

Series Gospel of Luke

This Message #11 The Parable of the Soils

Scripture Luke 8:1, 4-18

The previous two messages focused on the portion of Scripture we refer to as the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus introduced this teaching just a few hours after He had identified the twelve special companions who would be with Him during the years of His earthly ministry. Jesus designated these twelve men as His “apostles,” a term which means “sent ones.” It was Jesus’ intention to train them so that they would be ready to continue His ministry after His work on earth was completed. As potential future leaders, they had to have a thorough understanding of the “ins and outs” of the kingdom of God. The Sermon on the Mount was their first lesson concerning the attitudes and behaviors required of kingdom people.

During the early months of His public ministry, Jesus taught about the kingdom of God in several locations. Teaching was His priority mission. He had also demonstrated His power over disease, demons, and nature. Through these supernatural actions, He had attracted an incredible amount of attention, with people coming to Him from all over the northern and central parts of Israel. Everyone was excited and amazed about His authority, including His authority to forgive sin, and thousands of people were sometimes present when He spoke.

However, as Jesus continued to travel from town to town in Galilee in order to preach the good news of the kingdom of God, it became more and more obvious to Him that many of the people who pressed around Him were not genuinely interested in the spiritual aspects of His teaching. His healing activities were getting all the attention. There was another problem. The Jewish religious leaders who came to observe and listen as Jesus taught were increasingly critical of His words and actions. Not everyone who followed Jesus was a sincere disciple. Genuine interest in the kingdom of God was diminishing.

Recognizing the shift in the attitudes of the people, Jesus changed His style of speaking. Beginning in chapter 8, He began to incorporate parables into His teaching. Parables are true-to-life stories which call attention to spiritual principles. There are about 30 different parables in the Gospel accounts. The majority of them are in Luke. *[Parables comprise about 30 percent of the recorded teachings of Jesus.]*

Parables have unique characteristics. They can be used to reveal and clarify important truths and they can be an aid to remembering truth, but they can also conceal truth. The parables of Jesus had hidden meanings, and most of His listeners failed to grasp the deeper meanings in what He said. People who had a sincere desire to understand would have to seek out the interpretation by asking questions and thoughtfully reflecting on the words. Many of the people who heard the parables of Jesus did not have that level of interest, and so the deeper truths of the parables were hidden from them.

By using parables in His teaching, Jesus was able to separate the individuals who had only a casual interest in His words from those who had genuine spiritual concerns. In addition, the use of parables did not give Jesus' enemies as many direct statements by which to oppose and criticize Him.

The parable we will think about today is one of the most basic and important ones. It is so important that it is mentioned in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, as well as Luke.

Read Luke 8:1, 4-18

This parable described a situation that was well known to all those who were gathered around Jesus. In the Middle East, barley and wheat seed was sown in the fall. After the ground was dug up or plowed in rough fashion, the farmer scattered seed. He carried the seed in a bag which hung from his shoulder. He would broadcast handfuls of seed left and right as he walked through the field.

Large fields were divided into small plots. There were no fences or walls to separate the different areas. There would be narrow pathways between the individual plots. Many of the pathways would be used as shortcuts as villagers walked from their homes to work areas. In some regions of Israel, the layer of soil is not very thick. Rocks and slabs of limestone shale were visible in these areas.

As the farmer spread the seed, some of it would unavoidably fall on the pathways and on rocks and on thin soil. After the seed was sown the farmer would smooth out the soil and wait for the early rains to fall which would germinate the seed and start the growing process. There was nothing more for the farmer to do.

In late winter and early spring the sprouts would appear. The farmers would be very happy to see the green, new growth. The latter rains of spring would cause the plants to grow rapidly. It was in the spring time that the farmers would begin to notice the weeds and thorn bushes which would appear in the midst of the food crop, but there was nothing they could do about that. To walk through the fields to remove the undesirable growth would damage the good stalks of grain.

Jesus' listeners understood very well the problems of growing grain crops. They understood that some of the seed was wasted because it was trampled on and birds ate some of it. They understood that some of the sprouts would quickly die back when the sun dried out the soil. They understood the problems of thorn bushes. Painful scratches were a common problem when using the sickle to harvest the grain and as the thorn bushes were separated from the stalks of grain. They knew that the farmers had to wear protective coverings on their arms when harvesting the grain.

The listeners also understood the joy of harvest as they gathered the sheaves of grain and carried them to the threshing floor. In good years there would be a great sense of relief when they realized that there would not only be plenty of grain for flour but also enough to plant for the next season. An adequate supply could not always be assumed. Some years a family was forced to make a choice: to eat the harvest and not have enough to sow for the following season, or to starve in order to have seed for planting. A crop that yielded a hundred times more than was sown would be a real cause for rejoicing.

In telling this parable, Jesus did not make the farmer the center of attention, nor did He place a special emphasis on the seed. Jesus was most focused on the variety of soils. Only one of the four types of soil produced a satisfactory harvest. After telling the facts of the story, Jesus concluded with the challenge, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear," which was His way of saying, "If you get the point of what I have told you, then apply it to your life."

The parable served its purpose as intended. Verse 9 explains that Jesus' disciples asked about the meaning. These disciples represented a small segment out of the large crowd of listeners. They were the only one with enough interest in the parable to approach Jesus for the interpretation.

Before answering the question about the meaning, Jesus explained His reason for speaking in parables. He said that the "knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God" would not be withheld from His disciples. They would be given the privilege of understanding the deeper truths that He was communicating, while these same truths would be concealed from those who were disinterested in the secrets of the kingdom.

The word which is translated "secrets" appears several times in Scripture. In the Greek language it is the word "mysteria." This word does not refer to a mystery which cannot be known, but to something which can be known only by an insider, a person who has been given privileged information. In Scripture the word "mystery" has to do with the purposes and plans of God. It refers to God's work in human history and, in particular, God's work in and through the Church. In Scripture, the secrets of the kingdom were only revealed on God's initiative, and only revealed to those who had been called by God. The disciples were chosen and called, so Jesus was willing to share with them "the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God."

Jesus made a distinction between the disciples and "others." The "others" were those who were not interested in kingdom truths. They were outsiders. They could hear the outward form of the parables but had no desire to understand the deep meaning. The quotation in verse 10 is from Isaiah. It states the sad truth that people who fail to respond to the little glimmers of truth they are given will be unable and unqualified to receive more truth. What makes the situation for these people even more sad is the fact that their unwillingness to consider the truth of Jesus' words condemned them to remain outside the kingdom. It meant that they had no hope of a relationship with God. The failure of people to move forward in response to hearing the word of God is really a step backward.

Jesus began to explain the meaning of the parable in verse 11. The "seed is the word of God" — the good news of the kingdom. The story takes for granted that the seed which is sown is good and capable of producing an abundant harvest. The story emphasizes that the fruitfulness of the seed depends on the type of soil into which it falls.

It was impossible for the seeds to germinate on the hard pathway, just as the word of God cannot take root in the person whose mind and heart is hardened to spiritual concerns. Each time a person refuses to accept and apply God's word to his life makes it more difficult and unlikely that the truth will penetrate and implant itself in the human soul. The devil has so much control over such people that there is no possibility of belief and salvation.

The rocky ground represents the people who are easily attracted to the gospel and accept it quickly, but just as easily put it aside. Jesus stated that these people "believe for a while," but that they fall away "in the time of testing." These people accept the gospel in a moment of emotional excitement but give little thought to the significance and ramifications of their decision to believe. They do not have enough solid conviction and commitment to have an enduring faith. The truth does not penetrate deeply into their hearts and minds. They may be, for a time, taken up with the Word of God, but when the pressures of life increase, they fall away. The word for "fall away" is related to the word "apostasy." For some people, the start of Christian faith is easy, but it becomes impossible for them to sustain it.

In the third type of soil, the seed sprouts and grows, but the stalks of grain have to compete with thorn bushes for the nutrients, light, and space needed to become mature. Jesus said that this was the situation of people who are "choked by life's worries, riches, and pleasures." In other words, their loyalty to God is not whole-hearted. Spiritual concerns for them are but one priority among many, and the many other things, which by nature are worldly, prevent the person from reaching spiritual maturity. The thorn bushes prevented the stalks from producing heads of grain. There was nothing to harvest. In the same way, some "babes in Christ" never go on to spiritual maturity. The thorn bush represents anything that crowds God out of our lives.

Finally Jesus explained the good soil. The good soil represented the person with a "noble and good heart." This is the person who "hears the word, retains it, and by perseverance produces an abundant crop." The word "retain" implies that the person understands and applies the truth of the word to his life. He is a "doer" of the word and not just a hearer. The word "persevering" is another word which implies application — application over a long period of time.

This person is so committed to the truth that he does not give up or stop short of the goal of maximum fruitfulness. He knows that it takes time for the seed to mature and the harvest to be ready. This kind of person is pleasing to God, first, because of his heart attitude, and secondly, because of the results which are achieved. He is not like the other types of people in this parable who did not have the heart attitude or desire to accept, believe, and apply the truth of God's word.

Verses 16 through 18 bring this portion of Jesus' teaching to a conclusion. The disciples had been given an explanation of what would happen when the Word of God was communicated to people. They understood that many people would reject the message, but there was also the assurance of an abundant harvest, if they sowed the word of God in people's lives. Jesus wanted His disciples to understand the parable because He was preparing them for their future ministry responsibilities. They would have the future task to sow the Word of God just as He was doing.

In verse 16 Jesus described the disciples as "light bearers." They were not to hide themselves and their knowledge under a bed, but to put themselves in a position to shed spiritual light in the dark places of the world. While Jesus was on the earth, the mysteries of the kingdom were hidden to the people of the world, but verse 17 indicates that there would be a future day when those mysteries of the kingdom would be brought out into the open and made known to everyone. This, of course, happened after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus and the inauguration of the Church. Jesus was preparing His disciples to take the good news of the kingdom to all the people groups on the planet and to sow spiritual seed.

Because they were to be future leaders with important responsibilities, Jesus gave them a concluding warning: "Listen carefully." "Make sure you understand what I am saying." The reason is simple: Individuals who carefully listen to Jesus, with a desire to know more, who are determined to apply the truths to their lives, who persevere in their obedience, will be given deeper and deeper insights into the ways of the kingdom of God. Those who don't have the desire to know more of God's truth will close themselves off from God and will never become qualified to be a member of God's kingdom.

It is important for all of us to respond to the glimmers of truth we are given. Each time we refuse to accept and apply God's word to our lives makes it more difficult for the truth to implant itself in us.

Some Thoughts for Reflection:

Jesus wants us to be good “dirt.” This means we must

1. Listen to (and read) the word of God carefully;
2. Do what the word tells us to do (obedience);
3. Produce abundant spiritual fruit

My questions: Are you a disciple? Do you understand that you been called?

Then you have access to information which God expects you to communicate to others.