



# LIVING WORD EPISCOPAL CHURCH

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## The Sower

### Luke 8:1-15

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We'll be looking at Luke 8:1-15 this morning. After a quick introduction, Luke recounts the first of Jesus' major parables—these often cryptic stories he liked to tell about the kingdom he came to establish. This is the parable often known as "The Sower". Most of you are probably familiar with it. But before we get into the text itself, this is a good time to talk about *context*. A lot of the time we make the mistake of reading the Bible as if it were written directly to us. We forget that it was first written to people long ago living in an often very different world. Their history, culture, religion, and language are all important things we need to account for as we read God's word to them. Remember, when God spoke it had to make sense to them *first*. It's important that we do the best we can to read it through their eyes.

Context is important for understanding Jesus' ministry and his teaching. Remember that Jesus was speaking to people who were desperate for God to visit them and to rescue them from their long exile. But remember too that they had very specific ideas about how that was going to happen. Jesus stepped into history and upset all those ideas as he preached a very different kind of kingdom. And while many people chose to follow him, even more got angry with him because his teaching was so radically different from their own. If we forget this, there's a good chance we might miss the point of many of the things Jesus said. The parable of the Sower is good example. As the years passed and the Church became distant in time from those radical days of Jesus' earthly ministry, we forgot about that context. Christians started reading the sayings

of Jesus simply as timeless truths and moralistic teachings. Those timeless truths are often right, but we started missing the deeper teaching about the kingdom. The parable of the Sower, for example, became a story to teach us that we need to listen better to God when he speaks or that we need to actively cultivate his word in our lives. Other parables turn into stories about being nicer or more moral people. But, brothers and sisters, consider that if Jesus had simply been teaching the people to listen to God better or to sin less, he wouldn't have been crucified. The Pharisees would have loved him. That's exactly what they were all about: being more faithful to the law and compromising less. If that's what Jesus had been about, he wouldn't have been a threat to the Romans or the Herodians or the Sadducees, who controlled the priesthood and the temple. They never would have crucified him.

But the fact is, as we've seen, that Jesus came preaching a very different kingdom. It upset the Pharisees because it welcomed the outsider to come in; it upset the ruling Sadducees because it offered forgiveness and healing apart from the normal channels of priests, temple, and sacrifice. It upset Herod, who styled himself "King of the Jews", because in Jesus the true king had come. And it upset the Romans, because it declared that Jesus is Lord, not Caesar.

And if you've every wondered why Jesus taught in cryptic sayings and parables, we find the explanation as we remember the context. If he'd come out and said these subversive things openly, his ministry would have been over within weeks or months. Instead, he spoke in riddles so that those close to him understood. And remember that as he spoke in riddles, he did the work of the Messiah: he preached good news to the poor, release to the captives, and gave sight to the blind. Over the course of his three-year ministry this combination gradually opened the ears of the people. They gradually came to

understand. We read here that after telling the people this parable of the Sower, they didn't understand. But towards the end of his ministry he told the people the parable of the Wicked Tenants. It tells much the same story as the parable of the Sower, but by that point in his ministry the meaning was obvious to everyone who heard and they were ready to have him executed. So remember "context". Without it we're prone to losing all these important details and turning Jesus' teaching into nothing more than moralising stories. While those morals might be good and right, we end up missing his more important teaching about himself and his kingdom.

But first, in the opening three verses of Chapter 8, Luke gives us an introduction to this next phase of Jesus' ministry.

**Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. And the twelve were with him, and also some women who had been healed of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's household manager, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their means.**

As a heading to this next part of his gospel, Luke tells us about the people who were following Jesus as he travelled around Galilee. Luke mentions specifically the twelve whom Jesus had formally called as his disciples are with him. Their role is going to grow as the story goes on. At this point, they believe, but they've got to grow and understand more before Jesus cuts them loose to go out preaching his good news on their own. Luke says there were many other people with Jesus too, but he specifically tells us about two women: Mary, a woman whom Jesus had freed from seven demons and Joanna, a woman who was prominent because of

her husband who had a high rank in Herod's court. Mary might be the woman from the previous chapter: the former prostitute who anointed Jesus feet. We can't say for certain, but if she isn't the same woman, Luke describes her as someone with very similar feelings of love and gratitude for Jesus. The same goes for all these people. Jesus had brought good news to them as he travelled. Some of them he'd healed. Some of them he'd made clean. They had been outsiders; now they were members of his kingdom and of his family. Some of these women may have had nowhere else to go, like the prostitute. Jesus may have forgiven her and made her clean, but the people around them refused to accept that forgiveness. And so they took up with Jesus instead. Out of gratitude for the transformation Jesus had made in their lives, they gave what they had to support his ministry. For Luke, in the end, they serve as examples of the proper response to Jesus: He spoke and they heard. And they didn't hear passively; they acted faithfully on his word. They did what he said; they were obedient. That's what true faith looks like: it displays our love for the Saviour and our submission to his lordship.

More and more people are now flocking to hear Jesus. These people have shown their faith. They heard and they obeyed. But how will other people respond to Jesus' proclamation of the kingdom. Remember, it's not the kingdom people expected. And this what the parable of the Sower is all about. Look at verses 4-8:

**And when a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to him, he said in a parable, "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. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and**

**the thorns grew up with it and choked it. 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."**

Jesus gives us a picture of a farmer sowing a field. We might wonder why he's casting seed on the path or on rocks or amongst thorns. Remember that ancient Palestinian farmers didn't farm the way we do. Today we till the soil and then we plant the seed. They did the opposite. They scattered the seed, then they tilled it into the soil. The path people had trampled across his fallow field would soon be tilled up. The rocks weren't visible under that shallow layer of soil, but when the plow strikes them, the farmer will move on. He has every intention of cutting down, pulling up, or tilling right through the thorns, but as everyone who's tried to get rid of blackberry bushes knows, it won't be long before they grow back.

Jesus is preaching the kingdom. But how? He calls us to hear if we have ears, but even his disciples didn't have ears to hear. Luke tells us in verse 9 that the disciples, perplexed by this, "asked him what this parable meant." And so he said to them:

**"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.' Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. 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. 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. 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. 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."** (Luke 8:10-15)

This is the point where most Christians have seen Jesus as describing the reality we've all experienced in the Church. We all know people who have heard the word of God and refused it. We all know people who have heard and believed, but never put down any roots and whose faith withers and dies when tested. And we all know people who hear the word and believe, but whose faith is gradually choked out by their other loves, activities, and commitments. Now, all of those things are very true. They're obstacles to real faith we should be on guard for. But they're *not* the point Jesus is making. There are two keys that Jesus gives us, one in verse 10 and the other in verse 11. Jesus comment in verse 10 that "seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand" is a quote from Isaiah 6. And his likening in verse 11 of God's word to seed takes us back to Isaiah 55, where God's word is described as being scattered like seed. Isaiah 6:9-10 is the history of Israel in a nutshell; it's about God speaking and Israel's heart being hardened against it. Isaiah 55:10-13 is a passage about the coming Messianic kingdom—of a day when the seed will finally bear fruit and the great banquet will take place. It's about seed bearing fruit.

First, here's what we read in Isaiah 6:9-10:

**"Go, and say to this people:  
"Keep on hearing, but do not understand;  
keep on seeing, but do not perceive.'  
Make the heart of this people dull,  
and their ears heavy,  
and blind their eyes;**

**lest they see with their eyes,  
and hear with their ears,  
and understand with their hearts,  
and turn and be healed.”**

For more than a thousand years, God had been sowing his word in Israel, but she refused to hear. When God made his covenant with Abraham, he expressed his intent to bless the nations through Abraham’s children. God rescued Israel from her slavery in Egypt—he showed his lovingkindness to her—and in the wilderness he gave her his law so that she would know how to love him in return. Through that relationship she was to be the promised blessing to the nations: a witness of God’s love and his people’s love in return. But instead she refused to listen, she cavorted with pagans and prostituted herself to their gods—even bringing their idols into the Lord’s temple. The Lord had scattered his word like seed. He spoke through Moses, but the birds snatched away the seed before it could bear fruit. He spoke at Sinai and Israel received it with joy and said, “All the things that the Lord has spoken we will do,” but then like the seed scattered on the rocky soil, when hardship came, that commitment and faith withered and died. The Lord spoke through the prophets, but thorns—entanglements with pagan peoples, promise of riches and the good life, and devotion to foreign gods—choked the life out of it. And so God responded to this rejection with exile. He sent Israel away from his presence, even allowing the place of his presence, the temple to be destroyed. But even when Israel returned the land, her long exile supposedly over, even after she rebuilt the temple, God’s presence never returned. The exile continued. And yet in the midst of judgement there was hope. Through the judgement there was always a remnant of faithful people who heard and obeyed and kept sowing the seed of God’s word and that meant that on the other side of judgement there was hope. Someday the people would understand with

their hearts; someday they would turn and be healed.

And that now brings us to the other passage that Jesus references—Isaiah 55:10-13. This is a prophecy about that coming day, about the coming Messianic kingdom when the seed will finally take root, sprout, and provide an abundant harvest for the banquet. This is what that passage says:

**“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, — so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it. For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands. Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress; instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle; and it shall make a name for the LORD, an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.”**

This is the end of Israel’s exile: God’s word will finally produce a great harvest and that great harvest will bring an abundant plenty to his Creation. This is a description of the seed that Jesus described falling on good soil: “those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.”

And now we see what Jesus is really getting at—that this is the sort of

preaching that, as people come to understand its meaning, will put him on the cross. Jesus isn’t just talking about the different ways people respond to his preaching. What he’s doing is telling the history of Israel. The seed God sowed through Moses and the prophets was taken away by the birds, withered on the rocks, or was choked out by thorns, but the seed he is now sowing through Jesus—the one we know as his Word Incarnate—will finally take root and bear the promised fruit. It will accomplish what God purposed; it shall succeed in the thing for which he sent it and as a result the renewal of his Creation will begin. His faithful people will go out in joy and peace, the mountains and hills will break forth in song, the trees will clap their hands, good trees—cypress and myrtle—will take the place of thorn and brier, and most important of all, the name of the Lord will be established and never be cut off. Through God’s people the blessing he intended for the nations will finally be delivered and never again will they be exiled. His presence will be with them forever.

And this is what makes Jesus’ parable so controversial. This end of exile was what the Jews were waiting for—that day when God would return to visit his people and to destroy their enemies. And for the Jews, God would know his people by their faithfulness to *torah*—to the law. He would know his people through their circumcision, through their obedience and refusal to associate with the unclean, by their observance of the Sabbath, and by their devotion to the temple and its priests and sacrifices. But Jesus has been undermining that identity at every point. He’s announcing the kingdom by welcoming in sinners and the unclean; he’s announcing the kingdom by eating and healing on the Sabbath; he’s announcing the kingdom by offering the Lord’s forgiveness directly—completely bypassing the temple, the priests, and the sacrificial

system. Instead, Jesus is proclaiming that the kingdom has come in him—he is the kingdom and all are welcome. Instead of holding the outsiders at arms length to keep their contamination at bay and to make sure that God knows who strike down when he comes in judgement, Jesus is welcoming those outsiders into the kingdom and offering forgiveness and healing. And the really amazing and controversial thing about Jesus is that people's lives are being transformed—entirely apart from the usual channels.

Brothers and sisters, the new kingdom is found not in works, not in ethnic identity, not in a land or in a temple; it's found in the person of Jesus himself. For the first time we are able to hear as God speaks, because Jesus has become Israel. He's fulfilled her mission where she had failed. He's been faithful where she was faithless. He is the embodiment of the blessing promised to Abraham. He doesn't simply have good news to tell. Friends, he *is* the good news. He doesn't simply have the word. He *is* the Word. And so in the end, the parable of the Sower really is about hearing the word and about what our response should be. But it's not just a parable about listening better or responding by being more moral people. Jesus tells us that he is the Word, he is the kingdom, he is the true Israel, he is the one in whom we need to find our identity. Think of all the places we look for identity. Brothers and sisters, to hear and to follow Jesus is to give up all of those other things and to find ourselves in him. Forgiveness, healing, cleansing, membership come not from rules or ritual, but from him and in him. And this is why Luke told us about the disciples and the women and the crowd that were following Jesus. They had found their identity in him. They found forgiveness and healing in him as they heard. But they didn't hear *passively*. Brothers and sisters, they heard and responded *actively* by reorienting their new lives around him

and in him. As they came to know the loving grace Jesus had shown them, they responded by giving him their all and in giving all they bore fruit for the kingdom. Not only that, as they joined themselves with Jesus, he made them the kingdom, he made them the true Israel. Think of the former prostitute pouring out the last of her expensive perfume on Jesus' feet as a sacrifice of loving praise and gratitude. Think of these disciples and these women following Jesus from town to town through Galilee. Luke no doubt tells us specifically about the women because in following and supporting Jesus they were violating all the norms of their culture. Like Simon's friends sneering at the woman anointing Jesus' feet, people sneered at them and whispered about them as they passed through town with Jesus. But they were already bearing fruit. They were already manifesting the kingdom. The word had taken root. They were willing to sacrifice life, reputation, and property for the kingdom because they had found their real identity, their real life, their real security in Jesus. And, brothers and sisters, they followed him with joy. In Jesus God had visited them and ended their exile; in Jesus the harvest had come; in Jesus the long-awaited banquet had begun. And now this is the response that Jesus seeks in us. This is what he calls us to. If we have ears, let us hear and let us follow.

Let us pray: Gracious Father, you have spoken, but we have too often stopped our ears. Thank you for not giving up on us. Thank you for sending your Son, Jesus, the Word Incarnate and for giving us your Spirit to soften our hardened hearts, to open our deaf ears, to give sight to our blind eyes that we might finally respond to your word. Remind us daily that the proper response to your word is to follow Jesus—to turn to him in faith for forgiveness and healing from our sin, to seek the kingdom he himself embodies, and to follow obediently in

loving gratitude. We ask this through him, our Lord and Saviour. Amen.