

# Extravagantly Fruitful

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[ 0 : 00 ] I was trying to watch your faces as the text was read and there were all kinds of different responses to what we just heard.

Spirit of the living God, we believe that you enabled Luke to accurately write down the words of the Lord Jesus.

And I pray now in your mercy and grace that you would fulfill the purpose for which you inspired these words in our lives.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Jesus speaks parables to make us think.

And in the process, adopt a whole different perspective on life, his perspective. Jesus' parables are not nice little Sunday school lessons with a little moral to take home and try to apply to our lives.

[ 1 : 08 ] His stories are designed to unsettle us, to challenge us, and in some cases even to offend our understanding of the way things are and should be.

They are creative stories through which Jesus intentionally disorients our thinking in order to reorient our thinking around the kingdom of God.

The parable we just read is the first parable Jesus is asked to explain. It is not his first parable, as many people think.

Before speaking this parable, he spoke two others. After he had been freeing people from the grip of the demonic, he spoke the parable of the strong man. And at a dinner party in the home of Simon the Pharisee, after a woman who had been deeply moved by the compassion of Jesus crashed the party and wet his feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair, he spoke the parable of the two debtors.

The parable of the sower, or seed, or soil, is the first parable Jesus is asked to explain. Why?

[ 2 : 25 ] Well, clearly, at least I think you would agree with me, clearly Jesus is speaking about his own ministry. He is the sower who is sowing the seeds in the soil.

The seed is the word of God, as he says. The word about the kingdom of God and about the God of the kingdom. In the text, Luke tells us that he was going from one city to another, proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God.

The word proclaiming can be translated heralding. The picture is of a great leader, an emperor, for instance, sending a spokesperson, a herald, into the cities and villages of the empire, crying out, hear ye, hear ye.

And we are to imagine, then, Jesus going from one city and village to another, crying out, hear ye, hear ye, the kingdom of God has come near.

The word preaching is translated in other places as evangelizing. Evangelizing comes from the word evangel, which means good news.

[ 3 : 35 ] And the picture that word is to evoke is of a king having won a great battle, sending out spokespersons, evangelists, into the cities and villages of his realm, announcing with great joy the good news of the victory.

Caesar Augustus, for instance, had his own evangelist, whom he sent throughout the empire, announcing his evangel, his good news, that he, a son of God, has now established a new world order.

He has now established the glorious reign of peace. And Luke, then, wants us to imagine Jesus going from one city and village to another, joyfully announcing God's evangel, God's good news, that in Jesus and because of Jesus, God's new world order, God's reign of peace is breaking into the world.

So, the great sower is sowing the seed of his evangel in the soil of the world. The soils are the hearts of those who are hearing Jesus herald and evangelize.

Some are responding big time. Others are not. So, the parable is about Jesus and his ministry in the world.

[ 4 : 56 ] Pretty straightforward, right? Then why did the disciples ask him to explain it? Later in his ministry, he will tell another parable that they ask him to explain.

It's about the two sowings in the same field, the parable of the wheat and the tares. And I can understand why the disciples ask him to explain it. But the parable of the sower or soil or seed, why do disciples ask him to explain it?

Because this seemingly straightforward story raises all kinds of questions. Questions about what he calls the mysteries of the kingdom.

So, this morning, what I just simply want to do is I want to ask a number of questions of this parable. Number here means five. Questions this parable raises for me and questions I hear some of you bringing to the text.

Five questions. Question one. Who or what is the subject of this parable? Is it the parable of the sower? Is it the parable of the seed?

[ 6 : 05 ] Is it the parable of the soils? I've heard it referred to by all three titles. Again, the sower is Jesus. And again, the seed is his gospel, the word of God.

God's word about God's kingdom. And again, the soils are human hearts to whom Jesus is speaking. As he is to you and me right now. And as he is to many people outside this building, whether they know it or not.

So, which is it? Sower, seed, or soils? Jesus, gospel, or human hearts? Yes.

All three. In dynamic interplay with one another, inseparably so. I suppose you would have to say a whole mouthful. I'm going to turn now to the parable of the sower, seed, soils.

Question two. What does Jesus the sower expect of his seed in the soils? Fruit, of course.

[ 7 : 06 ] Mature fruit. He expects the seed to bring forth mature fruit. Fruit. The word mature comes from the word that Jesus attaches to the verb for bearing fruit.

It's the word *telos*, which we've encountered in other contexts. *Telos* means the inherent destiny of a thing. The *telos* of any seed is the inherent destiny of the seed.

The *telos* of a sunflower seed is sunflower. The *telos* of a grain of wheat is wheat. The *telos* of an acorn is an oak tree.

The seed Jesus sows is the seed of the kingdom of God. The *telos* of the seed of the kingdom of God is the life of the kingdom. And as he sows the seed of the kingdom into our human hearts through his heralding and evangelizing, he really expects to see kingdom life emerging.

What he develops in his Sermon on the Mount, for instance, which he's already preached before he gave this parable. He fully expects to see Sermon on the Mount-ness emerge in the hearts of those who hear him speaking.

[ 8 : 21 ] Mature fruit. The inherent destiny of the word that he sows into our hearts. Now, a number of writers in the New Testament, I think, are referring to this theme of the parable.

James, for instance, says, Humbly accept the word planted in you which can save you. Peter says, And then Paul rejoices that the Colossians have received the gospel, which he calls the word of truth, which, he says, is constantly bearing fruit in the world.

By the time Jesus tells this parable, he has seen such fruit emerging. Tax collectors are drawn to him, and they're changing their way of life.

Prostitutes are drawn to him, and they're discovering a whole different kind of life. Fishermen are drawn to him, and they're becoming signs of this kingdom. Jesus is extravagantly sowing and reaping extravagantly delicious fruit.

Now, one of the most significant signs of this kingdom life is the women who are beginning to follow him. Luke seems to be taken by this, which is why he even bothers giving us some of their names.

[ 9 : 41 ] Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna. He's so taken by this fact that it's as though he has to tell us about it. These women had heard this word about the in-breaking kingdom, and they had been healed by it.

Not just Mary Magdalene, all three of them. And they have done the unthinkable, says N.T. Wright. They have left the well-defined social space of home and family where they had a role and duty, and they have chosen to accompany Jesus and his followers looking after their needs and doing so, moreover, out of their own pockets.

Ben Wright's right. This is every bit as shocking from a first-century Palestinian point of view as the story of the woman letting her hair down and kissing Jesus' feet.

One can only imagine the looks they would get, the things people might say about such a company. But one can also imagine Jesus looking at them as people in whose hearts and lives his word is taking effect, people who are already bearing fruit, putting life, reputation, and property at the disposal of this extraordinary kingdom movement.

These women represent what Jesus the sower expects to see in the soils that hear his word. Given who Jesus is, and given the performative power of his word, he simply speaks and things happen, he rightly expects such fruit in any heart into which he speaks.

[11:13] He rightly expects kingdom life to emerge in us. He rightly expects his life to emerge in us. Later on, he will say, you did not choose me, I chose you and appointed you that you should go bear fruit and that your fruit remain.

And in that context, the fruit is the life of Jesus in the world. He rightly expects the life of his spirit to emerge in us. The fruit of the spirit, as Paul calls it, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Well, why then is it not happening more? Why is this fruit not happening in everyone who is hearing Jesus herald and evangelize?

Question three. What does Jesus the sower see as obstacles to the seed maturing in the soils? Jesus identifies four different kinds of human beings, or better yet, four different heart conditions. One, the hardened, trampled upon heart.

[12:22] Two, the shallow, rocky heart. Three, the cluttered, pulled in a thousand different directions heart. And four, the receptive heart, what he calls the good and honest heart.

And each of us have met people in these different conditions. Have we not? And would you agree that to one degree or another, all four of these heart conditions are true of each of us?

That is, there is something of each of the four heart conditions in each of our hearts. There are those hard places where it does not seem that his word is bearing fruit.

There are those shallow places. There are those cluttered places, oh mercy. And thankfully, there are those receptive places. Look at the soils a bit more carefully for just a few moments.

Each of these soils actually requires a separate sermon on its own. Soil one, the obstacle of hardness. And those beside the road are those who have heard.

[13:38] Then the devil comes, takes away the word from their hearts so that they may not believe and be saved. Jesus here is warning us that hardened hearts are very vulnerable.

The universe is not a neutral place. He tells us that there is a real, personal, diabolical opposition to him and his kingdom. There is a personal power of evil afoot, doing everything it or he can to prevent the kingdom from transforming our lives and spreading into the world.

And Jesus is saying he prays on hardened hearts. He seeks to further harden them to Jesus and his gospel.

Why would he do that? Because Jesus' gospel means the end of his kingdom. So he makes sure that hardened hearts get harder. He makes sure that bitter hearts get more bitter.

That resentful hearts get more resentful. That disappointed hearts feel more disappointment. And Jesus is warning us here that when we hear the good news of his kingdom, but do not embrace it because of the hard place in our hearts, the evil one is simply going to steal the news away.

[14:54] Soil two, the obstacle of shallowness. And those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy, and they have no root.

They believe for a while, and in a time of temptation, they fall away. I think Jesus is here telling us that when we welcome the news of the kingdom, we are soon going to find ourselves in trouble. We will face temptation to back away from all-out kingdom living. Oh, there's blessing. Abundant blessing. Forgiveness, peace, joy, freedom, cleansing, intimacy, eternal life, but also trouble. How could it be otherwise? The kingdom of God has come near. A revolution is on. There's going to be a change in government.

And if our hearts are shallow, when the trouble comes, we will be tempted to back off. Now, in Matthew's remembering of this parable, Jesus speaks of two kinds of trouble.

[16:06] They are tribulation and persecution. If we understand this, then when it happens, we will not back off. Tribulation.

The word is *flipsis*. We've met this in the book of Revelation. It's a technical term in the New Testament vocabulary. It means pressure, and sometimes it means crushing pressure. It's the kind of pressure that is experienced when two different powers come up against each other and both begin to exert their energy over the other. Jesus is telling us that when we get caught up in the good news of his in-breaking kingdom and who would not want to be caught up in it, we will find ourselves experiencing pressure, maybe even crushing pressure. As the kingdom of God comes up against all other kingdoms, the collision creates this *flipsis*. Again, how could it be otherwise? How could it be otherwise? Paul encourages the new churches throughout the Roman Empire saying, through many tribulations, we will enter the kingdom of God. [17:14] Through much *flipsis*, we will enter the kingdom of God. This is encouragement? Yes, it is, because he's telling us the truth. There's no experiencing of the kingdom of God without some sort of *flipsis*.

It cannot be otherwise. As the kingdom of God invades all the other kingdoms of this world, tension arises. And to walk with Jesus means to live in this tension and persecution. Because of the word, says Jesus, not because of you, but because of the word. For the simple reason that the word of the in-breaking kingdom disturbs the status quo. Which was happening everywhere Jesus went. Not that he went around as a rabble rouser. In fact, he shied away from public attention until Palm Sunday. It's just that Jesus went around preaching and living his gospel. And his announcement and embodiment of his gospel automatically challenged everything that was not consistent with his kingdom. I like how Mortimer Arias of Bolivia puts it. [18:25] The coming of the kingdom means a permanent confrontation of worlds. The kingdom is a question mark in the midst of the established ideas and answers developed by peoples and societies.

And simply by living his good news, by living his question mark, Jesus was experienced by the status quo as subversive. And therefore was persecuted. And he promises the same for any who stand with him. Blessing. Yes, lots of blessing. But also persecution of one sort or another. Another way to put it is to say that the gospel always messes with idols.

And thus subverts the way of life built on idols. And thus almost always brings some sort of persecution on those who are going to live Jesus' gospel. And if we remember this, when it happens, we won't back off on all-out kingdom living. We will persevere. Soil two is the heart that, as David Wenham puts it, gives up when things get hot. [19:41] I have a sense, by the way. Things are going to get hot. Soil three. Soil three. The obstacle of clutter.

The seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have hurt. And as they go their way, they are choked with worries and riches and the pleasures of this life and bring no fruit to maturity. Oh, mercy. How I know this heart condition. Do you? Cluttered hearts. Cluttered hearts is one of the reasons why, for all the preaching that goes on in the so-called first world, first world in the 21st century, the first world is so un-gospelized.

We hear, but all around us is worries. Or as Matthew puts it in his remembering of the parable, the worry of the world, the worry of the age. And Jesus says, we hear, but all around us is riches. Or as Matthew remembers it, the deceitfulness of riches. The problem is not worry as such or riches as such. [20:52] The problem is the worry of the age and the deceitfulness of riches. The worry of the age. Jesus uses the definite article.

And it seems to have something specific in his mind. Not just worries, but the worry. I think that he is telling us that the fundamental mark of any age, first or 21st century, is anxiety. Why? Because the age, having excluded the living God from its public life, now rests on very shaky foundations.

Oh, the age does not see it that way. The age thinks it's not that way at all. It thinks that its foundations are quite secure. We are the masters of the ship. If that's the case, then why, for all the bravado, is there this constant worry in our cultures?

Because the human spirit implicitly knows that these foundations cannot hold. To be blunt, when the age does not build on the living God, the age will build on idols.

[ 22 : 01 ] It's the living God or idols. It's either or. Any age built on idols will be marked by profound anxiety and worry. For the human spirit implicitly knows that the idols cannot hold it together.

If the foundation is shaky, the superstructure will be wobbly. And all of this wobbling sets up a constant sense of anxiety. Now, because we all eat and drink and breathe the air, the age, we all get caught up in the worry of the age.

And the kingdom of God gets choked in our hearts. And we get caught up in the driving force of the age. What shall we eat?

What shall we drink? What shall we clothe ourselves? And the fruit of kingdom living then does not emerge as it ought. And the deceitfulness of riches.

We don't need Jesus' help to understand what that means, do we? Riches trick us. Riches trick us to think that they themselves will satisfy us.

[ 23 : 12 ] Riches trick us to think that they are the security against the insecurity of the unknown future. And we are lulled away from all-out kingdom living.

So, soil-free warns us of the tremendous influence of the worry of the age and the deceitfulness of riches. And that this worry and deceitful clutter our hearts and choke out kingdom life.

So, question four. Who wins? The sower, the seed, or the soil? In the end, who wins?

Well, it appears that the soils win. Oh, in soil four, the sower and the seed win. And the seed fell in the good soil.

These are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart and hold it fast and bear fruit with perseverance. A 100 times the expected harvest. Extravagantly fruitful.

[ 24 : 11 ] But in soils one to three, the soils win. The hardened hearts, the shallow hearts, the cluttered hearts win.

Or so it appears. It appears. It appears that the devil wins in soil one. It appears that fear of trouble wins in soil two. It appears that worry and riches and the pleasures of life win in soil three.

I say appear because given who the sower is and given the life transforming power of his seed, I have a hard time believing that any human heart can finally resist Jesus and his word.

Jesus is the greatest preacher and evangelist who ever lived. When Jesus speaks, something always happens.

Let there be light. And there was light. Be gone. The demons flee. Lazarus, you come out. And a dead man walks out of the tomb. The kingdom of God has come near. And redemptive things begin to take place.

[ 25 : 19 ] I have a hard time believing that Jesus cannot win in all the soils. Now, maybe this is the scandal of the parable that I simply have to embrace.

I hope not. If it is, I will embrace it. But I hope it is not. Because Jesus is just too good a sower. And his seed is just too powerful to be overcome by human heart conditions.

It might help if I change the question. From who wins to who gets the last word? Do the soils get the last word?

Do human hearts get the last word? I hope not. The last word belongs to the sower and his seed, to Jesus Christ and his gospel.

Look at all the hardened hearts he has won. Right here in this room. Starting with me. Look at all the shallow hearts he has deepened.

[ 26 : 29 ] Right here in this room. He's doing it for me. Look at all the cluttered hearts he has overcome. Right here in this room. I am exhibit A.

So question five. What then is the primary call of this parable? Hold fast and understand, says Jesus.

Hold fast. Do not let it go. And understand. Understand. This is more fully brought out in Matthew's remembering of the parable.

Soil 4. Matthew 13, 23. The one on whom seed was sown on the good soil. This is the person who hears the word and understands it. Who indeed bears fruit, brings forth some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.

Understand. Now, understanding what Jesus means by understand helps us understand what he's getting at in all of his parables.

[ 27 : 29 ] Understand. Understand. Understand. Understand. Understand. Understand. Understand. Understand. Understand. Understand. It's suimi. It's sunimi. Literally put together. Yes, in the sense of making connections, mentally comprehending, but more in the sense of getting in line with and yielding to.

So, Dale Bruner suggests that the most helpful translation of the word understand is stand under. You understand. You understand by standing under. Soil 1. When anyone hears the word of the kingdom but does not stand under it, the evil one snatches it away.

Soil 4. This is the one who hears the word and stands under it. The problem is we stand alongside it.

Or worse yet, we stand over it and judge it. We will accept what we like.

[ 28 : 54 ] What we don't like, we'll just simply ignore. We'll try to fit it into our or our culture's way of understanding the way things are and should be. The call of the parable is to move from standing over it to standing under it.

Even under what you do not understand. And especially standing under what you do not understand. Jesus is telling us that the kingdom life emerges in us when we stand under his word about the kingdom.

That his life emerges in us when we stand under his word about his life. Now, is it not the case that whether or not we stand under his word, we are under it anyway?

Hebrews 1.3. He upholds all things by the power of his word. The whole world is under his word.

The whole universe is under his word. Hold fast, says Jesus. Hold fast whatever seed I sow in your soil. Stand under his word and watch it break up the hardness.

[ 30 : 09 ] Watch it heal bitterness and resentment and disappointment. Stand under his word and watch it move through the shallowness, taking you to deep, deep places in the kingdom.

Stand under his word and watch it disentangle the clutter and bring you into the freedom of the kingdom. Stand under his word and watch as the word brings forth the fruit of the spirit.

You see, it turns out that the seed the sower is sowing is his own life. When Jesus speaks, he gives us his life.

He gives himself to us. His words are not mere words, as he would say after the feeding of the 5,000. The words I've spoken to you are spirit and life. And whenever he speaks, he's giving us his spirit.

He's giving us his life. And his life will have its inherent destiny. His life spoken into us will bear his extravagantly fruitful life in us.

[ 31 : 15 ] The sower now calls us to gather at his table. And he calls us to stand under this wonderfully life-giving word.

This is my body given for you. This cup is the new covenant shed by my blood, sealed by my blood. And as I come to the table this morning, I think I hear him saying what he said through the prophet Isaiah.

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return without watering the earth, making it bear and sprout, furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the heaven, so shall my word be which comes forth from my mouth.

It shall not return to me empty. It shall accomplish the reason for which I sent it. Hear ye, hear ye, the kingdom of God has come near.

Let us together stand under this news as never before and watch what happens. Here we stand under this news as never before. intensity on earth in quotes.

[ 32 : 39 ] It shall lead us to taman with words of perspective. And see, it shall be complete ■ omph Sugar City by God is you.