GOOD SOIL

Luke 8:4–21

Key Verse: 8:15

“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.”

Happy Spring! It’s the time of year for gardening. Have you ever grown something from seed? It’s fascinating, isn’t it? With the right kind of seed and soil, the right amount of light, water and temperature, in just a few weeks, the new life of a tiny little plant begins. Some say they just don’t have a green thumb. But anyone, really, even children, can experience this wonder of nature. Jesus uses this common human experience to teach an important spiritual truth. Today we want to explore what he means. To emphasize his point, he adds a saying about a lamp on a stand. And his concluding words to his mother and brothers make it even more clear. May God open our hearts and speak to us today.

This passage marks a new section in Luke’s Gospel. In 7:1–8:3 Jesus interacts with a Gentile army officer, a widow, John’s disciples, a Pharisee and a sinful woman, and finally, with women who support him and his ministry. In all these cases the theme is faith—faith that Jesus values, faith through which Jesus can work. In this next section, 8:4–9:17, Jesus is still ministering to crowds, but now he’s also focusing on his disciples. He’s teaching and preparing them to become gospel workers like himself. In chapters 8–9 we want to consider the specific things Jesus is teaching, and why these lessons are so important.

It all starts with a parable. Look at verses 4–8. This is one of his most famous parables, the one about sowing seed. Before we delve into it, let’s first think about how Jesus uses parables. Great crowds are gathering and people are coming to him from town after town, and he chooses to tell a parable. Just a parable, with no further explanation. Then he just calls out: “He who has ears to hear, let him hear” (8b). He says this again later (14:35b). Seems kind of weird. What does he mean? Everybody can hear him, but not everybody has “ears to hear.” In this passage the word “hear” is repeated nine times. More than all the other Gospel writers, Luke highlights how people were “hearing” Jesus (2:47; 4:21,28; 5:1,15; 6:18,27, 47,49; 7:1,3,22,29). But were they really “hearing”? Do you ever talk and wonder if people are really hearing you? Perhaps Jesus is wondering this same thing. He doesn’t try too hard or talk too much; he just uses parables. What’s a parable? Simply speaking, it’s a story taken from ordinary life. A parable invites people to inquire about its meaning and think for themselves. But for those too lazy or too dull to do so, it’s just an obscure riddle.

Let’s read verses 5–8. It’s a setting that’s very real: a field, with all kinds of soil in it. First is a path, where many people, animals and carts pass through. Then there are places with only a thin layer of soil, with rocks underneath. Then, places where the soil seems good but where thorns are also vigorously growing. Finally, there’s good soil—places that are both receptive to seed and have plenty of room for it to grow. These four types of soil suggest that the field might have 25% good soil, maybe more, but probably less. The one sowing the seed can’t see what lies beneath, and there’s no digging or plowing—only scattering and waiting for things to happen. Some seed gets trampled on or devoured. Some sprouts but then withers away. Some gets choked. And some produces a crop. People who like to be in control, or who hate to waste, will struggle with this parable. Why just scatter all that valuable seed? Why allow so much waste? The problem is not with the farmer or his methods, or with the quality of the seed. It's trying to get us to consider the quality of the soils. Jesus explains more about it later. Here, the final result is surprising. Though so much seed gets ruined, the seed on good soil produces a hundredfold—more than making up for all the loss.

Look at verse 9. This is important. Crowds are listening, but disciples ask what it means. Some people get bothered by questions. Questions tend to slow things down. But disciples aren’t passively listening. They’re *interested*, actively engaged. They’re committed to learning. And look at Jesus’ response. (Read verse 10.) His disciples are role models on how to hear Jesus. Since they’re serious about learning, they get to know some “secrets.” Many people love secrets. In Greek the word is “mysteries.” It means fascinating, intriguing things. What are they about? Jesus calls them “mysteries of the kingdom of God.” This was the whole focus of his ministry. In verse 1 he’s traveling around, proclaiming and bringing people “the good news of the kingdom of God.” But here, only disciples understand what he’s talking about. He says their understanding has been “given” to them, meaning God revealed it. There’s a principle here. To those with a serious commitment, God reveals more. Jesus reiterates this. (Read verse 18.) It’s all about being committed to careful hearing, isn’t it?

In verse 10 Jesus quotes from the Old Testament. It’s a famous passage, Isaiah 6, where God sends his servant to tell his people, “Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive” (Isa6:9). That seems mean. Does God want to keep his people in the dark? No. He’s teaching that hearing is not about *quantity* but about *quality*. Even a brief moment of quality hearing can be life-changing. But sadly, like the crowds we can hear the good news of God’s kingdom over and over and never really get it. Why? Because we’re not yet committed to it.

With this in mind, let’s look at how Jesus explains his own parable. Read verse 11. “The word of God” is an important phrase in Luke’s Gospel. “The word of God came” to John the Baptist in the wilderness (3:2). People were pressing in on Jesus to hear “the word of God” (5:1). Later Jesus will say that people who “hear the word of God and keep it” are blessed (11:28). Here, he says “the word of God” is like seed. What does this mean? Seed has the potential to produce life. Seed has great potential to be fruitful and multiply. Likewise, God’s word is meant to give life and bear much good fruit. It’s not an abstract thing. Luke’s Gospel stresses how this fruit needs to appear in our personal lives (3:8–9; 6:43–44; 13:6–9). God’s purpose in giving us his word is to make our lives spiritually fruitful (Isa55:10–11). That expectation is as normal and healthy as a farmer scattering seed, hoping for fruit from his labor. But we don’t produce the fruit—the word of God does. It produces fruit depending on how we hear it.

Jesus goes on to explain how the different soils represent how people hear God’s word. Read verse 12. Here, the path is not straight or crooked, but hard. It’s too hard for the seed to get in. Why do people’s hearts become so hard? Maybe it’s because too many things or people come marching through. Or maybe they’ve allowed themselves to start doubting God’s love and become bitter and cynical. Basically, the devil is having a field day with such people. He keeps their hearts nice and hard so they won’t believe and be saved. It tells us that hearing God’s word isn’t a casual thing; it involves a spiritual battle.

Read verse 13. These folks are like “a flash in the pan.” They enjoy God’s word at first, but they have “no root,” meaning no deeper commitment. Their thin heart soil is covering many hidden rocks. And a time of testing always comes. Life unexpectedly throws hard times at us that test whether or not we’re really committed to God and his purpose. Sometimes the test comes in the form of persecution. Whatever the hardship is, without a commitment, we wither. This is true in ordinary human life. How much more so in spiritual life?

Read verse 14. We hear God’s word, but as we go on our way in daily life we foolishly allow other things to choke it out. Jesus says the thorns are “the cares and riches and pleasures of life.” They may not seem like thorns at the time, but they are. We all face these things daily. They are very real temptations. They don’t seem so bad, but when they dominate our minds and hearts, our spiritual growth gets stunted. We end up with immature fruit. It’s not tasty, you can’t cook with it—who wants *that*? But it’s so easy for us to become obsessed with our own welfare, possessions and comfort. Later Jesus says these things can weigh down our hearts and leave us spiritually unprepared (21:34).

Read verse 15. Being good soil for the word of God is not referring to some extraordinary people. It’s describing very ordinary people, people who just have an honest and good heart, who are willing to hold fast to God’s word, willing to be patient, especially during the hard times. Good soil is not about intellect—it’s about the heart. So what do we do? Jesus says it all starts by being honest. Honesty is the basis for having integrity of heart (Ps101:2). It’s not just honest emotions or words; Proverbs repeatedly tells us that such integrity affects the way we walk, how we live our lives (Pr2:7; 10:9; 19:1; 20:7; 28:6,18). The more we live based on what we sincerely believe, the more “honest” we become.

But having a “good” heart is challenging. Why? Jeremiah 17:9 says, “The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick; who can understand it?” What a troubling verse! We think we’re good and sincere, but we’re deceived by our own heart and don’t know how sick it is. What’s the solution? Jesus says we need to hear the word of God and “hold it fast.” Psalm 119:9–11 says, “How can a young man keep his way pure? By guarding it according to your word. With my whole heart I seek you; let me not wander from your commandments! I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.” To store up God’s word in our heart involves memorizing it. In our media-driven culture we absorb so many things. Scripture memorization isn’t easy or popular, but it can clean out all the junk within us. It’s like a spiritual bath for the heart and soul.

But “holding fast” to the word of God involves more than just memorization. It means *believing* God’s word, no matter what. It also means not just *hearing* it but *doing* it (6:47). It means *believing* and *doing* his word *“with patience,”* Jesus says, even when it seems to make no difference. This, too, takes real faith! “Holding fast” to God’s word means making hearing and doing his word our top priority, ahead of our own ideas and desires, and other people’s as well, as we see in the last part of today’s passage (19–21). In the midst of all of the hardships of life, all the things that make us worried or that tempt or distract us, we need to “hold fast” to the word of God, keep it at the forefront of our minds and hearts. May God help us “hold fast” to his word, so that he can cultivate an honest and good heart within us that bears the fruit he wants.

To help us further, Jesus tells the parable of a lamp on a stand (16–18). We like to keep the lights down low because too bright light can expose all kinds of embarrassing and painful things. But Jesus encourages us to let the light of God’s word blaze into our hearts, so that the healing can begin.

Jesus’ parables are a great help, not only in hearing his word but also in spreading it. We need faith to scatter the seed of God’s word and trust that God will cause some of it to land on good soil, that God will make it like a lamp for people in darkness. This is Jesus’ ultimate goal for his disciples—to carry on his work of spreading the word of God, the good news of the kingdom. May God help us grow as true disciples of Jesus who really hear his word and spread it by faith.