

The Soil of Our Hearts

Luke 8:1-18

We are back to Luke after a couple of months. We started last summer and the last time we were here was Labor Day weekend because of our evangelism series. The reason I want to go through Luke is primarily so we can grow as disciples of Christ by studying his life and ministry. Also because I've never preached through one of the Gospels before and it seemed this would be a good time to do so. So far in Luke, we've seen Jesus begin his first ministry tour, which was in Galilee. He had become very popular because of his healing and teaching ministry. He preached to a huge multitude of people in the Sermon on the Mount, which we saw in Luke 6, and he continued to minister in that region after that. And that's where we pick things up today.

In the last sermon, we looked at a couple stories in Luke 7 of how Jesus responded to a centurion and a prostitute and how he was actually pleased with them because of their faith, humility, gratitude, and love. Today we are going to look at the first half of Luke 8, which is mainly about one of the many parables Jesus taught at that time about the kingdom of heaven. A parable is a simple story that has a deeper spiritual meaning. Matthew records 6 of these kingdom parables, Luke includes just one.

The context around the teaching of this parable had to do with growing tension between Jesus and the Pharisees in the region of Galilee. Jesus' fame was spreading and that stirred up opposition from the religious leaders who were worried about all the attention he was getting, especially since he was clearly not lining up with them or supporting what they were doing. Matthew 12 tells about Jesus casting a demon out of a man, and after that the Pharisees accused him of being possessed by the prince of demons – saying that's how he was able to cast out demons. Jesus refuted and rebuked them and told them that it was by the Spirit of God that he cast out demons and in Matthew 12:28 he said, *"If I drive out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God has come upon you."*

And that's the statement that I think leads into his telling of the kingdom parables. The fact that he was casting out demons meant that the kingdom of God had come upon them – a kingdom that was different than the kingdom of the world and the religious kingdom the Pharisees were trying to spread. And so Jesus told them parables that revealed what the kingdom of God, or kingdom of heaven

was like. The first one that's recorded is what we call the Parable of the Sower. It's actually more about the soil than the sower, but that's what it's called. It's a parable that revealed the different ways that people would respond to Jesus' teaching. You had people like the Pharisees who rejected him and you had Jesus' disciples who received every word, and you had the rest of the people who were probably somewhere in between.

It's a parable that's very relevant today and helps us see where we're at in how we're responding to God's Word in our lives. It reveals where our hearts are at and it can be encouraging, convicting, or challenging. To what degree do we follow the teachings of the Bible? I suppose all of us would say we take the Bible very seriously, but if we would pry around and look at the details of our lives, it probably wouldn't be quite that straightforward. All of us hear the Word of God in various ways. For some, it's basically when we go to church on Sunday. For others it might include another Bible study during the week. Some of us have personal devotions and read the Bible almost every day or listen to preaching online. Some of us even go beyond that and study it so that we can teach.

The big question for us this morning is: How are you responding to God's Word in your life? When you read something or receive a teaching from the Bible, what do you do with it? How much do you let it influence your life? Do we allow God's Word to shape us or does it go in one ear and out the other? This parable will help us see where we're at. We're going to read it and the surrounding context and try to understand the heart of what Jesus was trying to say.

Read Luke 8:1-3.

Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, ² and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, ³ and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.

This gives just some general context for when this parable was spoken. Like I said earlier, the book of Matthew fills you in with a bunch more details, especially about the tension between the Pharisees and Jesus.

Read Luke 8:4-8.

⁴And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable, ⁵“A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. ⁶And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. ⁷And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. ⁸And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.” As he said these things, he called out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”

So this is a simple story, but it had a deeper meaning, and I’m assuming the people knew that. After telling it and the other parables found in Matthew, he didn’t tell the deeper meaning. He let the people wonder: “He who has ears let him hear.” I think the people would have wondered: “What was Jesus talking about? What did it mean?” That’s certainly what his disciples were wondering, and later on, when he was alone with them, he explained its meaning.

Read Luke 8:9-10.

And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, ¹⁰ he said, “To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that ‘seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.’”

In other words, the purpose of the parables is twofold – depending on who you are. The Reformation Study Bible says: *“To those who have a relationship with Jesus (like the disciples), parables deepen understanding and foster that relationship, but to those who do not (like the Pharisees), parables increase the confusion and ignorance. Thus the function of parables is both to enlighten and to conceal.”*

There are secrets of the kingdom of heaven that are told in parables and for those who love Christ and follow him, those secrets are given as a gift through further explanation and revelation from him. So that’s pretty cool – if you want to know what the parables mean, you’ve got to go to Christ and seek the answers from him. On the other hand, for those who don’t love Christ or follow him the secrets of the kingdom of heaven will remain a mystery because they are told in parables that can’t be understood and never will because they won’t seek him for the answers. Nobody knows the deeper meaning of the parables unless they go to Jesus to get the answers.

He goes on to reveal the secrets of the kingdom contained in this parable to his disciples.

Read Luke 8:11-15.

Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. ¹² The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. ¹³ And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. ¹⁴ And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. ¹⁵ As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.

So the secrets contained in this parable have to do with the ways people respond to the Word of God. The Word is the seeds, the people are the different kinds of soil, and what happens to the seeds is what happens in people's lives as they hear the Word.

I understand this parable a little better this year because I tried planting food plots for the first time and it was a big learning curve. I wanted lots of vegetation for the deer, so I bought seeds and then had to prepare the ground. I learned that in order to get a good crop I had to kill the weeds, get rid of some of the rocks, and make sure the soil was fertile and had the right nutrients. So I tried killing the weeds with herbicide. I picked a whole bunch of rocks. I did a soil test to find acidity and nutrient levels. I added lime and fertilizer. And then I planted the seeds.

You know what I found out? The seeds I planted along the trails didn't grow very well – the ground was too hard. I don't know if the birds ate them or not. The seeds in the sandy/rocky soil popped up but didn't do very well for lack of moisture. The seeds in the weedy areas came up, but the weeds choked them out and they didn't grow well. And in those areas where there was good soil and there weren't rocks and weeds, the plants grew really well – a bountiful crop.

So I can appreciate even more what this parable is talking about. It's all about people and different ways we receive God's Word. (Picture) Some people just

reject it – their hearts are hard and God’s Word doesn’t affect them in any way. Satan snatches away the truth. It goes in one ear and out the other. That’s the Pharisees. That’s unbelievers who reject Christ. They’re just not interested.

Some people like what they hear and believe for a while – it’s a breath of fresh air that gives hope in whatever circumstance they’re in. So they respond with favor. But then something happens that they don’t like. The rocks start to have their effect. Maybe God’s Word calls for some kind of sacrifice or something hard that they don’t want to do. Or maybe they face some pressure or persecution for obeying God’s Word. And as soon as that difficulty arises, they jump ship. They don’t want it anymore. It’s not the quick fix or magic formula for happiness they thought it was, so they move on to something else.

Others hear the Word and take it to heart, but their lives are so full of other stuff that it eventually it gets choked – pushed aside so it has very little influence. It doesn’t transform because there’s no room for change. There are too many other things to focus on and seek after. Too many problems or worldly pursuits.

But for some the Word is warmly received. There is an openness and willingness to be changed and transformed. The Word sinks in deeply and takes root and grows. Transformation happens. There’s the fruit of the Spirit, goodness, righteousness, and peace. There’s a difference in how they treat people and there’s ministry to others. The seed produces a bountiful crop.

That’s the hidden meaning in this parable and as Jesus shared that with his disciples I imagine there was some self-reflection. “What am I like? How do I respond to Jesus’ teaching?” Jesus followed with another illustration and warning.

Read Luke 8:16-18

“No one after lighting a lamp covers it with a jar or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light. ¹⁷ For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light. ¹⁸ Take care then how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away.”

According to what I read in Leon Morris’ commentary and the footnotes in the Reformation Study Bible, Jesus was telling his disciples that in the same way that a

lamp is lit to give light to all in the house, all the secrets of the kingdom will eventually be revealed. Therefore be careful how you respond when you hear these secrets and truths of the kingdom. To those who receive them (like good soil), more will be given. But those who reject them or turn from them (like the other soils) will not receive any more.

It reminds me of what it says in James 1:22-25: *“But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. ²³ For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. ²⁴ For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. ²⁵ But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.”*

Be careful how you respond to the secrets of the kingdom – the truth revealed in God’s Word. This challenge is the same challenge I believe we need to take away from this parable today. How are you responding to God’s Word in your life? Do you see traces of the hardened soil or rocky soil or soil getting choked out with weeds? If so, there needs to be confession and repentance. We need to yield in submission to God and humble ourselves before his Word.

This goes for the easy parts and the hard parts. The parts that call us to do things we’re glad to do and those that are going to be difficult. We need to guard against the tendency to let things go in one ear and out the other. We need to guard against abandoning truth when it calls for sacrifice or leads to hardship. And we need to pay attention to weed control and not let the busyness of life or the pursuit of worldly things drown out the influence of God’s Word.

May we all be like the good and rich soil so that when the seeds of truth are planted they can take root and grow, so that there’s transformation and a bountiful harvest of fruit.