

Parable of the Sower

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Date: 01 June 2008

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[0 : 0 0] We are continuing our series of sermons going through the whole of Luke's Gospel over 2008, and this morning we are in Luke chapter 8 where Jesus tells the parable of the sower.

So please keep your Bible open on page 1037, Luke chapter 8. To set this chapter in some kind of a context, in case you haven't been here, as some of you won't have to hear the earlier sermons in the first seven chapters, Jesus is starting to make a really tangible impact on his community, on his society, on life and his day. In the last chapter, which Derek preached on last week, a Pharisee has just invited Jesus around to his house, and while he was there, Jesus was worshipped and anointed by a prostitute, and Jesus forgave her, and he uses her example to show the Pharisee a kind of religious, moralistic figure that his sin in comparison was unforgiven. And as we see in verse 1, it's after this, Luke says, that Jesus traveled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. Excuse me.

There is so much that we could say, just from verse 1, we could do a whole sermon on this, but we won't. To learn about Jesus' own life priorities being completely gospel driven, I'll give you one insight just as we're passing through, to help you understand what Luke means when he writes about good news, or the other word for it, gospel, the thing that drove Jesus' life.

What is gospel? What is good news? What does this mean? I'll give you this definition. Gospel is a piece of important news that an objective event has happened, which you cannot ignore because it affects your life. Gospel is a piece of important news that an objective event has happened, which you cannot ignore because it affects your life. Now, if you know much about Christianity, you'll have heard, you know, we have four gospels in the New Testament, Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. Did you also know, though, that there is historic documents from the same kind of time and context, roughly, as the New Testament called the Gospel of Julius Caesar?

There's a document called that, the Gospel of Julius Caesar. You hear that and you think, what? I thought the gospels were just Christian things. As a genre, as a concept, they're not strictly. The Gospel of Julius Caesar is a document, is a message that Julius has become the Caesar of the Roman Empire, and it's been proclaimed to you, announced to you, and it has implications for your life. There's a new Caesar, the empire is going to change, and this is a message to you about your life has to come in line with that. And when you start to see, you know, that the Gospel is a proclamation of an objective event, a historic event that's happened and you cannot ignore, the whole concept of the Christian gospels, the Christian gospel, the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the gospel according to Luke about Jesus Christ, it all starts to come together. And when you see Jesus here proclaiming the good news, the Gospel of the Kingdom of God, this is when it all starts to come together, and you see that it's a big thing, that Jesus is proclaiming that an objective event has happened and you have to get in line with it. The Kingdom of God is at hand. God in the flesh has come to his people, and you have to deal with that fact. That's what this means, that Jesus is proclaiming the good news, the Gospel. So when you hear about Jesus proclaiming the good news, it's not that he has a kind of weak message, that he's not that sure about, you know, maybe something has happened, and you know, you might want to think about it. It's so much more forceful than that, so much stronger, in a winsome kind of way. If someone comes to you and proclaims, you know, if you live a couple of thousand years ago, proclaims the Gospel of Julius Caesar, ignore it at your peril, because whether you like it or not, Julius is now in charge, and when Jesus comes and he proclaims his Gospel, we cannot ignore that, because the Gospel that Jesus preaches, the good news, is a piece of important news that something objective has happened. So that's the kind of context that we set this in, in terms of good news. And then we read on that the twelve disciples were with him, and also some women who had been cured of evil spirits and diseases, and there's some information about them.

[5 : 00] And what you see is that Jesus has been financially and practically supported by a group of women who practice sacrificial giving, and that's the background to the parable of the sower, which we're going to go into just now. As we go into the parable, though, what is so important for us to grasp, is that this parable is about the Gospel. That's why we've just been explaining what Gospel means, about an objective thing that's happened that you have to deal with. In verse 4 and verse 5, while a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable, a farmer went out to sow his seed. Now the context that Jesus is telling this in is that he is going from town to town preaching the Gospel, the objective news that the Kingdom of God has come, and then he tells this parable about a farmer going around sowing seed. And he goes on to say in verse 11, this is the meaning of the parable, the seed is the Word of God.

So the seed is the Word of God, the Gospel message itself. In a way, it's a shame that we exclusively tend to call this the parable of the sower, because it's also just as much the parable of the seed, the parable of the Gospel. It's the parable that explains why the Gospel has such a range of different effects among different people in different places. And that is what we are looking at this morning. Three points on this, on the parable of the seed, the parable of the Gospel, and why it has different effects. Number one, the Gospel has no effect on some people.

In verse five, a farmer went out to sow his seed as he was scattering the seed, some fell among the path. It was trampled on and the birds of the air ate it up. Now the image that Jesus is evoking is of a farmer and he has a bag of seed and he's walking around taking out handfuls, throwing it out, scattering it everywhere. And to take this in, you really need to use your imagination to put yourself back, you know, 2000 years ago in the Middle East and the baking sunshine and farmland. And there, think of the path. The path is the hardest ground that there is, because it's constantly being baked by the sunshine. It's so dry as well as that it's always being walked on, trampled on. So the ground that's there is being compacted and toughened and forced closer together. And because it's the path, because it's not the kind of soil that he wants to grow the crops in, he never, he never tells it, he never breaks up the dry ground and tends it. So that's that kind of, that kind of thing that he's wanting us to imagine when he speaks about the path. It's dry, it's solid, it's impenetrable to seeds. So he's scattering the seed and some of the seed lands on the path. Notice what happens though, because the ground and the path is so tight, is so closed off, the seed does not get embedded into the ground. It just sits on the top. And Jesus adds this detail that even though people walk on top of it, trampling it, you know, which should push it down. It doesn't get pushed down into the ground because the ground is so hard.

So the seed is just sitting there. It has no opportunity to germinate, to get down into the soil and birds come and eat it. The seed is gone and the ground is the same as it has ever been.

So the seed zone on the path has no effect. It never becomes a plant, it never produces fruit. Now just as we're going through this parable, the way I would like us to do it is to take each point in the parable that Jesus is making. And then afterwards, you know, can currently be taking each point of Jesus explanation. And his explanation of the seed that falls on the path is in verse 12.

[9 : 04] Those along the path are the ones who hear. And then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts so that they may not believe and be saved. That's Jesus explanation. He's saying that some people are like this path. They hear the gospel, but it never penetrates the surface.

It doesn't even come close. It hits them, impacts them externally, but never internally. And because the gospel doesn't penetrate to go inside, it's just left sitting there on the outside and then the devil comes, takes it away and that's it. The gospel is gone and the people who have heard it are the same as they've ever been before. Why does this happen to these people though? That's the question that we ask. And that's where Jesus and the kind of deliberate things he picks in this parable come to the fore. The metaphor of them being the path. The path is so hard because it has been subjected to a lifetime of being trampled on. It never gets looked after. It never gets watered. Its soil never gets tilled. It's just used as a means to an end. It's hard because it is being continually hardened. In what way then can some of us be like the path? Being hardened, being resistant to the gospel. Well there are a million in one different ways. So I can't give any kind of exhaustive list at all. But I think there are three kind of general directions broadly that I want to point in. Emotionally. Emotionally some of us are hardened to the gospel because we've had some kind of awful emotional experience which has made us resistant. Some kind of terrible thing that's happened that makes you think, how could God exist and let this happen to me? And emotionally we close

ourselves off to the possibility of the gospel. Not everyone, that being said, who has a terrible experience reacts in that way. Some people say on the other hand, I couldn't cope if it wasn't for the gospel. But some people are closed off for emotional reasons. Number two, socially some of us resolutely resist the gospel for social reasons. For example, try sharing the gospel with your typical French person and you'll see that. You'll see the enormous social pressure in French culture which is very resolutely atheistic and secular. The enormous social pressure there against Christianity and against becoming a Christian is overwhelming. But maybe in our own social circles in Edinburgh, you know, that if you're at school it's just social suicide to become a Christian because it's so uncool. So there's some of us who are hardened to accepting the gospel for social reasons. Also, number three, intellectually some of us are hard towards the gospel for intellectual reasons because we've been raised simply to assume that to become a Christian is just a no-brainer. You don't do that because we've been raised on the assumption that Christianity has been disproved and nothing in our worldview intellectually needs Christianity to work and be plausible. So intellectually our minds are already made up. These are really broad general points and there are so many other reasons that people are hardened to the gospel. But those are some of them. I want to make two applications at this point though on the path on why the gospel and the gospel having no effect on some people. The first application is to Christians. [13:06] What do you see in God's own example of his evangelism? What you see is that God scatters seed on the path, on the hard places, and so should we. Take the gospel to the hardest of places.

Take the gospel to people who are closed off for emotional reasons. Love them, help them, heal their wounds, respectfully, appropriately, let them know that Jesus can bring healing, that His grace is transforming. Take the gospel to places where the social pressure against it is huge. Take the gospel to France. Take the gospel to the Muslim world. Take it to secular Scotland. Take the gospel to the intellectually hardened. Take it to our universities, to our bookshops, and our coffee houses. Take it to the blog sphere. Take it to the places where the resistance is hardest because if God sows the seed on the path, none of us have any right not to do the same. Sow the seed in hard places, but also work to change the soil where the hardness needs broken up, sensitively do it, and water it. Share the gospel in hard places, and couple that with people who can love the emotionally hurt, with people who can lead in an anti-Christian society, and people who can demonstrate that Christianity is intellectually credible. So that's application number one to Christians. We have to take the gospel to hard places. Application number two is to non-Christians, particularly those who identify themselves with the path. Not all of you who are non-Christians will. Some of you aren't that kind of hardly opposed to it. You're still considering. But if you're rejecting everything that I'm saying just now, if you hear this about the gospel and it's no way the shutters close, so those of you who cannot accept the gospel at all, let's say, for emotional reasons, would you let us love you? Would you let us try and share your pain? And more importantly, would you consider letting Jesus love you and bear your burdens? If you cannot accept the gospel for social reasons, would you let us explain to you that there's another way to live where the acceptance of the group is not the be all and end all? There's another way to live where being accepted by your society is no longer your saving grace.

If you cannot accept the gospel for intellectual reasons, would you let us dialogue with you and we'll try to understand where we're coming from on the different sides? And we can try and demonstrate to you that Christianity is intellectually credible. That's point one, the gospel has no effect on some people. Point two is that the gospel has a limited effect on some people. We're looking at verses six and seven. When some people hear the gospel, it impacts them and it has an effect, but the effect is limited. Verse six, some fell on rock, some seed, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Rather than the seed falling directly onto the path, some of it also lands on rocky ground. And things are different here. The seed manages to get embedded into the ground because it's less hard than the path and the seed actually germinates and it grows into a plant. But look at what happens. The plant withered because it had no moisture. I am not any kind of an expert on plants. I'm probably the least successful person in this room at caring for plants. I've had very few plants that I've tried to look after and it's always been disastrous. When I lived in Leitha, I had a baby coconut palm called shortus, which I bought and a week later I came home and it actually toppled over completely and just died. I had a bonsai tree once. It also died through neglect. The only plant I've ever had that has successfully survived for any period of time was a

venous fly trap called molly. And it only survived because it could feed itself. So I'm not an expert, but I've done some research into this on how plants survive and how plants grow. They grow. You have a seed in the ground and the seed germinates and it puts roots out into the soil. And in the soil as water goes down into the soil, the soil becomes moist through the roots, the plants absorb water. They live off it. But if a plant, and especially a fruit bearing plant, puts down roots in bad soil, in soil that's full of rocks, for example, the moisture content will be so low, too low, and the plant will not thrive. And if the soil basically is just rocks, the plant will wither because of the total lack of moisture. Look at what Jesus says about those who are like the rocky ground. Verse 13, those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no roots. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing, they fall away. These people receive the gospel and there's immediate joy, but there's no roots. It's a shallow kind of Christianity. And you ask yourself, well, if it's shallow and rootless, why were they so happy with Christianity in the first place?

[18:53] Why did they react like that? And you find the answer in the second part of the verse. In the time of testing, they fall away. When it gets tough to be a Christian, they abandon the faith.

Now, why do they do that? Well, look at the context they inhabit. Shallowness, lack of depth to put down roots, lack of moisture to feed growth in depth. Because of their general context and shallowness, they hear the gospel and think, that sounds great, but they don't make any deep assessment of what accepting this gospel will mean long term, because being a Christian means persecution and suffering at some point. But they have never taken a deep enough look at what being a Christian means to see that. And when it happens, they abandon the faith.

It is really hard to grow authentic Christianity in a shallow culture. And this is where this verse hits home to us, because our culture is a shallow one. We live in the age where the most gripping issue in millions of people's lives is whether a footballer's wife has cellulite. We live in the age where we do politics in soundbite form only. We don't want to read the whole manifesto or listen to a 40 minute address on how someone wants to run the country. Just give us a 30 second soundbite, even 10 seconds. We are the generation that created the reality TV star, famous for doing nothing for 15 minutes. And then we get another one and another one, so shallow. We are the generation that makes sure that everyone gets a degree, although very few get an education. It's all so superficial. And I think the reason that the majority of us find growing in the gospel so hard and such a challenge is that we are the products of a superficial shallow society. Thinking deeply about God and ourselves and Jesus, it's almost unnatural to us. It's so counter cultural. I know it's hard for me and I'm sure it's hard for many of you. Jesus says in verse 7, other seed fell among thorns which grew up with it and choked the plants. This time the seed lands in slightly better ground. It's moist ground, but the thing that stops it growing is that the ground is full of weeds. We were saying before a seed gets itself embedded into the soil and it germinates. It starts coming to life. It starts growing. It starts to sprout into a plant and it puts roots in the ground and it grows up the way as well. But the problem in this scenario is that the seed spreads its roots, but it finds that the earth is already full of other roots. There's intense competition for space, for moisture, for nourishment, intense competition from thorns and weeds underground among the roots and also above ground, and that these thorns are already up there and they're blocking all the sunshine which the growing good plant needs to photosynthesize. The earth is too crowded and as a result of the seed grows into a plant, the plant gets choked. Jesus's explanation of this is in verse 14. The seed that fell among the thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures and they do not mature. Some people hear the gospel and try to grow Christian faith, but there is a problem.

They try to bring Jesus into a crowded marketplace of things that they worship, idols in their hearts, rather than casting everything else out at the beginning, rather than pulling up all these weeds and saying to Jesus, grow here, be Lord of everything else. In metaphorical terms they are trying to grow plants in fields full of weeds. The weeds need taken out or they choke the good plants. Look at the particular thorns Jesus highlights. Life's worries, riches and pleasures. Worry. Worry is an interesting thing. It's one of those things that looks like it's one thing but it's actually something else. If you take someone who is a chronic worrier, if that's you, you think, well you think that person is surely very humble, very self abasing because they're worried, they're not arrogant, they're really humble. In fact, through the cleverness of the devil and of sin, it's actually the opposite. Worry is not a sign of humility. It's a sign of arrogance and pride. Worry comes about where instead of trusting in God's sovereign grace, for a particular situation and for life overall, we trust in ourselves and we re

self-reliant rather than God-reliant. That's where our expectation is. It's not that we trust everything and to be on God's shoulders for Him to bear it. We take it off there and we put it on our own and we think, oh no, can I do this? Well, this be okay. Worry grows from self-reliance rather than God-reliance and we panic a bit because the pressure we've taken from God is we're bearing it ourselves. Jesus says that the worries of life, taking the pressure for making sure that life is okay on your own shoulders rather than having them on God's, that is something that will choke your Christianity. It will choke your faith. It will strangle your relationship with Him. If that's you, if that's us, can't you see how the devil is tricking you, short-changing you? He's tricking you into thinking it's okay to worry because it shows humility and dependence on God when in fact he's taking you away from it. You don't need life's worries to choke your faith because you have a God who cares, a God who is sovereign, a God who will take these burdens, who will take your life and carry it himself. Jesus didn't say, for those who trust in me, welcome to a life of unending stress because it's all about you carrying these pressures on your own. He said, my yoke is easy, my burden is light, come to me and get rest. I'll give you rest. You don't need to be choked by life's worries because I will carry them for you. So if that's a weed in your life that needs pulled out, pull it out and let Jesus fill its place. That's the first weed that needs pulled out, life's worries, the idol at the roots of that weed that's growing up as self-reliance rather than God's reliance. But if you're a Christian, you don't need to have life's worries choking your faith because Jesus wants to grow that faith instead with the burden that he is carrying. The second and third weeds are riches and pleasure. What Jesus is saying is that some people want God, some people want Jesus, but even more than that they want money or pleasure more than they want Him. The way that God tends to judge us in the Bible is by giving us what we want, what we want more than anything else. And that's true for Christians and non-Christians. The thing that you want most, God will give it to you. He'll let you have it. If the thing that you want more than anything else in the world is God Himself, is Jesus Christ, you will get that. God will not withhold Himself from you and you will get Jesus and all of His holiness and grace and majesty. You will be with Him for all eternity. He will give you your heart's desire if you want something more than God, though God will give that to you.

[27:17] If you want money but not God, you'll get to be godless and rich and it will be completely empty. If you want pleasure, if you want sex but not God, that's what you'll get and it will be cold and empty. That's what we want. He gives us what we want in blessing if we want Him more than anything and in judgment if we want anything more than Him. You see this in Romans 1 for example.

So you have to make sure that what you want more than anything else is Him because He will not take an equal or a lesser place in our hearts alongside whatever idols are growing there just now. We need to do some serious weeding because we choke everything else. Did you ever think that pleasure could choke you? We have this cultural norm that if it feels good and as long as it doesn't harm anyone else, do it. That's the key to life and happiness.

That does not square with what Jesus is teaching. He says that the wrong kind of pleasure will kill you. It will choke you. It's dangerous. Point 3. The gospel has a saving effect on some people. Versait. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop a hundred times more than was sown. When He said this He called out He who has ears to hear let Him hear. Now after all of that that's been said, the gospel does have a different effect, a transforming and saving effect on some people. What is it that happens to these people? Well Jesus describes them as being good soil. The good soil is not hardened and neglected like the path. With good soil the ground has been well-tended and prepared enough for the seed to embed itself. It's a person who is open to the gospel from the outset so the gospel can sink in before the devil can take it away.

Also the good soil isn't full of rocks. It's deep soil. It's full of moisture. It has space for you to put down roots. It says in verse 13. But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart who hear the word retain it and by persevering produce a crop. Look at how this is where Jesus is a brilliant thinker and public speaker. Look at how He contrasts the good soil with the three previous kinds of ground. First, good soil people hear the gospel, He says. They hear the word. They take it in because they're open to it unlike the hard path where the gospel just bounces off. Number two, good soil people retain the gospel. They are willing to ask hard questions. They're not superficial in how they look at the gospel. They can put down deep roots and that's unlike the rocky soil. Number three, good soil people persevere and are fruitful unlike the thorny soil people whose faith is choked under trial. Good soil people endure because they put down good roots and they've

thrown out the old idols and they live fruitfully because the conditions for growth are excellent. So the good soil is unlike the other three. It's unlike the path that's unlike the rocky ground. It's unlike the thorny ground. And you see there's an analogy here that Jesus is bringing out that you find all throughout the Bible and the Old

[30 : 54] Testament and the new seed analogy, the fruit analogy that God works in our lives by His grace and that grace produces fruit, the fruit of the Spirit, the evidence of a new life.

What Jesus is making clear is that our response to the gospel, whether we are the path or the rocky ground or the thorny ground or the good soil, it matters. It really matters. In verses 16 to 18 he starts to spell the site about how your response to the gospel is so important.

And this is the context in which Jesus speaks about lighting lamps and hiding them under jars or having them open for all to see. Something that if you've grown up going to Sunday school, you'll have heard lots about. This is the context. This is where it gets its meaning.

And what Jesus is saying here is hard for us to grasp in the UK because we have a kind of secularism whereby it's okay to be religious but it's private. We ignore religion in our private and public life. It's okay to be religious in your private life and if you were to light your spiritual lamp, the appropriate place to have it is in a jar. You know, never out open. We're secular and we ignore religion. We relegate it to the home, to the private life. And in that context, you can quite easily think that your reaction to the gospel is not that important because it's private and it's not urgent. So whether I am most like the path or the other kinds of ground, it's not that pressing. But Jesus says that there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out into the open. Therefore, consider carefully how you listen, how you listen, how you receive the Word of God, whether it bounces off like the path, whether it has no depth to go into like the rocky ground, whether there are just too many other idols competing for your love and your worship like the thorny ground, or whether you've got rid of everything else and what you want most is Jesus. It matters. Consider carefully which one of those you are. And there's another reason in closing that your response to the gospel matters so much. It's in verses 19 to 21. Jesus's mother and brothers come to see him but there's a huge crowd around Jesus so they can't get to him directly and someone tells Jesus your mother and brothers are standing outside. They want to see you. Jesus says this, My mother and brothers are those who hear God's word and put it into practice. If there was ever an incentive to listen carefully to make sure that you are good soil and if you're not, if you're the hard ground, break the ground up and water it. If you're the rocky ground, pull the rocks out, get depth.

Think deeply about this. If you are the ground that's full of thorns, pull them out, get rid of the weeds, take them out by the roots. Make the soil good so that the gospel can grow. If there's ever an incentive, it's this, that Jesus says that good soil people, those who hear God's word, who receive the seed. And as He's just said, who put it into practice, who are patiently fruitful, they are His family. He calls them His mother and brothers. There's so much honor that comes in Jesus's eyes with being good soil people. There are some questions that we have at the bottom of the sermon notes for application of you to take this away and think deeply about this passage and your response to the gospel. So I will leave those with you and at this point we'll stop and we'll pray in response to God's word. Father and Lord, we thank you that you are the God of the gospel, a missionary God, an evangelist. We thank you that you through your

[34 : 54] Son have come and you have proclaimed the good news of your kingdom. We know that we respond to your word, to your gospel in different ways. Lord, we pray that you will help those of us who are like the path, because some of us are like that. We are rejecting your gospel. We don't want to accept it or believe it. We close ourselves off. We pray for you to help us. Lord, those of us who are like the rocky soil, we struggle so much to take a deep look at the gospel, what it means, what we commit ourselves to in accepting it. We pray for you to help us to rise above the lack of depth in our age and in our fallen culture and we pray for you to help us to put down roots in your word and to find moisture there so that we can grow. Father, some of us are like the thorny ground. Lord, we have idols growing away in our hearts and they are choking our faith.

They are competing for the space that should only belong to you in our trust, in our values, in our affections, and where we seek pleasure. We pray for you to help us, for you to give us strength to take away our idols, to put, as your word says, to mortify sin in our bodies, to put it to death and to get rid of these idols, to devote ourselves, to devote our hearts and our minds completely to yourself. Lord, we pray that you would help us to become good soil so that we can grow, so that we

can give, so that we can produce fruits and a harvest that will bring you glory in our character and in our evangelism, in our conduct. Lord, please be gracious to us.
Your word challenges us all and we pray that it would encourage us all, that you tell us who you are and what you require from us. Amen.