

9/13/26

How Are You Hearing?

Luke 8:4-18

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Today we begin a new worship series: **Jesus' Upside-Down Kingdom: Rethinking How Life is Supposed to Work.** Each passage we'll hear, in this five-week series, gives us a different version of the reaction, "Wait, that's not the way life's supposed to work!" What? The seed falls on different soil? The humble are justified? Let the weeds grow? Everyone gets the same pay? The younger son gets a party?! There can be tension between our instincts and Jesus' kingdom that we need to listen to, and learn from, to live as disciples of Christ.

Today, I'll be preaching about Jesus' first and foundational parable – what's often described as the Parable of the Sower, or the Parable of the Soils.

On one level, **a parable is simply a comparison, a putting of one thing beside another to make a point.**¹ Because parables involve images and characters, they're easier to remember than propositional teaching. However, because they involve images and characters, interpreting them is, sometimes, not so simple.

Parables make us slow down. They require that we wrestle with them, and ponder them, because their meaning isn't always easily apparent. In fact, we often miss the point, or put the emphasis in the wrong place. This is obvious from how we refer to a couple of Jesus' best-known parables – such as the Laborers in the Vineyard from *Matthew 20*, which is truly about the Outrageously Generous Landowner; or The Prodigal Son from *Luke 15*, which is more precisely, the parable of The Prodigal Sons, but, most accurately, the parable of The Loving Father. The parables of Jesus tend to turn our expectations upside down. You may find them disconcerting, and, sometimes, disturbing.

The parables of Jesus are about the Kingdom of God; they are about the mystery of the kingdom that's hidden in the world. The parables of Jesus are not nice little stories that you email friends with promises to receive innumerable blessings within 48 hours if you do so, but stories that shake our preconceptions, and call into question our understanding of who God is, who we are, how God works, and what we are to do.

¹ Robert Farrar Capon, *Parables of the Kingdom: Jesus' Left-Handed Approach to a Wrong-Headed World*, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1988), p. 15.

Jesus often taught using parables. “At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to **tease it into active thought.**”²

Matthew, Mark, and Luke all give a primary place to the following parable (*Luke 8:4-18*): “When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable: ‘A sower went out to sow his seed; and as he sowed, some fell on the path and was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up. Some fell on the rock; and as it grew up, it withered for lack of moisture. Some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.’ As he said this, he called out, ‘Let anyone with ears to **hear listen!**’ Then his disciples asked him what this parable meant. He said, ‘To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God; but to others I speak in parables, so that “looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand.” Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. **The ones on 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. **The ones on the rock** are those who, when they **hear the word**, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe only for a while and in a time of testing fall away. As for what fell **among the thorns**, these are the ones 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. **But as for that in the good soil, these are the ones who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.** No one after lighting a lamp hides it under a jar, or puts it under a bed, but puts it on a lampstand, so that those who enter may see the light. For nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed, nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light. **Then pay attention to how you listen; for to those who have, more will be given; and from those who do not have, even what they seem to have will be taken away.**”

² C.H. Dodd, quoted in Fred Craddock’s Interpretation Series Commentary, *Luke*, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1990, page 108.

The seed in the parable is the Word of God. The parable of the Sower reflects what happened in Jesus' day, and what is still happening, today. Jesus, and his message about the kingdom of the heavens, are not universally embraced. **The parable describes four different responses to Jesus and his message. We're invited to find ourselves in the parable.** Jesus describes a typical farmer in Palestine, who sows seed before plowing. To sow seeds meant to scatter them where they would have a chance to germinate. Everyone, in Jesus' day, knew what sowing was. Some of the seed ends up on the path that villagers have made across the stubble that the farmer intends to plow. Some fell on the rocky ground, where the limestone lies just below the surface, while other seeds fell in soil that has the seeds of thorn plants that will be turned under in the plowing, as well.

On one level, the parable makes the point that the victory of the kingdom is sure. As silent, mysterious, and unseen – as the germination of a seed in good soil – the kingdom will certainly come. The harvest is God's doing, and God is faithful. Yet, the time between sowing and harvesting is full of potential difficulties. The Word encounters many challenges between sowing and harvesting, so we shouldn't be surprised, or discouraged, that this is the case in our lives, or in our time.

The different experiences of the seed – on the path, rocky ground, among thorns, and in good soil – can represent the responses of different people to the Word, or our responses at various times in our lives.

What's important for us to understand is that **we're responsible for how we listen and hear.** In the parable, there is a progression – from worst-case scenario to best case. The worst case is the seed that falls on the path and is eaten by birds. Jesus, here, is equating birds with the devil, which is hard on us bird lovers. The devil recognizes the power of the Word, even when human beings don't. Elsewhere in the gospels, demons knew who Jesus was, when other people didn't. Birds recognize seed for what it is, even if a path doesn't. Just as birds will eat seeds and excrete them somewhere else – in a way that often helps the seeds thrive in a way unforeseen by the birds – so, too, even when the adversary may try to thwart the power of the Word, that latent power remains. We all know people who have been so hardened by life that they're like a beaten path, in which the life-giving seed of the Word finds little chance to take root. We can harden our hearts, so the Word of God can't take root and bear fruit in

our lives. This can happen, even in the lives of people who consider themselves committed believers.

The second response to Jesus is seen in those sown on rocky ground, who “*believe only for a while*”, and, in a time of testing, fall away. Shallow soil produces rapid growth that quickly withers away. The gospels tell the stories of many people who came to Jesus with great enthusiasm, only to disappear when the cost of discipleship and faithfulness became greater than they were willing to pay. In **Luke 9:57-58**, “*As they were going along the road, someone said to Jesus, ‘I will follow you wherever you go.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.’*” This person had **no idea of the revolutionary change of life implied by claiming to be ready to follow Jesus** anywhere on the adventure of discipleship.

Church membership lists across the country include the names of countless folks just like those in the crowd around Jesus. They joined a church because it was the “in” place to go, or it seemed like the right thing to do, or because they wanted something from the church. But when the expectations of Jesus are clearly shared, when the opportunity to enter the school of life with Jesus as our teacher, when long-held habits, thoughts, prejudices, and ideas are confronted by the gospel, their enthusiasm wanes, and these people disappear. Those sown on rocky soil are those who, when the going gets tough, they get going... away from the Word, Jesus, and the church.

The first soil is impenetrable; the second, shallow; but the third has the potential for a generous harvest. The seeds sown among thorns weren’t necessarily thrown on ground already covered with thorn bushes, but among unclean soil that was filled with the seeds of weeds. Jesus says, “*The cares of the world and the lure of wealth choke the word, and it yields nothing.*” Unless we have a clear view of the abundant life available to us in God’s kingdom, wealth creates – for some people – an illusion of security and well-being that causes us to trust it, rather than “*The living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy*” (1 Timothy 6:17). Some of the most generous people I know are committed Christians, who recognize their wealth is a trust from the Lord, and an opportunity to further God’s work and share joy by blessing others.

We don’t have to own things to love them, trust them, even serve them. The percentage of those in bondage to wealth is probably no greater among the rich than

among the poor. It's not money or gain, but *the love of it*, that is the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6:10, KJV). In Matthew 19:16-30, a rich young man asked Jesus what good deed he must do, to have eternal life. In answering him, the last thing he needed to do, Jesus said, was to “*sell your possessions, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.*” When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.” Jesus knew, for this man – and for others like him – material wealth and prosperity had a greater grip on his heart than God did. “*Jesus’ word revealed his true god. For even though he sincerely professed to keep the commandments and had recognized divinity in Jesus, he was unwilling to forsake his riches and keep the first commandment by following him. We need an understanding of God more compelling than wealth.*”³

The fourth and final response is the one we’re striving for, as we seek to devote ourselves to following Jesus, and becoming like him. The seeds sown **on good soil** are those “***who, when they hear the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patient endurance.***” Reading the scriptures on our own, participating in worship, taking part in a Bible study, seeking God’s presence during our daily lives – help to prepare the soil of our heart to make it more honest, good, and patient. An honest and good heart is receptive to the Word.

Jesus says, “*Some fell into good soil, and when it grew, it produced a hundredfold.*” **The seed will bear fruit and yield more than we can imagine.** The size of the yield reminds us of the Word’s power, and its mysterious sovereignty over the whole process of spiritual growth. The size of the harvest indicates it’s God’s supernatural seed at work that yields such a bountiful result.

We can only push images so far – we need to remember that when we’re interpreting parables; the soil of our heart or life isn’t *exactly* like soil in nature. There is little hope of arctic ice fields, or the sands of the Sahara Desert, producing like rich, Pennsylvania farmland. But the good news is that human soil is never without promise and potential. Natural soils can’t create – or choose – their own climate. Rocky, Maine soil can’t say, “That’s it, I can’t take one more winter, I’m moving to Florida!” Unlike soil, we can influence our spiritual environment in several ways. We’re responsible for

³ Dallas Willard, Spirit of the Disciplines, 199-200, on the deceitfulness of riches.

working with God to prepare the soil of our heart for the seed of God's Word and the presence of Jesus Christ. With God's help, we can do this by softening and humbling our hearts. We can choose to listen to the Word – actively, eagerly, and with a willingness to be influenced and changed – rather than, merely, to confirm our own opinions or positions. We can invite the Holy Spirit to probe deeper into our hearts than we have previously, which may unearth some blocks that have been lying beneath the surface preventing growth and fruitfulness. We can ask God to cleanse our hearts of the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of wealth and material things, so that God's Word can grow unhindered.

One time, someone who doesn't attend BBC showed me around his beautiful property, which had underground irrigation, fruit trees, lighting, ornamental shrubs, terraced gardens, and anti-deer defenses. It looked very nice, and required hours and hours of fertilizing, trimming, and maintenance, to keep it up. The owner was justifiably proud of the lovely space he had made. Later, I thought, it's amazing how much time, money, energy, and effort some of us invest in our lawn and our landscaping, to produce a beautiful, inspiring space. I'm all for beauty – don't misunderstand me – the folks who work in the Meditation Garden, here at BBC, do so to create a lovely space, where folks can connect with God. I love seeing beautiful gardens, I just don't want to do all the work that is required to have one. My point is, I found myself wondering **what beauty God would bring forth if we invested a similar amount of time, money, and energy in the soil of our heart, for God's Word to bear fruit, as the man did in his yard.**

I want to leave you with a final thought about seeds. An interesting thing about seeds is, they disappear. They need to be covered with dirt to function and fulfill their purpose; in fact, they die, in a sense. They crack open and become unrecognizable, as they're transformed into a sunflower, or a stalk of corn, or an apple tree.

Think about Jesus, the Word of God, sown in the field of the world; he dies, is buried, rises, and vanishes, but the fruit of his work produces in the most incredible way: a hundred, thousand, million-fold. His entire work proceeds, as does the work of a

seed: it takes place in a mystery, in secret – in a way that, Luther said, can neither be known or felt, but only believed, trusted.⁴

I've heard that some folks take their soil to be tested, to find out the composition and acidity of it. That determines what kind of fertilizer they need, to help whatever kind of flower, plant, or tree they wish to grow. I wonder, if we invited God to take a soil sample from our heart, today, what God's test would reveal. Let's pray.

Blessing: “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in Him, **rooted and built up in Him** and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding in it with thanksgiving” (*Colossians 2:6-7, NKJV*).

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Jesus says, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (v. 8). What do you think He means by “hearing”, in this passage? How is hearing God's Word different from simply being exposed to it?
2. Which of the four soils do you most readily identify with right now — the hard path, rocky ground, thorny ground, or good soil? Why? What makes you say that?
3. Jesus describes several things that keep the Word from producing fruit: opposition, shallow roots, worries, riches, and pleasures. Which of these tends to compete most with your attentiveness to God?
4. Verse 15 describes good soil as those who hear the Word, “hold it fast in an honest and good heart,” and bear fruit with perseverance. What does it look like, practically, to “hold fast” to God's Word when life gets difficult or distracting?
5. Jesus says that “nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed” (v. 17). How does this challenge the way we live out our faith privately versus publicly?
6. If you took the title “How Are You Hearing?” seriously, this week, what is one thing you believe God may be asking you to hear, receive, or respond to, right now? What would obedience look like?
7. What is one thing you've heard from God, recently, that you don't want to ignore?

⁴ Capon, 77-78.