

FIVE KEY BARRIERS TO DEEP LEARNING AND CHARACTER FORMATION BASED PRIMARILY ON JESUS' PARABLE OF THE FOUR SOILS



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Abstract: According to Jesus, what potential range of resistance to truth can prevent his follower from greater fruitful Christian living? The article proposes, from Jesus' life and teachings, a spectrum of five barriers to "unfruitful" living that can hinder deep learning and Christian formation. In the Parable of the Four Soils, three unfruitful soils are depicted. For the two additional barriers, one comes from John 15:4–5, and the other from Jesus' own Garden of Gethsemane experience. Practical implications are drawn for teachers as learners themselves and as facilitators of learning in students.

Key Words: learning barriers, worldview beliefs, inner heart formation, Christian formation, spiritual formation, awakening, parable, parable of the four soils, sin, confession

Introduction

Since Jesus is our main teacher (Matt 23:8; also Matt 17:5 [parallel, Mk 9:7, Lk 9:35]; Matt 12:42 [parallel, Lk 11:31]; Jn 13:13), what insights does he offer regarding types of resistance to truth preventing his follower from greater fruitful Christian living? Recently, I have become convinced the Parable of the Four Soils (Matt 13:3–23, Mk 4:3–20, Lk 8:5–18) offers insightful clues for believers regarding our heart response—or lack of response—to truth, based on the three unfruitful soils. Along with two additional barriers to be examined, the range of these five broad barriers covers much territory in response to the question raised above. As a heuristic device, each barrier suggests food for thought, offering an opportunity for integrative connections and convergence from the discipline of Christian education/formation.

With some humorous exaggeration, in Matthew 7:3–5, Jesus taught that we tend to be clueless about our own character gaps—our blind spots: "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in some else's eye and pay no attention to

the plank in your own eye? How can you say, 'Let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye? You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from the other person's eye" (TNIV). Although we may have deep insight into the needs of others ("the speck"), Jesus acknowledges we are basically clueless about the obvious "plank" in our own eye. The proposed five barriers may help us better recognize our own "planks"—obvious to others but hidden to us. First, a brief overview of the barriers is provided, naming each with a word beginning with the letter "D" as an alliterative memory device. Then additional discussion will be given to two particular barriers based on the first two soils, since these seem to be more complex hindrances that suggest intriguing insights on the matter. Finally, some practical implications are presented.

Orientation to the Parable of the Soils and Brief Survey of the Five Barriers

Jesus' teaching of the parable of the four soils in the Synoptics (Matt 13:3–23, Mk 4:3–20, Lk 8:5–18) offers intriguing insights into the hindering movements of our heart.¹ As recorded in Matthew and Mark, it is the lead story in the series of parables about the kingdom. Although the primary intent of the parable contrasts those who do and do not respond to the good news, yet Christians can experience a similar range of responses to truth, as R. T. France (2004) suggests.

But the types of soil are described not in terms of any particular group or groups, whether during Jesus' ministry or subsequently, but in general categories which may be applicable in many different terms and situations within Christian history. Even as 'interpreted' the parable therefore remains open-ended in terms of its pastoral application. The careful spelling out of the successive agricultural hazards therefore probably justifies the use to which the parable has been most frequently put in subsequent Christian exposition, as a basis for those who hear it even within the disciple community, to examine their own openness to God's message and the fruitfulness or otherwise of their response. The slogan 'Whoever has ears, let them hear' (v. 9) invites such an application. (p. 518)

Klyne Snodgrass notes, "The parable is about hearing that leads to productive living, and adapting the parable [for disciples of the kingdom] will mean

enabling people to move past merely hearing words—even with joy—to hearing that captures the whole person.” (2008, p. 176).

Briefly the story involves a farmer scattering seed that fell on four differing soils: some beside the road, some on rocky places, some among the thorns, and finally some on the good soil—the only one that proved to be fruitful. Jesus interprets the parable and indicates that the four persons represented by the soils all hear the truth. The difference lies in *how* they hear, the kind of heart each soil represents.

Seed Sown on the Road—Dismissive Barrier #1

“When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path” (Mt 13:19). The seed that fell on the road, which offered no opportunity to take root, represents the first barrier. That great word picture, “hard heart”, best summarizes it. Jesus was grieved at the hardened hearts of the religious leaders (Mk 3:5), and his own disciples (Mk 6:5–51–52, 8:17). What is a hardened heart? It is one that is closed off, even resistant to truth. For example, it could involve an arrogant refusal to hear truth from those of lesser status (e.g., Jn 9:34, “You were steeped in sin at birth; how dare you lecture us!”) Or, it could involve a lack of giving serious thought to the implications of truths we already know, as was the case of the disciples. “Aware of their discussion [of not bringing bread with them], Jesus asked them: ‘Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not see or understand? *Are your hearts hardened?* Do you have eyes but fail to see, and ears but fail to hear? And do not you remember [when the disciples gathered up extra baskets of bread from the miraculous feedings]?’” (Mk 8:17–18, emphasis added). Sadly, due to their dullness in remembering God’s past provision (Mk 8:16–21), Jesus’ disciples evidenced a hardened heart as if they were “outsiders” (Mk 4:11) or even like his opponents (Mk 3:5).

That Jesus was resurrected bodily from the tomb is a common Christian belief, yet to the 12 disciples on resurrection Sunday morning, it was a grave matter of skepticism. The women, who had visited the empty tomb, came to the disciples and reported the angel’s message, “He is not here; he has risen!” (Lk 24:9). But the disciples could not accept this fact. “But they [the disciples including Peter and John] did not believe the women, *because their words seemed to them like nonsense*” (Lk 24:11, emphasis added). Thomas also resisted accepting this truth—even though his close companions tried to persuade him with eyewitness accounts (Jn 20:25). Like these unconvinced disciples, we may not readily accept—we dismiss—ideas that do not make sense to us. Hence, I label this the *dismissive* gap. We will return to examine this dismissive barrier further, following the survey of the five barriers.

Seed Sown in the Rocky Soil—Discrepancy Barrier #2

“Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have *no root*, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away” (Mk 4:16–17). The second soil was shallow, a rocky place. The seed sprang up quickly, but withered just as quickly when the sun came up. There is some initial receptivity but, “they have no firm root in themselves” (Mk 4:17, NASV). The implication is, although we may give intellectual assent to a particular fact about God or agreement with a particular Christian virtue, that belief has not yet taken deep root in our character, which if it had, it would yield an increasing Jesus-like lifestyle pattern.

Consider an example from Peter’s life. During the Last Supper before Jesus was arrested, Peter strongly affirmed his loyalty to Jesus. Yet Jesus warned Peter the devil would soon test each of the disciples (“you all” plural, Lk 22:31), and Jesus had specifically prayed for Peter’s faith to hold firm (“you” singular, Lk 22:32). He added that, although Peter would fall, “when you have turned again, strengthen your brothers” (Lk 22:32). Yet Peter was too defensive and could hear neither Jesus’ encouragement that Jesus had prayed for him, nor that Jesus noted Peter’s key role in encouraging the other disciples. It seems his pride prompted such bravado, “Lord, I am ready to go with you to prison and to death!” (Lk 22:33)? Jesus’ response? More details: Peter would deny Jesus three times before a rooster crowed (Lk 22:34). Hours later Peter finally became aware and recognized his gap. After the rooster crowed and after Jesus looked at Peter, “Peter remembered the word of the Lord . . . And he went out and wept bitterly” (Lk 22:6–62). A profession from our lips is not always rooted in our heart. After we become aware of our discrepancies, we have an opportunity to acknowledge them to ourselves and to God, and invite his work in us. We will return to this important barrier later.

Seed Sown in the Thorny Soil—Distracted Barrier #3

“Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful” (Mk 4:19–19). Seed among the thorns—our third soil—began to grow, but the thorns choked the plants so they did not bear any fruit. The basic implication for Jesus’ disciples today is our way of life can become distracted, slowly drifting off course away from our priority to follow Jesus. He identifies three specific hindrances: “worries of the world [this age],” “the deceitfulness of riches,” and “desires for other things” (Mk 4:19; see also Lk 21:34).

What chokes fruitfulness is simply getting busy and pre-occupied with

living, but without much attention toward Jesus' Kingdom priorities. Worse, after a period of distraction, our lives may take on a destructive spiral downward, as Jesus phrases it, "[the house] collapsed and its destruction was complete" (Lk 6:49). Remember how Martha was *distracted*? While Jesus was at Lazarus' house in Bethany, his sister Martha blurted out, "Lord, don't you care that my sister [Mary] has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" (Lk 10:40). To which Jesus responded, "Martha, Martha . . . you are worried and upset about many things" (Lk 10:41). We get busy in life, even with good things—the "desires" Jesus identified relate to general living, not necessarily evil things—and yet we become easily distracted and off-center.

Being Disconnected Also Prevents Fruitfulness—Barrier #4

Let me suggest a fourth major formation barrier that also relates to unfruitful living. Consider Jesus' teaching about living a dependent life. Jesus depended on the Father (Jn 5:19–20,30). He informs us we need to depend on him as well. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me, as I also remain in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:5). This fundamental, relational reality for those in God's forever family involves both (a) an enduring objective status as branches—our "union in Christ" ("I am the vine, you are the branches")—and (b) an ongoing, experiential aspect—we must intentionally abide in Christ ("If you remain in me, as I also remain in you, you will bear much fruit"). The concept "to bear fruit" and the inability to bear fruit in John 15:2–5 provides a conceptual link between this passage and the Parable of the Four Soils in the Synoptics.

When the disciples could not heal the demonized son, they asked Jesus "Why could we not drive it out? And He said to them, 'This kind cannot come out by anything but prayer'" (Mk 9:28–29). Carson explains, "[The disciples] were treating the authority given to them ([Matt 10:1, 8] like a gift of magic, a bestowed power that works *ex opere operato* [i.e., the action by itself does the work]. In Mark, Jesus tells them this case requires prayer—not a form or an approved rite, but an entire life bathed in prayer and its concomitant faith" (1984, p. 392).

Abiding in Jesus is the central matter of living a dependent life. The consequences are severe, we are cut off from divine empowerment. We can not accomplish anything of lasting value—of bearing fruit—unless we are dynamically relating to him—while he is abiding in us. If we are disconnected from divine relationship and resources, we are just as fruitless as the three soils in the parable.

What does it mean to "abide" in Jesus? Whatever response we supply would fit into the category of the ways we can deepen personal relationships.

For example, we may want our last thought at night, and the first thought in the morning to be directed toward Jesus. Individuals and communities will need to experiment with how to grow and increase our connection and intimacy with Jesus. Love is a two-way street.

In Gethsemane Jesus Faces a Distressed Barrier (#5)

Thus far, four barriers were identified that hinder fruitful living: dismissive, discrepancy, distracted, and disconnected. The final major barrier is suggested from Jesus' experience in the Garden of Gethsemane. Why include this case with the other four barriers since it does not explicitly include a reference to "bearing fruit"? The situation is such an unusual event in Jesus' life, one of his lowest points (the other being on the cross with the expression of "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" (Mt 27:46)).ⁱⁱ Gethsemane offers an important and distinctive demonstration by our Teacher for a way to escape moral failure in a difficult situation. There is an implied strategy Jesus himself uses with success, a strategy made explicit in his rebuke to the sleeping disciples, who do not heed the warning and fail.

Among the various topics in Jesus' teaching ministry, one recurring theme is about "being alert," "keep awake" (Gk., *grēgoreō*, literal, Mt 26:38, 40; figurative, Mt 24:42, 25:13, 26:41). Disciples are to be alert regarding two particular points of reference: expectantly awaiting Jesus' Second Coming while continuing to serve God (e.g., Mt 24:42, 25:13), and being alert "not [to] enter temptation" (Mt 26:41; cf. Jesus' model prayer, Mt 6:13). Peter, in his Epistle, confirms this second point: "Be self-controlled and *alert*. Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour. Resist him, standing firm in the faith" (1 Peter 5:8–9, emphasis added). Is it possible Peter's exhortation comes with strong personal emphasis from his own various moral failures, particularly those on the night of Jesus' betrayal? Peter did not heed warnings given at the Last Supper nor at Gethsemane.

When Jesus found the three disciples asleep, he told them, "Keep watching and praying that you may not enter into temptation; the *spirit* is willing, but the *flesh* is weak" (Mt 26:41, Mk 14:38). Prior to entering a time of temptation, we need a strategy—especially to be aware that, in our own strength, we are no match for temptation and must turn to God for help. Peter precedes his warning with this key point: "Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, *casting all your anxiety on Him*, because He cares for you." (1 Pet 5:6–7, emphasis added).

Jesus entered the Garden of Gethsemane for a customary time of prayer (Lk 22:39), except this time was different. Suddenly Jesus was blindsided (notice the word, "began," Mt 26:37, Mk 14:33). Five different Greek terms of

deep emotion are used by the Gospel writers to describe the encounter: *adēmoneō* ("troubled/distressed," Mk 14:33, Matt 26:37), *agōnia* ("distressed/anguish," Lk 22:44), *ekthambeō* ("distressed," Mk 14:33), *lupeō* ("distressed/grieved," Matt 26:37), and *perilupos* ("deeply distressed/grieved," Mk 14:34, Matt 26:38). Looking for moral support during this trial, Jesus came back to his closest friends two times. But Peter, James and John could not keep awake.

This particular event highlights some kind of inner turbulence, a lack of peace, a troubled heart. There is one distinction of this barrier compared to the previous one. Since Jesus wrestled with such distress and he never sinned (Heb 4:15), then we can infer that becoming distressed is *not in itself a sin*. Yet, it is a clue we have entered a temptation zone. But if we ignore the signals and allow ourselves to give way to such internal pressure, then it can become debilitating sinful anxiety and excessive worry. This Distressed Barrier challenges us to be prepared, to be alert. We need to increase our ability to recognize the clues to our experiences of distress. Whenever we recognize being distressed, rather than ignore or deny the clues and slip into moral failure as Peter did, we need to press into God as Jesus did. Such readiness involves a learning curve, and we can get better at it, as long it is on our radar screen of formation barriers. Paul's helpful teaching on this matter in Philippians 4:6–7 may be Paul's meditation on Jesus' Gethsemane encounter: "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

"Heart" Formation, Our Worldview Beliefs and Formation Barriers

Five formation barriers were briefly identified: dismissive, discrepancy, distracted, disconnected, and distressed. The last three are more self-explanatory, but not the first two. Before returning to a discussion of the first two soils of the parable and further explanation of these first two formation barriers, it will be helpful to consider Jesus' emphasis on forming the inner heart.

Jesus' Emphasis on Inner Heart Formation

Jesus teaches we need to give closer attention to our inner life. "For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34; Lk 6:45). "Good people bring good things out of the good stored up [treasured] in their heart, and the evil people bring evil things out of the evil stored up [treasured] in their heart. For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks" (Lk 6:45, Mt 12:35). John Nolland (1989) comments, "Jesus' location of goodness in love of enemy and nonjudgment is a call to true inner goodness of the heart,

of which one's concrete acts of goodness will be the natural fruit. He cuts through the hypocrisy, shallowness, and self-deceit of every paraded goodness of externality" (p. 309). Our attention in learning and becoming more like Jesus is to give priority to our heart formation, rather than mere conformity of external behaviors, as Michael McClymond notes,

A purely outward or behavioral change was never enough for Jesus. His teaching again and again returns to the idea that people must change at their deepest level, or rather be changed, for them to live in a fashion that is pleasing to God. Jesus often spoke of 'hearts' as soft or hard, good or bad, pure or impure. . . . Rather than actions making the person good or bad, Jesus taught the reverse, that the actions of a person flowed from the 'heart' or essential character. (2004, p. 99)

Jesus' teaching about the centrality of inner heart formation is really not new information. It is an amplification of what was taught in the Old Testament Hebrew Scriptures—the Bible Jesus studied and meditated on.

Consider Proverbs 4:13 in the Wisdom Literature. "Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life." Bruce Waltke explains, "This direction or bent of the heart [wise, pure, or perverse] determines its decisions and thus the persons' actions. . . . Since the heart is the center of all of a person's emotional-intellectual-religious-moral activity, it must be safeguarded above all things" (2004, p. 91–92). Furthermore Waltke clarifies, "It . . . is the heart that governs all activity" (p. 298). If we wish to make any headway here, we must give attention to changing our heart flow since it directs how we live.

If we wish to become more like Jesus—particularly as we attempt to address our dismissive and discrepancy barriers—it will be important to recognize the key role that core beliefs have in our heart—our character—from which flows our thoughts and actions.

Worldview Beliefs

A key matter in our character formation relates to what we actually believe to be true. Why is this important? Dallas Willard explains, "We always live up to our beliefs—or down to them, as the case may be. Nothing else is possible. It is the nature of belief" (1998, p. 307). From deep down in our character, we live out our worldview beliefs. If we want to become aware of what our actual worldview beliefs are, we just observe how we act in a variety of situations. In most cases our actions exactly match our worldview beliefs. That is the basis for that proverb, "Actions speak louder than words," and a basic principle in economics (Claar & Klay, 2007, p. 239). God designed humans so our lives are primarily directed by our deeply held worldview beliefs.

It is a grace so we do not have to be re-trained every fifteen minutes. Perhaps it is also one of the factors that will ensure we will not sin in heaven, our lives will be directed by our deeply held worldview beliefs that will all be true at that point.

Our *deeply held worldview beliefs and desires* about God and life make up the core of our character,ⁱⁱⁱ particularly those beliefs and desires that are *strongly held* (say, 75% or 80% or more) and are very *central* in importance within our worldview. To simplify the discussion, I will use the term “worldview beliefs” or “core beliefs” as a *summary phrase* for a complex set of factors within our character that influence our lifestyle, which include a host of affective elements (e.g., desires, disposition, attitudes, feelings), along with the more cognitive elements (e.g., beliefs, knowledge, pre-theoretical aspects, imagination). For ease of discussion, I focus more on the cognitive aspects, but realize there is much more involved in character formation.^{iv}

Although, these core character beliefs that guide our life are fairly stable, they can be changed, not directly by our will power, but indirectly over time. Many of our deep beliefs were formed during childhood, mostly without our awareness. As we approach adolescence and young adulthood it is likely we have little idea of all the deeply held worldview beliefs that have been formed into our inner heart. With God’s empowering grace, each of us can influence changes in our character with good decisions and formation practices, on a daily basis, over time, like laying brick by brick to build a large wall. Willard notes, “A discipline is any activity within our power that we engage in to enable us to do what we cannot do by direct effort” (1998, p. 353).

Consider two analogies to suggest the powerful positive impact of our core beliefs for our lifestyle in contrast to individual daily (and less powerful) decisions, based on will power alone. Imagine a CEO of a good and successful company that, with the joint effort of all the employees, the company as a whole (i.e., our core beliefs) can accomplish much more than a CEO alone could do (i.e., individual decisions you or I could make). Or, one can prepare for retirement by regularly setting aside small deposits of money over many years. The resulting larger amount of funds (i.e., a deeply held core beliefs) has the potential to accomplish much more in comparison with having access only to one of the earlier smaller deposits (i.e., an individual decision you or I make). Willard clarifies,

[Jesus] knew that we cannot keep the law by trying to keep the law. To succeed in keeping the law one must aim at something other and something more. One must aim to become the *kind of person* from whom the deeds of the law naturally flow. The apple tree naturally and easily produces apples because of its inner nature. This is the most crucial thing to

remember if we would understand Jesus’ picture of the kingdom heart given in the Sermon on the Mount. (1998, pp. 142–43)

With small deposits of good decisions and practices over time that incrementally embed various Jesus-like core beliefs in our character, the result is our lifestyle “flows” with more Jesus-like values—even without thinking much about it—a cumulative effect one decision alone cannot accomplish.

True core beliefs rooted in our character offer many positive benefits. The downside comes from the false core beliefs we also hold. To illustrate the harmful consequences, consider an item from medical history. If you lived 200 years ago and had a terrible headache or fever, what do you think your doctor would prescribe? A good old-fashioned bloodletting. The word means just what it says: letting blood drain out of the body. Ever since the ancient Greeks, bloodletting was the standard medical diagnosis for almost all diseases. Physicians believed it was the most direct way to normalize the imbalance of the four main bodily fluids, since they were all interconnected. Lester King notes “In the eighteenth century and much of the nineteenth, phlebotomy (literally, “cutting the vein”) held a position in therapeutics comparable to that of antibiotics today. For inflammatory diseases, such as pneumonia, phlebotomy was the traditional and generally accepted method of treatment.” (1991, p. 192).

Finally in the mid 1800s, medical experiments began suggesting a new germ theory, that microorganisms were the major cause of diseases. In 1847 Ignaz Semmelweis (d. 1865), a Hungarian physician, discovered if doctors and nurses would just wash their hands with chlorinated lime solution before examining pregnant women, this would drastically reduce fatal “childbed fever” (technically called, “puerperal fever”), from which many women died. But the medical community ridiculed Semmelweis, claiming his views were extreme, going against established medical practice. Perhaps cultural mores played a greater role in such resistance, for these gentlemen physicians were insulted to be accused of having dirty hands that needed to be washed. Many years later, Semmelweis’ theories about antiseptic prevention were confirmed. Some of us may use Listerine mouthwash today, named in honor of the British physician, Joseph Lister (d. 1912) who, around 1867, introduced certain sterilizing agents for surgical instruments and cleaning wounds that helped to make surgeries safer for patients, although physicians were not initially persuaded by these innovations.

The accuracy of our worldview of reality is an important matter, for, in some cases, it can be a matter of life and death. Bloodletting as the panacea for most diseases was a wrong medical theory and brought much harm. Furthermore, we notice that changing deeply held worldview beliefs within a

larger community can be a difficult process. The key players—the gatekeepers within a community—must be persuaded of a more accurate representation of reality.

Both the positive and negative effects of our core beliefs are conceptualized in Simon Blackburn's definition of worldview, although he emphasizes the ethical aspects,

[The moral "environment"] is the surrounding climate of [our own] ideas about how to live. It determines what we find acceptable or unacceptable, admirable or contemptible. It determines our conception of when things are going well and when they are going badly. It determines our conception of what is due us, and what is due from us, as we relate to others. It shapes our emotional responses, determining what is a cause of pride or shame, or anger or gratitude, or what can be forgiven and what cannot. It gives us our standards—our standards of behaviour. In the eyes of some thinkers . . . it shapes our very identities. (2001, p. 1)

With this background, let us return again to a discussion of now the Dismissive and Discrepancy barriers.

Worldview Beliefs and the Dismissive Barrier

The dismissive barrier is based on the seed sown on the hard road, so that the seed could not grow at all. An implication is that truth is dismissed from any further consideration. What prevents today's disciples from dismissing truth? As discussed above, an important barrier is our current worldview beliefs. Specifically, we tend to restrict our search for new-to-us truths by the ideas or concepts we regard as *not* possible or plausible. The point is we do not expend much effort exploring ideas we do not regard as possibly true. Consider two set of ideas: 1) ideas that might be possible but we have not yet embraced, and 2) ideas we think are outlandish and impossible. Examples for category #1 ideas might include some UFOs exist, some reported near death experiences offer true accounts, more answers to prayer are possible, there might be worlds with people outside of our galaxy. On the other hand examples for category #2—ideas we give no credence to since they are so implausible or impossible to us—might include that the earth is flat, humans can fly by flapping their arms, or praying for a person who just died to be raised to life again. However, since we are not omniscient and do not know everything there is to know, can we recognize it is likely there are truths to consider that we now regard as impossible?

Thus, our false worldview beliefs can hinder us from learning new truths by bracketing off whole areas of ideas we now consider to be beyond belief.

Picture a high-walled, high tech, security fence surrounding our core beliefs that repels all intrusion, repelling both false and true ideas outside the perimeter. Peter, John, and Thomas could not imagine that Jesus was resurrected. The town of Nazareth could not grasp that Jesus, who had plied his woodworking and masonry skills among them, was anything more than "the carpenter" (Mk 6:3). This limiting belief held them back from receiving Jesus' healing ministry among them: "And he was amazed at their lack of faith" (Mk 6:6). For various reasons we may also tenaciously hold on to false worldview beliefs as these folk did—which can hinder us from formation into greater freedom such truths could bring.

At times learning the truth may be troubling since we will have to admit being wrong—a challenge for teachers sometimes. In addition, our arrogance may urge us toward the dismissive barrier and resist the truth, further delaying the learning process. For example, pastor and theologian Augustine (d. 430) eventually changed his view about the cessation of miracles when he became aware of miracles occurring in his own parish, which he discusses in *The City of God* (1998, Bk. XXII, Ch 8, pp. 1120–34; originally published in 426 A.D.). Peter Brown notes,

When Augustine wrote *On the True Religion* in 390, he had stated, explicitly that miracles such as had happened in the times of the Apostles were no longer allowed to take place; and he had repeated this view, by implication, in many other books and sermons. . . . It [shift in thinking to affirm reality of miracles] is, rather, that, within the immensely complex structure of Augustine's thought, the centre of gravity had shifted; modern miracles, which had once been peripheral, now become urgently important as supports to faith. (Brown, 1967, p. 415)

As a seminary professor with graduate theological training, I must admit I have initially dismissed Christian truths I thought were too crazy to believe. For example, I used to think God could not communicate to me personally and directly. But over a period of time I became convinced the Bible does teach this important truth (e.g., 2 Sam 16:5–10; Ps 32:8–9; Mt 10:19–20, Mk 13:11). As an example, many years ago I was making a research presentation at an annual meeting of the North American Professors of Christian Education. During the question and answer time, in response to a good question, my mind went blank. It seemed like hours went by. Suddenly a great answer came to mind and I quickly shared it. But I thought I was pretty smart. Now as I reflect back I realize that God provided a way out for me, by giving me the idea. I am now much more aware and more grateful to God for his personal guidance (e.g., Phil 3:15, Jas 1:5).

Regarding this particular heart response in the Parable of the Soils, not

only is the heart totally unreceptive, but Jesus explicitly says Satan is active to keep it that way—to hinder any further opportunity for receptivity. When our hearts are hardened to truth—when we become fearful (Mk 9:32) and are not open to consider a truth—we invite Satan's activity to keep us in the dark (cf. John 8:43–47, Rom 1:21, Eph 4:18; also Jn 8:43–47). Hopefully, when we do not receive truths initially, after more growth we'll be more receptive (e.g., Jn 12:16).

Worldview Beliefs and the Discrepancy Barrier

The discrepancy barrier was based on the seed sown in the rocky places, in which seed could not develop a sufficient root. The implication I draw is that our deeply held worldview beliefs are not necessarily what we "profess" or say we believe. In some cases our *professed* beliefs have little relation to our *worldview* beliefs—how we actually live. Note this analogy: we have a perception of ourselves—an idealized image without faults—that is in contrast with reality (we do have blind spots that are obvious to others). C. S. Lewis illustrates these gaps as rats in a cellar.

Surely what a man does when he is taken off his guard is the best evidence for what sort of a man he is? Surely what pops out before the man has time to put on a disguise is the truth? If there are rats in a cellar, you are most likely to see them if you go in very suddenly. But the suddenness does not create the rats: it only prevents them from hiding. (1952, p. 150)

Using the security fence analogy again, let us expand the image and envision a secure, high walled concentration camp, such that prisoners (i.e., false core beliefs) could not easily escape (i.e. and be corrected). But the twist in this imaginary case is these prisoners do not ever want to escape. Their sole mission is to wreak havoc in the camp. Furthermore, many of these prisoners are clever and, at regular intervals, are able to disable the guards posted along the high wall and shoot at "true ideas" on the outside to keep them from ever breaking in.

We envision that our idealized self firmly holds to that truth, but reality often disrupts our routines, giving us an opportunity to notice a discrepancy. Acknowledging my character gaps is getting a bit easier for me. For example, it was the first day of class and I was there to introduce a junior adjunct professor who was to teach one of our doctoral elective seminars. She was having difficulty setting up the Power Point connections for her presentation. Class should have started 10 minutes ago. Students were just milling around. Instead of offering to be helpful, I walked to the front of the room with forceful direction and privately told her to forget the power point presentation and

just start the class session without it. She brushed me aside—we have been colleagues for many years and have a comfortable relationship—and she kept trying the connection, which eventually began working about five minutes later.

While sitting in the back of the class during her opening presentation I finally became aware of what I had done. I was shocked. Was that really me? How arrogant to take charge of someone else's class. What a control freak. It just bubbled up from the core of my character. How embarrassed I felt when, *through the Spirit's awakening ministry*, I finally noticed it 15 minutes later. I could have explained it away, being the senior faculty member in the classroom, or just ignored it—implying, "That's not me." Such a response really meant my action did not fit with my *idealized* image of myself. But this time I could admit: Yes it was; yes, it is. My anxieties had risen to such a pitch I was worried the technical difficulties and a late start of class would reflect on my reputation. I became aware of my gap: I'm ok trusting God for my circumstances, except . . . when that controlling urge surfaces.

After having confessed my sin to God and ask for forgiveness, later in the week my action step was to go to my colleague and confess my sin. She had not really attended much to my controlling actions since she was concentrating on getting the connections to work. So she passed over my apology quickly. But it was a shocking discrepancy episode to me. Yet God the Spirit who loves me, who is committed to helping me become aware of my character gaps, strengthened me not to hide or deny these episodes as much as I used to.

Implications For Teachers as Examples and Gatekeepers

These five formation barriers cover a wide range of potential hindrances to deep learning and formation, for our own journey as Jesus' disciples, and for the formation journey of our students. As an initial prod to draw out implications for practice, Table A offers some suggestions. Column 1 summarizes the particular barrier; column 2 lists the biblical basis; column 3 identifies some key questions to ask, and the last column suggests possible practices to address each barrier.

There is a special challenge for teachers and those offering guidance to others (spiritual directors, pastors, counselors, ministry leaders, mentors, seminary professors, parents, etc) in that we can unintentionally work along with these barriers to prevent our students' learning and formation. One way we do that is by giving little attention to our own personal formation journey, for we model what it looks like to be life-long learners in all aspects, not just intellectual. Jesus' warning to the educational gate-keepers of his day has

Table 1

"Unfruitful" Spiritual/Character Formation Barriers

"Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear" (Mt 11:15).

Barrier	Biblical Basis	Key Questions	Possible Practice
1. Dismissive Barrier <i>"I know enough"</i> No/little receptivity to explore ideas further; Satan persuades us to remain in the dark	Four Soils Parable Seed on the Road: No fruitfulness Mt 13:15,19; Mk 4:11-12, 15; Lk 8:12.	<i>"Lord, what truths am I hesitant to consider"</i> <i>"Why do I hesitate to consider this new-to-me idea, Lord?"</i>	Also study other viewpoints within orthodox Christianity. Look to "credible witnesses" who are seeking to know God more deeply. (Lk 8:18; Phil 4:8);
2. Discrepancy Barrier <i>"That's not me. I normally don't do that."</i> False self: a professed belief without yet being rooted in character	Rocky Soil: No fruitfulness Mt 13:20-21; Mk 4:16-17; Lk 8:13.	<i>How able am I to recognize when I have had a character gap episode, a blind spot, a "plank"?</i> <i>When was my last "gap" episode?</i> <i>How does that episode inform me about my character at this time?</i>	Cultivate receptivity when Spirit awakens us to character barriers, also feedback from others. Be engaged in at least one formation project (Mt 5:20-48; 1 Tim 4:7-8)
3. Distracted Barrier <i>"Of course I'm on track. Why?"</i> Slowly drifting away from Jesus' priorities	Thorny Soil: No fruitfulness Mt 13:22; Mk 4:18-19; Lk 8:14.	Review a list of Jesus' priorities and life goals, ask: <i>"Where am I off-course now needing realignment, Lord?"</i>	Scripture study, examine Jesus' priorities, and life goals regularly. Ask for feedback from trusted mentors, friends (Lk 21:34-36; Rev 2:1-7) Daily/weekly examen.

Table continues

Table 1. Continued

"Unfruitful" Spiritual/Character Formation Barriers

"Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear" (Mt 11:15).

Barrier	Biblical Basis	Key Questions	Possible Practice
4. Disconnected Barrier <i>"Let me jump right in and do that" (our self-talk)</i> No/little intentional dependence on God	Jn 15:4-5 No fruitfulness without abiding in Jesus	<i>"How often do I consciously connect with God throughout my day?"</i>	Monitor being alone in thoughts, and consciously connecting with God. Use cues (e.g., hourly chime, place reminder stickies in key places) (Rev 3:20, James 4:8).
5. Distressed Barrier <i>"I'm not under any stress, really"</i> A disturbing moment of distress arises within (initial distress is not sinful)	Jesus' temptation in Gethsemane: Mt 26:37-39; Mk 14:33-36; Lk 22:42-44.	<i>Am I prepared to face temptation?</i> <i>How able am I to recognize inner distress?</i> <i>"Lord, what is this particular distress about?"</i>	Cultivate receptivity when Spirit awakens us to distress barriers; Pray Philippians 4:6-7 (Jn 14:27).

often gripped me in application as a teacher: "Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge. You yourselves have not entered, and you have hindered those who were entering" (Lk 11:52, Mt 12:13). In addition, when we become satisfied with our current understanding of the subjects we teach, we can short-change our students. As professors, we may be very learned, yet we still teach from our current, limited storehouses of worldview beliefs. That is, our "dismissive barriers" can hinder those we lead or teach to be exposed to all of God's truth (cf. Mt 5:19).

Consider some implications for our teaching practice from awareness of the discrepancy formation barrier. We may hinder deep learning when we over-emphasize knowing the Bible cognitively *without* helping to nurture Christians' inner formation into actually *believing* the Bible deeply rooted in our character. Since talk is easy, one can glibly profess many Bible facts and articulate sound theology without having the respective worldview beliefs represented by these facts and theology. God desires we become Bible-*hearted practitioners*, not just Bible *knowers*, to truly know Scripture "by heart"—not just as memorized but as heart-rooted. Living in the truth is the goal, not just professing it. From the parable of the soils we learn that bearing fruit is the only reliable indicator that we have a particular truth deeply rooted in our hearts, varying across a range of effects: some thirty, some sixty, and some hundredfold.

We can recognize it will not do to present an "altar call" type of commitment to our students to turn over a new season of dedicated living, with making only a verbal or written affirmation. In and of themselves, such declarations and desires to bring about a new pattern of Jesus-like living will not bring about the hoped for change. It is an important initial step. Then we can clarify the need for continuing, intentional engagement, over time, in formation practices, relying on God's grace, and being supported within the Christian community. Otherwise we only add more guilt when no change takes place.

Some Final Thoughts

According to Jesus, the main focus in learning to become more like Jesus is forming the inner heart, becoming the kind of person who—with increasingly developed settled dispositions—keeps the moral law more routinely, rather than just trying to keep the law by just trying harder and harder to keep the law. N. T. Wright notes,

Jesus himself backed up by early Christian writers, speaks repeatedly about the development of particular *character*. Character—the transforming, shaping, and marking of a life and its habits—will generate the sort of behavior that rules might have pointed toward but which a "rule-

keeping" *mentality* can never achieve. . . . In the last analysis, what matters after you believe [now as a Christian] is neither rules nor spontaneous discovery, but character. (2010, p. 7)

Jesus' life and teachings identify at least five major formation barriers that can hinder us in our heart formation into Christlikeness:

- Dismissive Barrier (resistance to truths that seem impossible to us),
- Discrepancy Barrier (professed values that are not character deep),
- Distracted Barrier (a lifestyle slowly drifting off course),
- Disconnected Barrier (not regularly abiding in Jesus), and
- Distressed Barrier (an initial moment of troubling emotional stress that is not addressed and becomes debilitating, excessive worry).

We can be clueless about our blind spots, our character gaps—the "plank" in our eye—as Jesus taught (Mt 7:2–4). In the present age this side of heaven, we have the opportunity to make progress in our formation journeys, empowered by the Holy Spirit, the divine agent of sanctification. Yet its completion cannot take place here but awaits the joys and glory of the next age.

King David penned an eloquent confessional psalm, in which he voices God's desire for us to be open about what hinders God's work in our lives. "Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; you teach me wisdom in *the inmost place*" (Psalm 51:6, emphasis added). According to Gerald Wilson (2002, p. 779), the last term "the inmost place" is an unusual one and often used in a physical context of "plugging up" available water sources." Wilson draws the connection to Psalm 51:6: "God seeks open access to those parts of our lives that we choose to keep deeply hidden within our inner world" (p. 779). As the Old Testament declares, "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick" (Jer 17:9, NASV). What does God expect at the moment when we realize we have barriers? Transparency. The Bible calls it "confession," agreeing with God about this particular gap or sin.

The bottom line is that throughout life, we need to be open to become aware of what is *hindering our formation journey into becoming more like Jesus*. Then we can own it, confess it to God, and invite God to help us be more responsive to receive his truth. Jesus teaches it is realistic to put "words of mine . . . into practice" (Mt 7:29) and to "learn from me" (Mt 11:29).^v

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¹Regarding the Jesus' experience in Gethsemane, Hebrews 5:7 (which most scholars agree refers to Gethsemane) indicates that Jesus' prayer was heard, that is, answered. Commentators holding to the traditional interpretation of Jesus' prayer as seeking another option tend to explain away this verse. I think Hebrews 5:7 suggests we need to consider a better understanding of Gethsemane. The impressive and cumulative evidence that Craig Blaising marshals to support a positive answer to Jesus' prayer is worthy of further consideration, "Gethsemane: A Prayer of Faith, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, 22(4), December 1979, 343-43.

²I rely on Richard Swinburne's model of character as mainly consisting of beliefs and desires, see *The Evolution of the Soul*, rev ed., Oxford: Clarendon, 1997, although his assumption of the evolutionary genesis of the soul is problematic for me.

³For further discussion of worldview beliefs see K. Issler. (2009, Fall). Inner Core Belief Formation, Spiritual Practices, and the Willing Doing Gap. *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care*, 2(2), 179-98.

⁴An earlier version of the material in this article was presented at the NAPCE annual meeting in Seattle, October 2011, and appeared in *Living Into the Life of Jesus: The Formation of Christian Character*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012.

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⁵I appreciate colleague Joanne Jung for directing me to this parable