

LUKE

“How the Heart Hears”

Luke 8:4-21

Sunday, April 8, 2018 (Easter Season)

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⁴ And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable, ⁵ “A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. ⁶ And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. ⁷ And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. ⁸ 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.”

⁹ And when his disciples asked him what this parable meant, ¹⁰ 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.’ ¹¹ Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. ¹² 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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵ 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.

¹⁶ “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. ¹⁷ For nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to light. ¹⁸ 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.”

¹⁹ Then his mother and his brothers came to him, but they could not reach him because of the crowd. ²⁰ And he was told, “Your mother and your brothers are standing outside, desiring to see you.” ²¹ But he answered them, “My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.”¹

Heavenly Father, your word is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path. Your word is living and active. Your word is breathed out and inspired by your Holy Spirit. This morning gives us eyes that see, ears that hear, and hearts that are fertile ground for your word to bear fruit in our lives. We pray this in the mighty name of Jesus, AMEN.

Introduction

This is a painting named ¹ “*The Sower After Millet*” (1889) by Vincent Van Gogh. Its subject matter is Luke chapter 8, specifically the parable of the sower. The image is true both to the scriptural text, as well as standard farming practices in Palestine. The farmer would carry a satchel of grain, slung over his shoulder as he cast the seed into the field.² The painting is an action shot; the sower is in mid-stride and mid-throw.

¹ [The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton: Standard Bible Society, 2016), Lk 8:4–21.

² Darrell L. Bock, [Luke](#), The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 228–229.

Now you may have heard the name Van Gogh, and you know that name as a famous artist. But what you may not know is that before Van Gogh became a painter, he had wanted to become a pastor. He studied theology and eventually became a missionary to poor coal miners in Belgium.

As a missionary pastor, Van Gogh loved the poor coal miners. He even gave away his lodging to a homeless man, while he slept in a hut on a bed of straw. He often gave away his own clothes and lived in fairly squalid conditions. And in fact, he was ultimately dismissed for “for undermining the dignity of the priesthood.”

But that didn't stop Van Gogh from preaching. In fact, there is often a sermon like quality to his paintings. His painting “The Sower After Millet” is an homage to another painting named the 2 “The Sower” (1850), which was painted a few decades prior by the French realist Jean-Francois Millet.

You may not guess by looking at the painting now, but Millet's painting created controversy when at the time of its first display. In Paris, there was a growing tension between the rich and the poor; the upper class and the lower class. In this environment, an art salon was a favorite place of relief and diversion for the wealthy, where they would often admire images of Greek and Roman mythology. But instead, Millet had authored several masterpieces that conveyed a sense of heroic dignity, beauty, and humanity in the life of poor. The elite of Paris hated this, but Van Gogh was inspired by it.

At first, Van Gogh simply imitated Millet's painting, but through its inspiration, he created his own unique masterpiece, 3 “*The Sower at Sunset*” (1850). Like the previous paintings, this painting shows the dignity and value of the poorer members of society. But above this very normal scene, Van Gogh places a massive and vivid sunset, which is radiating a sense of power and majesty. We know from Van Gogh's writings that the sun often is a symbol for God in his paintings. Van Gogh is still preaching. He is saying even in the midst of such a simple and mundane image such as a sower sowing his seed in a field, the glorious creator God is revealing himself.

In today's passage, we will be looking at how Jesus is painting a similar landscape with his words. He is taking the common imagery of farming practices and the countryside of ancient Palestine to talk about the kingdom of God. And he will teach his disciples how such a simple picture can contain such life-changing truth.

Van Gogh could have written a sermon or an essay about the dignity of the poor and the glory of God. Jesus could have just taught the crowds the right doctrines to believe about scripture, the heart of man, and the kingdom of God.

But for the truth to truly change our lives we often need more than the mere understanding of mental ideas. We are creatures who are stirred by the power of imagination. This is how our hearts hear the truth.

So with that in mind, let's take a closer look at our text.

Exposition

1.) The Purpose of the Parables.

Our text begins with the image of the crowd. Jesus the traveling teaching rabbi and the worker of miracles is becoming, for lack of a better word, a celebrity. There is a sense of expectation and fanfare surrounding his name throughout the whole region. People are coming from all around to catch a

glimpse of Jesus to hear him teach.

Now, a growing crowd would make most preachers very happy. But Jesus never mistakes a large crowd of people for true worshippers. Over and over again in the gospel, we see that Jesus is not interested in a nominal adherence or half-hearted devotion. He is interested in making disciples.

So how will Jesus deal with the situation before him? He going to teach the word of God, but he going to begin teaching the word in a very different way. He will begin teaching primarily through parables.

Now, the word “parable” (παραβολή) in the Greek language literally means “that which is tossed aside.”³ In other words, a parable is an analogy, a comparison, or an extended metaphor that comes alongside the truth that it conveys.

The gospel of Luke includes more parables of Jesus than any other gospel. And in this chapter, we are given not just a parable, but also an interpretation of the parable and a statement on why Jesus speaks in parables.⁴

Now, parables are deceptively easy. A parable is often so simple you can understand the imagery immediately. For example, look at the parable of the sower. A sower sows. There are four types of soil. Only type of soil truly bears fruit. The end.

But I warn you: beware a sense of familiarity when comes to parables.

When Jesus teaches through parables, he is often times subtly challenging and subverting people’s preconceived ideas about the kingdom of God. The problem with the Jews of first century Palestine is that they thought they already knew what the kingdom of God was. They thought that God would send a political leader to end their oppression and establish a new golden age of the kingdom of Israel. But Jesus has another vision of the kingdom in mind.

Some people like the disciples will truly hear the word of God. But others will hear the word, but not understand because the word contradicts what they want to be true. Thus, the purpose of parables is not necessarily to illustrate and clarify truth, but to make the truth uncommon and mysterious yet again. It is to call and entice people into a deeper engagement with the word of God.

Vincent Van Gogh’s style of art is often known as late or post-impressionism. And the whole idea behind impressionism is that the artist is not trying to give a photographic, realistic rendering of reality. He is trying to give an impression. And in fact, when you look an impressionist painting closely (Image 4), it looks like nothing. It is a just mess of paint and texture and color. But when you back away (Image 5), your mind naturally begins to put the colors together to form an image. In this way, the viewer becomes not just an observer, but also an active participant in the art.

This is exactly what parables are meant to do as well.

C. H. Dodd: “At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought.”⁵

³ Fred B. Craddock, *Luke*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990), 108.

⁴ Ibid., 107.

⁵ Ibid., 108.

Craddock: “The hearer has a feeling of strangeness in a very familiar narrative, and some interpretation is not only invited but urged. The hearer thus becomes an active participant in the communication and begins to offer interpretations.”⁶

Jesus is urging us into the work of interpretation. He is drawing us to curiosity; he is creating in us hearts postured toward true listening; toward being engaged and surprised by the word of God; toward holy inquisitiveness and a divine hunger for the depths. As Proverbs says, “*It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out.*” (Proverbs 25:2, ESV).

2.) The Nature of the Heart.

The two realities explored by the parable of the sower are the word of God and the heart of man.

The seed is the word of God, and the word possess spiritual power to produce life. From the book of Hebrews: “*For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account*” (Hebrews 4:12–13, ESV).

The rest of the parable is about the heart.

Some hearts are hard, like a well-worn path. We think of the hardened atheist, but in Jesus’s day this mostly applied to the Pharisees. The Pharisees were hardened to Jesus because he did not validate their preconceived notions about God, morality, and politics.

Do you expect the word to validate your agenda, and as soon as it doesn’t you find ways to justify what you already believe to be true? Where do you harden your heart to the word of God?

You think: “God can talk to me about the doctrine of predestination and the mysteries of the Trinity, but not my marriage. I would love to hear a challenging sermon that challenges all the evil in the culture in the world, but it makes me angry when I hear a sermon that would make me think about the evil in my own heart.”

Some people who hear the word have shallow hearts, with no sense of depth or rootedness.

They praise God when things are good, and blame God when things are bad. They fall away during times of testing, temptations, or trial.⁷

Some people compromised hearts.

They love the word of God, but they typically love the world more. Blaise Pascal once considered the greatest sin of the 1880’s the sin of “divertissement.” It is a term referring to the constant pursuit of distraction, entertainment, and diversion. How much more is this a problem for today? We fear silence, and we avoid hard conversations with God.

Then there are those with honest and good hearts.

They have hearts that are good soil that bear good fruit.

⁶ Ibid., 108–109.

⁷ “The term “testing” or “temptation” can refer to temptation toward immoral conduct, but it is used by Luke in the context of persecution in 22:40, 46; Acts 20:19 (cf. Luke 11:4), and so the testing referred to here probably refers to the temptation to fall away during times of persecution.”

Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, vol. 24, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 246.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control...” (Galatians 5:22–23, ESV).

True fruit is persevering, not temporary.⁸ Likewise, true fruit is not belief only, but practice. This is Dr. Robert Stein: **“The gospel must be responded to in faith, but saving faith is more than mere intellectual assent. True faith endures. It perseveres. It puts into practice the teachings of that faith. Luke believed that we are indeed saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone. This faith is accompanied by action (Jas 2:17), expresses itself through love (cf. Gal 5:6), and puts God’s word into practice (Luke 8:21).”⁹**

Now, when we read this parable, it may be tempting to think of people in your life and begin classifying them according to the type of soil they might be. But that is not the purpose of the parable. You cannot control the conditions of someone else’s heart. But you can do the hard work of looking at the condition your own heart.

The haunting this about this passage is that we can hear the word, the word can produce a response, and yet our lives are capable of not bearing fruit.

This parable is meant to evoke self-awareness of our own hearts so that we can grow in maturity and discipleship. Spiritual maturity recognizes spiritual attack, seasons of trial, and things of this world that compete for our affection for God.

Christ is telling us that in order to be a disciple, we must learn to cultivate ears that hear and understand. We must learn to cultivate an environment in our hearts that are capable of bearing fruit. We must cultivate faith that leads to persevering obedience.

The same word that softens and brings transformation can also harden.

So ask yourself the uncomfortable questions like, how have you hardened your heart toward the Lord? Have you prevent depth from developing in your heart? Have you allow the cares and the worries of this world and the deceitfulness of riches to enchant your heart? How do you typically respond when the word challenges you?¹⁰

When we stop listening to the word, we lose the word. When we let it challenge us, it grows in our heart more and more.

3.) The Importance of Hearing and Responding to the Word.

I’ve taught this many times before, but it bears repetition. Often times we think faith is simply believing something to be true. But the medieval theologians knew that faith was something more: faith is knowing the truth, believing the truth, and trusting or resting in the truth.

⁸ “Fruit is never a matter of an overnight exercise. It takes nurturing. Thus, Jesus’ teaching does not look at the reaction to God’s Word in a single moment but over a period of time, which may be why the planting analogy is used. It takes time to bear fruit, just as it takes time for weeds to choke the seed or for the lack of root in a plant to become evident. Jesus’ point deals with how response to the Word is a product of a process. Only one soil meets the goal for which the seed was planted, the fourth soil.” Bock, 230.

⁹ Stein, 251–252.

¹⁰ “The same word that softens some hardens others. When a stepping-stone for one became a stumbling block for another, some thinkers among the Hebrews were content to say God causes some to step across and some to stumble. In other words, the *result* of an action was stated as having been the *purpose* of the action.” Fred B. Craddock, 111–112.

We must learn to rely on the word of God. As Proverbs says, “*Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not lean on your own understanding*” (Proverbs 3:5, ESV).

And to trust the word means that we approach the word with an expectation to believe and obey, not to analyze and evaluate.

This is really easy to miss, but one reason the disciple will understand Jesus’s teaching and the crowd will not understand is this – they have relational access to Jesus, and they use it.¹¹ Simply said, relational nature to truly hearing the word of God. The disciples ask Jesus what the parable means, and he explains it. You can ask God to help you understand his word too.

The Holy Spirit inspired Scripture to be written. You can ask him to help you understand it. If you are uncomfortable praying your own words, pray this prayer from Scripture: “Deal bountifully with your servant, that I may live and keep your word. Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your law. I am a sojourner on the earth; hide not your commandments from me!” (Psalm 119:17–19, ESV). You can pray this prayer, and know this is a prayer that God will answer!

A few practical things I want to mention.

In your private devotion, read the Bible for transformation. Don’t just try to crank through your Bible reading plan. Slow down. Listen. Get a good study Bible, and understand the history behind Scripture. Let the word of God challenge you, as well as comfort you. Pray for understanding. Don’t read the Bible to simply confirm your own biases.

When you hear a sermon, come with the expectation to hear the living word of God. Come with an open heart. Come with a desire to be challenged and changed. Come expecting to learn. Take notes, and review them throughout the week. Think about what encouraged you. Think about where God is calling you to a greater faith and obedience.

In community group, participate in the conversation. Exhort one another and stir one another up to good works. Talk out what it looks like to obey God’s word. Stir one another up to love and good works.

Love the word. Treasure the word. Obey the word. Our relationship to Jesus often looks very much like our relationship to the word. To hear and obey is the mark of being a part of the family of God.

Conclusion

But sometimes we are like the man before Jesus, pleading for his son to be healed. “Lord, I believe! Help my unbelief!” And if that is you, do not lose hope. We serve a God who is capable of changing hearts.

I think this parable can only make sense when we consider the initiative and intervention of the sower. In fact, “To understand this parable, we must recognize that seeding in Palestine generally preceded plowing so that the path through the field would eventually be plowed (cf. Jubilees 11:11; *Sabb* 73b; *Sabb* 7.2.).”¹²

¹¹ “Teacher, what does this parable (in Matthew and Mark they ask about parables in general) mean (v. 9)? The fact that they asked is very important. Real understanding—significant learning and communication in matters of value and relationship—is antiphonal; it does not occur without response.” *Ibid.*, 111.

¹² Stein, 244.

Sometimes the soil of our hearts is changed by a gentle rain of grace that softens. Sometimes it takes a piercing plow that breaks the hardness. For 19 years my heart was a combination of the first 3 types of soil. But the Lord took a plow to my heart.

Have you allowed the Lord to change your heart? You can ask him to do this today.

We are transformed and changed not by new ideas, but by new affections of the heart. Because of the resurrection, the Spirit can give you a new heart.

“And I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules. You shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers, and you shall be my people, and I will be your God” (Ezekiel 36:26–28, ESV).

In this season of resurrection, may Christ’s resurrection life live in us! May the Spirit of God graciously create in us the good soil hearing hearts! Through faith and persevering obedience, may we be found among the family of Christ! May the living God give us life through the power of his living word!

AMEN.

Ministry time: prayer for a hunger for the Word, ears that hear, hearts that are not hardened, and hearts made new by the Spirit.

Community Group Discussion Questions

- 1. Jesus often taught through the use of parables. Why do you think he did this? How do parables invite us into a deeper engagement with God’s word?*
- 2. When you apply the parable of the sower to your own life, which type (or types) of soil often describe your own heart?*
- 3. How have you seen the word of God produce “fruit” in your life?*
- 4. The command of Luke 8:18 is “Take care then how you hear.” Why is it important to be self-aware of how we are paying attention to God’s word?*

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