The Parable of the Soils

The Parables of Luke
Kristofer Holroyd

Bible Text: Luke 8:4-15
Preached on: Sunday, August 23, 2015

Westminster Presbyterian Church
2801 W. Riverside Ave.
Muncie, IN 47304

Website: http://www.westminpca.com/
Online Sermons: http://www.sermonaudio.com/westminsterpres

> 5 "A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along
> the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. 6
> And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it
> had no moisture. 7 And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up
> with it and choked it. 8 And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded
> a hundredfold." As he said these things, he called out, "He who has ears to
> hear, let him hear." 9 And when his disciples asked him what this parable
> meant, 10 he said, "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.' 11 Now the parable is
> this: The seed is the word of God. 12 The ones along the path are those
> who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their
> hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. 13 And the ones on the
> rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these
> have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away. 14
> And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as
> they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures
> of life, and their fruit does not mature. 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.

Father, we ask now that you would open our eyes to see, our ears to hear, our hearts that we might understand. Cause us, O God, to know you more and to love you better. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Please be seated.

What was the last movie that stirred you deeply? The last movie that maybe made you angry? The last movie that maybe gave you motivation or excitement about something? Or the last movie that made you cry? What was the last movie that stirred you? For me, I cry very easily at movies. I know this is a surprise to many of you but I'm quickly moved to tears. When I am touched deeply and angry, I cry. When I'm moved by the way that a father loves his kid, I cry. When something sad happens, I cry so much so that my

daughters laugh and come over, "Dad, are you crying again?" I cry so easily at movies that I cry at movie trailers. What is it about movies that move us so deeply? There is something about a good story that bypasses the rational parts of our brain, that bypasses our defenses, that bypass our protective strategies and go right at our hearts. Right at the deep places of our being. Because in many ways, movies are like modern day parables.

Jesus was an itinerant preacher. This means that he would go from city to city, from town to town, from village to village proclaiming the word and at each place he would often repeat the same messages. So in one place you have the Sermon on the Mount but he would preach the same content when he went to another village. He would tell one parable in one town and then tell the same parable at the next and this is really important to remember when we study the Gospels because we get frustrated when we say, "Well, how come Mark reports Jesus' words this way and Matthew this way? How come Luke tells the parable this way but John tells it another way?" And it's because Jesus would say the same story over and over in different places. It helps us make sense of what's happening in the Gospels, helps us remember that the Gospels aren't written chiefly chronologically and reminds us that not everything Jesus says and does is in the text. John says that, right? He says, "If I were to write down everything that Jesus said and did, there aren't enough pages in the world to contain it."

We need to remember that we're not studying here historical things but the report of them in the text, that will become important as we look at the context shortly, and we need to remember that the people in the ancient Near East are illiterate. They don't read. Most of them cannot read, cannot write so they come to one of Jesus' sermons and they hear him preach and they go home and they say, "Man, that was a great point. I want to listen to it again." They can't go to iTunes and download it. They can't pull their Bible out and re-read it.

So parables are uniquely suited here for memory work. You see, the rabbis have these strategies that they speak and teach in a certain way that helps their disciples remember what it is that they have said and parables are particularly and uniquely suited for people who don't read. They are easy to memorize. They are easy to take home and meditate on the rest of the day. They are full of pictures from life and memory triggers so one person goes out and he's in the field and he remembers Jesus' stories about a man who goes out into a field. The next time they're on a trip and they're on the road, they remember Jesus talking about a man who was on a journey. The next time they walk by a fig tree, they remember what Jesus said to the fig tree. They are full of familiar characters: sowers and farmers and landowners. Full of familiar situations: going on a journey, going to a party, coming home from work. And it is easy for the ancient Near Eastern audience to find themselves in the story itself. And parables are shocking. Like any good story, like a great film full of plot twists and unexpected turns and unbelievable things, the wrong person is the hero. The person gets mercy that we would have never thought would have gotten mercy. There is judgment on cultural icons. Parables are shocking and they expose the hearts of the people and what they believe about God and what they believe about others and what they believe even about themselves so that as their heart is exposed, they might be confronted with the truth of God's word, with the truth of God's kingdom.

So as we begin a new series, we are going to study together Jesus' parables in the Gospel of Luke. Why? Why are we studying these parables? Well, because it is easy for us to succumb to easy cultural Christianity. We go to church. We do the right things. We sing the right songs. We hang out with the right people. It's easy to fall into this trap of simply believing what our parents have always believed, simply believing what the Christian culture tells us that we're supposed to believe and we just fall into this pattern of easy, lazy Christianity and the parables are going to go past our defenses, past our protective strategies and go right at our hearts, exposing what we believe about God, exposing what we believe about one another and exposing even what we believe about ourselves in order to challenge our hearts to trust our God, to change our view of ourselves and to radically love others. That will transform our community at Westminster Church so that we will not be satisfied with empty words and outward appearances and if the Gospel changes our hearts and lives, that is going to radically change our wider community where they see the real Gospel. Where they see hearts transformed by the Gospel. Lives radically different.

So this morning, as we begin to enter into the parables, it will feel maybe a little bit more like a lecture this first one because I want to give you principles for studying the parables. I'm very excited about us studying them together in this new series and our joy in the morning Bible study, women's Bible study on Tuesday mornings, they're going to be studying the parables along with us in the sermon series.

So, how do we study a parable? I'm going to give you five principles this morning, five things to do when you approach the text which is great to do when we study any text but especially the parables. So the five. First, I'll read them to you and then we'll study them together. The first is we're going to look at the context. We're going to look at the message to the original audience. We're going to look at what we share in common with them. Put ourselves in the story. And then see the message to us. We're going to go over all of those again but we're going to look at the context; we're going to look at the message to the original audience; we're going to look at what we share in common with them; we're going to put ourselves in the story; and then we'll see the message to ourselves.

So when we say look at the context, there are two aspects to this: we want to look at the context in life and the context in the text. You see, for the ancient Near Eastern hearer, they hear the parables and they immediately put themselves in the story. You go to a Hollywood blockbuster, it is easy for us to put ourselves in the story because we relate. We recognize the cities. We recognize the street names. We recognize the work. We recognize the kinds of foods that they eat. For the ancient Near Eastern person, when they hear a parable, they jump right in. It's a different culture for us and so it's harder for us. We have to work hard to see what's in their backyard because that's not our life. What does their life look like? How do we get in touch with their life? What do I need to know in order to be able to study them? Tools like getting a good commentary. A good ancient Near Eastern cultural history.

We've got to study the context in life. We've got to study the context of the text and we don't do this very well. Now, not just we as a congregation, we as pastors don't do this very well. We come to a miracle of Jesus and we say, "Well, Mark tells it one way. Let's see how Matthew and Luke tell it also," and then we try to get at the historical event and now I think we know exactly what happens and the danger is we begin to preach the historical event instead of the text. It is easy for us to get away from the text. Now, don't mishear me: God is sovereign; God rules over history; God is working history toward his end goal. But what we have is the word of God; this is what is inerrant. This is what is inspired. This is God's word to us and we miss it when we jump away from the text and try to get at the extra details from the other Gospels.

Let me show you a little bit more what I mean. Luke 8 is the parable of the soils. Mark tells the same parable in Mark 4 but in Mark 4, the parable comes with a number of other parables: the parable of the mustard seed. The kingdom of heaven is like the mustard seed, the smallest of seeds that when it goes into the ground nobody has high expectations but then it grows up to this giant tree. It's with the lamp under the basket. These parables about growth that show the kingdom of God is small and faces a lot of opposition but it still flourishes. So when we read Mark 4 and this parable in the context of Mark, what we see is Mark is using this parable to say, "The kingdom of God will be opposed but it will prosper. It will multiply. It will do its function and its purpose and grow and even bad soil can't stop it."

But that's not how Luke uses the parable. For Luke, it's in the context of chapter 7. Here's Jesus at a Pharisee's house having dinner and while they're eating this woman comes in so overwhelmed with her love for Jesus she begins to weep behind him and her tears cover his feet and she uses her hair to wash his feet. Then you have chapter 8, these women who expend themselves to provide for Jesus and the disciples after the parable of the lamp under a jar. Then the story about Jesus' mother and brothers where Jesus' mother and brothers come to the house and say, "Hey, tell Jesus that we're here because we have a claim on him," and he says instead, verse 21, "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it." Why does Luke put that here? What is Luke doing? Why is it in this context of the text? And this is essential for us to study Scripture in general and especially the parables what comes before; what comes after; who is listening; who is the audience.

Only then when we've looked at the context in life and the context in the text can we begin to get after what the parable meant for those who heard it. What broken part in their life is Jesus addressing? What sin is he speaking to? What lack? What in their hearts is going after? Then we have looked at the context. We have looked at the message to the original audience. Only now can we start to ask: what do we share in common? What do we have in common with those to whom and for whom the text is given? What sin in our life is similar? What broken places in our hearts resonates with their story? What lack is in us? And one of the ways we get after that is by putting ourselves in the story, especially in parables, to read the stories from each perspective. So the parable of the prodigal son: you have a younger son, you have an older son, you have a father. To read the parable from the perspective of the younger son, what is he experiencing? What is he

thinking? What is he feeling? What is he going through? The older son: how is he impacted when the father comes out to him and then to read it from the perspective of the father and, you see, now we start to put ourselves in there and you get these different perspectives, different characters.

How are we like them? How are our hearts like the different soils? What's happening in us when we hear the text now from the context of life and text from the message to them, from what we share in common. Now we're getting after how the word of God is speaking to us and we can get after: what is God saying to us? God speaks to us in his word and through the parables, he goes after our hearts, bypassing our defenses. Bypassing the surface how you live issues, going right after our hearts, our affections, our loves, our longings, our passions, our deep desires and then when our hearts are transformed it impacts our lives.

Context. Message to the original audience. What we share in common. You in the story. The message to us. Let's practice. Let's look at this parable here in Luke 8 and see this exactly. Now, the future messages, we're not going to walk through these steps just like this but I want us to have these tools for study so we practice them together. So a Palestinian farmer goes out into a field. He has a massive field, right? And in the middle of his field is this road that travelers travel on. They come and they walk through his field. There is this worn path. They bring their horses. They bring their carts. He's got his field and the ground all around. He takes his bag, puts it over his shoulder so that the bag is in the front and the bag is filled up with seeds and as he walks around, he begins to scatter the seed. Now, it's easy for us to think he's just throwing them around. No, he goes and he pours them out by row, pouring the seeds out by row all the way along. Well, what happens? Some of the seed is going to fall on the road and the travelers come along and they're stepping on it. The horses come along and they are prancing on it. The carts come along and they ground it down into the ground. The birds come and eat it up. But he keeps scattering the seed row by row.

Well, some of it falls on rocky soil. Again, we think about in our perspective, "Well, there must be rocks everywhere." No, no, no, this looks like good soil. It's good topsoil but what happens in the ancient Near East in Palestine underneath is this layer of limestone. This thick layer of limestone rock underneath the soil that absorbs all of the moisture so the plant begins to grow a little. The roots hit the limestone. They don't get enough water and enough moisture. They spring up a little and then they die. He keeps spreading the seed. He keeps spreading the seed. Some of it falls among the weeds. Now, of course, he's a good farmer. He's going to till the land. He tries to pull the weeds as much as he can but any of you who have ever had a garden, it doesn't matter what you do, you still end up with weeds. Now, in Palestine, the weeds grow six feet tall. The weeds that they're talking about are six feet tall with these bright flowers on it: red flowers and blue flowers and yellow flowers and these big seeds soak out the moisture and choke off the plant. They shade it so the plants don't get enough sun. They pull the water out and eventually the weeds choke them off and they die. But some seed falls on good soil and a single seed can reproduce 35 times. Sometimes, sometimes sixty-fold or even a hundred-fold.

Here's our context in life. Let's look at our context in the text. We already this sinful woman forgiven where this woman brings an alabaster flask of ointment, stands behind Jesus at his feet weeping. Her tears cover Jesus' feet. She washes them with her hair and the Pharisee in his heart says, "If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what sort of woman is touching him for she is a sinner." Two kinds of responses to Jesus in Luke 7: the woman who is aware of her sin, the word has taken root in her heart and she loves deeply; and the Pharisee, self-righteous, sits in judgment, "How could you let somebody like that touch you?"

Chapter 8, these women who are expending themselves to provide for Jesus and the disciples, the lamp under the jar, Jesus' mother and brothers, verse 19, 20, 21. Again, we have these two responses. Here are those that think they have a claim on Jesus because they are related to him by blood, "He needs to come out and see us because I am his mother or I am his brother and he needs to come and see me." Jesus says, "No," the other response to the word is, "Those who hear the word of God and do it." Two responses to God's word.

In the middle of the parable, still looking at the context of the text, chapter 8, verse 9, his disciples ask him what the parable means and listen to what Jesus says again, verse 10, "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.'" Two responses to the word of God. Parables revealed to the disciples and concealed to those who are hard-hearted and he shows this by quoting Isaiah 6. This is a quote here where it says, "seeing they may not see, hearing they may not understand." In Isaiah 6, the people because of their hardness of heart have been sent out into exile. They are being punished by God, sent to a foreign land, imprisoned in a foreign land and the Lord gives to the prophet a message that the people don't understand because it is a form of judgment for their unbelief.

Parables are a form of judgment for those who have hard hearts and refuse to listen to the word of God, but it's not just that. We tend to think it's only that but parables are also in God's word and, here again, he says to the disciples, "To you it has been given to know the secrets." To the believers, it is given to go after our hearts to expose those places still left untouched by the Gospel. To change what we believe about ourselves. Change what we believe about others. Change what we believe about God. So Darrel B. says this to summarize, "In short, what the disciples get in parables is insight into the kingdom but what is given to those who reject God's offer of revelation is a story that prevents them from understanding what God is doing."

It's the context in life. The context in the text we can start to get after. What is the parable saying to that audience? An audience full of people who have an outward appearance of faith but are not bearing fruit? Well, the message is about all of life. You see, in the parable, it's from putting the seed in the ground all the way to harvest. It's not talking about a single moment in your life. It's not talking about what you did or didn't do this

morning or what you did or didn't do last year, ten years ago, next year, but the sum of a person's life. How are they responding to God's word?

Two points. A two point parable. We get stuck in our study of the parables trying to figure out, "Well, does everything have a meaning and there are 1,000 points in there? Or does everything have one main point?" You've got to read it in the context. You've got to let the text speak. That's why we read it in the context of the book of Luke and we see here two points: the ones who respond to the word of God with hard hearts are the three soils and the ones who respond and bear fruit is the good soil. We see that in the context of chapter 7, in the context of chapter 8. The message then is about: how do you respond to God's word? The message to the original believers, the challenge is: how will you respond? Will you respond like the forgiven woman or like the Pharisee? Will you respond like Jesus' real mother and brothers or will you be truly his mother and brother by responding to the word, letting it take root in your heart and bearing fruit? Do you have real faith or show? How do you know? Verse 15, the good soil "are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart and bear fruit with patience."

Context in life and text. The message to the original audience. Now, how are we like them? How are we like an audience of people with outward appearance of faith but no real fruit? Do we trust in the showy? Do we trust in the things that are seen? Do we trust in just the words that we are able to say in our worship services? Are we too busy for the word of God to take root in our heart? Too busy chasing our culture? Chasing money? Chasing ease? As he says in verse 14, "choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life so that our fruit does not mature"? Under pressure when life is hard, when life is grievous, when we are challenged, when we are tempted, when we suffer, do we run away? Do we give up? Do we shrink from trials?

We put ourselves in the story: which soil is most like your heart? The one who hears the word of God and simply tramples it? Turns away? Ignores it? The one that immediately is excited and joyful and hallelujah! Well, then life gets hard and we turn away and abandon faith. Or like those who began to grow and we have one foot in church, one foot in the world and in culture and we're too busy chasing after life, chasing after money, chasing after possessions, chasing after comforts to bear fruit. Or are our hearts good and honest and bear fruit with patience as Jesus says in verse 15. Are we like the Pharisee or like the widow? Are we like Jesus' mother and brothers or his true mother and brothers? Is our faith real or showy? This is about our whole life, not one single moment of failure or success but a sum of the whole life. Do we bear fruit or not? How will you respond to God's word, the seed of his word, scattered over your heart?

This is our new series. Jesus' parables in the book of Luke. The heart of the Gospel going after what we believe about God, what we believe about ourselves and what we believe about others so that through the parables God goes after these deep places in our heart bypassing our defenses, bypassing our protective strategies, penetrating deep into that place of our affections, our loves, our desires, our longings so that through God's word our hearts would be transformed and that our lives might be transformed. That this community might be transformed so that that community can be transformed.

Will you join me in prayer?

Father, we give thanks to you for your word like a seed scattered into our hearts. And we give thanks to you for your Spirit because it is only your Spirit that transforms our hearts. God, turn our hearts from those that are of stone, from those that are rocky or full of weeds to those that are good and honest and soft to your word. Would your word take deep root in us and would you expose what we believe about you. The lies that we believe about ourselves, the lies that we believe about others, transform them with the truth of your word that we might love you better, love others better, even love ourselves better as we see our worth. Our comfort in life and in death is that we belong to Jesus. And through us, God, would you transform the world around us as your Gospel goes forth? Come Holy Spirit, seal your word in our hearts. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.