

The Sower and the Seed

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[0 : 0 0] Please turn with me in your Bibles to Luke chapter 8 from verse 4 through 15 to the parable of the sower and the seed, or what should more properly be called, I guess, the parable of the soils.

Heavenly Father, we bow in your presence. May your word be our rule, your spirit our teacher, and your greater glory our supreme concern, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

It was all but empty, but it used to be full, so they told me. The Highland Church I was visiting had maybe 20 or 30 older people mournfully singing what should have been a joyful psalm.

When I came out of the church, which could seat many, many hundreds of people, one of the old men, bearing a rather depressed look in his face, said to me, Sad, isn't it, Colin? When I was a boy in the 1920s, you couldn't get a seat in here.

There were so many people coming to church. It got me thinking. Why did so many people go to church then, but so few do today?

[1 : 2 6] The deep question with no simple answers. Was the preaching better? Was the Holy Spirit working more powerfully than he is today? Did they just do church better back then?

Or is the answer to be found somewhere else? It seems to me that the church of today may well contain just as many faithful Bible-believing Christians as it did a hundred years ago.

The difference is this. A hundred years ago, there was a cultural pressure to go to church. Given there was no TV or sports on a Sunday, it was the only form of entertainment people had.

But out of a congregation of a thousand, there may well only have been 50 or 60 faithful Bible-believing Christians. Today, there's a cultural pressure on us not to go to church.

And Sunday's full of sport and full of TV. There are still 50 or 60 people. The difference is they're mostly all Christians. What we've seen in the last hundred years is Jesus' parable of the sower and the seed in the life of Scotland.

[2 : 4 3] For whatever reason, the vast majority of those who listened to the word being preached a hundred years ago didn't really hear, didn't respond in faith and trust.

The church in Scotland has been and is being sifted and refined. There may be fewer people in church, but there may be just as many faithful Bible-believing Christians as there ever has been.

See how important it is that we take seriously the words of Jesus in Luke chapter 8 and verse 8. He who has ears to hear, let him hear. If we want to avoid the scenario where churches in 100 years' time are 10 times smaller than they are today, we need to be ultra careful how we hear the word of the gospel.

Do we hear it with faith in our hearts? Do we want to be faithful and fruitful to the word of the gospel? Then let's listen carefully as we examine two things from Jesus from our passage.

First, hearing the parable. And second, heeding the parable. Hearing and heeding. Now, the central verse of this parable is in verse 8, where Jesus says, He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

[4 : 06] But the central theme of this parable is contained in verses 9 and 10. And this is one of the reasons, as Anne so rightly said, it's so important that we carry a Bible with us, either on our phones or a paper Bible, so that we can keep on checking what's being said.

Verses 9 and 10. When his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he, Jesus, said, To you it's been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they're in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.

Now, we've always been taught that Jesus told parables to make things easier to understand. But Jesus here says different. For those who hear, Jesus tells these parables to reveal to them the so-called secrets of the kingdom of God.

But to those who do not hear, Jesus tells these parables to conceal from them, to hide from them, the secrets of the kingdom of God.

In other words, Jesus uses these parables as tools of judgment against those who do not want to hear what he is saying. For those who hear, Jesus tells his parables so they may hear more.

[5 : 24] For those who do not hear, Jesus tells his parables so they hear even less. What then is of first importance, according to Jesus in this passage, is that we hear.

For our hearing is that which is the measure of his judgment upon us. If we choose not to hear, he shall so work in us that next time the word is preached, we'll hear even less.

But if we should choose to hear, he shall so work in us that we shall understand the word preached more and more every time we hear it.

Let me say that again so that the message of this parable sinks down deep into our hearts. What is of first importance to us is that we hear the gospel.

Or as Jesus says, he who has ears to hear, let him hear. Let's explore this teaching of Jesus in two stages.

[6 : 31] First of all, that hearing is obeying. And secondly, that hearing is a gift. From verses 9 through 10, hearing is obeying, and hearing is a gift.

Hearing is obeying, first of all. Hearing is obeying. So words change their meaning as times move on and culture changes. A good example is the word gay. When I was a boy, the word gay was used to describe a feeling of happiness.

The word hear is another such word. We think of it as another way of saying listening. That it has to do with the brain processing sounds it receives through the ears and translating those sounds into language.

But hear is a deeper word than listen. Because in the world of Jesus' day, it wasn't just the words we were listening to. It was also how those words made us feel.

How we responded to those words. I have no doubt that everyone who was listening to Jesus' words that day would have understood that he was talking about sores, seeds, and soils.

[7 : 46] But listening to them is not the same as hearing them. We may listen to someone's words and they do not change the way we feel nor cause us to respond to them in any meaningful way.

So when Jesus says he who has ears to hear, he's not merely talking about listening. He's challenging us and saying how do my words change who you are on the inside?

How do they make you feel? How are you responding to the gospel? As we'll see later, the seed planted in four soils each received a listening, but only the seed in good soil belonged to the person who really heard the gospel of Jesus.

It was that person who was changed by the word of Jesus and responded in faith. So let's get this straight. He's not talking about listening.

He's talking about hearing. If you like, we can call it hearing, hearing not just with the mind, but with the heart and with the will. So hearing in this respect is more than mere listening, it is obeying.

[9 : 07] The challenge to us is that we may listen to the word of God being preached, but are we hearing it? Is it changing how we feel, how we think?

Are we obeying it? So hearing, first of all, is obeying. But secondly, from verses 9 and 10, hearing is a gift.

It's a gift. You know, there are some things in God's word that are not just difficult to understand, they're difficult to swallow.

It's okay for us to say what we've just said about the difference between listening and hearing and how what makes a soil a good place to plant the seed of the gospel is that it belongs to a heart which is really hearing what Jesus is saying.

The problem is this. None of us, by nature, have the capacity, the ability, or the willingness to hear the spiritual message Jesus is preaching.

[10 : 17] None of us were born with spiritual ears to hear. So we cannot hear. None of us. By nature, we were all born spiritually deaf.

If ever we are to hear in the manner to which Jesus is calling us, hearing with not just the mind but with the heart and the will, we need God to give us spiritual ears capable of hearing his spiritual message.

And so in Luke chapter 8 verse 10, Jesus says to his disciples, to you it has been given to know the secrets.

In his sovereign grace, God has opened their deaf ears so that they may listen not just with their ears to the gospel but with their minds, hearts, and wills.

We don't like being told that there are some things we can't do. But here is something we cannot do without God's transforming grace. Hear the gospel. You know, it's the most wonderful thing when the light comes on in someone's eyes when perhaps for many years they've been listening to the preaching of the word of God but not responding to it.

[11 : 38] But then, then almost at an instant the light comes on. And for the first time in their lives they really hear.

It's a sign that God is at work in their hearts. That's what prompted John Newton in that hymn of his amazing grace to write, I once was blind but now I see.

Was deaf but now I hear? Is that it for us? Has the light come on in our hearts? If it has, if the word preached is penetrating and we feel compelled to believe in Christ, it's a sign that God is working in us and we must do nothing to harden our hearts against him.

The problem with the Pharisees and the religious leaders of Jesus' day is that having listened to Jesus' words, they hardened their hearts against him.

They listened to him but they refused to believe the message he was preaching. They hardened their hearts and God's judgment was that he hardened them even further.

[12 : 53] I've started to learn how to play the guitar. It's actually quite painful at the start because the pads on your fingers are struggling to hold the strings down to play a chord.

But after a while the pads on the end of your fingers get a bit harder and it becomes a little bit less painful, a bit easier. The same thing happens with our hearts. When we refuse to believe what Jesus is saying our hearts harden toward his message and that's serious.

Jesus. It happened to Pharaoh in the days of Moses who would not listen to Moses. It happened to the people of Israel in Isaiah's day who wouldn't listen to the prophets' warning and against whom the words Jesus speaks in verse 10 were originally aimed.

And in time it happened to the Pharisees of Jesus' day whose hearts were so hardened toward him that eventually they crucified him just to stop him speaking. They didn't want to listen anymore.

I suspect that's what happened to hundreds who used to go to church a hundred years ago. Well, what's the application of this first point for us?

[14 : 10] It is to pray and to pray and to pray more that God would open our hearts to really hear the gospel. That he would so work in us to open not just our minds but also our hearts and our wills to respond in faith to him.

Let's make this our prayer. Lest the judgment of this parable should fall upon us. Lest we be the hard soil, the thorny soil, the stony soil. You know, this is the kind of prayer God loves to answer.

An answer he will by giving to us as he gave to Jesus' disciples to know the secrets of the kingdom of God. Namely, the gospel of a crucified and risen Savior.

Heeding the parable. Well, secondly, heeding the parable. Heeding the parable. I make no apologies for devoting the majority of our time to this small section of our passage in verses 9 and 10 because if we understand that, that it's our spiritual hearing which is in question here, then the parable Jesus tells us about the sower and the seed or more accurately the different kinds of soil makes sense.

So I wanted to consider the remainder of our passage, the parable itself, then the explanation under three very brief headings, the sower, the seed, and the soils. The sower, first of all.

[15 : 36] In Jesus' parable, the sower represents God. He's the one scattering seed over the field. God is the ultimate evangelist. throwing out, dispersing the word of the gospel.

In the immediate context of Luke 8, Jesus is the sower. He sows among the crowds through word and work. As he sat in the house of Simon the Pharisee at the end of chapter 7, when that sinful woman broke an alabaster jar and anointed his feet, he is sowing the seed of the gospel by the way he reacts to her, by the things he says.

God is always the sower when the gospel is being proclaimed. He may use what we do and what we say as tools and instruments, but ultimately, it is him who is sowing the seed of the gospel through us.

In our daily lives, when we come into contact with people who do not yet know the gospel of Jesus Christ, God is sowing the seed of the gospel through us. We may not be conscious that anyone is watching what we do or hearing what we say, but they are.

Through his three-year public ministry, God is sowing the word every time that word is preached. You'll know that in Jesus' day, sowers sowed using their hands and they threw out seed in every direction.

[17 : 06] And when the word is being preached as it is right now, imagine the seed being sown from the mouth and the words spoken are like seed being thrown out and dispersed in every direction, but ultimately they are not the words of a man, they are the words of God, and it's he who is doing the sowing.

Second, we have the seed. The seed. The seed is what Jesus calls in verse 10 the secrets of the kingdom of God. The secrets of the kingdom of God are that Jesus is the Messiah, the cross is the way of salvation, and that faith in Jesus is the instrument by which we are saved.

Jesus is the Messiah, the real Jesus, not the Jesus the crowds wanted him to be, an earthly king with an earthly army, but a heavenly king whose mission is to conquer his people's sins by dying in weakness as their sacrifice on the cross.

And it's by faith in Christ, not by obedience to the works of the Mosaic law, we become the people of God. So the seed is the gospel, the good news of Jesus, and how his sacrificial death on our behalf offers forgiveness to all who will believe.

Here's the message, God is sowing it through the mouths of preachers and Christians all over the world today. When the word is being proclaimed, sinners are offered salvation through faith in Jesus, it is as if God himself is sowing seed.

[18 : 52] Well, the question for us, of course, is, as Christians, what seed are we sowing? Are our works, are our words pointing to the real Jesus and offering salvation through faith in him?

And then lastly, the soils, the soils. Remember, Jesus here is preaching to a large crowd, and he says, in that crowd, my word will be heard in one of four ways.

Recalling that the central theme of this passage is how that word is heard, and not just whether people are listening to it or not. It will be heard in one of four ways, he says.

The first is when that gospel is preached on what Jesus calls the path. Here we have people with hard hearts.

The words of Jesus bounce off them. They don't penetrate beyond the ears. The words of Jesus are like water off a duck's back to them. The devil, who is always active when God's word is being preached, because he does not want anyone to respond to that message in faith, plucks that message right from their ears.

[20 : 12] Have you ever been so tired that when you're reading a book, you have to read and reread a sentence in that book because you just can't take it in? That's the idea here.

The soil's hard, and the word is not believed. There is no response as such. The second is when the gospel is preached in what Jesus calls rocky soil.

Soils in Palestine could be thin and lack depth. Underneath a rather thin layer of soil, there was quite hard rock. And seed planted in that soil germinated quickly, but soon withered because there was no possibility of sinking roots deep into the soil.

According to Jesus, these people receive the word with joy, but in times of testing, they fall away. Their manner of hearing is not sufficient.

It doesn't last. In times of persecution or when they face difficulties with their health or with life circumstances or challenging questions, they haven't allowed the gospel to sufficiently penetrate their minds, their hearts, and wills to lastingly and permanently change them.

[21 : 34] They haven't heard well enough. The third is when the gospel is preached in what Jesus calls thorny soil.

The soils of Palestine seem to have this ability to produce a wealth of prickly thorns. These seeds germinate quickly, but they're soon choked off by the thorns which grow alongside them.

Jesus describes these thorns as the cares, riches, and pleasures of life. The plant grows, but notice what Jesus says in verse 14, the fruit does not mature.

Again, this person's manner of hearing is not sufficient. As they go on their way, the cares and the riches and the pleasures of life become more important to them than the gospel itself. They're choked by the distractions of this life, by the worldliness of this age.

We've seen it before, we'll see it again, and although this person may still profess some kind of faith in Christ, there is no fruit of obedience, holiness, and righteousness.

- [22 : 48] Now, the last is when the gospel is preached in what Jesus calls good soil. later in verse 15, Jesus describes what that good soil looks like. It is those who hear the word, hold it fast with an honest and good heart, and with patience bear fruit.

The soil you see is the heart of the person into whom God is sowing the word of the gospel, and this person's heart is honest and good and bearing fruit with patience. She doesn't allow testing to get in the way of her faith in Christ.

She puts Christ before the riches and pleasures and cares of this life. She patiently endures through it all, and at length, she produces a crop a hundred times what was sown.

She becomes the kind of Christian who is quick to forgive, who is slow to condemn, who is quick to show mercy and love to those in difficult situation.

The only difference between the four kinds of soil is the quality of their hearing. At another stage, we'll return more in detail to how those four types of people respond to the gospel and how we see evidence of Jesus' parable in the church today.

- [24 : 20] But at the end of the day, what separates the hard soil, the sowny soil, the thorny soil, and the good soil is the quality of our hearing. Because the good soil are those who do not just hear with their ears, but with their minds, with their hearts, and with their wills.

They are heeding what they're hearing and obeying the message of the gospel. through faith in Christ, they're being changed inside and out.

That's the message Jesus is getting across to us today. It is the quality of our hearing that counts. Not just our listening, but our hearing, the impact of the word of the gospel upon us and how it changes the way we feel, the way we think, and the way we behave.

You will know that the gospel of Luke was written first to the early church who would enthusiastically spread the gospel over the whole Roman world.

And that message met with similar responses wherever it went. Hard hearts, stony hearts, thorny hearts, good hearts. It met with the same responses a hundred years ago in packed churches up and down our land.

- [25 : 33] It meets with the same responses today. At its most basic level, Jesus is telling us in this parable, get serious about how we hear his word.

It should not just affect who we are and what we do on a Sunday in church, but that every hour of every day we're putting the gospel which reconciles people to God and people to people to work in our lives.

how serious are we about hearing the word? Remember, hearing means so much more than listening, but doing also.

How many shall be in hell having heard or having listened to thousands of sermons but never heard one of them? forever the regret that having listened they never really heard.

Jesus' message about the quality of hearing was so powerful that many years later his brother James wrote in James 1.22, be doers of the word and not hearers only.

- [26 : 55] As then we close, we do so by asking not so much, and this is important, so listen up, by asking not so much what kind of soil are we, but what kind of soil do we want to be?

What kind of soil do you want to be today? If we want to be the last type of soil, the good soil, then let's prayerfully make every effort to hold fast to the word as it's preached, to take seriously the call to faith in Jesus Christ.

After all, has anyone else ever died to take our sins away? Has anyone else ever sacrificed himself on a Roman cross to to give us eternal life?

And having believed in Jesus, let nothing distract us. No wealth, no cares, no pleasures. Let's refuse to allow the world to squeeze us into its weird mold.

But rather, believing the gospel, let's produce the fruit of love, forgiveness, kindness, and mercy.

[28 : 14] And in short, to become more and more like Jesus every day. Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we all know that for many years, many of us came to church, listened, understood the words that were being said, but we weren't really hearing because the words didn't penetrate behind our ears and into our minds and our hearts and our wills.

But we thank you that to us you gave the understanding. And you call upon us to pray and to pray to you for this understanding.

And Lord, we know that this is an understanding that we ourselves can produce, it must be given. So we pray that you would give this understanding and this faculty of hearing today to those who even hear in this place have listened to this message but have not heard it.

In Jesus' name we pray these things. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.