

The Parable of the Soils

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[0 : 00] The following message is given by Walt Alexander, lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church in Athens, Tennessee.! For more information about Trinity Grace, please visit us at TrinityGraceAthens.com.

Turn to the Gospel of Luke, the third Gospel in our New Testament. We're going to dive into Luke 8 and study a parable there.

Luke chapter 8. I'm going to begin reading in verse 4. Luke chapter 9.

And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell 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. Verse 9. 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.

[1 : 35] But to 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.

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 a time of testing, fall away.

And as for those who fell among 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.

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

[2 : 44] With patience. That's the word of God. Have you ever been pulled through a knothole backwards?

Have you ever gotten a burr in your saddle? Or perhaps, have you ever run around like a chicken with your head cut off?

Now I know some of you have done that. What about a hissy fit? Have you ever had a hissy fit? I don't know about you, but do you ever wonder how some of these phrases get coined and submitted in our vocabulary, and some people's vocabulary more than others.

Some people, when you talk to them, even for just a few moments, phrases like these fill the conversation. My mom is one of these people, and we almost needed a translator when my wife first came in to the family.

Because hissy fit was not in her daily language. Some of these phrases are just humorous, and some are just plain odd. Like, being stabbed in the back.

[3 : 54] You know, that's a phrase we kind of throw around. But that phrase, if you just stand back and listen to it, is a bit shocking and nauseating. Nevertheless, it captures well the experience of being taken by surprise.

Right? Of something coming up from behind. Perhaps something painful and malicious. But nevertheless, something heartbreaking. Something that blindsides us and takes us down.

Right? You know, parables in many ways are like that. They are meant to surprise. They're meant to catch us off guard. You know, they're meant to disorient us a little bit before they orient us again.

You know, some passages are very direct. Seek first the kingdom of God. Parables are not. They're indirect. If that makes sense.

They teach us truth in an unexpected way. You know, one author says it like this. Some passages come through the front door. Parables sneak in through a back window and into the middle of the house.

[5 : 07] Into the heart of the home. So that they might change us from the inside out. Changing the way we view God, His kingdom, and our life in the world.

And this morning, we're going to begin a 10-week series on the parables of Jesus in the gospel of Luke. These are some of the all-stars. Some of our favorites.

Nevertheless, I trust we're going to be surprised by these verses. Parables are littered throughout Jesus' teaching. I was reading one book this week. And they said one author. One thing all historians, so that's not talking about Christians per se, all historians agree on about Jesus Christ is that He was crucified and He spoke in parables.

That's one thing everybody agrees on because there's so many of these parables. I think it's about 30% of Jesus' teaching is in parables. And yet, they're often misunderstood.

Parables simply mean story. And these stories, Jesus told about everyday things like soil and sheep and coins and fish and feasts. And all of them, though, were seeking to come at us in a surprising way and uncover the surprising way of grace and life in the kingdom.

[6 : 19] And this morning's parable is no different. It's very common. It's one of the few found in all three of the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, that are very similar.

You know, it's often referred to as the parable of the sower. However, this morning, what we're going to see is a more fitting title would be a parable of the soils.

Parable of the different soils. In a word, where we're going is listen up. Hear and hold fast to the saving word. Listen up. Hear and hold fast to the saving word.

First point is the seed is the word of God. The seed is the word of God. Now, first century Palestine was largely an agrarian society. That's just a farming society.

Seeds, sowing, fruitfulness, and failure of crops would have been some of the most common topics of everyday life and some of the most common metaphors of life and death.

[7 : 22] And so the general topic of what Jesus is talking about in this parable is not new. In fact, it's very common. And so Jesus gathers a crowd and tells about this sower.

I don't have to review the passage right now because you know this very well. You know, the sower goes out to sow seeds in a plowed field. He walks the rows and throws seed here and there by hand.

He was open-handed, literally, and generous with his seed. And some falls on the path, right? Some fall on rocky soil. Some falls among thorns.

Some falls out on the edge of the field. And some lands in good soil and bears much fruit. And so Jesus tells this parable around the crowds. And then later on, the disciples say, what's this mean?

Right? Because they're stories. They come at us indirectly. And so Jesus says, the first thing he says about this parable is, the seed is the word of God.

[8 : 21] Look down at verse 11. He says it quite literally. Now, the parable is this. The seed is the word of God. Now, to understand what the significance of what Jesus is saying here, we have to get a little bit of the context.

I want you to flip back a few pages to Luke 4, if you don't mind. Or scroll up, whichever way you're doing it. You know, Jesus is from Nazareth.

We know that, right? And Jesus begins his ministry in a region around his home called Galilee. It's just a mountainous region in northern Palestine. And at the outset of his ministry, Jesus makes very clear, my job is to preach the word.

Right? We know enough about our Lord to know that. And yet, in all of his gospels, Jesus begins this preaching, proclaiming that the kingdom of God is at hand.

You've just got to hang on with me for a little bit more. But he begins by saying the kingdom of God is at hand. And many people, when they first heard those words, would have thought, Jesus is about to take up the throne in Rome.

[9 : 25] I mean, in Jerusalem. Jesus is going to send his throne to save and protect his people. He's going to make everything right. That's what all the Old Testament looked forward to. And so they assumed that he would set the captives free, that he'd feed the poor, that he would establish justice.

That's what godly kings have always done. And so that's what they would have thought. A lot of people would have called those messianic expectations. And there were lots of them because there's lots of promises in the Old Testament.

But Jesus' first moment in public ministry makes very clear what he's all about. Look in verse 18, Luke 4. He says, and you probably remember this passage.

Jesus stumbles into the synagogue or into the temple. Actually, the synagogue here. He opens this scroll and he says, this is fulfilled about me.

Look in verse 18. He says, the spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and the recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.

[10 : 35] Now, we'll bypass the fact that this is pretty astounding, that Jesus walks into a synagogue and says, this is fulfilled in me. And all his buddies are going, do what, brother?

But it's very, so we'll overstuff that for just today. But you can see very clearly what he's all about. He says, three times there, proclaim. He sent me to proclaim good news.

Sent me to proclaim liberty. He sent me to proclaim the year of God's favor. Let's look a little bit closely. You know, Jesus right there, he quotes Isaiah 61 and says that passage is fulfilled in him.

Strikingly, if you keep reading Isaiah 61, where he quotes the very next words are, and the day of vengeance of our God. So the idea is to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God.

Now, Jesus deliberately leaves out that. What he's saying, because if he was bringing vengeance, he'd have to ascend a throne.

[11 : 46] But right now, what he's saying is right now is not a day of favor, or not a day of vengeance, but a favor. Not a day of judgment, but of mercy. Not a day of condemnation, but of salvation.

Remember the way John says it, John 3, 17. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order the world might be saved through him.

And so, in verse 43, if you keep moving down to Luke 4, he says, I must preach the good news of the kingdom to the outer towns as well, for I was sent for this purpose.

Now, I know I've left a few questions out there, but Jesus is the sower, and he's sowing the good news by preaching. Now, let's flip back.

Now, you may be thinking, how is this a secret of the kingdom? Look down in verse 10. When he gathers his disciples to you, it's been given to know the secrets of the kingdom.

[12 : 51] And then he tells them the seed is the word. What's the secret of the kingdom? Well, the secret of the kingdom, when he says the seed is the word of God, what he's saying is that the kingdom advances and bears fruit through preaching this good news.

Now, they would have expected him to rule, but what he's saying and what he's showing them is that this is how it's going to happen. The kingdom of God is not going to come when the Lord ascends on his throne, but right now, by the preaching of the gospel, sinners are brought under the saving reign of Jesus Christ.

That's the good news. And it advances through words, is what he's saying. Not through power, not through prestige, not through authority, not through government.

That's why he says, my kingdom is not of this world. You remember? Pilate says, oh, so you are a king. He says, yes, but my kingdom is not of this world. And so this just astonished them.

They would have thought he's coming to ascend the throne. I think sometimes we can think like them. We can think what the church really needs is a certain man in the White House.

[14 : 06] Or we can think what the church really needs is a political party in control of Congress. Or what the church really needs is a better ministry to the poor.

And I do believe we need a better ministry to the poor, better social programs or something like that for the kingdom of God to really begin advancing, for the church to have a visible, certain influence in the world.

But what Jesus is telling them is, though you don't see it, my kingdom advances and bears fruit through preaching. Through words.

I was reading a book this week. You know, in many ways what he's saying is, don't be distracted. The main work of the church is a work of words.

I was reading this book that quoted another book this week called How to Do Things with Words. You know, and the author pointed out that words not only communicate information, words do things.

[15 : 09] They make things happen. And Haven's going to find this out pretty soon. You know, when a pastor says with words, I now declare you husband and wife, you may kiss your bride.

And that's every pastor's most awkward moment of his ministry. Because that's when he wants to turn around. But a new social and spiritual reality comes into play.

God says two become one flesh. This mystery is profound. But also, a new social reality comes into place. Two human beings are really married, recognized by society.

And tax benefits come with it. Same thing happens when the United States says, you are now a citizen. My father-in-law, the refugee in this country, eventually, once all the affairs are in order, and once you wait for that certain amount of time, and pass all the different things you have to pass, like American history tests that we probably couldn't pass right now.

That's another story. But you're a citizen. You're employable, legally. You belong. You're an American. American. Words change reality.

[16 : 29] They change the way we relate to one another, to society, to the government, and so on. In a similar way, that's what Jesus is saying about the words of the gospel. That the kingdom advances and bears fruit on earth through words.

They change lives for eternity. It brings folks from death to life. It transfers them from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's Son. It ushers them into a kingdom that cannot be shaken.

It fills their life with fruit. It gets things done. That's what Jesus is saying. We don't need a good life. We don't need some secret knowledge.

We just need the words of the gospel to be saved. That's what God said. We need the words of the gospel to completely change our eternal destiny and everything that matters about us in our life.

This reminds us we must give attention to how we hear. The main work God wants to do in our lives is through a book.

[17 : 28] And we want to watch how we read and watch how we listen. Point two. The different soils are the hearts of those who hear.

Different soils are the hearts of those who hear. After describing himself as a sower who sows the word, Jesus goes on to say the different soils are the hearts of those who hear this good news.

Essentially, he breaks it into four different soils and four different hearts. The first one is hard hearts. Remember, the first soil the seed lands on is hard soil.

It's along the path. The idea is it's been literally, or I quote, trampled underfoot for many years. The rain runs off it.

And the sun only hardens it all the more. It's that Tennessee clay. And so the seed doesn't take root, right? Because the ground is so hard.

[18 : 31] Jesus says in verse 12, look at me. He says, the ones along the path are those who have heard. But then the devil comes and takes away the word of God from their hearts so that they may not see and believe.

Some fail to hear the word to believe and be saved because of their hardness of heart. There are few things that Scripture tells us to fear more than a hard heart.

No one sets out, right, to harden their heart. But our hearts grow hard when we hide and indulge and secretly feast on sin.

You know, our hearts can grow hard through withholding forgiveness from someone who wronged you. I find this so interesting that you're not the one who is in the wrong, and yet you're the one that can be left with the hard heart.

Our hearts may grow hard by quieting the persistent voice of our conscience and refusing to repent of secret sin. You know, or our hearts may just go hard through difficult circumstances that have waylaid us and left us, to use one of our phrases, licking our wounds, right?

[19 : 49] And self-pity in our hearts are hard. The point is, after the heart grows hard, the same word that softens and saves some only hardens and closes others.

The Puritans used to say, the same sun that melts the snow hardens the clay. You have to watch out for a hard heart. Point two, or B, a shallow heart.

Shallow hearts. The second soil the seed lands on is shallow soil. It's on the rock. It's not deep enough. You know, it cannot access enough moisture.

And so the seed produces fruit, but quickly withers away. Look at verse 13. Jesus says, The ones along the rock are those who, when they heard the word, receive it with joy.

But these have no root. They believe for a while. And in a time of testing, they fall away. If you've been a Christian for any length of time, you know what this means.

[20 : 55] Many people start well. Many people respond to the gospel with joy. Many confess Jesus Christ, make commitments to follow Him, but few finish well.

So much so, our Lord says in Matthew 7, 14, For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.

The point is, few stay on this path because of their shallowness of heart. I mean, there's so much right in the beginning. That's what's confusing about all this. There's this joy, you know, and our feelings are so wonderful.

We can't be saved without them. We must feel deeply about who God is, such that our joy, peace, confidence, and fear are found in Him. But if our feelings aren't tied to something, eventually they fail.

You know, I've seen this so many times. Just last year, a friend of mine from high school connected, and we talked and I think came to the Lord.

[22 : 00] You know, he said he wanted to move to Athens to be a part of the church plant. And yet, last I reached out to him, he's moved on.

It's so familiar that we can almost forget how devastating it is. But whatever the details are, Jesus says, some will respond with joy.

And yet, when testing come, fall away. Point three, strangled, or B, C, strangled hearts.

The third soil the seeds land on is along the outside of the field where the soil is not tilled and where weeds and thorns grow. And gradually growing up around the seeds, the thorns choke it out.

You know, we all know how this works because it's spring. And we had to round up the weeds this time of year. Yesterday, I took out a couple of weeds in my yard.

[23 : 12] They were honeysuckle weed that were like 12 feet tall. They were blocking my maples from getting suns.

I had to take them out. And so you can see how it happens. These weeds grow and then they strangle out the life of other things. Look at verse 14.

It says, 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.

Now, this verse is haunting to me. Last week, I tried to state very clearly that Jesus gives joy and fills our life with good gifts of food and drink and so many earthly blessings.

But those good things should come with a warning label is what our Lord is telling us here. Now, the cares and pleasures and riches of life are not bad in and of themselves.

[24 : 19] It's not a bad thing to make money or own a car or a nice house or have nice things. The bad thing is when those things strangle our heart.

I was trying to think about this. Like, how does this happen? John Piper tells the story of being in a college English class and hearing his professor, I guess, just kind of lament as he was speaking.

And he said, One of the greatest tragedies of the fall is that we get tired of familiar glories. One of the greatest tragedies of the fall is that we get tired of familiar glories. I love that.

You know, this world is filled with glory. I think that's what Jesus is getting after in the wedding in Cana and these things is that this world is just filled with things to enjoy. Beautiful mountains, vast seas, endless varieties of food, rich relationships, so much music and so much provision.

And yet, and so these things are meant to fill our lives with just continual gratefulness to God and incessant gratefulness to God. And yet, when we grow familiar with these things, our hearts begin to be strangled.

[25 : 30] We're not content with simple pleasures we have and just want more. We're not satisfied with the possessions we have and just want more. We're not happy with the house or car or whatever we have.

We just want more. And that's how I think our hearts begin to get strangled. And it happens gradually. Even what that text points out, it happens slowly.

Finally, point D, open hearts. The final soil the seed lands on is good soil. It's soft ground, rich in the middle of the field, immediately bears fruit and grows and brings forth a hundredfold harvest.

Look in verse 15. 15. Jesus says, As for the good soil, there are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart and bear fruit with patience.

Now, what's the point of all this? Probably what the disciples were thinking. What is Jesus trying to teach his disciples? I think the point is, the soil makes all the difference.

[26 : 45] The soil makes all the difference. Now, one of my close friends is a soil science major. I don't even know what that phrase means. He sent me this fascinating article about soils.

I think illustrates this point very well. And I quote, Now, he keeps going.

He says, He says, It's a subterranean underground community that includes worm, insects, mite, and other anthropods.

You've never heard of amoebas and fellow protozoa. The idea, he says, that in a teaspoon of good soil, it may contain a teaspoon, a billion bacteria, yards of fungus.

Which kind of sounds a little gross. Several thousand protozoas and a few dozen other anthropods. The idea is that the soil, the plants and the soil work together, he says.

[28 : 25] The soil feeds the plants. He says, He says, He concludes, The organic farmer's mantra has never seemed more appropriate.

Feed the soil, not the plant. Feed the soil, not the plant. Take care of the soil and let it do its work.

Now, they're arguing this is a surprising discovery because it's not in the sun or the rain or the pruning or the tilling or the skill of the sower or farmer or the fertilizer. It's the soil that makes all the difference.

It's the soil that makes things grow. It doesn't matter any climate. And if you know anything about wine in France, then you understand that it's all in the soil because the climate is most terrible.

And so this is the same thing Jesus is saying in this passage. It's all about the soil. So he's telling these disciples at the outset of his ministry, it doesn't matter who preaches or how well they preach.

[29 : 59] It doesn't matter what the person's background is or their past or their sin issues are. It doesn't matter whether they're Jew or Gentile or a tax collector or a sinner. It doesn't even matter that the word is preached.

It's the same word that softens some fails to help others. And it's shocking for them to hear. You know, in a world of Judaism where it was easy to see a hierarchy, well, that guy goes to church.

That guy does his thing. That guy cleans up his outside. The world is no different than our world. But what he's saying is that has no bearing. It only matters what's in their heart.

It only matters if the heart is open. That's what makes all the difference. Now, this is striking. Jesus is not even saying the word makes all the difference.

He's saying the soil makes all the difference. So he's sending them out into ministry aware that regardless of how well they preach, not everyone will respond.

[31 : 19] Keep them from growing weary. Point three, the fruit, therefore, comes from an open heart. The fruit comes from an open heart.

I think we've covered this well. But if the only thing that matters is the heart, how can we make sure our hearts are open? I don't always do this, but I just want to give a couple practical things here.

The first is listen. Now, it should be pretty obvious. Here is one of the most repeated words in this passage. But listen up to the word. Read it.

Don't read it for others. Read it for yourself. You know, sometimes we read that Bible and think about something our wife should be working on. Our kids should be working on. But read it and then respond to it.

I love this way Thomas Watson says it like this. Take every word you read as spoken to yourselves. When the word thunders against sin, think thus God means my sin.

[32 : 27] When it presseth. Now, that's not a word we typically use. But when it pushes us or commands a certain duty, God intends me in this. Many put off Scripture from themselves as if it only concerned those who lived in the time it was written.

But if you intend to profit from the word, bring it home to yourselves. A medicine will do no good unless it be applied. Bring it home.

I love that image. That's what I'm trying to do in the mornings. I'm trying to bring it home to myself. You know, it's not enough to just hear and read. We have to respond. When was the last time you stopped doing something after reading or hearing the preaching of God's word?

When was the last time you were really convicted upon while hearing or reading God's word? Listen. That phrase, he who has ears, let him hear.

That's one of the most repeated phrases in the New Testament. Remember in Revelation 3, he says, Let the churches hear what the Spirit of God is saying to the churches.

[33 : 40] That phrase is repeated. Not all those who hear really hear. So we must give attention to hearing. Persevere. Point B.

You notice it doesn't say down there, Hear the word and then obey it. Now, by all means, I'm all for obedience. But it's not up for us to listen and obey perfectly.

I think this is chosen very carefully to say, Listen and hold fast. Persevere. Hold on to it. Yet strikingly in this passage, Listening and persevering is the key to overcoming three major obstacles in the Christian life.

The devil, suffering, time of testing, And the world, the pleasures of this world. So persevere. Hold fast. To the word.

And to perseverance. In many ways, this just encourages my heart. Because oftentimes when we're reading and planning ourselves in the word, It does not look pretty.

[34 : 49] It just looks normal. And yet, As the Bible does again and again throughout the New Testament, It calls us just to press on.

Finally, be fruitful. Then, it says, Bear fruit with patience. We want fruit, right? And yet, this reminds us, It's going to take a while.

I like that. Because I'm, It's okay to grow slowly. I said several weeks ago, And this verse just commends it.

But, If we listen and persevere, The word will bear fruits in our lives. In such a way, That will be a soil, That's fruitful.

So hold fast, To the word. To this saving, Word. Why don't you go ahead and, Stand with me as I pray. Father in heaven, Thank you for these, Few minutes.

[36 : 04] Thank you for the opportunity to, Consider your word. Pray, Father, That you would help your word, Have its intended effect, God.

We pray that you would shape us more deeply, To follow you and to serve you. And Lord, We pray that you would keep our hearts open. Keep them tender.

Keep them soft. Keep them responsive, To your word. And to your commands. We pray, In Jesus name.

Amen. Amen. You've been listening to a message, Given by Walt Alexander, Lead pastor of Trinity Grace Church, In Athens, Tennessee. For more information about Trinity Grace, Please visit us at, TrinityGraceAthens.com Thank you,