

POWER OF GOD'S WORD

CORE PASSAGE: LUKE 8:4-15

CONTEXT

Jesus traveled from town to town preaching the good news of the kingdom with His disciples. Jesus's preaching ministry was both the context and the subject of His parable of the sower. As Jesus traveled, He indiscriminately spread the seeds of the gospel far and wide. The four Gospels record a diversity of responses to Jesus's teaching: rejection, doubt, fear, joy, sadness, anger, and belief. In the parable of the sower, Jesus classified people's responses into four general categories as He illustrated the power of the Word and the danger of rejecting it.

KEY CONCEPT

Jesus taught the importance of receiving the Word and producing fruit from doing so.

As you examine Luke 8:4-15:

- Discover why Jesus taught in parables: to expose who truly was seeking truth.
- Recognize that we are transformed and bear fruit when we hear and trust the gospel.



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TIMELINE

Jesus Appoints His Twelve Disciples (Luke 6:12-16)

SESSION STUDY: Jesus Teaches and Explains the Parable of the Sower (Luke 8:4-15)

Jesus Heals Two Daughters (Luke 8:40-56)

Jesus Delivers His Sermon on the Plain (Luke 6:17-49)

Jesus Calms a Storm (Luke 8:22-25)

Daily Readings

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| ☐ Day 1: Luke 8:1-8 | ☐ Day 4: Mark 4:10-12 |
| ☐ Day 2: Luke 8:9-15 | ☐ Day 5: Mark 4:13-20 |
| ☐ Day 3: Mark 4:1-9 | ☐ Day 6: Psalm 81 |



Scan this QR code to access this session's Scripture passages.

IF WE TRULY SEEK GOD'S WISDOM, HIS TRUTH WILL BE REVEALED TO US (LUKE 8:4-10).

Circle the four types of soil on which the seed is scattered. Then underline the phrases that describe what happened to the seed in each soil type.

4 As a large crowd was gathering, and people were coming to Jesus from every town, he said in a parable, 5 "A sower went out to sow his seed. As he sowed, some seed fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the sky devoured it. 6 Other seed fell on the rock; when it grew up, it withered away, since it lacked moisture. 7 Other seed fell among thorns; the thorns grew up with it and choked it. 8 Still other seed fell on good ground; when it grew up, it produced fruit: a hundred times what was sown." As he said this, he called out, "Let anyone who has ears to hear listen." 9 Then his disciples asked him, "What does this parable mean?" 10 So he said, "The secrets of the kingdom of God have been given for you to know, but to the rest it is in parables, so that 'Looking they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.'"

As crowds gathered around Jesus, He told them a parable about a sower who scattered seed. The agricultural setting would have been familiar to Jesus's audience, and the simple descriptions easy to follow. The sower and the seed remain the same in each example, but the condition of the soil changes throughout, producing drastically different results.

A path consisted of very hard, packed-down soil. The seed that fell there could not penetrate the soil and was trampled or eaten by birds. Likewise, neither the seed scattered on rocky ground nor the seed sown among thorns survived for long due to the constraints of their environments. By contrast, the final seed nurtured by good soil grew and produced fruit in abundance. After reciting the parable, Jesus said, "Let anyone who has ears to hear listen" (v. 8).

LEADER NOTE: Jesus's call not only to hear His words but to listen closely is found throughout the synoptic Gospels (Matt. 11:15; Mark 13:9; Luke 14:35). In John's Gospel, the sheep that belong to the Good Shepherd hear His voice and follow Him. Jesus's desire for His listeners was that they would not only hear His words but would heed them, building their lives on Him and bearing fruit for the kingdom of God (Matt. 7:24-27; John 15:7-8; Jas. 1:22-25).

What does Jesus's exhortation to listen tell us about Jesus's desire for His audience?

At the conclusion of the parable, the disciples realized that though they heard Jesus's words, they did not understand Jesus's spiritual point, so they asked Him to explain it. Before answering, Jesus briefly explained the purpose and limitation of parables.

Jesus's parables contain within them nuggets of kingdom truth, but these mysteries cannot be unlocked merely by hearing or personally dissecting their component parts. Their wisdom must be given, and only Jesus holds the keys to their riches (Col. 2:3). The disciples were granted this wisdom because they asked Him. Like Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 8, Jesus called out and invited all to pay attention. The disciples came to Him in faith and were rewarded with understanding. The rest only heard a story about a sower scattering seed.

LEADER NOTE: Jesus's parables served a two-fold function. For the disciples who had ears to hear by faith, the parables revealed truths about the kingdom of heaven. But for "the rest" (those who had closed their eyes and hardened their hearts; see Matt. 15:15), the parables concealed understanding. In this way, the parables were a type of judgment on the unbelieving crowds, clouding God's mysteries. Thus, the people were divided into two groups: those who were given spiritual understanding of God's Word and those who were not (1 Cor. 1:10-16). Those two groups are still present today wherever God's Word is communicated.

How does the fact that wisdom must be sought in a Person change the way we approach Bible study?

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THEOLOGY CONNECTION

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ILLUMINATION OF SCRIPTURE: Because of the vast difference between God's wisdom and ours and because of humanity's sinful state, human beings are incapable, on our own, of fully grasping spiritual truth without being aided by the Holy Spirit through illumination. When it comes to understanding the meaning of God's Word, Christians do not rely ultimately upon human reason in interpretation, nor do we rely solely upon an institution or body of scholars. Instead, a Christian's ultimate reliance is upon the work of the Spirit of God, who illuminates the Scriptures in the heart and mind (John 14:15-18; 16:7-15).

Notes



SCAN ME

Bonus Content

Scan this QR code to see a comparative view of the parable of the sower in the Synoptic Gospels.

GOD'S WORD NEEDS TO BE HEARD AND INTERNALIZED FOR TRANSFORMATION (LUKE 8:11-15).

Highlight how Jesus defines these parts of the parable: seed, seed along the path, seed on the rock, seed among thorns, and the seed on good ground.

11 “This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. **12** The seed along the path are those who have heard and then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved. **13** And the seed on the rock are those who, when they hear, receive the word with joy. Having no root, these believe for a while and fall away in a time of testing. **14** As for the seed that fell among thorns, these are the ones who, when they have heard, go on their way and are choked with worries, riches, and pleasures of life, and produce no mature fruit. **15** But the seed in the good ground—these are the ones who, having heard the word with an honest and good heart, hold on to it and by enduring, produce fruit.”

Jesus explained that the seed in the parable represents God's Word. A sower scatters seed with a purpose—he intends for the seed he scatters to germinate, thrive, and produce fruit. Although Jesus knew that not every gospel seed would be received, He preached with the expectation that some would bear fruit. For others, there would be obstacles.

Seed sown on hardened hearts cannot bring salvation, as Satan quickly snatches the truth away to prevent understanding and belief. The gospel offers abundant life, but the thief seeks to steal, kill, and destroy (John 10:10). Seed sown on shallow hearts, though received joyfully, cannot endure for lack of nourishment (“no root”; Luke 8:13). Without the work of the Holy Spirit to transform the heart, shallow belief falls away during testing. Seed sown on a heart rife with thorns—“worries, riches, and pleasures of life” (v. 14)—is slowly strangled as worldliness and misplaced priorities prevent living faith.

LEADER NOTE: A common concern that arises when studying this parable comes in trying to understand which of the soils represents people who are saved versus those who are not. Darrell Bock stated that this concern misunderstands Jesus's message and “to ask this question of each soil is to misdirect the parable's emphasis. Jesus is not communicating the minimum response required to receive blessing. Rather, he is instructing the disciples on fruitfulness by pointing out obstacles that prevent such a response.”¹

Which of these obstacles to receiving the gospel have you encountered in yourself or a loved one?

Key Concept: Jesus taught the importance of receiving the Word and producing fruit from doing so.

GOSPEL CONNECTION

Scripture teaches us that Jesus is the way to salvation, and following Him by faith with the Holy Spirit will lead to true transformation.

With such powerful obstacles at war against the gospel, it is a miracle that any seeds of faith survive to bear fruit. Yet that is exactly what happens with the fourth seed—this person receives the Word and holds fast to it, so that it endures and bears plentiful fruit. The difference lies in the soil of the heart. But how is it possible to have “an honest and good heart” (v. 15) suitable to receive God’s Word and bear fruit? This requires the work of the Holy Spirit, who exchanges a heart of stone for a heart of flesh, enabling believers to trust God and obey with a heart of love (Ezek. 11:19-20).

LEADER NOTE: What does it look like to “hold on” to God’s Word to “produce fruit” (Luke 8:15)? It looks like abiding in Christ. Jesus said: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you want and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this: that you produce much fruit and so prove to be my disciples” (John 15:7-8). Believers who bear fruit do so by persevering in their faith in Christ, internalizing His Word, and praying for the Spirit to produce fruit through them. Then, as they walk in the Spirit, they bear the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:16,22-23).

How should the expectation that some seeds will bear fruit motivate us to spread gospel truth?

VOICES FROM THE CHURCH

“We win the [spiritual] war for the Word when we look to bear fruit with patience (Jas 1:2-4). We’re not trying to rush into maturity or skip the things that produce growth. We just steadily read, believe, and apply the Bible, and let patience have its perfect work in our lives.”²

–Thabiti Anyabwile

Notes



ARRIVAL

ENGAGE: As your group arrives, ask who has a green thumb and who doesn't. Allow a few volunteers to give examples of their gardening successes or failures.

TRANSITION: Even the greatest gardener has successes and failures. Today, we're going to discuss a popular parable Jesus told about a sower who scattered seed. The seed fell on different types of soil, but only one soil had just the right conditions to allow the seed to take root and bear fruit.

CONTEXT

SAY: A parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Jesus often taught in parables, so much so that one-third of all Jesus's teachings were shared as parables. When interpreting a parable, it's important to ask what the main point of the parable is. One of the major themes of Luke's Gospel is how to get faith and use it in daily living. Jesus demonstrated this by teaching the disciples that faith comes through receiving the Word of God.

RECAP

ASK: As you read the passage recounting the parable of the sower this week, what stood out to you that you might not have noticed before?

REVIEW: Jesus told the parable of the sower to the large crowd that followed Him, and as Scripture states, He never taught them without a parable. Privately, His disciples asked Him what the parable meant. Jesus explained that the sower represents someone who shares the gospel of the kingdom. Just like a seed brings forth life, the gospel is life to those who believe. A seed can't grow unless it's planted; similarly the Word of God must be planted in someone's heart to grow and bear fruit. Yet the growth is dependent upon the type of "soil" into which the seed is planted.

TRANSITION: As we dig into the passage together, think about situations in your own life when you've tried to share the gospel with others and it didn't seem to go so well. Maybe the person responded joyfully but soon stopped going to church and living for Jesus after the newness wore off. Consider the soil of your own heart as well.



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Key Concept: Jesus taught the importance of receiving the Word and producing fruit from doing so.

GROUP ACTIVITY

CHART: Direct your group to page 22 in their Personal Study Guide (PSG), where they will find a chart titled “Four Soils, Four Responses.” Recreate the chart on a board so you can record the group’s findings as they interact with Scripture.

Notes

Four Soils, Four Responses

Read Luke 8:4-15. Record what Jesus said each type of soil represented, any corresponding obstacles to faith, and how to overcome those obstacles.

THE SEED ALONG THE PATH	THE SEED ON THE ROCK
THE SEED AMONG THORNS	THE SEED IN GOOD GROUND

READ: Call for a volunteer to read aloud Luke 8:4-15.

ENGAGE: Form three smaller groups and assign each group a type of unfruitful soil from the parable. Instruct the groups to talk through the following questions and write down their thoughts on the chart in their PSG: (1) What did Jesus say the type of soil represented? (2) What are the obstacles that create barriers to faith? (3) How might you have overcome such obstacles to receive God’s Word in faith and grow and bear fruit in your life?

REGROUP: After a few minutes, invite a volunteer from each of the groups to present their findings. Write down their discussion points on the chart on the board and encourage the other groups to fill in the details on their PSG.

DISCUSS: How does Jesus’s explanation for the seed in the good ground contrast with that of the other soils? (*Record responses on the board: “hold on”; “enduring”; “produce fruit.”*)

Notes



SUMMARIZE: Display **Pack Item 3: Kingdom Growth** and highlight specifically the “Believers’ Mission” section for the following. Say: “As Christians, it is our calling to share the gospel with others as we go about our daily lives. The sad truth is that not everyone who hears the gospel will follow Jesus. Some will reject the gospel outright; others will fall away through hardships and distractions. Only the good soil of a good heart produces fruit that lasts. In 1 Corinthians 3:5-9, the apostle Paul taught that gospel growth is often a team effort. We don’t know when we share the gospel whether we are clearing out thorns, picking out rocks, tilling the soil, or watering a planted seed. All Jesus calls us to do is be faithful to His commission to share the gospel.

DEBRIEF

How should this parable encourage us as we share the gospel with others?

What “fruit” should we expect to see in our lives as believers in God’s Word?

SUMMARIZE

The seed of the gospel is not sown in a climate-controlled, curated greenhouse. Instead, the gospel goes forth in a world that is openly hostile to it. That any of us receive the gospel and hold fast to it shows God’s miraculous mercy and kindness to us. Let us humbly pray for the gospel seed to take root in the lives of others so we can delight in the harvest.

HEAD, HEART, HANDS

Walk the group through the Head, Heart, Hands section in the PSG (p. 23). If running short on time, specifically highlight the **Heart** section in this week’s study, inviting volunteers to share their responses to the question in this section.



HEAD: Not only do we need God’s help to understand His Word, we also need His help to “hold on” to His Word. Any time we hear God’s truth, spiritual warfare commences in which Satan attempts to steal away those truths so we forget what we have learned (Jas. 1:22-25). But God’s power is greater than the devil’s

What are some ways we can keep God’s Word in our mind and heart?



HEART: The parable of the sower is about the battle taking place over the soil of people’s hearts. This parable gives us key markers to look for in our own lives to see if gospel transformation has taken place. Do we care enough about God’s Word to ask Him for help to understand and believe it? Do we hold fast to it when difficulties and distractions come? Are we bearing fruit in keeping with repentance and faith? These are evidences of true transformation.

What evidence do you see in your life that the Holy Spirit has given you “an honest and good heart”?



HANDS: Transformed hearts produce fruitful hands. As our hearts overflow with spiritual fruit, we show kindness and generosity to others. And because we love others, we desire to share the good news of the gospel with them so that they too can be transformed from the inside out. Pray for the Holy Spirit to prepare and soften the soil—the hearts—of unbelievers, and pray He will prepare you to share the gospel with them.

For whom will you pray and share the gospel this week?

NEXT STEPS

Challenge the group to consider these actions as responses to this week's session.

- Read Isaiah 55:10-11. Reflect on how this passage shows God's plan and sovereignty as His Word goes out.
- Spend some time reflecting on your personal walk with Jesus: What fruit are you producing in faith? What obstacles challenge your fruit-bearing, and how can you address those obstacles?
- Consider how you might be sowing, planting, or watering the seed of the gospel in your conversations with others, and evaluate how you may need to approach those conversations specifically.

Invite volunteers to share prayer needs for this week. Encourage them to record these in the space on page 23 in their PSG so they can pray for others throughout the week.

PRAYER REQUESTS AND PRAISES



PRAYING SCRIPTURE

CLOSE: Pray through Psalm 81:10-14 with your group. Thank God for giving us His Word and His gospel, and pray for your group to be people who listen to God's Word and obey it.

References

1. Darrell L. Bock, Luke: 1:1–9:50, vol. 1, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1994), 733–34.
2. Thabiti Anyabwile, Exalting Jesus in Luke, Christ-Centered Exposition Commentary (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2018), 145–46.

JESUS'S USE OF PARABLES

Adapted from an article by R. D. Fowler



What is a parable? The word *parable* means “to place alongside.” A parable is a figurative saying that illustrates a spiritual truth by comparing common experiences. Of the approximately sixty parables in the Synoptic Gospels, fifty-two are narratives. A parable, however, can also be a similitude (Matt. 13:33), an allegory (Ezek. 17:2; 24:3; Matt. 13:18,24,36), a proverb (Prov. 1:1,6; Mark 3:23), a riddle (Ps. 78:2; Mark 7:17), or a symbol (Heb. 9:9).

Many of us are familiar with Jesus’s parables, though we may not understand exactly what they are or why Jesus used them. In Matthew 13:10, the disciples approached Jesus and asked, “Why are you speaking to them in parables?” This was the larger company of followers that included the Twelve (Mark 4:10). At this point, there was growing hostility toward Jesus. The disciples recognized a change had taken place in His method of teaching. His reply indicated a two-fold purpose in His use of parables to both reveal and conceal the mystery of the kingdom of God.

FIRST-CENTURY TEACHING TOOL

Jesus was unparalleled in His use of parables, though He was not the first to use them. Parables were in use before the first century by writers such as Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle. They were a common teaching method of Rabbis Hillel and Shammai between 60 BC and AD 30. Later rabbis also used parables in the Gemara and the Midrash.

Parables were also a part of earlier oral tradition in the Old Testament. Of the parables in the Old Testament, none is more familiar or more closely linked in style to Jesus’s narrative parables than the parable that the prophet Nathan told

King David (2 Sam. 12:1-14) to expose his adulterous relationship with Bathsheba. The parable had an immediate impact.

IN JESUS’S TEACHING

Approximately one-third of all Jesus’s sayings in Scripture were parables. Jesus’s parables demonstrate Jesus’s knowledge and understanding of human life in a variety of arenas, such as agriculture, agronomy, fishing, and others.

When we consider why Jesus used parables, we first recognize that His doing so was a fulfillment of prophecy (Isa. 6:9-10). Additionally, they were effective for teaching the multitudes who followed Him because they would have been familiar with this form of instruction.

The old adage “a picture is worth a thousand words” applies to Jesus’s parables. The word pictures He painted in the minds of those who gathered to hear Him teach were precisely what made them effective for revealing truths. In Matthew 13, Jesus painted word pictures of a sower planting seeds and a man sowing good seed in his field only to find tares growing in his crop. Matthew also recorded Jesus’s teachings referring to a mustard seed, leaven, hidden treasure, a merchant seeking pearls, and a dragnet of fish. All of those subjects, even now, paint vivid pictures in our minds.

Jesus’s parables were likewise timeless in their presentation. The message communicated in the first century communicates in the same way today. The parables of the sower, prodigal son, and the good Samaritan still communicate spiritual truths in the modern world. I am not a farmer, but I can easily grasp the parable of the sower and the different soils in modern agricultural practices.

*Those who seek a more complete relationship with Jesus
desire to understand the parables and their meaning.
They seek to understand what His parables reveal.*

Parables also make theological truth easier to understand. Similarly, today we employ various forms of multimedia to present and reinforce the message of the gospel in sermons and Bible studies. Like the parables, these help people understand the truth of Scripture more easily than a purely theological discourse might. Parables are clearly a tool for revealing truth.

Jesus's use of parables was paradoxical, however, in that they both revealed and hid truths. A paradox is something that contradicts itself yet remains true. Jesus said the parables were intended to reveal the truth and make it easier to grasp for those for whom the truth was intended. Equally true, however, they were intended to hide truth from those who reject Him (Matt. 13:11-15).

EFFECTIVENESS IN JESUS'S DAY

Were Jesus parables effective for both purposes? The dogmatic answer, of course, is "Jesus used them, therefore, they were effective!" How, though, could they be effective for both revealing and concealing the truth at the same time?

The answer to that question is indicated by the different responses to Jesus's parables. In the multitudes that followed Him were two distinct groups of people. Both heard the parable of the sower; it was a good story, and it caught everyone's attention—but only one group sought to understand the spiritual truth the parable taught.

Those who rejected Jesus, those who were unreceptive to the message of the kingdom of God, listened but did not hear. All who heard the parable of the sower could understand the truth that seeds sown in different soils produced different

outcomes. The seed sown on the hard ground does not take root and does not produce a crop. For those who rejected Jesus, this was the only point to the parable. For those with no desire to understand, the true meaning remains hidden.

On the other hand, Jesus told His disciples they had been given the honor of understanding His parables. Yet they had to ask what the parable of the sower meant. For those who followed Jesus, who were spiritually committed to Him and whom the Spirit was calling to that kind of commitment, the parables served to awaken within them the desire to know and understand more completely. The disciples desired to know the hidden meaning. Sometimes the meaning became clear over time. Other times they needed help and asked for clarification.

We can correctly conclude, then, that Jesus's parables were effective for both concealing and revealing truth. The same is equally true today. Those who seek a more complete relationship with Jesus desire to understand the parables and their meaning. They seek to understand what His parables reveal. Unfortunately for those who reject Jesus, whose hearts are hardened against God, the meaning of Jesus's parables remains concealed.

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