

## Luke 8:1-21      The Mystery of the Kingdom

Jesus now was on an itinerant ministry tour. There is no mention of synagogues. The increasing hostility of the Pharisees and the size of the crowd following Him, may have led Him to do open air preaching (8:1).



The large number of people who followed Jesus everywhere (c.f. 7:11, 24; 8:4, 19, 40, 45) were 'a very mixed crowd.' (8:2-3) Among them were :-

1. The Inner Circle – The twelve disciples, and also the three women disciples who are identified by name, were in this inner circle! Mary Magdalene who was an ex-demoniac; Joanna the wife of Herod's steward, Chuza, who was rich; Susanna and many others who provided for Jesus' ministry team. Note, rabbis in those days refused to teach women!
2. The Outer Circle – In the outer circle were the people who came to see miracles, those who followed their friends, others who were chasing excitement, and also some who really wanted God. Jesus was never fooled by the size of the crowd. He often sorted them out. How? He used 'parables' to separate out the 'casual hearers' from the 'sincere seekers'.

### A. What is a Parable?

This was a unique teaching method of Jesus. He used no charts, no icebreakers, no illustration tools to make His messages more palatable or memorable. But He used parables.

1. What is a parable? It is (1) a story, and Jesus was a master storyteller; (2) a similitude - a parallel story with a spiritual lesson inside; (3) a known earthly story that reveals the unknown heavenly reality; (4) a story with a 'mirror' in it to see our own 'spiritual condition'. A lot of people came to see miracles, but Jesus was saying, "You came to see things, but I am going to hold up a mirror for you, so that you will see what you need to see, not what you want to see"; (5) a story with a 'mystery' in it. This parable is the only one that explains the 'mystery of the kingdom' in the gospels! (c.f. Matt 13:2-9; Mark 7:16)
2. Why did Jesus use parables? Not to make the truth more accessible to the public, but to hide deep spiritual truth from casual hearers, so that only the hungry could get it. This is the '*dual function of the parable*'. (C.f. Isaiah's call in Isa 6:1-13) Isaiah was the prince of prophets, and the scope and the heights of his revelations are unparalleled. However, much of his message wasn't understood by his generation. How much do we understand?
  - God      Whom shall I send and who will go for Us?
  - Isaiah    Here I am! Send me.
  - God      Go and speak. But the people won't understand a word you are saying. Why? They are stiff necked people, i.e. proud. Their heart is not right. The soil of their heart is not conducive to receive the word of God. But keep speaking out My word, it will cause further 'hardening of their hearts'.
  - Isaiah    How long, Lord?
  - God      Until the cities are laid waste and without inhabitant!

Apostle Paul quotes from this passage of Isaiah in Acts 28:26-28. Also in Rom 11:25 Paul speaks of Israel's 'partial blindness' or 'hardening of the heart'. Why? It is because people hardened their hearts when God's word was declared to them. It began in Isaiah's days and continued through Jesus's days and Paul's. Til when? Until the judgement of God comes to Israel and Jerusalem, and the temple is destroyed. Until only the remnant remains, returns and is restored. Note that we are living in the days of Israel's restoration!

3. Jesus stood in the same tradition as Isaiah. He pointed to the spiritual condition of His generation as childish, self-centred and unresponsive (7:32). Jesus was saying to the crowd, 'The words you are hearing today will either bring a 'blessing' or a 'curse' to you; 'fruitfulness' or 'further hardening' of the heart. You cannot stay the same after receiving the true Word of God: You either have more light, or less light. The parable of the sower and the parable of the lamp are one and the same warning: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" (8:8)

“Therefore, take heed how you hear.” (8:18) It is each hearer’s responsibility how he responds. *Exactly the same spiritual principle works for you and me today.*

## B. Parable #1: The Parable of the Sower

1. In Jesus’ days in Israel, farmers sowed seeds by scattering them over the field. The Palestinian sowers scattered the seeds first, then ploughed the field afterwards.<sup>1</sup> (1) Some seeds fell by the wayside, and birds quickly ate them up. (2) Some fell on the rocky ground and germinated a little, but soon dried up and died. (3) Still others fell among the thorns and the thorns choked their growth. (4) But those that fell on the good soil produced so much that they more than made up for the lost seeds. So the farmer was happy although on the surface, most of the seeds seem to have been wasted.
2. Then *Jesus wrapped up by crying out*, “*He who has ears to hear, let him hear!*” (8:8). That was it! Jesus didn’t explain the meaning of the story. So where was the ‘mystery’? Jesus didn’t tell them anything they didn’t already know. They were mostly farmers who knew agriculture, i.e. the parable of the sower, or they were housewives who knew housekeeping, i.e. the parable of the lamp. Most would say, *“Is that all? There is very little in it.”*

It was like telling car mechanics about four different types of engine oil, or telling housewives to put the frying pan on the gas stove to cook a meal. Later Jesus explained to his disciples the meaning and the mystery only *when He was asked* (8:9). Most hadn’t bothered to come back to ask Him. But unless you ask Jesus, you cannot receive the revelation! This is how Jesus separated the sincere seekers from the casual followers.

3. Mystery Unveiled #1 – The Condition of the Soil : Everyone belongs to one of these four categories of soil. Do you see the condition of your own heart in any of them? The truth is, unless you are serious about your own spiritual life to the point you are willing to change, you won’t see it. You may see it in others, but not in yourself.
  - a) Wayside – This is the pathway people tread on, so it represents the condition of a hardened heart that is not even ready to receive God’s word. The word cannot fall into the deeper part of this heart to germinate. And the devil has easy access to this heart, and he quickly moves in to take the word away, so that the person cannot believe and be saved. The only thing the devil is afraid of is, the word of God in your heart. If he can take the word, then he has you.
  - b) Rocky ground – This person at first receives the word with great joy, so this seed sprouts quicker than other seeds. But because the soil is not deep enough, it lacks moisture and nutrients. So when - not if - the time of testing, persecution and tribulation comes because of the word (Mk 4:17) immediately he falls away. Here it is not the devil stealing the word like the previous case, but self-stumbling under pressure and offence.
  - c) Thorny ground – This person has received the word of God in his heart and thus is a born-again believer. He has also thought about the word deeply and the word went deep into the soil of his heart. So he doesn’t easily fall away from faith. This seed sprouted in time to give an abundant harvest, but he also has lots of other competing interests in life – the cares of this world, deceitfulness of riches, pleasures of life and desires for things, so the fruit does not mature (Mk 4:19). His problem is underneath - the two different root system is tangled up, i.e. two different competing desires, E.g. desire for God, but also for riches, power, honour etc.
  - d) Good soil – This person has a noble and good heart and ‘keeps the word’, and therefore bears a 100 fold harvest. Which ground represents the soil of your heart?

*“If anyone loves Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.” (John 14:23)*

Challenges: (1) The creative power of God is in His word. This is the only thing the devil is afraid of, and the only power that will make you fruitful in life. Nothing else will - no leadership skill, blessing, or gifts. What is your

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<sup>1</sup> Morris, Leon. Tyndale Commentary: Luke, p166. Leon Morris witnessed this way of farming in 1952.

relationship to the Word of God? (2) The seed is perfect. The problem is the soil. Nobody is born with perfect soil. Then the key is to continually cultivate and plough the soil of your heart. (3) Farming is not an instant business deal. It takes time and going through different seasons to get to the harvest. This is also the spiritual law. You need patience to let the word of God in your heart to grow and bear fruit in its appointed time. Never give up prematurely. Hold on to the word!

#### 4. Mystery Unveiled #2 – The Sower’s Perspective :

- a) 75% of the seeds were wasted. But the farmer was not bothered about the wasted seeds because the good soil produced more than enough harvest to make up for the lost seeds in the end. The difference between ‘wasted seeds’ and ‘productive seeds’ were not in the seeds but in the soil. So don’t tamper with the seed of God’s word to make it palatable for everyone. No genetic engineering allowed!
- b) Consider Isaiah who was sawn in two, Jesus who was crucified, and Paul who was rejected by his own Jewish people but received by gentiles. Two things every farmer must have are ‘confidence’ and ‘patience’. We must be content to sow the ‘unadulterated word’ and leave the results to God, because one good seed will produce far more fruit than all the wasted seeds. *The crowd will not always get it, but the joy from the few who gets it, will make it all worthwhile.* E.g. A missionary to Ethiopia led only one blind beggar to Jesus, then he was sent back home. This beggar converted 3000 Ethiopians.

### C. Parable #2 : The Lamp and the Light

- a. At first the two parables don’t sound like the same message. But it is an indoor story parallel to the previous outdoor story. After lighting up a lamp, what do you do? You put it up as high as possible, not as low as possible. You put it on a stand. Light always works best when it is up high. It shines down and illuminates the house. Every housewife knew this.
- b. So also you have a great influence on other people if you have the word of God sown in your heart. Jesus is the ‘Word of God’, and He said ‘I am the light of the world’. Jesus also said we are the light of the world. This is one of the few things Jesus said of himself and of us. Once you have the light lit up, you need to lift it up where it can be seen by the people. The major function of light is to expose things. That’s why Jesus said let your light shine so that the people may see your good works and glorify God in heaven.

Nothing will be kept hidden forever. The presence of light exposes the darkness in society and in people’s hearts. Don’t hide your light, the truth of God’s word. Let it shine through your words and deeds. The light may be resented, but it cannot be resisted. Why do we preach? Why do we sow when it seems so much is wasted? It is because the word of God will not return void. It will accomplish God’s purpose for which it has been sent. Are you excited at the possibility of sowing seeds in the hearts of other people?

- c. Again Jesus finished this story with the same warning to the hearers: *“Therefore, take heed how you hear. For whoever has, to him more will be given; and whoever does not have, even what he seems to have will be taken from him”* (8:18). This is completely true of the nature of God’s word. Whenever you listen to the word of God, you either end up with more or with less. If you receive the word into your heart, you end up with more than you had before. But if you resist the light that exposes the darkness, then you end up losing even what you had before. Nobody goes home the same after hearing the word of God.

### D. Who are Jesus’ family?

The message here is the same as the two parables above. Our response to the word of God determines our position in Jesus’ family.

1. Jesus’ own family came to see Him while He was in the middle of crowd. His mother and brothers were outside trying to get Jesus. They were convinced that Jesus suffered from mental illness of schizophrenia (C.f. Mark 3:21), so they were going to seize Him and bring Him home.
2. Jesus’ response was surprising: (1) Jesus did not go out to see them at all. (2) Jesus said my mother and brothers are those who hear God’s word and put it into practice.

In other words, you are Jesus' family if you listen to God's word and you put it into practice. Other people may say you are crazy or insane, but you are Jesus' own family. It is amazing how many fruitful followers of Christ were called crazy! In the long run it is only Jesus' family who will outlast and outlive all the critics and accusers.

3. Jesus' own brothers became convinced that Jesus was indeed the Son of God only after His resurrection. One is called James, the other Jude, who wrote the epistles in the NT named after them.

The truth is, the more you follow Jesus, the more you become sane and convinced of who Jesus is.

## E. Questions

1. How did Jesus describe the people of His generation? (Luke 7:31-35) In what ways does Jesus' criticism of His generation also apply to us and our generation?
2. What is a parable? Why did Jesus use parables to speak to the crowd?
3. Can you explain the four different categories of soil in Jesus' parable? Which of the four describes the condition of your heart the best?
4. How do we remove the hindrances and cultivate the soil of our heart to become good soil?
5. Are you excited to sow the 'seed' of God's word in other people's lives? What are the important lessons to remember as a sower?
6. How does Jesus define "His family"? What common themes do the two parables and Jesus' teaching on His family in Luke 8:19-21 have?