**THE FOUR SOILS**

Luke 8:1-15

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.”

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The setting of our passage today takes place around the time when Jesus’ ministry was getting really popular. At around this time, lots of people have been healed by Him and He had already given His famous Sermon on the Mount. So really a lot has already happened especially when you check out the other gospels in Matthew, Mark and John. And then we get into a point in Jesus’ ministry when He started giving His messages in Parables. The one we’re unpacking today seems to be the first of the many He gave. Though the format of His message seems to have changed, the content of what Jesus talked about remained the same: (v.8)

1. The Good News of the Kingdom of God

The kingdom of God is good news! But is it good news to you?

Firstly, we must ask, “What is the kingdom of God?”

In its most basic sense, the kingdom of God is the domain in which God is king. God of course is de-facto, king and Lord over everything. But this is also a broken world; a world corrupted by sin. Man was actually created to worship and obey God---and in doing so, to rule over all of the rest of creation. But when man chose to obey Satan instead, instead of ruling, we became slaves of him who sought to destroy us. Everyone is born in this same condition---enslaved to sin’s power and Satan’s influence and hostile to God’s rule.

It’s tiring to live like this; to live under the constant lies of Satan; to live in a world ruled by principles of deceiving others and the profits that come with being deceived in return. Actually, it’s no life at all. Perhaps you may have already sensed this yourself; to sense not just that brokenness in the world, but the brokenness in me. The agonizing fact that while there are many things we can seem to fix in the world, but what I cannot fix is the wrong inside me---the part of me that hurts others, the part of me that is subject to condemnation, the secret part of me that desires what is actually vile, the part of me that is unclean, and the part of me that I’m ashamed about.

Jesus talked a lot about the kingdom of God. Actually, that’s the bulk of what He talked most about throughout His entire ministry. “Repent!” He says in Matthew 4:17, “for the kingdom of heaven is near.” Why? Listen to this beautiful word of God in Colossians 1:13-14: “For He has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son He loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.” Jesus preached repentance because repentance is necessary for the forgiveness of sins. (Acts 3:19) With repentance, we gladly surrender to God’s rule in our hearts. This is further evidenced by proof of a person’s salvation, as the person’s spirit is born again as one who belongs to God, responds to His word and submits to His rule. By contrast, a person who does not belong to the kingdom of God is indifferent, defiant and hostile of God’s authority in his life.

Those who do not live in the kingdom of God sometimes live in dangerous company with demons. (see v.2) Have you ever given yourself the chance to think about this? Have you ever come to a point where you’ve said, “I do not want to live with demons anymore!” Well, to that Jesus came to give the good news of the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is really good news! But is it really good news to you? Lots of people came from afar just to hear Jesus talk more about the kingdom of God. And perhaps that's part of the reason why you’re here today too. ‘What is this kingdom of God? I want a piece of it! How do I get into it??’ Well, we already know that repentance is necessary. But perhaps somewhere in our hearts, we’re secretly hoping for a slightly different answer, so Jesus told us this parable:

5 “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.

6 Some fell on rocky ground, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture.

7 Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants.

8 Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.”

Then He said, “Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear.”

The disciples really wanted to know what this farming story has to do with the kingdom of God so they asked Him what the parable meant. Well, the seed is really like the word of God. It’s scattered indiscriminately towards different kinds of soils. But each soil received the seed of God’s word differently. Notice the first soil, which is likened to a path. What happened to God’s word? The birds ate it up. While this is true, let’s take a closer look at what happened before that: ‘It was trampled on.’ In some sense, this soil’s receptivity toward the seed of God’s word is one of indifference and passive hostility. Not only does this soil not care about God’s word, it treats God’s word without value, perhaps treating it as a passing joke, and let’s not even get started about the parts that they vehemently disagree with or feel offended by! Our hearts can be like that. Are you like that? Have you ever heard of this phrase? “Good for you!” Perhaps you’ve even at one point used it yourself in response to someone you’ve already written off in your mind as giving you biblical platitudes. But Jesus has a stern warning for such a heart attitude---such a response can cost a person their salvation: “Those along the path are the ones who hear, and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.” In a sense, salvation through God’s word does come to them, but they cannot be saved.

The second soil responded a little differently. This soil seemingly appears to have God’s word growing in it---but only for a short time. The soil is characterized as being rocky and lacking in moisture. Jesus tells us the problem of this soil: “they have no root.” Plants need roots to live. As any gardener would know, it doesn’t matter how lovely looking or how green the plant’s leaves may appear. The real problem here however, is that the soil is not supportive of God’s word---it is full of hard rocks underground. It too-- is hostile to God’s word, only in an invisible way. This heart can appear to receive God’s word with great joy---but only superficially; in truth it is unrepentant and unchanged. It’s amazing how deceptive this soil can be! But Jesus can see what others cannot see. The roots are invisible to those who only see the foliage---but God is not deceived. Also, the fruit of such a life is not deceived---in a time of testing, they fall away.

The problem of having no root speaks about one’s superficial attitude toward God’s word. God’s word challenges because it’s the word of truth; it’s supposed to challenge us. We’re not just to cherry-pick the parts that we like or agree with, or even just the parts we completely understand. God’s word can feel uncomfortable or even foreign at times---much like a root burrowing its way through the soil. And although God’s word brings us comfort, its purpose is not to provide us with comfortable lives or lift us up a level from our current economic standards of living. Nor is its purpose to provide you with a ‘better way of life’, or even a ‘better you’, as some people would have you believe. Rather, God’s aim is to give you His life; it’s His life--in you! He does that through His word and it’s challenging to us because He demands to be obeyed (!) It’s His life in you--He gets to decide; simple as that and He makes no compromises about it. This is what the kingdom of God is about---it’s about God being your king (!) This, believe it or not, is a good thing! When God’s word challenges you to believe what He said instead; when He challenges you to obey Him instead---it’s a good thing! (Uncomfortable as it is..) He tells us why: “Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey---whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?” (Romans 6:16) True repentance, sincere obedience is not just dogma---it’s a matter of salvation; it’s a life or death matter. Contrast this to the response of one who submits to God’s word though having failed miserably:

“Have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love; according to your great compassion blot out my transgressions. Wash away all my iniquity and cleanse me from my sin. For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. Against you, you only have I sinned and done what is evil in Your sight, so that You are proved right when You speak and justified when you judge. Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me. Surely you desire truth in the inner parts; You teach me wisdom in the inmost place.” Psalm 51:1-6

The excerpt of that Psalm was from David who wrote it after God severely rebuked him and punished him for his sin with Bathsheba. But this Psalm too, from the same David:

“The law from Your mouth is more precious to me than thousands of pieces of silver and gold.” (Psalm 119:72)

Notice how this is the same word of God that rebuked him of his sins!

“If your law had not been my delight, I would have perished in my affliction. I will never forget your precepts, for by them You have preserved my life.” (Psalm 119:93)

At this, we can all pause to think what word of God is personally challenging me specifically in my life today? Is there an area in my life where He’s challenging me to submit to Him? Is there an area in my life where it’s rocky in attitude towards what God wants to do?

A superficial attitude toward God’s word (albeit a joyful one) is still a rejection of His word. God’s life cannot grow in him. But if “his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.” (Psalm 1:3)

Let’s look at the third soil. Let’s read this one together.

“Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants.” This soil is very interesting. Because it seemed receptive to God’s word and even allowed it to take root. God’s word seems to grow in this soil. But this soil also cultivated interests that competed with God’s word. As it was described---’they grew up with it.’ According to Jesus, the thorns in this soil represent life’s worries, riches and pleasures.

What did Jesus mean by that? Let’s spend a moment looking at each one. First off---worries. I think we’d be lying here if any of us were to say, “I never worry; nope---I have no worries of any sort ever in my life at all.” Of course we worry! I actually googled at what age do we start worrying and it yielded the result that children as young as 3-4 years of age. Children as young as 11 or 12 have been diagnosed as having bonafide anxiety disorders. Can you believe that? If you’re not afflicted with anxiety disorder, count yourself lucky. But what God want to give us not that lucky draw ---but that peace that comes even in the midst of storms; the peace that is there even in personal trials and tribulations. Now that peace--is a gift from God. Jesus said, “Do not worry.” Actually, even your doctor tells you that. Worries kill you. Not only do they kill you physically, they kill you spiritually. Worries are deceptive too. Jesus said, “Who, by worrying can add a single hour to his life?” (Matthew 6:27) It doesn’t! But worrying sure makes us think that it does! Worries are deceptive and add no value to our life; on the contrary, it costs us our life, physically and eternally. It’s helpful to know where worry stems from. God’s word reveals to us that worries come from not being able to trust God’s love. Jesus says in Matthew 6:31-33 → “So do not worry, saying ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.” This doesn’t mean that we’ve been given licence to be lazy, rather we should labour in our heart’s desire to: “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.” So while there is no such thing as a life without worries, there is such a life where there is the assurance of God who really, really, really loves His children, and God who really, really loves you. And because of the certitude of that truth of God which you can let reign in your heart---you will be able to say, ‘I will not worry, because God’s got this’.

Second: Riches. It’s easy to write off what Jesus says and think, “Well God’s kingdom sounds like a place just filled with monks.” But Jesus is not telling us to desire a life without riches, to be absent of worries and bereft of pleasures. What He wants us to desire is Him (!)---to desire life with Him. What’s problematic with riches is that it’s so deceptive. We tend to depend on what we have and what wealth can provide us rather than depend on what God can give us. The first of the blessings mentioned in Jesus’ popular Sermon on the Mount is: “Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:3) To be poor in spirit is to know the abject poverty of one’s self---the knowledge that there is absolutely nothing worthy that I could offer God and how there is absolutely nothing I can do to deliver myself out of my own decrepit condition. This can fly in abject opposition of what the world teaches---but it is the first knowing of the heart that leads to God’s salvation. The problem with wealth is because it gives us the opposite message that ‘we can do it’; ‘i can do it’ or that ‘it is I who can lift myself out of this condition I’m in’. We’re not abdicating personal responsibility here---personal responsibility, yes. But problematic here is how easily wealth can distort God’s truth---and it comes at a very high cost of one’s salvation. When we cultivate our desires for wealth, we also cultivate the lies it tells us in our hearts, until they rob us of our knowledge that we actually need God.

The desire for wealth can even make us think that we’re desiring God when in reality we desire wealth more than God. Just observe the kid who gets his heart’s desire for a toy and is totally consumed by it completely ignoring the parent. We are like that. Jesus also said something about wealth to this effect that is completely true (though we perhaps might not want to admit to it). He says: “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” (Matthew 6:24) This is probably why at times God purposely withholds giving us these things because He purposefully wants to give us something that is of better value than what can be eaten by moths, grow mouldy, stolen, destroyed by fire. When we fill our appetites for things that can perish, spoil or fade, we have no appetite left for what is eternal; what is of God. So unless we actively discipline our hearts to know this difference, to turn away our desire for wealth, and exchange it for desiring God, we can be easily deceived and this deception can cost us the kingdom of God. As a practical example, some people have chosen to not work on Sundays, so that there would be time set apart for worship of God, even if it means less income. It may be something small, but believe me it’s a lot harder than it appears because there’s a real cost to that--one that you can even put a dollar figure to it. Our hearts naturally have an intimate relationship with our wallets (or bank accounts). This will definitely compete with our relationship with God because God calls us to be lovers of Him. So unless we sever this love affair we have with the riches of this world and its promises--- we can be sure that our relationship with God will be negatively affected. Just as a parent’s role in a child’s life is not simply to provide for them, God purposed to give His life to us so that we may have life in Him. He is not about giving us what money can buy---God is about giving us His love. When our hearts can be fully surrendered to receiving this truth-- those who do will know intimately what it means to live and receive the riches of the kingdom of God---that no riches of this world can even compare. The happiest kid is not the one who has the most toys---but the one who is most secure in their parents’ love. Isn’t this true?

The third item Jesus mentioned is pleasure. Pleasures as described here that compete with God’s kingdom refer to the lust for the desires of this life. The biblical sense of lust is not confined merely to unrestrained sexual desire, but applies liberally to the overwhelming desire that has its focus on pleasing oneself. This is in complete contrast and a direct offense to everything that Christ is! Consider who Jesus is, as described in Philippians 2:5-8: “Christ Jesus, Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death---even death on a cross!” “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 2:5-8) Christ in you is the fulfillment of God’s word in your life. I hope we can all clearly see how if we can continue to engage in the worldy dogma and practices of pleasing one’s desires, goals and dreams---it’s going to be very problematic for our spiritual life.

The kingdom of God is ultimately about taking off the patterns of the old life in which sin is in control and is satisfied. The pursuit of life’s riches, the labour for its worries and the indulgence of its pleasures stands in direct opposition toward Christ---in whom God’s children have been called to be more like HIm each day. A heart that is full of pursuits of what this life can give will not have the time or the attention to invest in God’s word. It is interesting that the bible should use the word ‘choke’ to describe the life of a person who has refused to let go of the patterns and pursuits for the pleasures of this world. Choking is a process that does not produce an immediate end to one’s life, but it’s conclusion is certain death. It’s a process that is single handedly fixated for the target of killing a person and robbing him of eternal life. It sounds menacing. But this is exactly why Jesus told us about it. He does not want us to be deceived about the nature of weeds and thorns. Are there thorns in your life right now that are competing with God’s word in your heart? Now is the time to take them out---before they take your life. Give them to the Lord and choose to believe and listen to God’s word instead.

But there is also a fourth soil.

“Still(!)”, Jesus said, “Other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.” The good soil by contrast, is someone who heard the word and not only received it, but retained it. This means that there are some elements of ‘holding on’ going on around here. The heart is like a storage of sorts. Some people hold on to their past and pains. Other people hold on to their emotional baggage. Other people hold on tightly to their own ideas. There are those who cling on tightly to weak and miserable principles, because it rewards them, even though it makes them weak and miserable. Still, there are those who hold on to God’s word----even when it’s hard, amidst all the pressure around him to drop it---. This heart soil holds on to God’s word even when it no longer makes sense to hold on to it; it holds on to God’s word even when it cost him his whole world and the things in this life he holds most dear. Why? Because Jesus is worth holding on to. Because this heart soil knows that Jesus gave His life to love him. And that He is living; that He knows and sees what is going on, and that He cares; this heart soil holds on to God’s word because it knows that God is able to fight for His people, to correct wrongs and that He is faithful and that He rewards. This soil, by persevering, produces a crop. Not just one measly strawberry either---but a hundred times more than was sown. There can be no crop without perseverance. Perseverance refers to godly living and believing in God’s truth that always accompanies salvation. Godly perseverance is about action. The bible talks about how we’re to be ‘doers of the word’ not ‘hearers only’. “Faith by itself, if not accompanied by action, is dead.” (James 2:17)

“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.” (James 1:22)

“But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it---he will be blessed in what he does.”

Perseverance is about holding on to God’s word even when it has left us bereft of worldly profit. Let’s not confuse perseverance with stubbornness either---the two are not the same! I actually thought I had perseverance until trials exposed that what I actually had was stubbornness. Perseverance is about faith. Stubbornness by contrast, is about maintaining pride; it’s about self-preservation; it cannot say, ‘I’m wrong’. I was so stubborn that it came to a point that I thought it’s better to die than to hope in God. I came to a point thinking that maybe His promises didn’t apply to me. I think I must’ve really broken God’s heart to think that. It was then that God somehow helped me to realize that perseverance is not so much about willpower as much as it is about how much I love Jesus; how much I consider Him worth holding on to. <slide> I learned that perseverance is not so much about Christian dogma, or about the building of character, as much as it is about the person, Christ. I really thank God that He helped me to know that at a time when my life really depended on it. Godly perseverance is centered on God, has it focus on Him, and is about seeking His reward above worldly gain. Because Godly perseverance is centered on Jesus Himself, I came to the crucial understanding of the relationship between perseverance and eternal life. Retaining God’s word and persevering in it is ultimately about letting God’s word accomplish its result in your life. This is what holds true for those who live in the kingdom of God.

So we see here that this isn’t just some ‘cute’ farming story. It can be a sober warning to us because of its eternal implications. Our participation in the kingdom of God depends a lot on our attitudes toward God’s word. In the end---only one kind of soil has the life of God in it---fruit being proof of its salvation. All the other soils do not have the kingdom of God in them; they proved to not even have the life of God; and are thus in fact, still ‘spiritually dead in their sins’.

To conclude all this, Jesus' words frame it the best: “Whoever has ears to hear, let him hear.”