses on others.

Other people have no depth. Their perception of life never gets deeper than immediate self-gratification. They can get excited about the gospel right now, but the excitement fades as soon as something else catches their attention.

Other people get distracted by life, and church stuff falls by the wayside.

But the seed that falls on good soil produces a crop. Remember, the seed is the Word. The places where the seed falls are various types of people. The good soil, the faithful people, cause the seed to grow and produce, create more seeds and becoming nourishment for new people and seed for other good soils.

Jesus further illustrates that good soil is like a lamp, illuminating others. And, in verse 18, He emphasizes that good soil has a responsibility, and will have more demands placed on it. And, finally, failure to perform results in the benefits of the kingdom being withdrawn.

I suppose no one should claim mastery of precision agriculture and 100% germination. But the goal is clear. The purpose of the good soil is making more seed, spreading the Word. Over the centuries, church-goers have become more and more terrified by that prospect, probably because the task seems way too big and the techniques that have been presented seem either very strange or well above my skill level. But it is not. Remember the adage, "If it sounds complicated, it's probably wrong." Spreading the gospel is not complicated or requiring of years of training. All you need to do is to find someone who has an interest in looking into the Word, and read it together and discuss what you find. The stuff that has seemed complicated to you in the past, you likely will never find, because what confused you was not really in there.

But, if we are going to get through this chapter, I need to stop with that positive promise. If there is an interest, I can do a lesson just on that topic: How to discuss the gospel with someone else.

The second section is just three verses, a strange little scene that I call "addressing hidden assumptions," which is also presented in Matthew, Mark, and another place in Luke (Matthew 12:38 – 50, Mark 3:31 – 35, 8:11 – 12, Luke 8:19 – 21, 11:24 - 36). Here's the one that is in 8:19 – 21:

Then His mother and brothers came to Him, and could not approach Him because of the crowd. And it was told Him by some, who said, "Your mother and Your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see You." But He answered and said to them, "My mother and My brothers are these who hear the word of God and do it."

In every era and culture, family has been the center of life's most important connections. However, spiritual connectedness is the goal; physical family is the illustration. Don't get stuck in the illustration. Certainly, physical family is important. But look at the many family units you know. Very few actually work as desired. In general, family relationships often are a source of great disappointment. Yet, God used the illustration of the family: of the Father, the Son, being brothers and sisters in the faith, all based on our physical families. Why did God use that illustration for the relationships between the faithful when the illustration fails so often? I think it is because almost everyone has the desire for a functional family. The church family is not likely to perform that much better than the physical family, but the hope should still be there. The church family will have nearly as many less-than-functional members as physical families.

Jesus' point is to value that church family, with all its flaws, just as much as your flawed physical family. In fact, the family of God should provide a lot more hope than our physical families. In our physical families, the oddball members, the ones who are entirely self-centered and totally untrustworthy, rarely change. We just put up with the chaos that they inject. But in the church family, we have much more hope, because God has promised to provide the indwelling Spirit to all the faithful, even the really odd ones, whose job it is to transform their characters into that of Jesus. Jesus was not putting down His physical family in this little scene, but reminding His audience that the spiritual family is the reality; the physical family is the temporary, the illustration. Our faith needs to have high expectations for, and place a high value on those spiritual family relationships.

Next, in just four verses (22 – 25), a little scene is presented in which Jesus will challenge the incomplete thinking of the disciples. The same scene is recorded in Matthew 8:18 – 27 and Mark 4:35 – 41. The disciples are blown away by a miracle Jesus performs. Jesus' response is, "Where is your faith?"

Now it happened, on a certain day, that He got into a boat with His disciples. And He said to them, "Let us cross over to the other side of the lake." And they launched out. But as they sailed He fell asleep. And a windstorm came down on the lake, and they were filling with water, and were in jeopardy. And they came to Him and awoke Him, saying, "Master, Master, we are perishing!" Then He arose and rebuked the wind and the raging of the water. And they ceased, and there was a calm. But He said to them, "Where is your faith?" And they were afraid, and marveled, saying to one another, "Who can this be? For He commands even the winds and water, and they obey Him!"

Sudden, violent storms are common on the Sea of Galilee because the lake is in a bowl of steep mountains. Jesus was taking a nap in the back of the boat. The panic of the disciples, despite having several professional sailors in the group, was understandable. Turning to Jesus for help was a good idea. They just didn't think it through. If they believed in the promises about the Messiah, they would have concluded that this could not be fatal because the Messiah had more to do and was not predicted to die by drowning. Compare this to the millions of unbelieving Jews who crammed into the Temple in 70 AD because they believed it to be the safest place on earth since they mistakenly assumed that the Messiah had not yet come. They knew, from Daniel 9:24 – 27, that the Messiah had to come before the Temple could be destroyed. Even the unbelieving Jews thought through the descriptions of the times of the Messiah.

In verse 25, the disciples use the word, obey, which, in its peculiar verb tense, carried the idea of voluntary submission. While the disciples may have marveled just as much if Jesus had overpowered nature, the fact that the wind and waves responded to His rebuke was even more impressive. Of course, Jesus could control the weather with just a word; that's all it took at creation, a word. A physical confrontation, an epic battle worthy of an action movie, would be out of character for Jesus and would be no more than showmanship.

So, what is the application for our faith? In what ways do we suffer from incomplete thinking?

Here's one. Comfort is the American expectation. Lacking a command in the Bible to divest, do we excuse our abundance? Do we fail to accept opportunities dropped in our laps? Do we make commitments before thinking it through? Do we just assume that our comfort is what God intends for us?

Do we fail to think through competing claims on our time? Do we think we must do it all? Can we delegate?

Do we panic over things He has already promised to handle?

Are we amazed when His promises work?

The next little scene is 14 verses, so I will summarize. It is also recorded in Matthew, Mark, and two places in Luke (Matthew 8:28 – 34, Mark 5:1 – 21). The fancy name for the event is the Gerasene Demoniac. Here is my summary:

Jesus and His disciples sailed across the Sea of Galilee to the eastern shore, the region of the Gerasenes or Gadarenes, depending on your translation. Almost immediately after landing, they met a demon-possessed man who lived among the tombs. He was known to be tremendously strong. The demons who possessed the man recognized Jesus and immediately assumed that Jesus was there to cast them into the abyss, which had been predicted by Zechariah 13:2. They were wrong about Jesus' immediate intentions, but it does illustrate that the demons knew that Jesus was the Messiah and that they would soon be cast into torment although not quite yet. The demons begged not to be cast into Torment but into a nearby herd of pigs. Remember, this was a Gentile region, so pork was popular and therefore a profitable form of livestock. Jesus agreed, but inhabiting the pigs set them into a frenzy, resulting in them running into the lake and drowning. The pig-herders ran back to town to tell everyone what happened. The villagers came out to investigate and found the formerly demon-possessed man in his right mind and, of course, about a thousand drowned pigs. The villagers asked Jesus to depart from their region, probably to avoid the loss of more livestock. The formerly demon-possessed man pleaded with Jesus to accompany the group back to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, but Jesus told him to stay in his own region and tell everyone how he had been made well, which he did. Jesus and the disciples went back to the west side of the Sea of Galilee, the Israelite side.

So, what was the point of including this story? It is a little humorous, although perhaps not so much for the pig owners and the demons. The Gentile villagers appreciated the power Jesus displayed, but they were not interested in relating to God, but rather were consumed by earthly life and potential future losses if Jesus stayed around. What did Jesus do? He did not harangue them for their unbelief. Rather, He was polite and moved on. That's a model we can emulate.

Secondly, Jesus did not address the fact that pork was a major industry. As a Jew, Jesus would not have ever eaten pork products of any kind. But He made no mention of His scruples to these Gentiles. These people had never claimed that they were going to follow the Law of Moses; they were not Israelites. Jesus let His practices stay His practices and did not expect others to imitate His lifestyle choices, even though it was a part of the Law of Moses. We are in a similar position with outsiders. Many actions that are legal in our culture are not things we choose to do because of our faith. Trying to patch up the behavior of outsiders to match what faithful people do gets the cart before the horse. First address faith. Then, from that platform, address behavior.

Further, Jesus had an interaction with demons, a demon-possessed man, and a bunch of unbelieving Gentiles. Associating with them did not imply condoning their life choices. We should be similarly open-minded. The Scriptures about being separated from sinners are about church folks who are divisive (Titus 3:10, Jude 19), who call bad things good (1 Corinthians 5:9 – 13), or who assert that Jesus did not come in the flesh (1 John 2:18 – 19, 4:2 – 3, 2 John 7 – 11).

Not associating with unbelievers would put an end to evangelism. As Paul put it, “If I meant that you should not associate with all sinners, you would have to leave the planet (1 Corinthians 5:10).

And the last scene in this chapter is about the daughter of a synagogue official who was deathly ill (8:40 – 56). The same story also may be found in Matthew 9:18 – 34 and Mark 5:22 – 43. Jesus demonstrated how faith responds to the faithful. This story also is a bit long, so I will paraphrase.

When Jesus returned to the western side of the Sea of Galilee, the Israelite side, He was met by a multitude. A man named Jairus, a synagogue leader, interrupted the crowd and begged Jesus to come to his house to heal his 12-year-old daughter. So, Jesus stopped what he was doing with the crowd to help this one distraught father who obviously had faith that Jesus could heal His daughter. Along the way, a woman with an issue of blood which she had been battling for 12 years caught up to Jesus from behind and touched His cloak, thinking that this would be sufficient to be healed. Despite the throng and its inescapable bumps, Jesus felt something when she did that and stopped and inquired who had touched Him. The disciples were incredulous that, in this jostling crowd, Jesus could have felt one, specifically. Finally, the woman confessed that she had done it, and Jesus comforted her with, “Daughter, be of good cheer; your faith has made you well.” When they finally arrived at Jairus’ home, he was informed that it was too late; the girl was already dead. When Jesus insisted that she would be fine, He was ridiculed, because everyone knew that she was, indeed, dead. But, Jesus took Peter, James, John, and the girl’s parents into the room, shut the door, and raised her from death. And He cautioned them to tell no one how it had happened.

Jesus demonstrated the devotion between the faithful, and also that faith has inherent flexibility. As I mentioned earlier, Americans especially have as a cultural trait the habit of overcommitting, of scheduling every moment of the day. Then, when something unexpected happens, someone’s needs will not be met. Here, Jesus left a crowd (who then followed to see what was up) to help Jairus, but stopped along the way to help the woman with the issue of blood. Can you picture Jairus tapping his foot during the delay. Further, by touching Him, the woman made Jesus unclean, which Jesus would know and, although not in the text, surely Jesus took care of that appropriately. But, that would be one more little inconvenience. Overall, Jesus left space for the unexpected, and responded immediately to faithful people.

So, what can we learn from this scene? Do we feel inconvenienced by the needs of the faithful? Perhaps we schedule ourselves into anxiety and feeling overburdened. Notice how Jesus’ faith flowed from one need to another. He was with a group, so He took the group to the location of the next need. Along the way, He stopped to handle another need, all without controversy.

Do we limit our focus to the task at hand, or do we go with the flow? Do we have confidence that God can handle the next good thing? I’m not saying that we should drop our commitments because something came up. No. We should leave room in our planning for things to take longer than expected, so we can take up those things that happen along the way, without anxiety, enjoying the opportunity.

In these scenes in the gospels, God left us illustrations of how godly character works in a messed up world, as well as how to enjoy the ride. We began with the parable of the sower, which has two major points: (1) that many people are just bad soil. The low response rate is not your fault. And (2) as those who have accepted the Word implanted (as James 1:21 describes it),

we have a responsibility to nourish others and to spread the Word. But it is not like getting a license to practice medicine requiring years of study and practice. Rather, it's just a matter of finding other good soils. The Word does the work; we just plant it.

Jesus illustrated that our spiritual family is the one that lasts. Our physical families are important, but the church family needs to be right up there in importance to us.

Jesus chided His disciples for not having enough faith to expect Him to do the impossible. They were in over their heads in a small boat in a big storm and didn't remember that Jesus had the power to take care of it. This is one of the really important reasons to know what God has actually promised, not promises that people made up to suit their theology. We need to expect those legitimate promises to happen, or they won't.

Then there was the demon possessed man and the demons being transferred into a herd of pigs. Sometimes, the audience is not ready to hear the message because they are overwhelmed by the concerns of this life. Be polite, and walk on. Sometimes those who have benefited from the works of God want to bury themselves in church work, among the faithful, when they would be much more useful out in the unbelieving world, demonstrating what can and has happened.

And finally, in the scene with Jairus' daughter and the woman with the issue of blood, remember that the works of God will not fit in our busy schedules. We need to leave space for stuff to happen, to marvel at the opportunities God provides, and be comfortable fitting them into our exciting and low-stress lives.