A NOBLE AND GOOD HEART

Luke 8:4–21

Key Verse: 8:15

“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.”

One of the themes in Luke’s Gospel is the importance of believing and giving the word of God. In chapter 1 he starts out by mentioning those who were *"servants of the word"* (1:2). Later in the chapter, the angel tells Mary, *“For no word from God will ever fail”* (1:37), and she responds, *“May your word to me be fulfilled”* (1:38). In chapter 2, the shepherds *“spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child”* (2:17). In chapter 3 John the Baptist’s ministry began when *“the word of God came”* to him (3:2), and this fulfilled the word of Isaiah the prophet (3:4). In chapter 4 Jesus spoke *“the gracious words”* of God (4:22), and his words had authority and power (4:32,36). In chapter 5 people were crowding around Jesus, like thirsty deer, *“listening to the word of God”* (5:1). In chapter 6 Jesus taught that we shouldn’t just hear his words, but put them into practice (6:47,49). In chapter 7 the centurion said, *"But say the word,"* believing it would heal his sick servant (7:7). And as the crowds listened to Jesus’ words, they came to understand that God’s way was right (7:29). As chapter 8 begins, Luke tells us how Jesus was going around from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The good news he was proclaiming was based on the word of God.

Now Jesus tells two parables: a farmer sowing seed, and a lamp on a stand, both to help us examine how we’re responding to God’s word (4–18). Then his mother and brothers come to see him, but Jesus says, *“My mother and brothers are those hear God’s word and put it into practice”* (19–21). In this study may God help us learn how to cultivate a noble and good heart toward his word, so that we can retain it, persevere and produce the crop God wants.

Look at verses 4–8. *“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. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds ate it up. Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. 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, ‘Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.’”* Though we may’ve heard these words before, when Jesus first spoke them they were fresh and intriguing. He took the parable from everyday, working men and women’s lives, and it was something most people would relate to. People sow seed, expecting it to produce a crop of something—flowers, or in the case of hungry people, food of some kind. Their livelihood depends on the seed producing a crop. How frustrating, when the seed gets snatched away even before entering the soil! Or when the seed starts growing quickly, but then dies just as quickly! Or when the seed starts growing well, only in the end to get choked out by various kinds of weeds! But how nice when seed penetrates good soil, springs up and produces a luscious crop, a hundred times what was sown! Jesus’ ending to the parable, though, was strangely abrupt. No explanation; just *“Whoever has ears to hear, let them hear.”* What Jesus was really teaching was a mystery, a secret, locked up in the words of his parable. Only those who had ears to hear could decipher its meaning.

Look at verse 9. *"His disciples asked him what this parable meant."* The disciples weren't sitting there like bumps on a log, or falling asleep. They were actually listening, trying to understand. Their asking what the parable meant may seem like a small matter, but it's not. Sometimes, when people ask questions, they're not really trying to learn anything; they're challenging the person they're asking and want to be perceived as knowing better. Or so often, we don't like to admit we don't understand, so for fear of looking dumb, we keep silent and don’t ask. To really ask a true question involves becoming vulnerable. But the disciples were so comfortable with Jesus they could ask him anything. They weren't trying to impress; they just really wanted to know what his parable meant. This quality—wanting to learn—was what made them real disciples. Once we think we've got everything all figured out, that we know better than others, once we cease to have any more questions, we've stopped learning and growing.

Let's read verse 10. *"He said, 'The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, "though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand."'"* What we notice here is that Jesus used parables not for his disciples but for the crowds. We also notice that even though they'd just admitted they didn't know what he meant, he told them, *"The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you."* Saying this means Jesus really respected them. The disciples had this knowledge, but the crowds, though seeing, didn't see, and though hearing, didn't understand. We know from Luke's Gospel that Jesus liked to include outcasts and overlooked people. Some of the last people anyone would think of including, Jesus included. So this distinction between his disciples and the crowds is hard to understand. In fact, it's paradoxical. Jesus is saying that the people with the questions are the ones who have more knowledge? Yep. And the people who think they've got all the answers and don’t ask may not know so well as they think they know. It's interesting. As we listen to God's word, often we think we see, but we don't really see, or that we hear, but we don't really hear.

The key point here seems to be *"the knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God."* Jesus says here that it already **has been** given to his disciples. The disciples weren't super-scholars; they were ordinary Galileans, and frankly, sinful men. So where'd they get this knowledge? Verse 10 implies they received it from the Father through following Jesus. But what is this *"knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God"*? Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, predicted that the coming one would *"give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins"* (1:77). This was the knowledge that, despite all their study, the Pharisees lacked, because they never repented. But when we repent and follow Jesus, he still gives us this knowledge of the kingdom. When we experience it, we start living on a deeper level. We realize that beneath the surface of things, there's a spiritual reality. When the disciples started experiencing the secrets of the kingdom, they realized they had so much more to learn. This is why they were always asking questions. Once they'd tasted these secrets, they didn’t become proud; they wanted to know more and more. To know the secrets of the kingdom of God is still the best thing in the world.

After praising his disciples for having been given the secrets of the kingdom, in verses 11–15 he gives them more secrets by explaining what his parable meant. Read verse 11. Jesus said the word of God is like seed. How so? A seed is small, but it’s able to produce life. Slowly but surely it transforms into a plant that bears fruit. The seed has life-giving power in it. The farmer doesn’t produce the plants. All he has to do is scatter seed, and the seed itself produces plants, which produce the crop. This metaphor teaches us to have confidence in the word of God. It’s because the seed of the word leads to faith. So in verses 12–13 the word *“believe”* is repeated. Romans 10:17 says, *“Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ.”* 1 Thessalonians 2:13 says, *“And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.”* When Paul was saying his final goodbye to the Ephesian elders, he said, *"Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified"* (Ac20:32). May God bless us to sow the seed of his word in ourselves and share it with others, so that we may grow in personal faith.

Read verse 12. Here Jesus is saying that the ministry of God’s word is a spiritual battle. The devil isn’t an old fairy-tale; he’s real. We need to be aware that he’s always there, trying to distract us from God’s word and take it away. Back in verse 10 Jesus quoted from Isaiah 6:9, *“…though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.”* If we go back and look at Isaiah 6, the very next verse, verse 10, describes people’s hearts as being *“calloused.”* It’s no wonder that the first kind of soil Jesus uses in his parable is the path. A path is too hard to receive any seed. What could make a person’s heart so hard toward the word? In verse 5 Jesus said the soil was *“trampled on.”* Humans, animals and carts kept going over it until it became as hard as asphalt. We shouldn’t allow many things or people into our hearts to trample on them. Proverbs 4:23 says, *“Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it.”* A path-like heart could also mean being distracted, worried and upset about many things—too busy-minded to reflect on the word we’ve heard (10:40–42). Or it could mean hearing the word many times, over and over, but never really opening up to it. Many regular churchgoers can actually be quite hardened toward God’s word. Many things can make our hearts hard. When we’re desperate and in need, our hearts can be open to God’s word, but when the problems are gone, we don’t want to listen to God anymore (Ex8:15). When we’re blessed with some kind of success, our hearts can become arrogant and hardened with pride (Da5:20a). When we give up the daily struggle in Christian life, our hearts can be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness (Heb3:13). Deuteronomy 10:16 says, *“Circumcise your hearts, therefore, and do not be stiff-necked any longer.”* A path-like heart needs some major repentance.

Read verse 13. Here Jesus seems to be describing emotional people. They study the Bible only on the emotional level, when it feels good. But when any kind of hardship or suffering is involved, they shut down and step out. Jesus used the words *“no root.”* Back in verse 6 he said *“no moisture.”* To grow, a plant needs moisture, which it gets from its roots in the ground. But if underneath an area of soil there are many rocks, plants’ roots can’t get any moisture there; so they wither and die. What’s this *“root”* we need for God’s word to grow in us? It seems to mean being deeply connected with Jesus. Elsewhere Jesus said he is the vine and we are the branches (Jn15:5). Paul taught new believers, *“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live your lives in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness”* (Col2:6–7). No root seems to mean no deep commitment to or connection with Jesus. Sometimes, underneath the soil of our hearts, we find things we didn’t even realize were there—areas of rock-hard hardness—sins, pride, selfishness, and basically, no room for Jesus. To have a root means to dig down deep to root out these rocks. It requires repentance on a deeper level. If we’re too lazy, we won’t go through all the trouble to do it.

In verse 13 Jesus also describes *“the time of testing.”* In every Christian’s life this time seems to come. It’s a really hard time. It could be having a health or financial crisis, relationship problems, or persecution for our faith from peers, co-workers or family. The time of testing is a time we’re tempted to get out of our suffering by any means. Why does God allow these times of testing in our lives? 1 Peter 1:6–7 says, *“In all this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that the proven genuineness of your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.”* God allows the time of testing to refine our faith. We need a deep root in Jesus, personal faith and commitment to him; then we can endure any kind of severe test and come out shining.

Read verse 14. Here Jesus seems to be describing people who haven’t learned how to apply what they’ve heard to their real, practical lives in the world. They go to church, but in real life they don’t really live like Christians. The soil in their hearts isn’t hard; there aren’t any rocks. But without applying what they learn in God’s word, weeds also grow in their nutrient-rich heart-soil. What are the weeds that choke out God’s word from our hearts? Jesus says they’re life’s worries, riches and pleasures. Life always has its worries, riches and pleasures. What should we do? When we confront the temptation of life’s worries, we should keep our spiritual priorities, holding onto Jesus’ promise, *“But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well”* (12:31). When we confront the temptation of life’s riches, we should hold onto Jesus’ words, *“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions”* (12:15), and his words, *“This is how it will be for whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God”* (12:21). When we confront the temptation of life’s pleasures, we should remember the words about Moses from Hebrews 11:25, *“He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.”* If we don’t struggle with the practical temptations in our lives of worries, riches and pleasures, God’s word gets choked out of our hearts, and we won’t mature spiritually. What did Jesus mean by being mature? It seems he meant being strong and wise enough in him not to be swayed by these things. Jesus doesn’t want us to hide from life’s worries, riches and pleasures. He wants us to be mature enough to confront them with faith.

Read verse 15. Who are the people with *“a noble and good heart”*? They seem to be those who love God’s word. The Psalmist wrote, *“…for I delight in your commands, because I love them. I reach out for your commands, which I love, that I may meditate on your decrees”* (Ps119:47–48). For many people, Bible study is a duty or chore. But to have *“a noble and good heart,”* we need to grow in a real love for his words. When we love his words, we never get tired of them—we *“delight”* in them. When we by nature are sinners, how can we have such a *“noble and good heart”*? Jesus says here that it happens when we *“retain”* the word. To *“retain”* the word means to obey it. 1 Peter 1:22a says, *“Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth…”* Elsewhere Jesus prayed for his disciples, *“Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth”* (Jn17:17). James 1:21–22 says, *“Therefore, get rid of all moral filth and the evil that is so prevalent and humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you. Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.”*  When we humbly accept God’s word, hold onto it in our hearts and struggle to obey it in our daily lives, our hearts become more and more noble and good (Lk6:45).

Read verse 15 again. We should take note of the phrase *“by persevering.”* Persevering is hard. We can’t expect Bible study to always make us feel good, or Christian life to be all fun and games. We can’t expect fruit in our lives to come right away. We need to persevere. It means “steadfast constancy.” It’s not easy to persevere in Christian life, but it’s absolutely necessary for God’s word to bear fruit. James 1:2–4 reads, *“Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.”*  Our Lord Jesus is calling each of us to persevere in his word.

And what is *“the crop”*? In verse 14 Jesus used the word *“mature.”* The crop seems to be real Christian maturity. It’s when we truly understand God’s grace (Col1:6b). It’s when we *“live a life worthy of the Lord and please him in every way: bearing fruit in every good work, growing in the knowledge of God…being strengthened…with great endurance and patience*” and having hope in his kingdom (Col1:10–12). May God bless each of us to persevere in his word so that we can grow inwardly in real Christian maturity and lead others to him.

In verses 16–18 Jesus tells the parable of the lamp on a stand, not to tell us to shine our light to others, but to let the lamp of God’s word shine on our inner lives, exposing what we need to repent of. And in verses 19–21 Jesus taught by his own example to put obeying his word and commitment to those who do so even ahead of our human family.

Let’s read verse 15 once more. May God bless us each to cultivate a noble and good heart toward his word, so that we can retain it, persevere and produce the crop that God wants.