

Good Ground for Discipleship – Luke 8:4-13

⁴And when a great multitude had gathered, and they had come to Him from every city, He spoke by a parable: ⁵“A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell by the wayside; and it was trampled down, and the birds of the air devoured it. ⁶Some fell on rock; and as soon as it sprang up, it withered away because it lacked moisture. ⁷And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it. ⁸But others fell on good ground, sprang up, and yielded a crop a hundredfold.” When He had said these things He cried, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” Luke 4:4-8 (NKJ)

The parable of the soils is found in all three Synoptic Gospels (Matt. 13:18-23; Mark 4:2-20; Luke 8:4-15). Our focus will be on Luke’s account. In Luke especially, Jesus used this parable to explain the purpose of all parables and to illustrate how people respond to God’s truth. This parable fits Luke’s purpose of recording the life of Jesus in such a way as to generate faith in the unsaved and cultivate fruitfulness in the saved. Fruitfulness is a chief characteristic of a disciple (John 15:8). The parable shows the centrality of God’s Word in salvation and discipleship, and how some who believe do not persevere in faithfulness to God’s Word to become fruitful.

The Parable’s Design

The parable is straightforward in its details. The sower is mentioned first, but recedes into the background as the fate of the seed and the condition of the soils take center focus. Clearly the emphasis is not the sower, nor the seed itself, but the fate of the seed determined by various types of soil.

Jesus concludes the parable with “He who has ears to hear, let him hear!” (Luke 8:8). This indicates that truth will only be perceived by those receptive to it. After Jesus tells the parable, the disciples question its meaning, which elicits this explanation of God’s design for parables—to enlighten those who are receptive to the truth about God’s kingdom and to conceal truth from those not receptive to it (Luke 8:9-10). Then Jesus quotes Isaiah 6:9 where Isaiah was told his ministry would not be received by all. Isaiah and Jesus both ministered to the nation of Israel which as a whole was unresponsive to their message, though individuals received it.

The Parable’s Context

In Jesus’ interpretation the sower is not mentioned, giving prominence to the seed as God’s Word. The surrounding contexts point to God’s Word as the revealed truth centered on Jesus’ identity as the Messiah. Preceding the parable, John the Baptist questioned Jesus’ identity (Luke 7:18-21) to which Jesus responded with Messianic claims (Luke 7:22-28). The Pharisees and lawyers were predisposed to reject Christ’s testimony (Luke 7:30), which Jesus saw as characteristic of the whole generation who rejected Him (Luke 7:31-35). In contrast to the Pharisee’s blindness (pictured in the character of Simon) is the story of the sinful woman who recognizes Jesus and is saved (Luke 7:36-50).

Following the parable, Luke recounts the story of Jesus’ mother and brothers who tried to approach him but were hindered by the crowd. Jesus uses the occasion to proclaim that His true spiritual mother and brothers “are these who hear the word of God and do it” (Luke 8:19-21). With this explanation, Jesus sets forth His condition for intimate and fruitful discipleship that was taught by the parable—responsive obedience to God’s Word (Compare John 8:31; 15:7-8; 17:6).

The Parable’s Interpretation

Jesus interprets His parable in Luke 8:11-15. In His explanation to the disciples, Jesus says the seed that fell on the impacted wayside was snatched away by the devil. The devil keeps the Word away from their hearts so that these ones never believe and are therefore never eternally saved.

The second soil represents those who believe but fall away. Some people interpret this faith as superficial, but the only deficiency is its duration, not its sincerity. While the details of a parable should never be emphasized at the expense of the main point, neither should the clear statements of a parable be ignored. If Jesus says these people believed, then they believed, if only for a while. Temptation causes them to fall away, which seems to indicate falling away from the truth of the gospel. While it is not specified what the temptation is, it appears to be something that challenges their faith in the truth of God's Word, perhaps false doctrine or persecution (Matt. 13:21; Mark 4:17). True believers can fall into false doctrine (thus the many New Testament warnings) or be unwilling to take up their cross and suffer for Christ, an important condition for discipleship (Luke 9:23). In any case, falling away does not mean that these believers lose their salvation. The parable is about conditions for persevering in fruitfulness, not persevering in salvation.

Those pictured by the third soil clearly show life, but growth is choked into fruitlessness. Actually, there is mention of some fruit, but it is stunted, immature. This is due to the cares, riches, and pleasures of life that distract these believers from growing in God's truth. Jesus later teaches that a chief characteristic of a disciple is that he deny himself (Luke 9:23), something these believers did not do.

The purpose of God's Word is to bring people to faith and to fruitfulness. This is pictured by the good soil, described as those having "a noble and good heart." The focus of the parable is not on the activity of the sower or the power of the Word, but on the predisposition of a person's heart. It does not explain why some hearts are predisposed to fall away from truth, or are distracted by worldly pleasures, or are open and receptive to the truth, only that they are. Temptations and distractions to one's faith do not in themselves explain why some hearts are not fertile soil for growth. Certainly the fruitful believers were exposed to both, but because of their good hearts they were fertile and therefore fruitful. In the end and from the human perspective, believers are responsible for their own hearts and how they respond to God's Word. Persevering in God's truth is the key to fruitfulness. This is not perseverance in order to be saved, but perseverance in living out the Word of God.

The responsibility of the hearer is emphasized by the parable that follows the parable of the soils (Luke 8:18-18). The one who has the light and shares the light is a receptive person. The warning Christ gives is "Therefore take heed how you hear." So one's predisposition of heart is not something that can be blamed on exterior circumstances, but it comes from a habit of cultivation of the truth and seeking what is good. To good and faithful stewards of the truth, God gives more truth.

The Parable's Applications

Those who sow God's Word should spread it to everyone, but with the awareness that people will respond differently. They should therefore seek to cultivate those who are receptive and fruitful.

The sower should spread God's Word, not his own. To the extent that the Word of God is diminished in our message, the responsibility of man to receive and obey it is diminished. This would promote the importance of expository preaching and teaching. God's Word taught in context has the authority to convict, change lives, and bear fruit. Discipleship programs should target the person's heart with the Word of God.

Finally, we should monitor our own hearts lest we succumb to false teaching or worldly distractions that stunt our fruitfulness for the Lord. One sure way to receive more from the Lord is to share more from the Lord by setting our light on a stand for all to see. Faithful disciples bear fruit and bring God's truth to the world.