

Extravagantly Fruitful!
(Series: "Parables of Jesus: Posing The Scandal of His Good News")

"And other seed fell into the **good soil**, and grew up, and produced a crop a hundred times as great" (Luke 8:8).

"And the seed which fell in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and **hold it fast**, and bear fruit with perseverance" (Luke 8:15).

Jesus speaks parables to make us think. And in the process, to adopt a whole new perspective on life – His perspective.

Jesus' parables are not just nice little Sunday School lessons, with a little moral to take home and try to apply to our lives. His stories are designed to unsettle us; to challenge, and sometimes even offend, our understanding of the way things are and should be. They are creative stories through which Jesus intentionally dis-orients our thinking in order to re-orient our thinking around the Kingdom of God.

I like how NT scholar C.H. Dodd put it in his now classic work of 1935 *The Parables of the Kingdom*: "The parables are most characteristic element in the teaching of Jesus Christ as recorded by the gospels." They function by "arresting the hearer by [their] vividness or strangeness, and the leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought."

The parable we just read is the first parable Jesus is asked to explain. It is not, as many tend to think, His first parable. Before speaking this one He spoke at least two others.

After He began freeing people from the grip of the demonic, He spoke the Parable of the Strong Man. "But no one can enter the strong man's house and plunder his property unless he first binds the strong man, and then he will plunder his house" (Mark 3:27).

And at a dinner party at the home of Simon the Pharisee, after a woman, who had been deeply moved by the compassion of Jesus, crashed the party and wet Jesus' feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair, He spoke the Parable of the Two Debtors. "A certain moneylender had two debtors: one owed five hundreds days wages, and the other fifty. When they were unable to repay, he graciously forgave them both. Which of them therefore will love him more?" (Luke 7:41-42).

The Parable of the Sower ... or Seed ... or Soil ... is the first parable Jesus is asked to explain. Why?

Clearly, Jesus is speaking about His own ministry. He is the Sower who is sowing Seed in the Soil. The seed is the word of God, He explains (8:11). The word about the Kingdom of God and the God of the Kingdom.

Luke tells us that Jesus was going about from one city to another, “proclaiming and preaching the kingdom of God” (8:1). The word “proclaiming” can be translated “heralding.” The picture is of a great leader, an emperor, for instance, sending a spokesperson, a herald, into the cities and villages of the empire, crying out, “Hear ye, Hear ye!” We are to imagine Jesus, going from one city and village to another, crying out, “Hear ye, Hear ye ... the Kingdom of God has come near!”

The word “preaching” is the word translated in other places “evangelizing.” Evangelizing comes from the word “evangel,” meaning, “Good News.” The picture is of a king, having won a great battle, sending a spokesperson, an evangelist, into the cities and villages of his realm, joyfully announcing his “good news.” Caesar Augustus had his “evangelists,” whom he sent throughout his reign, announcing his evangel, his “good news” that he, “a son of god,” had now established a New World Order, a new and glorious Reign of Peace.

Luke wants us to imagine Jesus, going from one city and village to another, joyfully announcing God’s Evangel, God’s Good News, that in Jesus and because of Jesus, God’s New World Order, God’s Reign of Peace, is breaking into the world.

The Great Sower was sowing the Seed of His Evangel in the Soil of the world. The soils are the hearts of those who are hearing Jesus herald and evangelize. Some are responding – big time! Some are not.

So the parable is about Jesus and His ministry in the world. Pretty straightforward, right? They why do the disciples ask Jesus to explain it?

Later in His earthly ministry, they will ask him to explain another. The one about two sowings in the same field; the Parable of the Wheat and Tares. I get why the disciples have to ask Jesus to explain it! (Matthew 13:36). But the Parable of the Sower ... or Seed ... or Soil? Why do the disciples ask Him to explain it?

Because this seemingly straightforward story raises all kinds of questions. Questions about “the mysteries of the kingdom,” as Jesus puts it (8:10). “.... Leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought ...”

So this morning, I want to ask a number of questions about Jesus’ parable. Questions it raises for me. Questions I know many of you bring to the story. Five questions.

Question one: Who or what is the Subject of the parable? Is it the Parable of the Sower? Is it the Parable of the Seed? Is it the Parable of the Soils? I have heard it called by all three titles. Again, the Sower is Jesus. The Seed is His Gospel, “the word of God,” God’s word about God’s Kingdom. The Soils are human hearts, to whom Jesus is speaking. As He is to you and me right now. As He is to people walking on the streets outside this building right now, even though they may not yet realize it.

So which is it? Sower, Seed or Soils? Yes. All three. In dynamic interplay with one another. Inseparably so.

Question two: **What does Jesus the Sower expect of His Seed in the Soils?** “Fruit,” of course. “Mature fruit.” He expects His Seed to bear mature fruit. The word “mature” comes from the word Jesus attaches to the verb for bearing fruit. It is the word “*telos*,” which we have talked about in other contexts. “*Telos*” means the inherent destiny of a thing. The “*telos*” of any seed is the inherent destiny of the seed. The *telos* of sunflower seed is a sunflower. The *telos* of a grain of wheat is wheat. The *telos* of an acorn is an oak tree.

The Seed Jesus sows is the Seed of the Kingdom of God. The *telos* of the Seed of the Kingdom of God is the life of the Kingdom. As He sows the Seed of the Kingdom into human hearts through his heralding and evangelizing, He fully expects to see “Kingdom fruit” emerging. What He develops in His Sermon on the Mount, for instance, which He had already preached before He spoke His parable. He fully expects to see “Sermon-on-the-Mountness” emerge in the hearts of those who hear Him preach. “Mature fruit.” The inherent destiny of the Word He sows in our hearts.

A number of writers of the New Testament seem to be referring to this note of the parable. James says: “Humbly accept the word planted in you, which can save you” (1:21). Peter says: “You were born again, not of perishable seed, but imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:23). Paul rejoices that the Colossians have received the gospel, which he calls “the word of truth,” and which, he says, “is constantly bearing fruit all over the world” (1:6).

By the time He tells the parable, Jesus *is* seeing such fruit emerge! Tax-collectors are drawn to Him, and changing their ways. Prostitutes are drawn to Him, and finding a different kind of life. Fishermen are drawn to Him, and become contagious signs of the kingdom. Jesus has been sowing extravagantly, and is seeing extravagant fruit!

One of the most significant signs of kingdom life is the women who are following Him. Luke is taken by this. And bothers to even list their names for us: Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Susanna. He is so taken by the fact that he has to tell us about it. These women had heard the word of the inbreaking Kingdom and were healed by it. All three, not just Mary.

“And they have done the unthinkable,” writes NT Wright.

“They have left the well-defined social space of home and family where they had a role and a duty, and have chosen to accompany Jesus and his followers on the road from place to place, looking after their needs, and doing so, moreover, out of their own pockets.”

Then says Wright:

“This is every bit as shocking, from a first-century Palestinian point of view, as the story of the woman letting her hair down and kissing Jesus’ feet. One can only imagine the looks they would get, and the things people might say about such a company. But one can also imagine Jesus thinking of them ... as a people in whose hearts and lives the word had had its effect, people who were already bearing fruit, putting life, reputation and property at the disposal of this extraordinary kingdom movement” [*Luke For Everyone*, 95].

These women represent what Jesus the Sower expects of His Seed sown in the Soil of the world.

Given Who Jesus is, and given the performative power of His word – He simply speaks and things happen, He rightly expects to see such fruit in any heart into which He speaks. He rightly expects the Kingdom life to emerge in us. He rightly expects His Life to emerge in us. He will later say: “You did not choose Me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should remain” (John 15:16). In that context, the fruit is His Life in the world.

He rightly expects the Life of His Spirit to emerge in us. “The fruit of the Spirit.” Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Then why is this not happening more? Why is the fruit not emerging in everyone who hears Jesus speak His Good News?

Question three: What does Jesus the Sower see as obstacles to the Seed maturing in the Soils?

Jesus identifies four different human hearts. Or, four different “heart conditions.” (1) The hardened, trampled down heart. (2) The shallow, rocky heart. (3) The cluttered, pulled-in-a-thousand-different-ways heart. And (4) the receptive heart; what He calls “the honest and good heart.”

And each of us has met people in these different conditions. And, would you agree that, to one degree or another, all four of these heart conditions are true of each of us? That is, there is something of each of the four “heart conditions” in each of our hearts? There are hard places where Jesus’ word has not yet seemed to bear fruit. There are shallow places. There are cluttered places. Oh mercy! And, thankfully, there are receptive places.

Soil one. The obstacle of hardness. “And those beside the road are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their heart, so that they may not believe and be saved” (8:12).

Jesus is warning us that hardened hearts are very vulnerable. The universe is not a neutral place. He tells us that there is real, personal, diabolical opposition to Him and the kingdom. There is personal power of evil afoot, doing everything in its, his, power to prevent the kingdom from breaking into our lives and transforming the world.

He preys on hardened hearts. He seeks to further harden them to Jesus and His Gospel. Why? Because the Gospel means the end of his kingdom! So he makes sure hardened hearts stay hard. He makes sure that bitter hearts stay bitter, that resentful hearts stay resentful, and that disappointed hearts stay disappointed.

Jesus is warning us: whenever we hear the good news of the kingdom, but do not embrace it because of the hard places in our heart, the evil-one steals the news from us. But if we open up to Jesus’ word, even a little bit, the evil-one has no room to work; he cannot take it away.

Soil two: the obstacle of shallowness. “And those on the rocky soil are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy; and they have no root; and they believe for a while, and in time of temptation fall away” (8:13). Jesus is telling us that when we welcome the news of the kingdom we are going to find ourselves in trouble.

We will face temptation to back away from all-out kingdom living. Oh, there is blessing, much blessing: forgiveness, peace, healing, freedom, joy, cleansing, intimacy, eternal life. But also trouble. How could it be otherwise? “The kingdom of God has come near.” We are talking revolution -- a change in government!

If our hearts are shallow, when the trouble comes, we will be tempted to back off. In Matthew’s remembering of the parable, Jesus speaks of two kinds of trouble: tribulation and persecution. If we understand this, when it happens we will not back off.

Tribulation. The word is *thlipsis*. We met it when we studied the Book of Revelation. A technical word in the New Testament vocabulary.¹ It means “pressure,” sometimes “crushing pressure.” The kind of pressure experience when two forces come up against one another and began to exert their energy to overcome the other.

Jesus is telling us that when we get caught up in the in-breaking of God’s kingdom – and who would not want to be? – we will find ourselves experiencing pressure, maybe even crushing pressure. As the kingdom of God comes up against all other kingdoms, the collision creates *thlipsis*. Again, how could it be otherwise?

Paul encouraged the new believers throughout the Roman Empire saying, “Through many tribulations [*thlipsis*] we must enter the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). This is encouragement? Yes, because it tells us the truth. There is no experiencing of the kingdom of God without some degree of *thlipsis*. It cannot be otherwise. As the kingdom of God invades the other kingdoms of our world, tension arises. To walk with Jesus in this world is to walk in that tension.²

And persecution. “Because of the word”, says Jesus (Matthew 13:21). Not, “because of you,” “because of the word.” For the simple reason that the word of the in-breaking kingdom disturbs the status quo.

Which happened everywhere Jesus went. Not that He tried to be a rabble-rouser; in fact, He shied away from public attention (until Palm Sunday). It is just that Jesus went around preaching and living His Gospel. His announcement and embodiment of His good news automatically challenged everything not consistent with the kingdom.

As Mortimier Arias of Bolivia puts it, “the coming of the kingdom means a permanent confrontation of worlds. The kingdom is a question mark in the midst of the established ideas and answers developed by peoples and societies.”³

Simply by living His good news, Jesus was experienced by the status quo as a subversive. And was, therefore, persecuted. And He promises the same for all who stand with Him. Blessings, yes; lots of blessings. But also persecution of one sort or another.

¹ Heinrich Schlier, “*thlipsis*”, in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), Vol. III, 139-148. A must read article!

² I expand on this more fully in my book on the Revelation of Jesus Christ, *Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey through the Book of Revelation* (Vancouver, BC: Regent College Publishing, 2004).

³ *Announcing the Reign of God*, 46.

Another way to come at it: the Gospel always, and by necessity, messes with idols.⁴ And thus subverts the way of life built on idols. And thus almost always brings some sort of persecution on the those who seek to live Jesus' good news.

If we remember this, we will not back off when trouble comes, but will go on to bear kingdom life, we will persevere. Soil two is the heart that, as David Wenham puts it, "gives up when things get hot" (*The Parables of Jesus*)

Soil three: the obstacle of clutter. "And the seed which fell among the thorns, these are the ones who have heard, and as they go their way they are choked with worries and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to maturity" (8:14).

Oh, how I know this "heart condition"! Cluttered hearts are one of the reasons why for all the preaching that takes place in the so-called First World in the 21st century, the First World is so un-Gospel-ized. We hear... but all around us is "worries;" or as it is in Matthew's version of the parable, "the worry of the world," literally, "the worry of the age." And, says Jesus, all around us, "riches," or as in Matthew, "the deceitfulness of riches." The problem is not worry as such; and it is not "riches" as such. The problem is "the worry" of the age, and the "deceitfulness" of riches.

"The worry of the age." *The* worry - definite article. Jesus seems to have something specific in mind. Not "worries", but "the worry." I think He is saying that the fundamental mark of the age – 1st and 21st century – is anxiety. Why? Because the age, having excluded the Living God from its public life, rests on very insecure foundations. Oh, the age does not think of it this way. It thinks its foundations are quite secure: "we are the masters of the ship."

Why then, for all the bravado, the worry? Because the human spirit implicitly knows that the foundations cannot hold. To be blunt, when the age does not build upon the Living God, the age builds on idols. Living God or idols; either-or. Any age built on idols will be marked by profound worry. For the human spirit implicitly knows idols cannot finally hold it all together. If the foundation is shaky the super-structure cannot but wobble. And the wobble sets up a constant state of anxiety.

Now, because we eat and drink and breathe "the age," we all get caught up in "the worry" of the age, and news of the Kingdom of God gets choked in our hearts. And we get caught up in the driving questions of the age: "what shall we eat? What shall we drink? What shall we wear?" (Matthew 6:31). And the fruit of the kingdom does not emerge as it ought.

And "the deceitfulness of riches." Do we need any help to understand what Jesus is getting at? Riches trick us. Riches get us to think that they are the sources of our wholeness. Riches get us to think that they are our security against the uncertainties of the unknown future. And we are slowly lulled away from all-out Kingdom living.

Soil three warns us of the tremendous influence of "the worry of the age" and "the deceitfulness of riches". The worry and deceitfulness clutter our hearts and choke kingdom vitality.

⁴ See Bob Goudzwaard's, *Idols of our Time*, just as relevant now as when he wrote in 1979.

So question four: **Who wins? Sower, Seed, or Soil?**

It appears that the soils win. Oh, in soil four the Sower and the Seed win. “And the seed fell in the good soil, these are the ones who have heard the word in an honest and good heart, and hold it fast, and bear fruit with perseverance” (8:15). 100 times the expected harvest! Extravagantly fruitful!

But in soils one to three the Soils win. The hardened hearts, the shallow hearts, the cluttered hearts win. Or, so it appears. It appears that the devil wins in soil one. It appears that fear of trouble wins in soil two. It appears that worry and riches and pleasures of life win in soil three.

I say “appears” because given Who the Sower is and given the life-transforming power of the Seed, I have a hard time believing that any human heart can finally resist Him and His word.

Jesus is the greatest preacher and evangelist who ever lived. When Jesus speaks something always happens. “Let there be light” – and there was! “Be gone” – and the demons flee! “Lazarus, come forth” – and a dead man walks out of the tomb! “The kingdom of God has come near” – and all kinds of redemptive things take place. I have a hard time believing that Jesus cannot win in all the soils. Maybe this is the scandal of the parable I have to embrace.

I hope not! If it is, I will have to embrace it. But I hope it is not. Jesus is just too good a Sower. His seed is just too powerful to be finally overcome by any human “heart condition.”

Maybe it would help if I change the question from “who wins?” to “who gets the last word?” The soils? Do human hearts get the last word? I hope not. The last word belongs to the Sower, and to his Seed, the Word of God?

Look at all the hardened hearts He has won. Right here in this room! Starting with me! Look at all the shallow hearts that He has deepened. Right here in this room! He is doing it for me! Look at all the cluttered hearts He has overcome. Right here in this room! I am exhibit A!

So, question five: **What then is the primary Call of this parable?**

“Hold fast” (8:15) and “understand” (8:10). Hold fast, do not let go... and understand. This is brought out more fully in Matthew’s remembering of the parable.

Soil four: Matthew 13:23 – “And the one on whom seed was sown on the good soil, this is the person who hears the word and *understands* it; who indeed bears fruit, and brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty.”

Understand. Understanding what Jesus means by *understand* helps us understand what He is getting at in all His parables. Understand. *Suniemi*. Literally, “put together”⁵. Yes, in the sense of “make the connections, mentally comprehend.” But more in the sense of “get in line with”, “yield to”.

⁵ *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Christian Literature (Third Edition)*, revised and edited by Fredrick William Danker (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000), 972.

The Apostle Paul uses the word in this later sense in Ephesians 5:17 – “So then, do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is”. Yes, understand in the sense of comprehend with the intellect, but more in the sense of “get in line with”, “yield to”, even if you do not yet fully comprehend it intellectually!

Thus, Dale Bruner suggests that the most helpful translation of the verb understand is “stand-under”⁶. The way to under-stand is to stand-under.

Soil one: “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom, and does not *stand under*, the evil-one snatches ...” (13:19). Soil four: “This is the one who hears the word and *stands under* it” (12:23).

The problem is that we stand *alongside* the word; or worse, we stand *over* the word. We try to make Jesus’ word fit our understanding of the way things are and should be. It cannot work: His word challenges our understanding of the way things are and should be.

The Call of the parable is to move from standing over His word to standing under His word. Even under the word we do not understand! Especially under the word we do not understand!

Jesus is telling us that Kingdom life emerges when we stand under His word of the Kingdom. His Life emerges when we stand under His word of Life.

Is it not the case that, whether or not we choose to stand under His word, we *are under* it anyway? Hebrews 1:3 – He “upholds all things by the word of His power.” The whole word is under His word; the whole universe is under His word. “Hold fast” (8:15), says Jesus; “hold fast” the Seed the Sower sows in the soils of your heart.

Stand under His Word, and watch it break up the hardness, healing bitterness and resentment and disappointment. Stand under His Word, and watch it move through the shallowness, taking you into the depths of the Kingdom. Stand under His Word, and watch it disentangle the clutter, bringing you into the freedom of the Kingdom. Stand under His Word, and watch as the Word brings forth the fruit of His Spirit.

You see, it turns out that the Seed the Sower sows is His own Life. When Jesus speaks He gives us His Life; He gives Himself to us. His words are not mere words. As He says after the feeding of the 5,000: “The words I have spoken are spirit and are life” (John 6:63). Whenever He speaks He is giving us His Spirit, His Life. And His Life will have its inherent destiny. His Life spoken into us will bear *His extravagantly fruitful Life in us*.

⁶ *The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28* (Waco, Texas: Word, 1990), 491.

So, the Great Sower now calls us to gather together at His Table. Here He calls us to stand under His life-giving words, “This is My Body given for you,” “This cup is the New Covenant in My Blood.” As we come to His Table, we hear Him saying:

“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth, making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so shall My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:10-11).

“Hear ye, Hear ye: The Kingdom of God has come near.”

Let us together stand under this news as never before. And watch what happens.