

LUKE 8.5-15: THE PARABLE OF THE SOILS

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Jesus must have been a pretty charismatic figure.

Like Barack Obama and now Sarah Palin in the USA, Jesus attracted vast crowds.

For a while at least, he was a real celebrity.

“People kept coming to Jesus from one town after another” (Lk 8.4). Indeed, according to Matthew: **“The crowd that gathered round him was so large that he got into a boat and sat in it, while the crowd stood on the shore”**. (Matt 13.2).

They were heady days in Galilee

But not everybody responded to the preaching of Jesus.

Some of his listeners listened to him stony-faced, with no intention of giving him a proper hearing.

And of those who did give Jesus a positive reception, only a small minority eventually became disciples – the rest proved to be just fair-weather friends.

As a preacher today, I find this so encouraging.

If of all people Jesus could gain such a mixed response, no wonder my preaching gets a mixed response!

With that thought in mind let’s turn to Luke 8 and reflect on the parable of the Sower – or rather, let’s turn to the parable of the soils.

Whereas in the other Gospels the parable is a parable of encouragement, assuring the disciples that there will be a harvest – here in Luke it is a parable of challenge: **“For heaven's sake listen”**.

The fact is ***a harvest may be guaranteed, but not, alas, in the heart of every hearer***

The seed, said Jesus, is **“the word of God”** (8.11) - but as this word is preached, people's responses will be varied.

So, says Jesus, **“Listen, then, if you have ears!”** (8.8)

SOIL TYPE 1: THE BEATEN PATH YIELDS NO GROWTH

Luke 8.5 **“ Once there was a man who went out to sow corn. As he scattered the seed in the field, some of it fell along the path, where it was stepped on, and the birds came and ate it up”**.

The disciples didn’t immediately catch on to what Jesus was saying. So later Jesus explained the parable to them in this way: **“The seeds that fell along the path stand for those who hear; but the Devil comes and takes the message away from their hearts in order to keep them from believing and being saved.** (Luke 8.11)

I.e. There are those whose hearts are like a trodden footpath running across the field - the seed has no chance to sink below the surface - the **“Devil”** sees to that - he interferes with the whole business of sowing.

I find it significant that ***Jesus believed in the reality of the power of the Devil.***

This means that Paul, when he later talked of fighting with principalities & powers, was but following in the steps of Jesus.

We need to take note of this emphasis.

The fact is: we too are engaged in a spiritual battle: every time your ministers are at this lectern, we are engaged in a spiritual battle - we need your prayers. Needless to say, we need your prayers at other times too, for the battle is not restricted to when we preach!

Who are those who may be likened to the beaten path?

1. **The indifferent** - who fail to see the Gospel's relevance – it goes in one ear and out the other. They hear, and yet they do not hear.
They may come along to a special service - perhaps to a Harvest Service or one of our Christmas services - they hear the preacher expand on the good news of Jesus - of God's gracious offer of life in Jesus - and yet they never respond. Somehow the penny fails to drop - they do not see that the preacher is dealing with a life & death matter - indeed a matter affecting their own life & death.
2. **Those with closed minds** - who refuse to listen. "*My mind is made up. Don't confuse me with the facts*". Why should they have closed minds? Sometimes because they are fearful of the difference the Gospel would make to their lives. There are many people who in their heart of hearts know that the Christian Gospel is true, but they refuse to accept Jesus as their Lord & Saviour, for simple reason they are not prepared for all the changes that would have to follow. The cost is too great.

Listen, says Jesus, make sure your heart is not like a beaten path.

SOIL TYPE 2: THE ROCKY GROUND YIELDS SHALLOW GROWTH

Lk 8.6: "**Some of it fell on rocky ground, and when the plants sprouted, they dried up because the soil had no moisture**".

Later in Lk 8.13 Jesus explains: **The seeds that fell on rocky ground stand for those who hear the message and receive it. But it does not sink deep into them; they believe only for a while but when the time of testing comes, they fall away**".

The AV speaks of "*stony ground*" - but the picture is not of soil full of stones, but of rock lying just below the surface.

The parable reflects farming conditions in Palestine, where there was often only a thin skin of earth lying on top of an underlying shelf of limestone rock.

On such ground seed would quickly germinate, because such ground quickly became warm with the sun's heat. But when seed sent down roots in search of nourishment/moisture, it would find only rock - and so starve to death.

Those with no depth are those who respond only superficially to the call of Jesus to follow him.

- In the Gospels, we read of the rich young ruler, who asked Jesus: "**Good Teacher, what must I do to receive eternal life?**" On being told, he turned round & went away sorrowful (Lk 18.18)
- On another occasion, an enthusiastic would-be-disciple said to Jesus: "**I will follow you wherever you go**". But Jesus replied: "**Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lie down and rest**" (Lk 9.57f).
I.e. Jesus was saying, '*Young man, count the cost!*' I can imagine the young man just creeping away, his enthusiasm punctured.

But its not just figures in the Gospels who make a superficial response to Jesus.

- There are those who have gone forward at some mission or another - at the time they were caught up in the emotion of it all - oh, they meant what they did - but somehow that infant faith never rooted - with the result that once trouble came, once opposition was encountered, their faith began to fade away.
- But this kind of response doesn't just happen at times of special mission - it can happen here within the ordinary course of church life. It is, e.g., all too easy for a young person to go along with the crowd, to follow their peers, but somehow never really think the whole thing through.

It has been said: "*Shallow growth is the result of a spiritual growth that is emotionally exhilarating, but intellectually rootless*". (David McKenna)

That is why we have Alpha groups. post-Alpha groups & baptismal classes... because we want to spell out what it means to follow Jesus. We don't want to have a series of spiritual miscarriages on our hands.

Listen, says Jesus, make sure your heart is not like rocky ground

SOIL TYPE 3: THE THORNY GROUND YIELDS STUNTED GROWTH

Lk 8.7: "**Some of the seed fell among thorn bushes, which grew up and choked them**". The seed sinks in - it germinates - and grows up to harvest.

BUT weeds and thistles keep pace with it, threatening to stifle & suffocate its life before the day of harvest of home.

According to Jesus the thorns = "**the worries and riches and pleasures of this life**" (Luke 8.14). The picture here is of people who make a response, but then life gets too busy - other things take priority over God.

- We get married & have children
- We get promoted & are given additional responsibilities
- We are given a rise, but somehow not sufficient for all the demands being made upon us.

Everything piles up – the result: God gets squeezed out.

Sorry God:

- I've got to decorate the house today
- I've got to visit the in-laws today
- I've got to entertain the boss & his wife tonight
- I've got to do my homework

Do you get the picture? Worship, prayer, Bible reading - all get squeezed out.

Gradually the cares of this world begin to choke the spiritual life.

We no longer take Jesus seriously, when he tells us "**not to be worry about the food you need to stay alive or about the clothes that you need for your body**" (Lk 12.12).

We ignore Jesus' call to be above all concerned with God's kingdom, and in effect we show God the back door.

I say "**we**" - for although we may apply this to others, is it not true that we too are at times almost too busy for God? At times our spiritual existence too is threatened.

What are we to do? ***Pull out the weeds - get rid of the thorns.***

Weed out those thorns which are threatening to stifle our spiritual existence.

Jas Stewart: "*Worship is a basic necessity of life, just like sunshine & fresh air & vitamins. The reason we get flurried & strained & hectic & neurotic... is that we have been neglecting this basic need... We have been trying to live without oxygen*".

Listen, says Jesus, make sure your heart is not like the thorny ground.

SOIL TYPE 4: THE GOOD SOIL YIELDS FULL GROWTH

Lk 8.8a: "**And some seeds fell in good soil; the plants grew and produced corn, a hundred grains each**". Jesus went on: **Listen then, if you have ears!** (Lk 8.8b)

The question arises: ***Can we be likened to good soil - Are we really listening?***

Or does it go in one ear, and out the other?

We hear, but do not really hear.

Our listening does not lead to a real response.

Let me use an analogy

Most of us listen to radio - for much of the time mere verbal/musical wallpaper.

But what would happen if all of a sudden the announcer would do what announcers

sometimes used to do and break in with a SOS message: "*This is a SOS message.*

Would PB-M kindly go to Brighton & Sussex hospital where his mother is desperately ill."

Wow, if I were to hear my own name mentioned & were to learn that a loved one was desperately ill, ***I'd be all ears*** - indeed, I'd listen not just with my ears. but with my mind... with my whole being.

I would then act at once. A matter of life & death.

It is that kind of listening/action which is required of you & me when it comes to the call of Jesus.

Jesus wants us to listen with all that we are. ***Are you really listening?***

The fact is that it is not enough to ask Jesus into our hearts & lives to be our Saviour, nor is it enough to be baptized. The fact is that the only conversions and baptisms that count in the kingdom are those confirmed by a life of discipleship.

To put it another way: we need to keep on growing and developing in the Christian life.

Or to connect with our theme of 50 Days of Passion, each one of us needs to have a passion to grow.

If we are passionate about our spiritual life, then we will want to do our very best to attend a small group – although even attending a small group is not sufficient – for sadly, some people attend small groups year in and year out and never seem to grow in the faith. We need to become intentional learners – people who want to grow, people who want to allow God's word to take root in our lives, people who want God's word to bear fruit in their lives.

Listen, says Jesus. For heaven's sake, listen!