

Responding to salvation

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[0 : 00] In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of his robe filled the temple.

Above him stood the seraphim, each had six wings, with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called to another and said, Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory.

And the foundations of the thresholds shook at the voice of him who called, and the house was filled with smoke. And I said, Woe is me, for I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips, for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts.

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, having in his hand a burning coal that he had taken with tongs from the altar. And he touched my mouth and said, Behold, this has touched your lips, your guilt is taken away, and your sin atoned for.

And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then I said, Here am I, send me.

[1 : 21] And he said, Go, and say to this people, Keep on hearing, but do not understand. Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.

Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and blind their eyes. Lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed.

Then I said, How long, O Lord? And he said, Until cities lie waste without inhabitant, and houses without people, and the land is a desolate waste, and the Lord removes people from far away, and the forsaken places are many in the midst of the land.

And though a tenth remain in it, it will be burned again, like a terebinth or an oak, whose stump remains when it is felled. The holy seed is its stump.

Soon afterwards, he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God.

[2 : 31] And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities. Mary called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chusa, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their means.

And when a great crowd was gathering, and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable, And some men, and some men who had gone out, and the thorns, and the thorns grew up with it, and choked it.

And some fell on into good soil, and grew and yielded a hundredfold. As he said these things, he called out, He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

And when 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 for others they are in parables, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.

Now the parable is this. The seed is the word of God. The ones along 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.

[4 : 12] And the ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root. They believe for a while, and in time of testing, fall away.

And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those 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.

As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience. No one, after lighting a lamp, covers it with a jar, or puts it under

a bed, but puts it on a stand, so that those who enter may see the light.

For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light. Take care, then, how you hear, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he thinks that he has will be taken away.

Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. And he was told, Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you.

[5 : 32] But he answered them, My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it. Now, I wonder how you'd respond if the following message appeared on your mobile phone.

Emergency alert. Ballistic missile inbound threat. Seek immediate shelter. This is not a drill. Well, that was the message.

You may know that every mobile phone owner in the U.S. state of Hawaii received two weeks ago on Sunday the 14th of January. Unsurprisingly, it plunged people into widespread panic, presumably on the assumption that the inbound missile was from North Korea.

It took a full 38 minutes before a second message confirmed that actually it had been a false alarm and a state employee simply pressed the wrong button on their computer.

Now, you and I are bombarded with messages every day. News outlets, social media, information which we have to process and digest. We all have that, whether we're at school, at home, or at work.

[6 : 41] Which ones do you act upon? Which ones do you ignore? Which ones go in the in-tray in the hope that at some stage you might have the time to do something about them? And then amidst all of that, of course, here we are on a Sunday morning and we are hearing another message.

The message of the Bible. Well, how do we respond to that? Is it something to be acted upon straight away? Is it something which we put in the in-tray to be acted upon at some stage in the future?

Or is it something which can be safely forgotten about come Monday morning? We're in the middle of a series of talks in Luke 7 and 8. And I've been capturing Luke's aim for these chapters in the New Year maths equation, which, again, you'll see is there on the outline on the back of the service sheets.

Luke's aim with these two chapters is that we'd have a big view of Jesus, a big view of the salvation that he has come to bring, because a big view of Jesus is then the engine that will drive a big discipleship, a discipleship that really transforms our lives.

The alternative, of course, is a small view of Jesus, which barely has an impact on our lives at all. And this middle section of Luke 7 and 8 is about our response to Jesus.

[8 : 01] So last week, Luke chapter 7, verses 36 to 50, how we respond to Jesus' salvation, how we respond to the forgiveness of sins. Do have a listen online if you weren't here last week.

And today, chapter 8, verses 1 to 21, how we respond to Jesus' words. So, two main headings, you'll see them there on the outline.

First of all, God's kingdom advances. God's kingdom advances as God's word is proclaimed. Right from the start of Jesus' public ministry, you may well remember back in Luke chapter 4, right at the start of Jesus' public ministry, as he launches his manifesto, it has been a ministry of proclamation, of speaking, of teaching.

Now, I think it's easy to lose sight of that, because, of course, it's the miracles of Jesus, which so naturally seem to grab our attention. And yet, Luke reminds us here that Jesus is essentially a teacher with a message that needs to be heard.

Verse 1. Soon afterwards, he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. Verse 4. And when a great crowd was gathering, and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable.

[9 : 21] You see, it answers the question, how do I receive Jesus' salvation? How do I receive the forgiveness of sins 2,000 years after Jesus himself was walking on earth?

Why? It is through hearing God's word. Indeed, that's the whole focus of this section. Hopefully, we picked that up as Stephen read the passage for us. So, verse 8. Jesus says, He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Verse 11. The seed is the word of God. Verse 18. Take care then how you hear. Verse 21. My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.

In summary, verse 12, it is by believing, it is by believing, believing the word of God and thereby being saved. Now, I guess as I say that, it seems so simple, doesn't it? And yet, so vital. If you're here today because you want to take a closer look at Jesus, you see, how do you do that? Well, by listening to the words of Jesus, as we are now.

[10:33] How will friends, family, colleagues, neighbours come to follow Jesus? By hearing the words of Jesus. It's why week by week, the sermon is at the heart of our services here at Grace Church.

It's why when we have guest events, our aim is simply to explain the word of God because that is how God's kingdom advances. So God's kingdom advances as God's word is proclaimed, but as God's word is proclaimed to the spiritually hungry.

Because, you see, it begs the question, doesn't it, that how does God's, how does Jesus' teaching work? How does the word of God work? Take parables, for example, since we're looking at a parable here this morning, the parable of the sower.

When I was at school, I was taught wrongly that Jesus taught people in parables to make it easier for people to understand what he was saying.

But that couldn't be further from the truth. Have a look at verses 9 and 10. And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, he said, to you it's been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables so that seeing they may not see and hearing they may not understand.

[11:58] Jesus is saying, his parables act as a kind of filter mechanism. They deliberately limit the benefits of Christian faith, of understanding, to the spiritually hungry, to those who will sit at Jesus' feet and learn from him.

You see, just have a look at verse 8. Verse 8, Jesus says, he who has ears to hear, let him hear. Jesus' invitation is to anyone, to everyone.

But then notice, will you, it's only those who like the disciples in verse 9, have a look at verse 9, it's only those who like the disciples in verse 9 who come to Jesus and to want to learn more who he then explains the parable to.

It's to them that Jesus says, verse 10, to you it's been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God. Whereas you see, to the others he says, verse 10, for others they are in parables so that seeing they may not see and hearing they may not understand.

Now Luke is quoting from that first reading which we had from Isaiah chapter 6. The first five chapters of Isaiah show us the spiritual state of God's people.

[13:19] They've turned their backs on God. They're refusing to listen to God. Refusing to listen to his word. And it's to them that God then says in Isaiah chapter 6, okay, if that's what you want, that is what you will get.

I will harden your hearts so that you won't be able to see or understand what I'm saying to you. So you see, what is Jesus saying in verses 9 and 10?

He's saying that his parables, his teaching, act as a deliberately sifting device. Or to change the metaphor, rather like a pair of automatic sliding doors.

perhaps in a shop entrance or a supermarket or something like that. In other words, you can be walking down a high street or walking down a lordship lane and there you are.

You're just walking along the pavement next to a shop which has automatic doors. You have no intention at all of going into that shop. You just keep walking down the pavement and the doors remain firmly closed.

[14:28] And yet, the moment you turn towards the doors because your intention is to go into the shop, then the doors open for you and you can walk in.

In the same way, Jesus is saying his parables are designed to filter out the spiritually hungry. He makes a similar point in verses 16 to 18.

Verse 16, the truth about his kingdom and the forgiveness of sins has been publicly proclaimed like a lamp that's been put on a stand so that everyone can see it.

And therefore, you see, what is at stake now is the way people respond. Verse 18, he says, take care then how you hear. For to the one who has, more will be given and for the one who has not, even what he thinks he has will be taken away.

Jesus is saying you have a choice. The spiritually hungry are given more. Those who show little or no spiritual hunger, why even what they think they have will be taken away.

[15 : 44] God's kingdom advances as God's word is proclaimed to the spiritually hungry who become part of Jesus' family. I wonder if you were struck as I was by verses 2 and 3.

There are wonderful, it's a wonderful snapshot of some of those who follow Jesus. The 12 apostles, yes, but Luke also mentions three women. He mentions them by name.

Remarkable in a society where rabbis often wouldn't teach women and yet Luke honors them. just as the section finishes with a snapshot of the spiritually hungry who followed Jesus.

Theirs is the most wonderful privilege. Verse 20. Jesus was told your mother and your brothers are standing outside desiring to see you.

But he answered them my mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it. isn't that remarkable? If you put your trust in Jesus you are closer to Jesus than his own biological family.

[16 : 56] If you put your trust in Jesus you are closer to Jesus than his mother Mary was. Closer to Jesus than his brother James. It's very timely isn't it?

Two weeks ago you may have read in the papers that the Prime Minister appointed a minister for loneliness. She said for far too many people loneliness is the sad reality of modern life.

Well that's where we are isn't it? 60 years of so-called progressive social change in our country and that's where we are. A record number of people both young and old living on their own as family units have disintegrated.

it's why the message of Jesus Christ is such wonderful news. Because those who trust in Jesus aren't simply disciples or believers or followers.

Yes of course they're all of those things but they are family members of Jesus family. God's kingdom advances as his word is proclaimed to the spiritually hungry who become part of Jesus' family.

[18 : 16] Now that just begs one question which we're going to spend the rest of our time this morning thinking about. How then will you hear?

How then will you hear? Let me read verses 11 to 15 again. Now the parable is this.

The seed is the word of God. The ones along the path are those who have heard. Then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts so they may not believe and be saved.

And the ones on the rock are those who when they hear the word receive it with joy but these have no root. They believe for a while and in time of testing fall away. And as for what fell among the thorns they are those 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.

As for that in the good soil they are those who hearing the word hold it fast in an honest and good heart and bear fruit with patience.

[19 : 26] Notice will you what is the one thing which all four categories of people have in common? Each one hears the word of God. I think we're used to thinking that the distinction is between those who do hear the word of God and those who don't.

In other words those who are here in church on a sunny morning and those who are outside doing something else. And yes of course there is a distinction there. But Jesus is making a different distinction here.

He's saying there is a distinction amongst us. There is a distinction amongst those who hear God's word. He's saying you can hear the word of God to no effect or you can hear the word of God to great prophets.

And my assumption is that it would be naive to imagine that the distinction Jesus speaks about here in the parable of the sower isn't also a distinction which operates here at Grace Church every single week.

So let's look at each type of soil in turn and as we do so let's be asking ourselves the question how am I hearing? How am I hearing?

[20 : 44] What am I doing with God's word? First of all, verse 12, the path. Someone hears a sermon on a Sunday, a talk at a carol service or the women's lunch and it's barely over and they've forgotten it.

They're already kind of mentally on to the next thing that's happening in their day. I've had the experience of bringing people to a guest event, asking someone what they thought about afterwards and all they could comment on was what the speaker was wearing.

Or perhaps on a Sunday morning over coffee at church, there are those who seem to want to talk about anything but the sermon. Now, why is that?

It's because the word has been snatched. One commentator writes, let us beware the devil, we shall always find him at church.

because the devil would love us not to believe in Jesus. And as Luke puts it in verse 12, not to be saved. In other words, it would be quite possible to come to Grace Church Dulwich every week and to be completely unchanged by what we hear.

[22 : 00] The word is simply stolen, snatched away. It makes no difference. Secondly, the rock. Someone hears the message of Jesus and they respond with joy.

They've never heard anything like it. It's wonderful that the Bible comes alive to them. They're spiritually hungry. And yet it doesn't last because, you see, they've never counted the cost. They want to be well thought of, perhaps part of the in crowd, and so they fall away. Remember the words of Jesus in Luke 6, verse 22?

I put them there on the outline. Jesus said, Bless you when people hate you, and when they exclude you, and revile you, and spurn your name as evil, on account of the Son of Man.

And there may be some here this morning for whom Jesus' warning could not be more relevant. Perhaps someone actually you're willing to follow Jesus, but only really up to a point, so far, and no further, and certainly not if it means you will be opposed by others.

[23 : 15] And yet, Jesus says, don't expect to be following him in several years' time if we are not prepared for the opposition that will come our way. I guess some of us will know people like this, who have begun well, it seems, excitingly, but actually two, five, ten years later, they are nowhere.

It's why it's important if we're looking on the Christian faith that we count the cost first of following Jesus. It's why it's important those of us who have children that we teach our children the cost of following Jesus.

Well, what about the thorns, verse 14? Now, I want to spend a little bit more time on the thorns, because they certainly pose the greatest threat to me, I think, and I guess I imagine to many of us in this room.

Notice, will you, in verse 14, Jesus mentions, well, he mentions the cares of life, so perhaps worries, worries about children, worries about the mortgage, health, education, education, and so on.

He mentions riches, the desire for wealth, career advancement, achievement, wanting to advance our reputation in the eyes of others.

[24 : 38] And he mentions pleasures, the distractions of entertainment or endlessly going off seeing people at weekends or endless holidays and retirement or perhaps it's an unhelpful relationship, it could be anything, couldn't it really?

I think the important thing to notice about these things in verse 14 is that they are the very things which our culture says are important. They are the very things our culture says we should be chasing after.

Isn't that striking? The very things our culture says we should be chasing after, these things are valuable and important. important. In other words there's a direct clash between things that Jesus warns us about and things our culture says are worth striving for.

Two weeks ago the singer Dolores O'Riordan died at the age of 46. She'd been the lead singer of the Irish band The Cranberries, their first album, released in 1993.

Did anyone buy it? I bought it. Was it only me? Others did as well. Excellent. Great. It's a great album as was the second one. The title of the album, everybody else is doing it so why can't we?

[25 : 55] That's the pressure we feel isn't it? Everybody else is doing it so why can't we? And what's Jesus' answer? Because you are gambling with your soul.

These are the very things that can take us away from Jesus. Parents, just think for a moment. What are the habits and patterns that we are cultivating with our children?

For example, exams. For many, it's exam season. Exams are undoubtedly one of the cares of life. Do we give the impression that academic success is the be-all and end-all?

If we encourage our children to prioritize schoolwork and exams and revision over, say, going to JAM, going to the youth group, well, where does that end? Surely it is cultivating a pattern that is likely to continue at university and beyond into adulthood, whereby work always trumps hearing Jesus' words.

Likewise, if you have younger children and you're not yet at the stage of exams and you don't yet have exam pressure. Nonetheless, if your children's schedule is so busy that you find that actually in practice you don't have time to read the Bible with them and pray with them each day, then surely at that point the alarm bells should be ringing, shouldn't they?

[27 : 28] Because it means actually you are too busy and your children are too busy. By contrast, someone told me just last week how they had just turned down a big job with a big salary for precisely this reason, because they knew it wasn't going to help them or their family to continue to hear God's word and grow as disciples.

Isn't that a great thing to do? It's taking what Jesus is saying seriously. What about the good soil? Well, the soil is wonderfully fruitful.

Verse 8. Some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundred folds. So you say, why is this person so different? Well, verse 15.

As for those in the good soil, there are those who hearing the word, hold it fast in honest and good hearts and bear fruit with patience. Notice they still hear the word.

What's the difference? It's how they hear. The difference lies in their heart. They treasure God's word. They ponder it.

[28 : 40] They hold fast to it with integrity and endurance. They persevere in it. In summary, they do verse 21. They hear the word of God and they do it.

In other words, not hearing and simply becoming more theologically expert or advanced, more of an expert on what the Bible says, but rather in terms of our New Year maths equation, hearing such that we do indeed have a bigger view of Jesus, a bigger view of the salvation that he brings, such that that in turn leads to a bigger life-transforming discipleship that really engages our minds, engages our hearts, changes our lives.

Four types of soil, four ways in which we can respond to God's word. Let me ask you a question which may seem rather random, but hopefully you'll get the point.

how many cookery programs have you watched in the last year? Now, we all know about the Bake Off and MasterChef and Come Dine With Me and all the rest of them. But here's the follow-up question.

How many of those recipes have you actually cooked? In other words, have you simply watched Come Dine With Me or whatever it is because it's entertaining and interesting and it passes the time of day and it's quite fun and you enjoy it and you can chat to others about it?

[30 : 23] Or actually, do you watch those programs so that you can put into practice what you hear? Is it changing you? And that's the question Jesus wants us to ask about the Bible.

You're hearing God's word, here we are week by week, but actually, are we doing anything with it? Is it changing us? Let me close with three applications.

Number one, listen carefully today. Listen carefully today. It's why you produce a talk outline week by week on the back of the service sheet to help us to follow the talk, to engage with it, to take notes, those who find notes are a useful way of engaging with it.

It's why there are questions on the bottom for reflection, to help us to think things through so that the word of God isn't sort of snatched straight away as soon as the sermon is over.

It's why we serve tea and coffee at the back, to encourage discussion, thinking things through, chewing things over, praying together about what we've heard.

[31 : 33] second application, listen carefully over a lifetime. Listen carefully over a lifetime because the parable is about what you do with Jesus' word over a long period of time.

Grace Church is 12 years old. And while you can't look at an individual on a Sunday morning and say that person is being choked or in that person you can see that the seed has been snatched or there is someone with a good heart, you can't do that week by week.

But actually over a period of time then you can do that. I guess for many of us there will be real joy as we look back over, possibly for some of us over those 12 years, perhaps I guess for others over a shorter period of time, but nonetheless we can look back over a number of years and we can see those in whom God's word has borne fruit.

But there will also be a real sadness at those in whom it hasn't. Remember verse 15, the issue is our heart, not our circumstances.

Many of us are busy, many of us have plenty of cares in this world, demanding jobs, aging parents, difficult circumstances, our own children and so on. And yet some of us are very quick to say, I can't

make growth group, I can't make church on Sunday, I haven't got time to read the Bible on my own and so on.

[33 : 07] I'll do those things, but I'll do them when life is less demanding. And yet others facing all the same circumstances, manage to read their Bible, are regularly here at church and at growth group.

It's interesting, isn't it? The circumstances can be the same. The difference is not the circumstances, the difference is the heart. And therefore if you're the kind of person who is always blaming your circumstances, rather than focusing on your circumstances, will you turn the spotlight round and instead focus on your heart?

Third application, understand how Jesus' kingdom grows. Because of course the parable addresses the issue of strategy.

It's as God's word is broadcast far and wide that his kingdom will grow. And the various responses that we hear in the parable, why they are all evidence that the word of God is at work.

As the quality of the soil, the sort of heart someone has, is revealed. In other words, it's a mistake to think.

[34 : 26] It's a mistake to assume that if you only preach the gospel in the right way, people will respond in large numbers. I think sometimes we can find ourselves assuming that.

But no, they didn't with Jesus preaching and they won't with ours either. Instead, we are to expect precisely the variety of responses that Jesus tells us about here.

There will be those who hear a talk and it goes in one ear and it goes out the other. There will be others who they seem to begin the Christian life and then give up and still others who are choked by the busyness of life and the cares of this world.

It doesn't mean the word of God is powerless quite the reverse. And be certain that they will also be those who receive the word with a good heart, an honest heart, and produce much fruit.

Because actually the real surprise, if you like, of the parable is not so much the amount of seed that is wasted, but instead it's the size of the harvest.

[35 : 34] Some seed fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold. which means that we are oohing for another one of theiestars-based wild card wires and ■ric for another one.

So that I've explosion a hundredfold filled for another one and for another answer. I believe that we have made a different price and I've been practicing for another one. First, let's see how it's successful.