

It's All About the Soil

Luke 8:4-15

Cynthia Thomas tells the true story from her brother's honeymoon. The wedding and reception were wonderful. They danced till the wee hours of the morning, and so it was very late by the time the groom and his bride got to their hotel's fancy bridal suite. They opened the door and hit the light switch only to discover nothing but a couch, chairs, and a table—no bed!

They poked around and discovered it was a sofa-bed, with typically lumpy mattress and uncomfortable springs. After a fitful night and waking up with sore backs, the groom went to the hotel desk to complain.

The front desk clerk asked, "Did you open the door inside the room?" When the groom went back to the room, he opened the door they thought was a closet. And there, complete with fruit basket and chocolates, was a beautiful bridal suite bedroom!

[source: Cynthia Thomas, Glen Ellyn, Ill. Christian Reader, "Rolling Down the Aisle."]

The twin function of Jesus' parables

So it is for many when it comes to the parables of Jesus. Jesus' parables hold within the secrets of God's Kingdom. Jesus calls them secrets in that the parables perform a twin function:

- For those who come eager and hungry to hear from God, the parables reveal life-changing truths—about what God is like, what he values, what it truly means to be in his Kingdom, and more.
- But to those who hear Jesus' teaching disinterested, closed-minded about being willing to change, the same parables conceal deep truths that could otherwise bring great insight and freedom.

That's a very brief overview of last week's introduction to this new series titled Secrets of the Kingdom: Unlocking the Parables of Jesus.

- Jesus' parables hide truth from the self-satisfied;
- While they reveal truth to those who come eager and hungry to hear from God.

It's all about the soil

We pick up this morning with the parable that introduces all the other parables. Open your Bible with me to Luke chapter 8 and verse 11. All three synoptic gospels—Matthew, Mark & Luke (synoptic meaning similar in content)—all three include this parable, along with Jesus explaining it. Beginning in Luke 8:4 we read...



While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: 5 "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. 6 Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. 7 Other seed fell among

... told this parable: 5 A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. 6 Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. 7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. 8 Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown."

Like almost all of Jesus' parables, the storyline is simple—so simple that many miss the secret. Along with the other parables of Jesus, there's something here that goads a personal response, the sense "I need to do something with this." Just like the others, this parable is engaging. It gets us thinking, trying to figure out the secret—a secret that turns your thinking upside down. And this like the other parables of Jesus reveals the secret at the end. Kind of like a good punch line at the end of a joke, or like the big reveal comes toward the end of an M. Night Shyamalan movie, the final line is where you want to look the closest.

Did you catch the secret?

As Jesus ends the parable, he does so with a caution. A bright flashing caution light. Verse 8: *When he said this, he called out, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."*

"If anyone has listening ears, now's the time to use them! Are you listening, really listening?"

Verse 18 is similar. Jesus cautions...

"Consider carefully how you listen."

Be very careful that you don't *miss the secret*.

We dealt with verses 8-10 last Sunday. Jesus' disciples really want to know the secret here. So Jesus unpacks the parable, a phrase at a time, beginning with verse 11:

11 "This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. 12 Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. 13 Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.

14 The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. 15 But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.

In the end, Jesus reveals, it's all about what the soil does with the seed. It's all about what the soil does with the seed. The seed is the same quality throughout: the seed, Jesus says, the word of God.

Spiritual life, a spiritual harvest, spiritual abundance comes from hearing, retaining, and persevering with the Word of God. Period. We don't want to modify the seed of the Word of God. We don't need to alter it to try to get better results. God's Word, the NT says, is living and active. So a spiritual harvest, Jesus says, comes from hearing, retaining, and persevering with the Word of God. It's all about what the soil does with the seed.

[To help the congregation remember, we handed out seed packets at this point]

I want you to remember this, so we have a gift for you today. These are the real deal, a garden in a box. If you want to experience this parable, plant these seeds. Take it to the next level. See the parable play out for yourself in real time.

Four responses to the seed of God's Word

While those seed packets are being given to you, let's get our hands dirty. Let's dig into the dirt, taking the four places the seed of God's Word is sown, each with different results, considering carefully how we listen. First comes the...

1. Hard path: God's Word finds no place in me.

Jesus says...

"A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up."

Verse 12 Jesus explains:

"Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word

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Verse 12 Jesus explains:

"Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved." Luke 8:12

That end phrase tells us what God's aim is: that people might believe and be saved. The good news of Jesus is that getting right with God is not about what you do. It's about believing what Jesus has done. His death and resurrection is more than enough to make peace between you and God; to forgive any and all of your offenses against God. If you catch nothing else, carefully consider this: Jesus came so that you may believe in him and be saved.

Unfortunately, the reality is that there is also a devil who actively fights against God's purpose. His day will come, and he will be thrown into hell. But until then, the Bible clearly teaches there is a real devil, who really does steal, kill, and destroy where God wants to give, bring to life, and build up.

Fields in the first-century Middle East were long, narrow strips of land marked off not by fences but by footpaths. The sower would take an open cloth bag looped over his shoulder and *throw* a handful of seed at a time over the field. No Reynolds Farm Equipment store nearby, no John Deere tractors, so the most efficient way to plant at the time was this kind of broadcasting. When broadcasting seed, *some* would fall beyond the field's boundary onto the hardened path. Before it had a shot at germinating, the birds would grab them as food.

Some people's hearts, Jesus says, likewise prove to be against receiving God's Word. The devil snatches the seed away before it can have any effect.

How does the devil snatch the Word of God away from a person's heart? He uses deceit. Jesus said the devil is a liar and the father of lies (John 8:44). The devil deceives through false teachers who claim to represent Jesus but in reality twist the Scriptures to undermine the Bible's clear message.

The devil also exploits our natural passions, distorting them to destructive ends: appetites for food and sex run outside God-given boundaries; pride of accomplishment aggrandizes to vain selfishness; the strength of God-given will gets pressed to the point of stubborn independence and unwillingness to learn and change. The devil diverts the mind and affections from God and his living Word, to self and the self-determined path.

John Yates tells the fictional story of a weekend when the Devil put on a garage sale. All of Satan's tools were marked with various prices. There were his tools of hatred, over there was jealousy, near the back was deceit and lying, right up front was pride—all of them at exorbitant prices, far more than you'd expect at a garage sale.

But over to the side of the yard was a tool on display all by itself. It was more obviously worn down from use than any of the other tools. It was also had the highest price tag of all. That tool was labeled, DISCOURAGEMENT.

When questioned, the Devil explained, "Oh, why that's more useful to me than any other tool I have access to! When I can't bring down my victims with any of the rest of my tools, I bring out discouragement, because so few people realize that it belongs to me."

[Source: John Yates, "An Attitude of Gratitude"]

Discouragement snatches God's Word away, so that it finds no place in you—if you don't fight back with the promises of God's Word.

Another way to say this is that the devil tempts us to bring us down, but God tests us to bring us up.

[Source: Jerry W. Mixon in *Along the Way*]

The second kind of ground we want to dig into, the second place we want to consider carefully

The second kind of ground we want to dig into, the second place we want to consider carefully how we listen is...

2. **Rocky ground: God's Word takes no root in me.**

Jesus says...

"Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture."

Verse 13 he explains...

"Those on the rocky ground are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away." Luke 8:13

Jesus is describing a farmer's nightmare: sowing seed on what looks like great land, but beneath a layer of soil is a rock bed. The seed has no chance of taking root.

These are people who come in with a splash and look like they're going to do great. But sooner or later, some hardship hits them. And they're blown away. They disappear. Gone. It becomes apparent then that somehow the message never really got through. It didn't take root. They didn't sink their roots deep in Christ. They didn't anchor themselves to God's Word. They sort of believed for a while; but when things get too hot, they got out of the kitchen. They fall away.

One of the greatest reasons for connecting with a local church is to help one another put down roots in God's Word, help one another anchor to God's Word so that when hardship comes, you have a strong root system to hold strong.

A plant that never puts down roots...will never thrive. It is the roots that keep a tree standing through storms. Consider the Giant Sequoias you can find out West.



It is their roots that enable Giant Sequoias to live 2,000 to 3,000 years and grow as much as 250 feet tall.

It is their roots extending out as far as 300 feet from the tree's base that give them stability. More specifically, it is their roots interconnecting with the roots of nearby trees that enables them to reach so high and yet not fall over in storms. Anyone hear a Kingdom secret in that? Sequoias fuse their roots together rather than competing against one another. The secret of Giant Sequoias is found in the roots.

The third kind of ground we want to dig into, considering carefully how we listen is...

3. **Thorny ground: God's Word is choked by everything else pulling on me.**

Verse 7 he says, *"Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants."*

Verse 14 Jesus explains:

"The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature." Luke 8:14

Thorny weeds choke out fruitfulness. The Greek word Luke uses is the same used to describe the crown of thorns put on Jesus' head to mock him as King, as Lord. There are a hundred different "weeds"—things that look green but promise what they can never deliver. What they do instead is push aside and choke out the fruitful life God intends. Jesus names three such thorny weeds: life's worries, riches, and pleasures.

life's worries, riches, and pleasures.

A recent study tracked the top temptations Americans face. "Often" or "sometimes," respondents say, we...

- Worry—60%
- Procrastinate—60%
- Eat too much—55%
- Are lazy—41%
- Spend more money than I can afford—35%

There are several things that can choke out the fruitful life God intends. You get distracted, pulled aside from what matters most, what will last forever, by what seems attractive in the moment.

I came across something fascinating recently from the realm of brain science research: Neurologists have scanned the brains of people as they recalled times they felt close to God in prayer or worship. The same specific area of the brain (called the caudate nucleus) lit up in all of these people when they felt connected to God.

Neurologists then tested another group, but this time exposed them to material possessions. When they showed images of products that were tied to "cool" brands, the exact same area of the brain lit up. What the neuroscientists discovered, then, is that people who bought certain items experienced the same sensations as those who had deep religious experiences.

[Source: James Bryan Smith, [The Good and Beautiful Life](#) (InterVarsity Press, 2010), pp. 163-164]

In other words, brain science research shows how easy it is to substitute stuff for God—ultimately choking out the fruitfulness for which God created you. So carefully consider how much mental real estate you give to worrying about the future, the love of money, and pleasure.

Finally, the fourth kind of ground. The fourth kind of ground we want to dig into, getting our hands dirty as we consider carefully how we listen is...

4. Fruitful ground: God's Word is bearing fruit in me.

Verse 8 Jesus says...

Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown."

When he said this, he called out, "Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear."

Verse 15 he explains the meaning:

"But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop." Luke 8:15

They hear God's word, they cling to God's word, and thus in time they patiently produce a harvest.

They seize God's Word and hold onto it, sticking with it until at last there's a harvest.

I was driving out of state recently and came across a farm radio show. They were talking about how to make money as a farmer. And in the midst of the discussion, when the host asked his guest about farm futures, as in the stock market, his guest came back with something that sounded like it was written for us today. He noted that in order to make money as a farmer, in order to make it all the way till the harvest, you need to be three things:

- Positive
- Patient
- Persistent

"That's what good farmers are," he said.

- They're positive: there are lots of reasons you can choose to be a Debby Downer, but that's not going to bring in crops.
- They're patient: there's no such thing in farming as an instant crop, despite our advances in

- They're positive: there are lots of reasons you can choose to be a Debby Downer, but that's not going to bring in crops.
- They're patient: there's no such thing in farming as an instant crop, despite our advances in technology. A season is a season, no matter how you cut it. So you can stress yourself to death, or you can wait patiently until the crop is ready to harvest.
- And they're persistent. Some years are lean and mean. Sometimes there's drought. Other times pests come along and mess things up, so there's a lack of harvest to bring in. But they don't quit. They keep sowing. And waiting. Until there is a harvest.

The parable of the soils today

In the same vein the NT letter to the Christians in Galatia urges us on today, to think and act like spiritual farmers, with this admonition:

"Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up." Galatians 6:9

The mark of authentic faith, Jesus says, is endurance. So ask God for opportunities to share your faith. Don't stress over how people will respond. That's not on you. Just look for ways to plant those seeds. Some will receive the good seed of God's Word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop!

May that be true of us in our faithfulness—that we receive God's Word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop! And may this become true of generations to come, through our faithfulness.