The parable of the soils
Luke 8:1-15

This morning we are continuing our study in the gospel of Luke and we have reached chapter 8 and the parable of the soils, or sower, as it is more commonly known. I prefer to call it the parable of the soils as the sower stays the same and scatters the same seed but it is the 4 different types of soil that are what the parable is all about. But before we get into the parable, I just want to spend a few minutes on the preceding 3 verses of Luke chapter 8.

We are told that Jesus 'went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve disciples were with him, as well as many others.

Can you imagine how exciting it would be to have Jesus come to your village with his entourage? People would just put their daily activities on hold, and go out to listen to Jesus. They were seeing instant, miraculous healings of cripples that they'd known all their lives. People blind from birth had their eyes opened and dead people came back to life. And yet, despite his ever-growing popularity, Jesus went to small villages as well as big cities. He wouldn't have just gone to Geneva and Zurich and Lausanne where most of the influential people were but he'd have come through St. Sulpice and Cossonay and Bussigny too! Jesus has a lot to think about; people to see, places to go and yet he cares about the people in little villages. Take comfort in that this morning. He may be in control of the entire universe but he also cares about you: what you wear, eat, where you go, what you do at work and at home. You are incredibly significant to God. Listen to what Psalm 37:23 says 'The Lord directs the steps of the godly. He delights in every detail of their lives.' Every detail of your lives guys. How amazing is that?

And then interestingly Luke mentions by name 3 women. Mary Magdalene, Joanna and Susanna. It is significant that Luke mentions these three women who travelled and supported Jesus' ministry, especially because in the Jewish culture of that day women were not supposed to learn from Rabbis let alone travel with them. Yet Jesus ministers to their needs, Luke tells us he has healed them and he allows them to travel as a regular part of his team. No doubt Jesus would face opposition for doing this and of course these women would undoubtedly be challenged by the Pharisees but they had been touched by Christ and were willing to endure any mocking to follow him and support him. And that is exactly what they did Luke tells us.

These women supplied the financial needs of Jesus & his disciples. Effectively, Jesus was a supported missionary! We are not told of any other supporters of Jesus' mission than these women in scripture. They were meeting the needs of Jesus and his disciples out of their own resources. They applied what Paul later encouraged the early Christians to do which is to contribute generously to the Lord's work.

Even in this we see the truly humble nature of Jesus, who was willing to make Himself dependent upon others. He didn't have to; He could have just created all

the money He would ever need. He showed he could provide for not only himself but for 5000 others from a couple of fish and some bread and yet in His perfect humility he received from others. I think there is a lesson in this for many of us who are too proud to receive help from others. You know sometimes the ability to humbly receive is a better measure of Jesus in our lives than the ability to give. Giving often puts us in a higher place, but receiving may put us in a lower place. And that's not just financial, although it definitely is that, but it applies to grace. We so want to give back to God, to feel like we've earned some of His favour. But just like Jesus received from these women the support he needed we must also receive from others and receive from God His grace and blessing without any guilt or attempt to pay it back. We need to escape the debtor's ethic and humbly receive like Jesus did.

And so we come to the parable. And we will read from verses 4-15.

J.C. Ryle, an Anglican Pastor from Liverpool, said 'this parable is of universal application. The things it relates are continually going on in every congregation wherever the gospel is preached (so that includes ours). The four kinds of hearts that it describes are to be found in every assembly that hears the Word. We should say to ourselves, as we read it, *this concerns me. My heart is seen in this parable. I, too, am here.'* And so this morning I would encourage you to assess which soil best describes your heart and trust the Holy Spirit to bring conviction, guidance and clarity as we seek to be more like Jesus.

Just by way of introduction, the word parable comes from the idea of "to set along side." A parable is a short story that signifies a spiritual truth. The importance of this parable is apparent not only because it is told in 3 of the 4 gospels, but also because Jesus himself says in verse 8 "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." In other words, 'make sure you are listening to this: don't miss it.' We are challenged by Jesus to respond.

Let's just talk about the actual seed for a moment. We know that the seed represents the Word of God and so at this point you might ask why a farmer would allow precious seed to land in unsuccessful places. The fault however is not with the farmer, or the seed. His desire is to get as much seed as possible to take root in good soil but there is inevitably going to be some waste as it falls or gets blown to unproductive places. This is not the fault of the faithful farmer or of the seed but is entirely dependent upon the condition of the soil where it falls. You may find it reassuring this morning to know that you as a believer are called to scatter the seed. You are called to share the gospel. But you are not necessarily responsible for the ground that it falls on! Faithful preaching and good evangelism is crucial but good ground is necessary if there will be fruit. I take comfort in knowing that my responsibility is to simply sow and you shouldn't get discouraged when you don't see results. As Isaiah 55:11 reminds us, wherever the seed (God's word) goes out, it will not return void. The results are God's responsibility.

And then Jesus goes onto explain the parable. Thankfully! Because I wouldn't have got what it means but neither did the disciples so that makes me feel better!

But, interestingly, before the explanation, Jesus quotes a passage from Isaiah 6:9 which is both perplexing and provocative. He says to his disciples "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.' At this point you might think what on earth does Jesus mean? Is Jesus saying he doesn't want people to understand the truth? Is he purposefully concealing it from some people? This statement does raise some interesting questions. We know that a parable causes listeners to search and discover the truth and meaning for themselves. The reason Jesus used parables was not to stop some from understanding but rather to separate the sincere seeker from the casual hearer. Parables conceal their true meaning from the careless and hard-hearted and cause the diligent to seek understanding. These disciples were diligent and so Jesus goes on to plainly interpret it for them and for us.

But just before we get into the interpretation and application of this parable, we should assess our own hearts. Clearly, we all fall into one of the 4 categories. The parable is designed to be one of caution, which requires careful self-assessment, as it is about how we hear the Word of God. Even as I prepared this message I found myself pointing fingers at others thinking of those I have seen get choked by the cares of this world or those that didn't last when things got tough, but then I felt the Holy Spirit gently say to me, 'how is the soil of your heart these days?' We cannot be complacent and simply think we are good soil. We must let the Holy Spirit examine our hearts this morning as we consider this challenging parable.

Beware of the Devil – seed on the path

We are told that the seed that falls on the path is trodden on or eaten by birds. Birds are often a picture of evil in the Bible and Jesus explains that the devil himself comes and takes away the word of God from peoples' hearts. We are told in Ephesians 6:12 that 'we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.' And it is true that wherever the word of God goes out, our enemy, the Devil, meets it with great opposition. Even as I preach right now, no doubt the enemy wants to steal the message before it takes root in anyone's heart.

The Devil is successful when the word of God doesn't even get a chance to leave an impression upon a persons mind. Just as you can be sure that God's plans and thoughts towards you are only good and perfect and for your best and His glory, you can also be certain that you have an enemy, the devil who makes it his aim to distort the word of God and destroy as many of God's children as possible. He wants to make you powerless and he doesn't get tired of trying to bring you down. He is hard at work in the world and he is especially hard at work in the church seeking any occasion to harm Christians through whatever means necessary. He will do everything he can to stop the progress of the gospel and prevent anyone from coming to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

I think there are a number of ways in which Satan hardens a person's heart and they can be very different ways! J. C. Ryle exposes the Devil's methods well when

he says, 'From him come wandering thoughts, sleepy eyes, fidgety nerves, weary eyes and distracted attention. In all these things Satan has a great hand' So maybe it's not just me that's boring you to death this morning, maybe it's not just you that struggles to remember sermons. Perhaps the Devil is working to harden your heart this way. We might also think of the person that says they have been hurt too many times or refuses to believe there can be a loving God when there is so much suffering in the world. They have built up a resistance to God and the Devil helps them along. You know we can even harden our heart those areas of God's Word that we are a bit uncomfortable with. You become a selective listener. There can be no resistance in our hearts to any part of God's word. Maybe you're forgetting about the enemy of your soul. Don't let him harden your heart. Beware of the devil.

Beware of short-lived emotional responses – seed on rocky ground

The second caution we receive is not to be like the seed that falls on rocky ground. Jesus' audience knew well the landscape of their country that in Israel much of the Land is a thin two or three inch veneer of soil over a Limestone bedrock. And so the problem is that there is no depth of soil for the seed to root down to get the moisture. This type of person hears the word and receives it with joy, Jesus tells us. They realize they need a saviour, they even feel convicted of sin. They profess faith in Christ and it appears sincere; they come to church, even get involved in ministry. Everything looks right but sadly it's all on the surface and as one preacher (Rob Salvato) put it, 'the sun comes up and things start to get hot!' Maybe persecution comes in from family or friends, or unemployment strikes or death of a loved one or some other difficulty and it becomes too much for them. They lose the zeal they started out with and tragically their faith in the word of God dissolves and they go back to their old lifestyle. To me this emphasizes the desperate need we have to be self-feeders. We cannot rely on one sermon a week to get us through no matter how good it may be! We desperately need to be in God's word getting rooted, drawing moisture everyday so that when the difficulties come we don't wilt.

Beware of the cares of this life- seed among thorns

The third caution in the parable is to beware of the cares of this world. In 1 John 2:15-16 we read 'Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride in possessions—is not from the Father but is from the world.' Jesus is saying that for many people the word of God is choked by the cares of this world: those things that charm us and occupy our thoughts and attention.

Jesus is even not talking about sin here guys, he is talking about the thousands of things that in themselves are innocent, even gifts given to us by the Lord Himself, that when pursued excessively choke the word of God. One preacher (Ryle) said 'Open sin is not the only thing that ruins souls'. These temporal things can ruin the effect of the word of God upon our lives. The pursuit of the cares of this world if we do not submit them to God and make room for His word can suffocate every sermon we hear and render us totally ineffective.

Thorns steal all the moisture from the ground so that the seed simply cannot grow. The thorns represent the cares of this world. They are what prevent the seed from producing fruit. They will choke the word of God in your life. The cares of this life are one of the greatest dangers that face us as Christians, especially young people. There are so many traps out there that Satan is laying. 1 Peter 5:8 tells us that our adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.

Perhaps you truly desire to obey the bible. You realize that to love God you must obey his commandments and you really want to, but the things of Earth, the small pleasures; money, leisure, houses, cars, promotions; these things have got such a hold on you that there is no room left for the Word of God to have its rightful place in your heart. It gets crowded out. Beware of the cares of this life. They are subtle, attractive and extremely dangerous. As Jesus warned us in Mark, "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his soul? Mark 8:36

And finally we come the fourth type of the soil.

A fruitful faith - Seed on good soil

This good soil, Jesus tells us, represent those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience. Notice that key word: patience. In contrast to the seed that fell in rocky places, that shot up quickly but it didn't last. Jesus is not talking about a flash in the pan kind of faith here. He's talking about an endurance race and it will take perseverance and hard work to produce good fruit. Jesus says honest and good hearts are trademarks of good soil. What does it mean to have an honest and good heart? Honesty speaks of being honest with God about your sin and your weaknesses. It means you don't pretend to be better than you are. It means to see your sin as God sees it and realize your need of His grace, and when Jesus uses the word 'good'; it is in reference to your character and we know that the testing of your faith produces endurance and endurance produces character. So the question is how do we become good soil? By staying sensitive to the Holy Spirit in our lives. By letting people speak into our lives and being honest with others. By praying alone, praying with others and reading and studying God's word. This is how a believer continues to be good soil.

But perhaps you are hearing this for the first time this morning and you are not sure that you have put your trust in Christ. God's offer of salvation is for you this morning. Jesus died on the cross to deal with your sin and rebellion against Him. Don't let the Devil steal this word before you leave this building. You need to get right with God now.

And what if you feel like you are not fertile soil right now? Let Hosea 10:12 be God's cry to you this morning, 'Sow for yourselves righteousness; reap steadfast love; break up your fallow ground, for it is the time to seek the LORD, that he may come and rain righteousness upon you.'

Perhaps you don't feel like there is much fruit in your life at the moment, perhaps you feel choked by thorns; perhaps you've hardened and let the devil get

a foothold in your life. God can break the hardest hearts and remove the thorns, he can wash you with the water of His word. When the word of God sinks down deep into your life, you will see fruit and so will others. There must be fruit of the Spirit in a believer's life otherwise it is just an outward profession of Christianity that is dry and dull and gives no assurance or hope. The Christian walk is one of fruit, hope and life and Jesus came that we might have life; and life more abundantly (John 10:10). This life is everlasting and it starts now, its available to all whose hearts are good soil.

And so this morning we have looked at four different ways in which people hear and respond to the word of God. Possibly all of them are represented here this morning in this congregation and yet only one of them is right in God's sight. Which camp are you in this morning? When you hear the word of God do you harden your heart and allow Satan to snatch it before it has time to permeate your life? Perhaps you received the word at first with excitement and now you are wilting, as things get difficult. Maybe you truly desire God and yet you just can't take your eyes off the cares of this world; every week you come to church and after hearing the sermon say to yourself, 'now I want to live for Christ' but by Monday your eyes are fixed on other things that temporarily satisfy. Or maybe you are the good soil this morning and you are bearing fruit. Praise God. It is Him who works in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure (Philippians 2:13). Whichever soil you think best represents you this morning I encourage you to respond to Jesus and His word, as Jesus Himself encourages us, 'let him who has an ear to hear listen', so we must.