

The Sower

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[0 : 00] Okay, this morning we're going to go back to our reading in Luke's Gospel. So this is the beginning of a new series for us here in St. Columba's.

For our morning worship, the next 10 Sundays, God willing we will be looking at parables in Luke. Not all of them, there's more than 10, but we're going to do them consecutively in the sense that we'll move through the chapters of Luke as we do them.

So today we're looking at a very well known and it's a very appropriate one to begin with, the parable of the sower Luke chapter 8 from the beginning to verse 17.

Now any column, for example, a ministry student or anyone being encouraged to take services or preach sermons will be told there's nothing like a good story.

Make sure you illustrate your sermons with lots of good stories. It gives people breathing spaces, it gives them time to relax, it helps people understand the theological truth behind the message that you're bringing and it's the key to all good sermons.

[1 : 15] But what I'd like to say is, wait a minute, hold on, slow down and stop just for a moment, that's so quick. Let's not, in other words, sorry, I didn't make the connection between that and the parables.

A lot of people say, well look at Jesus, he told so many parables and they were great stories that everyone understood and were clear explanations of theological truth.

Let's not be quite so quick, let's not misunderstand Jesus or shortchange God. This parable is all about the Word of God. It's all about the seed which Jesus describes as the Word of God.

So let's do a little bit of plowing at the beginning by way of introduction just to get clear why Jesus told parables in the Bible.

The immediate context helps for us because Luke is unfolding, Luke is describing in the gospel the outworking of Jesus' ministry and his preaching of the good news of the gospel.

[2 : 18] In the previous chapter, in Luke chapter 7 and in verse 22, he said, when John was asking the question, is Jesus really the Messiah?

Is he the one that is to come? Jesus said, go tell John what you've seen and heard. The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news, preach to them.

So, and you'll find that throughout John's Luke's gospel that there's this emphasis on the good news of the kingdom of God. And his emphasis both here, both there and also in the brief summary version of the Sermon on the Mount that he gives at the beginning, he speaks about those who are poor in spirit, who will receive the message of the good news of the kingdom.

In other words, he's getting across and throughout his gospel, those who are not poor financially, but those who recognize their poverty of spirit and need before God.

He's overcoming the belief that is prevalent in the, among particularly the religious people around him, that the kingdom of God is for the good people, for the worthy people, the people who have earned it, the religious people maybe.

[3 : 38] The three miracles in the previous chapter, they deal with sickness, death and the sinful life. All of these great reasons for the good news of the kingdom of God.

And the three recipients in the previous chapter who believed, well, at least according to the hearers of that time, the religious worthy, those who were the recipients of these miracles were the unworthy.

The Gentile, a woman and a notorious sinner, all of whom were regarded by their religious elite of the day as being unworthy of the kingdom of God, of not being able to have a place at the great marriage feast of the Lamb, as it were.

So the immediate context is that Jesus is wanting to get across the importance of how we listen and listening and depending on Jesus in a needy way spiritually.

But then there's a wider context also. Sam 78, where we sung from, it gives a prophetic description of how the Messiah would teach, she would teach in parables.

[4 : 54] And that's been fulfilled by Jesus here. And then in Isaiah chapter 6, in verse 9, and that's quoted here in the chapter we read together in Luke chapter 8, if you look at verse 9 and 10, it's not set out so clearly as a quote, but you see it there.

Jesus asked, as disciples asked rather what the parable meant, and he said to them, to you, has been given the secrets of the kingdom of God, but to others they are imperable. So that, and here he's quoting from Isaiah, seeing they may not see and hearing they may not understand, a quote from Isaiah 6 verse 9.

It's quoted more fully in the Matthew version of this parable and also recorded in the Mark version in chapter 4. So Jesus is saying that these stories are not really just straightforward.

They are not simply illustrations to make a point which makes the point easier to understand, not exactly.

Not so straightforward as that. Jesus is saying, and he's in quoting from Isaiah, he's reminding them that the stories were revealed, were given to reveal something about the hearts of the hearers, the listeners.

[6 : 21] To you as an ear to hear, let them hear. But those who are seeing may not see and those who are hearing may not understand. And it's highlighting that the parables separated the listeners, those who wanted to find out exactly what they meant, and those who just shrugged their shoulders and said, ah, well, it's just a story.

It hasn't got any real meaning, it's unintelligible. It was pretty, I enjoyed it, I liked the story, but it doesn't mean anything. I don't think God is speaking through it. So it wasn't, the parables weren't given quite so much to aid understanding like illustrations, although when they explained, they do aid understanding.

But rather they were more like test cases as to whether the listeners wanted to understand the gospel and to dig deeper to find out the meaning and learn more, or just walk away without any spiritual understanding of what was being said.

In other words, the parables actually hid the truth from those who were not willing to listen or who didn't want to listen or who were negative in their response to Jesus Christ.

Jesus reveals the mysteries of the kingdom through the parables as they explained, and they make perfect sense as they're explored.

[7 : 46] But for those who just couldn't be bothered, their hearts became hardened further to the truth. They didn't seek the Jesus of the parables. So for Jesus, the parables are not really part of a sermon structure.

They're not just breathing space or illustrations, nice stories to make the gospel really easy to understand. They had, and they still have a purpose of blinding the eyes of those who don't want to see, who don't want to search, who don't want to find out, who don't want to come to Christ for help. And there's a very important truth at the foundation of that explanation with regard to the way you listen and the way I listen to the Word of God.

Does your interaction with the Word of God in mind, does it draw you to that place where you see your need more and look for grace and help and deeper understanding?

Does it draw you closer to Jesus, or do you just close the Bible and say, well, I don't understand it anyway? It's not relevant to my needs.

[8 : 55] And so you harden your heart against the truth of the gospel. And you don't allow it to expose your need and expose the truth of Jesus Christ.

So that's by way of introduction. The parable of the sore here, look at it for a few minutes this morning, probably would be better to be called the parable of the soil or the parable of the seed. Because the sores, well, he is integral to it, but it's more about the... more than anything, it's about the soil in terms of the story, the parable that he tells.

So what's the parable about? What is this story that Jesus tells? What's it about? It's about getting rich.

It's about bringing up kids. It's about getting a job, promotion, going on holiday, having a new house, being ill, being redundant, being bullied at work, exams, traveling the world, falling in love,

growing old, going into overdraft, being hurt by a friend watching Netflix, reading the Bible, not believing in Jesus' unseen spiritual enemies, persevering, authentic faith, the mystery of God overcoming death.

[10:07] It's about all of these things, isn't it? Because Jesus talks about that in the passage. He says when he's explaining it, he says the things of this world, what does he say?

The cares and the riches and the pleasures of life, the times of testing and trial, the spiritual opposition we face. It's about all of these things.

It's about the things of your life and of my life today and tomorrow and during the week. It's about all of these things. Let's not so spiritualize the stories that it's of no relevance and no meaning to how you will go out and live your life and me, mine, tomorrow.

So it's about all of these things. But can I focus it down? Can I focus it right down? Because it's got a central message and a central truth, which is the condition of your heart and of my heart before God.

That's really what it's about. Because the soil is a picture of our hearts and how we respond to the seed, which is the Word of God.

[11:12] And so it's all about the condition of our heart before God. So if you wanted to take a theme from that parable, that's what it is. It's the... Jesus speaking about the condition of our hearts before God through His Word.

Now if God is God, then that matters, doesn't it? The condition of our hearts before God, you know, if He's the Creator, the given of life, if He's the King of kings before whom we will all stand one day, who says that we are rebels, whose hearts need to change by grace, which is the good news of the kingdom, then it matters.

If He's some distant potentate of no power or a make-believe then, let's just close the service down just now and go and walk on the car-free streets.

Well done, everyone who made it today. Proud of you. So if God is God, remember, but what is Jesus asking?

What is Jesus asking of us in unveiling this parable? What's He asking? Well He's asking at least these questions. When you read the Bible, which is the voice of God, do you believe it or do you ignore it?

[12:38] And do you say, well, I can't accept that teaching and the kind of life I'm living. I can't accept it. It doesn't even penetrate beyond your ears.

He's also asking, well, how do you respond? How do we respond to God when troubles happen in your life? You know, the seed that falls on the stony ground when testing comes, what happens? So God is asking that question. What do you do with God when trouble comes, when difficulty comes in your life? How do you deal with that? Do you respond in the way He explains here, which we'll go on to look at?

Or He's also asking, what is filling your heart and life day to day? What's important so that you've no time for God in your day to day life?

What is, you know, He talks about the seed that fell among the thorns and it's choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of this life so that there's no fruit, fruit doesn't mature.

[13:48] And He's saying, what is it when you leave the church, what is it in your day to day life that is filling your life with such importance that there's no place for Jesus Christ, no place for bearing fruit?

So the really relevant questions that He's asking of us in a response to the Word of God as the living Word.

So He's asking these questions, what's He teaching? What's He teaching? Well, He's teaching about the condition of our hearts as listeners. So all about listening this parable, listening to God, listening to Jesus Christ, listening to the Bible as His living Word, the condition of our hearts.

He's reminding us that we naturally reject the Word of God. Naturally we're like the seed that is thrown onto the path.

The ones along the path of those who hear or who have heard, then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts so they may not believe and be saved. Really hard soil, that's what He's talking about.

[14:53] Naturally that is the condition of every one of our hearts. Naturally we reject the Word of God, naturally. Spiritually we're rebels against God.

Without the preparatory work of God in our hearts, we have hardened hearts against Him. And so we need God to work in our hearts to change them so that we can receive His Word by faith and respond to His Word.

So even as we listen today, there's a spiritual enemy at work who's always seeking to take away that seed from our hearts. That is His work.

And naturally we will not receive His Word. Naturally we will not respond to His Word. We need a miracle of God's intervention in our lives.

He's also saying that if our hearts are unchanged in response to the Word, even when we love hearing about Jesus early days, He will be a temporary phenomenon in our lives.

[16:02] So the parable speaks about this seed that is in shallow ground and then on ground it's choked. In one case there's joy for a little while until testing comes.

In the other case, Jesus and His Word is choked altogether. Because there's not a change in the soil. There's not a change in the heart is what Jesus is saying.

So there can be temporary joy in Jesus, an emotional experience about, oh, Jesus is great and He loves me and He's good. And we can maybe expect all kinds of amazing things from Jesus without truly understanding what He says with no deep insight and with no willingness to allow His Word to dig deep into our hearts so that when difficulties come, we just stick our fingers up at Jesus and say, well, I thought you were going to be my Savior and now you've abandoned me.

Life's no better for me now. I'm just going to walk away. We shrivel in times of testing, that's what He's saying, because the Word hasn't penetrated our hearts.

Or He will be like an insurance policy to us where we think, oh, Jesus is great and that's marvelous. I don't need to think about it now until I die and then I'll go to heaven.

[17:21] But in the meantime, my life is so full of important things and cares and enjoyments and pleasures and stuff that He's no place in my soul. He hasn't really taken over my heart and I don't really love it.

He's an important day to day, in other words. And again, faith just withers because there's no depth. There's too many competing loves. We can't give our love to lots of different things, Jesus says. Too many distractions that I love more that are more important than the person of Jesus. That's if our hearts are unchanged, if we don't let Jesus into the heart.

And I think what Jesus is saying here powerfully is that we need Jesus' power in our lives to both listen and to live for Him.

We need His power to listen and to live. We need His sovereign power to work in our hearts.

[18:24] His timing, His mystery, His will. You think of the parable of the sower. We'll take God as being the sower, okay? Like use other people to sow the seed.

But we'll take Him as the sower. The sower needs to prepare the soil, doesn't he? If it's to bear fruit, if the roots are to go deep.

That's really the unspoken truth of this parable is that the sower has already done lots of work in the soil to prepare it for the seed.

And the reality is, God is the sower of first cause. We need God to change our hearts because we're dead, not sick.

Spiritually we're dead without Him. And we need God to change our hearts right from the beginning. And within that there's great mystery about His sovereignty and our responsibility.

[19:20] But we come to Him asking for Him to change our hearts and to renew us and to prepare us to receive Him and to receive His Word because without Him we have no life.

And His Word is life. You know, it talks about the seed going into the ground, then bearing forth fruit, deep roots going in. His Word is life, you know, that's the interesting thing about seed, isn't it? The seed goes into the ground. But what happens to the seed? We see this elsewhere in Scripture. The seed dies before it brings life. And there's mystery in that, isn't there?

And the seed is the Word of God. But it's much more than just the Word of God, can I say, as a book. The seed is much more than a dry kernel.

It mysteriously dies and bursts into life. And so the Word of God is much more than just the accumulation of knowledge from a book, theological and everything else, knowledge.

[20:25] It is, it's not less than that. It's not less than intellectual knowledge. But it's more than that. It is coming to recognize the seed, the Word of John 1 who dies in order that we can live, who dies to bring life to us.

So our relationship to the Word is relational, not merely intellectual, not merely about the accumulation of facts.

It is entrusting our lives to the truth of the Word which is the person of Jesus Christ and what He says. It is being overwhelmed by His great love and commitment to us so that we will not allow everything else in life to choke Him from His preeminence in our lives.

It is just recognizing His amazing love and rooting ourselves deeply in Him. So the Word of God, when it speaks here of the Word of God as the seed is the Bible, but it's much more than sometimes I think we think of what the Bible is.

We think of the Bible as simply a document, but we know that Jesus, God said in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God.

[21 : 48] So it is taking our relationship with the Bible and recognizing it, revealing the person God communicating through us through Jesus Christ.

And He's also teaching, and I want to just focus on this as the main point, not the longest you'll be pleased, but the main point is that genuine life.

The genuine life of faith, genuine life of a believer is all about root and fruit. That's what it's all about.

A genuine life of a believer is all about root and fruit because he talks about the heart, it's the heart that is hard and then he speaks about the good heart at the end.

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

[22 : 46] So the root is able to go deep in order for the fruit to be able to be born. That's the truth of this in many other parts of Scripture. The Word therefore, the Word, Jesus Christ and the revelation of Him through His Word must go deep into our hearts.

Isn't that the difference? There's shallow, there's choked, there's hard, but then there's prepared soil. So that the Word of God goes into hearts that are spiritually exercised.

So as Christians, we have this great responsibility to cooperate with the Holy Spirit and let the light of God's revelation, the Word of God, the person of Jesus into the dark corners, the black corners, the black areas of our heart to allow His light and His cleansing in, so that our roots become strong because He is gold, because He is grace and love.

And we are to be a people who allow Him to search into the deepest corners of our lives in order that we can root out the sin and the weeds and everything that chokes us and the stones and everything else, so that we can be well-rooted in Him.

So we search the Word, we wrestle with Him, we are close to His Word and His promises and His truth and His character, and we pit them against our experience.

[24 : 23] And that happens most when it doesn't happen on the rollercoaster, it's not the best illustration, it doesn't happen on the high points of the rollercoaster, on the low points.

It happens in the times of testing. That's what He's saying, isn't it? He's saying that you will know the grace of God and you will know the roots are dug not in the happy times, but in the difficult times.

And that is hard going. Have you ever turned soil? That's, you know, unprepared? There's a lot of work in that.

Swab or brow, we do it. We dig out the weeds, we turn it, we fertilize it. We mature it, we eat it, whatever it is. But it's hard work. And God, Jesus is saying that we bear fruit when we have learned through trials and allowed His grace to dig into the very deep parts of our hearts, to consider the competing idols that may be there, to root out these idols so that we listen, so we say sorry, so that we submit and change and we allow Him to be the great gardener who tends our hearts.

What's the parable saying? It's saying we're prone to shallowness. But He's saying testing will come. We're prone to competing loves, to loving other things before Jesus.

[25 : 51] And He says that will expose what we're a relationship with Him and our understanding. But grace changes everything for us. That's the key. Grace changes all of that, and we have a battle therefore.

It's not easy. We have a battle to allow grace to change our dark hearts and we allow God through the Spirit and our cooperation to be changed by Him. The word is not simply an ethic or a law, I think, as we often understand that.

It is a law of love of a crucified Savior. That's what it is. It's a crucified Savior we will have that we will remember shortly who offers forgiveness and adoption into His everlasting Kingdom.

This is about the Kingdom of God, His gift and a life that overcomes testing and darkness and opposition and trumps every deceitful love that tempts us away from Him. And if we don't at least see that in seed form, you'll walk away unchanged by Jesus Christ and by His Word.

[27 : 03] And the Lord's Supper is a visual for us of that as we think about it. So it's a spiritual exercise, and it's an exercise that takes time. Jesus reminding us our relation to the Word and the condition of our hearts.

And if you've ever planted any seed, you'll know that. You don't wake up the next morning and there's an apple tree or whatever it might be.

Nothing seems to happen for ages, it's very frustrating. But there is something happening, there's a lot going on. And that's often how God works for us.

He's working patience in us and He's working perseverance. The most common questions that I hear and that I ask myself are why Lord, when Lord, or what's the point Lord?

I want to know now Lord, I feel like giving up Lord. You aren't hearing Lord, you don't understand Lord. And often He's saying, I'm asking you just to be patient, to let that seed work in your heart, deep down rooted so that you can bear fruit, times of testing, times of misty, times when He is dealing with the loves that are part of our hearts.

[28 : 21] And that can seem very unglamorous in the Christian walk. We like glamour and often it's not like that. And then lastly, I think within that whole idea of root and fruit, there must be fruit.

We seek that as believers. When we work with God, when we respond to His voice, when we repent of our sins and come to Him in need, when we hear as Jesus wants to hear, like those who are poor in spirit.

That's who the kingdom of God is for, those who are poor in spirit, who recognize their need and we come to Him and we let His life and His word work in us in dark times and with the loves and the idols that are in our hearts, rooting them out.

We will bear His fruit. We will bear His fruit. That's not an optional extra. And I think what's the thing about fruit?

It's always visible. Fruit does, it's not a potato which grows under the ground. It's fruit that can be seen.

[29 : 38] Beautiful, attractive and appealing. People will see the light of Christ in our lives. Many, many years ago, I was 16 years old, went to Canada on holiday and drove from Toronto to Niagara Falls.

And there's a little place just before Niagara Falls called Niagara by the Lake, I can still smell the fruit in that place. It was like walking into a fruit heaven.

I don't know if it was or not, but that's my memory of it. Peach trees and apple trees and just this verdant smell, beautiful smell and beautiful visual.

And I still sense that 40 years later. And the fruit of the spirit is similar in our lives.

It doesn't need to be that glamorous or dramatic, is it? But as you go into your work this week, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

[30 : 51] That's greatness to Jesus. That's fruit bearing. That's what requires our roots to be well dug down in the Word, who is Jesus and in His communication to us through the Bible and in the Bible and in its truth.

Just let Jesus change the world. Our work is to partner with Him to change our hearts as Christians. And then just see where in the world that will lead.

Don't worry about that side of things. Just let God do His work in your heart. Change your heart by His grace and His love. Transform you.

Recognize His Lordship, His justice, His rightful desire to punish all evil and darkness. And yet to see that He's done that on Jesus' Son in your place and in mine.

Because we put our faith and trust in Him. The greater love has no man than this. Amen. Let's pray. Father God, help us to understand You and Your Word and Your truth.

[32 : 02] We thank You for this amazing parable. And we thank You that You explained it to Your disciples, to those who asked.

And we thank You that You explained the purpose of Your parables, which was to encourage us to dig deeper, to understand some things that are difficult because they are truth.

And because You want us to be these needy, poor and spirit people who come to You for riches, who come to You for forgiveness and for life and for hope and perspective.

And we pray for that today. And we pray Your Holy Spirit will take Your Word and apply it to us. If we are battling today with troubles and testings and difficult times and are really tempted to give up, maybe hear Your voice today.

If we are being attracted, Lord God, by lots of other things in life, other loves, other idols that take the preeminence in our hearts, Lord, we will listen to You calling us back to Yourself.

[33 : 07] And if our hearts are hard and we have no intention of responding to Your Word, but just allow it to be taken away as swiftly as we walk out the door, then maybe hear Your voice also and bless the visual of Your Lord's support to us as we celebrate together today.

In Jesus' name, we ask these things. Amen.