

Luke 8/4-15: THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

1. Jesus tells a parable (v4-8a)

Although we are already in the eighth chapter, and nearly 1/3 of the way through the Gospel, this is the first parable recorded by Luke.

A parable is a fictitious story drawn from everyday life that illustrates a spiritual truth.

[Jesus has, however, already used several parabolic sayings: brief comparisons with something in everyday life that illuminate the truth he is teaching (e.g. 5/31, 5/34-35, 5/36-39, 6/38, 6/39, 6/41-42, 6/43-44, 6/48-49, 7/41-42 – the last of these could qualify as a parable).]

This is one of the most well-known of the parables Jesus told – yet it has something fresh for us.

Like most parables, it is about the kingdom of God (see v1) – here, how we enter, remain, grow and bear fruit in it.

Like John the Baptist (3/7-9), Jesus was not taken in by the large crowds coming to hear him (v4): he tells this parable precisely to expose (warn against) a superficial or short-lived following of him.

The story (v5-8a) is both simple and contextual: his hearers would have been able both to follow and relate to it. Nevertheless, it requires an interpretation (v9) to have any meaning/significance.

2. Jesus speaks about his use of parables (v9-10 cf. v18)

v10 is Jesus' interpolation between the disciples question (v9) and his answer (v11ff). A literal reading of this verse would imply a form of hyper-Calvinism-meets-Gnosticism: God only wants some to be saved, has already decided who they are, and gives to them only the secret knowledge needed to enter the kingdom; conversely, he speaks in veiled and confusing parables to everyone else precisely so they are *not* saved. *But*: Scripture plainly asserts that God wants all men to be saved, and that we can choose to accept or reject his invitation (cf. Dt 30/19); Jesus has come precisely so people *can* be saved (17/10 - why would God frustrate his own purpose in sending his Son?), and parables are a means of illuminating truth, not obscuring it. The passage from Isaiah, and Jesus' use of it here, is an effect-as-purpose idiom, where, to heighten the meaning, the effect of something is presented as its purpose (cf. 12/51 [vs 2/14], and the English saying, "He fell down never to get up again"). For Jesus, as for Isaiah, though he is sent by God and speaks his message, people, because of the hardness of their hearts, will not receive him. This is the *effect* of Jesus' preaching, even when he speaks in simple parables, not the *purpose* of it. Conversely, for those who have a heart open to God and his truth, parables will illuminate that truth still further (the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God are given to them).

This is why Luke intentionally and meaningfully places v16-18 immediately after the parable. Each of these verses appear elsewhere in Luke (v16 in 11/33, v17 in 12/2, v18 in 19/26) with a slightly different meaning/application. Here they have to do with peoples' response (or lack of it) to the Parable of the Sower, and the ultimate outcome of their response. "Therefore consider carefully how you

listen." (v18) Those who thought they possessed spiritual truth but do not respond to the parable's call to listen and adjust – "whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him". Conversely, those who are submitted to God, and do understand spiritual truth, will be given even more understanding through such parables – "whoever has will be given more".

3. Jesus interprets the parable (v11-15)

When Jesus interprets the parable, he makes it clear that this particular parable is also an allegory. In most parables, the story and all its elements serve only to illustrate one main truth; each element in the story is not meant to correspond to something in reality. When people have allegorized parables, outlandish interpretations have resulted. We should only do this when Jesus gives us clear license to do so – as here.

In this parable, then, as in all allegories, every element in the story corresponds to something in reality. "The **seed** is the Word of God" (v11), that is, the message Jesus had been preaching to the crowds; for us, it is the message from God and about God that we hear. The **sower** (or farmer) is the messenger, the one preaching the word of God (here, Jesus; for us, one or more others). He scatters his seed wherever he can, indiscriminately, even though he knows not all of it will find fertile soil – those who preach the gospel need to do likewise.

But this parable is not really about the seed or the sower. It is about the **soils**, about human hearts – for the four different kinds of soil (or ground) that the seed sown by the sower falls on stand for four different kinds (or states) of the human heart – and the life that results from each heart. Note how, as Jesus interprets the parable, he speaks of each kind of soil as "those... who" (it is people he is talking about); and in the first and last cases he speaks of the "heart". Perhaps this parable should rather be called 'The Parable of the Soils' (or Hearts).

[i] "some [seed] fell along the path" (v5 – paths used to go through ancient fields): some hearts are hard and cannot be penetrated by the word landing on them. The seed here is trampled on, or birds eat it, before it can germinate: people hear the Word but, before they can properly consider it, the devil 'tramples on' (distorts, discredits) it and "takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved" (v12). Note the simple formulation which Jesus implies here, and which is confirmed throughout the rest of the NT: to believe is to be saved.

[ii] "Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture." (v6) Note that this seed actually germinates and begins growing, but then dies because there is nothing (or insufficient) to sustain its life and growth. Jesus confirms this in his interpretation: some people "receive the word with joy when they hear it", "they believe for a while" (note: they are saved!), "but they have no root" and "in a time of testing they fall away" (v13). Some hearts like what they hear and embrace it, but their understanding and/or their faith is shallow – and as soon as any testing (of life or of their faith) comes, they fall away. Two reasons are given for their demise. "They had no moisture": perhaps their relationship and walk with God was insufficiently sustained by either their personal devotionals or their church fellowship. "They have no root": there was not the understanding of, or conviction about, biblical

truth (teaching) to anchor them securely in the faith/truth come what may (including a certainty that this, and this alone, saves).

[iii] The unhappy outcomes with the first and second type of soils are clear but that with the third is more subtle, insidious and thus dangerous – and thus perhaps also more common amongst and relevant to many to whom we preach. These plants (unlike the first) do begin growing, but (unlike the second) they *do not die!* These people do not fall away – they remain living as believers – but their spiritual life is choked and made ineffective and unfruitful. For this seed falls among thorns, which grow up with it and choke the plants (v7). There is seed other than the word which is in the heart, which is not eradicated as it should be prior to sowing, which is growing up at the same time and bearing its fruit in the human heart and life. This is not the shallow, short-lived heart; this is the divided, distracted, compromising heart – perhaps more common, certainly more dangerous. Jesus tells us what the thorns that grow in our hearts alongside the word are: "life's worries, riches and pleasures" (v14). These usurp the good crop's nutrients and space (time and energies); they choke our spiritual life so we "do not mature". We are ruined (rendered useless) without knowing it!

[iv] Finally, there is "good soil", where the seed (the word of God) not only germinated and grew but "yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown" (v8a; this is an unusually productive harvest – cf. Ge 26/12). [Matthew & Mark say "multiplying thirty, sixty or even a hundred times": that is, not all good soil has to have the same return to be called good; the quantity of increase is directly proportional to the quality of soil.] This "stands for those with a noble and good heart" (v15) – it is both about and for our hearts that Jesus is telling this parable: he wants us to examine – and *adjust* – our hearts. How do we tell 'a noble and good heart'? When it hears the word, it retains it (v path), and by persevering (v rocks [not falling away requires our persevering]) produces a crop (v thistles).

P.S. Jesus' appeal - then and now (v8b cf. v16-18)

Jesus punctuates this parable with an unusually strong appeal to his hearers to listen and respond. "Listen!" he says at the outset, an appeal of urgency and authority (Mk 4/3). He finishes the parable with another impassioned appeal: "When he had said this, he called out, 'He who has ears to hear, let him hear.'" (Lk 8/8b) – a challenge to his hearers to understand the message and appropriate it for themselves. And Luke follows Jesus' interpretation of the parable with 3 sayings of Jesus that appear elsewhere in the Gospel with a different application but here all have reference to the parable he has just told. Just as a lit lamp is placed to give light and not hidden (v16), "there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open" (v17). What is really in my heart and yours will out; the true state of our 'soil' will become evident eventually in what it does or doesn't grow, however much we would like to think or hope differently. "Therefore consider carefully how you listen." (v18) Jesus wants us to hear, really hear – not for the sake of hearing his words merely but so that we do something about them. *For the four kinds of soil (states of heart) are not unchangeable givens that we can do nothing about.* If this was the case, why bother telling the parable? They do describe how your and my heart may lie now, and how we are likely (as long as we have that heart) to respond (or not respond) to the word. But Jesus tells the

parable, and earnestly enjoins us to listen to it, so that, understanding what certain 'soils' look like (what the giveaway signs are), we can recognize our hearts and make an adjustment – so that the seed indeed finds good soil in our hearts.

Even for the unbeliever, the revelation of how the hard 'path' of his heart may cause him to lose the opportunity given him when he hears the word may help him to guard his heart so that doesn't happen. For believers, in whose heart the seed has already germinated, their hearts will be described by one of the remaining three soils in the parable. If they recognize their heart in the description of the second soil, and see what it may easily lead to, they may be provoked to deepen their root and find moisture. For those who see their hearts and lives described in the third soil and its result, they may be moved to repentance, to weed out the thorns from their hearts and become fruitful. And for those who are good soil, there is always the incentive to produce even greater fruit for their Lord.

Jesus speaks the parable of the soils to you & me. What soil are we? What soil do we want to be? Let us become that soil.

