

## **PLACES IN THE HEART**

**Luke 8:4–21**

**Dr. George O. Wood**

Luke 8:4–21 (NIV)

“While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town, he told this parable: ‘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 of the air ate it up. Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants. Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.’ When he said this, he called out, ‘He who has ears to hear, let him hear.’ His disciples asked him what this parable meant. He said, ‘The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, “though seeing, they may not see; though hearing, they may not understand.” This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God. 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. Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away. The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life’s worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature. 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. No one lights a lamp and hides it in a jar or puts it under a bed. Instead, he puts it on a stand, so that those who come in can see the light. For there is nothing hidden that will not be disclosed, and nothing concealed that will not be known or brought out

## **PLACES IN THE HEART**

### **Luke 8:4-21**

into the open. Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him.’ Now Jesus’ mother and brothers came to see him, but they were not able to get near him because of the crowd.

Someone told him, ‘Your mother and brothers are standing outside, wanting to see you.’ He replied, ‘My mother and brothers are those who hear God’s Word and put it into practice.’”

All of us who preach the Word of God regularly probably, if you were to ask us what our favorite story or sermon is, would be able to tell you. But I wonder if you went to Jesus and asked Jesus, “Lord, what is Your favorite sermon that You ever preached?” I wonder what kind of response He would give.

I don’t really know how He would answer what His favorite story or what His favorite sermon would be. But I believe I do know what He would answer if you were to ask the Lord, “Jesus, what is the most important story You ever told? What is the foundational story?” He would say, “It is the story of the sower and the seed.”

In the Gospel of Mark, the parallel reading to Luke 8, He himself tells the disciples that unless they understand this parable, they won’t understand any of the parables. This is a parable that tells a foundational secret. Since the Lord told it to the disciples, they made the secret available to all of us, so it’s not a secret anymore. But at the time it was given it was a secret. And it was a secret about the kingdom of God. There were people who thought that when Messiah came, the kingdom of God would be imposing and installing a king in the land, with temporal and political rule. Jesus, through this story, was saying, “God doesn’t rule like that. God doesn’t rule from a power base.” God comes, and when He comes, He stands, waiting to be received. It is an act of your will to receive Him. The kingdom is seed sown, and if you’re to have the kingdom in you, you must be the good soil in order to receive it.

## **PLACES IN THE HEART**

### **Luke 8:4-21**

Jesus is saying here that His parables both conceal and reveal truth. That there will be some who hear this story and go away saying, when they're asked, "What did the Lord teach today?" they will say, "He told a story. I'm not quite sure what His point was, but it was a great story." There will be others who hear the story and will see deeper into the story what it means that Jesus is talking about regarding the kingdom, and about our response to the kingdom. Jesus is saying that the time is soon going to come when that which is spoken in secret will be said in a public place. Just as it's true that you cannot hide the light of a lamp—it will be seen. So the teaching of Jesus will not be able to be hidden. And those who hear Him will become capable of hearing more, and those who do not obey Him will be capable of less obedience. "For to him who has will more be given" (Matthew 13:12).

I used to think Jesus was teaching capitalism in that statement. The rich get richer and the poor get poorer. Isn't that true? To him who has, more will be given. But what Jesus is saying is a foundational principle of all learning: the student who learns more is the student who masters the subject as he or she goes along.

I was talking with my kids recently about the subjects in school I did the worst in. I was a hopeless student of algebra and geometry. I can get history or English, but don't turn me loose in algebra and geometry. And those of you who are parents of teenagers and your kids are struggling in those areas, they're not hopelessly challenged or anything like that. It's just that some people have a blockage on those subjects. Those are the only courses in my life I ever got D's in. Even what I had, the little theorems that I learned, I don't even know now. I don't even know what a theorem is. I know what a thesis is, but a theorem? I haven't got the slightest idea. Even what I had has been taken from me.

## **PLACES IN THE HEART**

**Luke 8:4-21**

And the Christian life is like that. We use it or lose it. We're growing or we're retarding. We are developing in God or if we're sitting still, we're going backyards. That's what the Lord is saying, "If you will learn this parable, then more is given to you. But if you don't learn the basics, then even what you have—the basics—are taken from you." Our listening becomes better or becomes worse. Our listening to God is that way.

Preachers of the Word are constantly subject to the helpful, and sometimes negative, criticism of the hearers. But Jesus here turns the table and subjects all of us who are listeners of the Word to the closest of scrutinies. "To him who has, will more be given."

In this little story of the sower and the seed, I have found a message which I've called "Places in the Heart," with all due apologies to Sally Field. There are some places in the heart that this parable is talking to us about. Places in your heart, and places in my heart in reference to God.

**I. The first is the place in our heart where we are simply not open to the kingdom of God, we do not open to the reign of God.**

It may not be the totality of our life that is closed. It may simply be an aspect of our existence—an aspect of our life that we have walled off. We have not let the penetrating Word of Jesus into that dimension of our life.

When you think of a path—seed falling upon a path or a road—get asphalt out of your mind.

Jesus is not talking about paved roads. He's talking about a farmer's field. He's talking about a footpath through the field. No sower is so stupid as to cast seed on asphalt. But the footpath and the sower is taking out of satchel the seed, and some of it, by the very nature of the method of sowing, is falling on the footpath. The footpath can't yield anything, because the dirt is compacted. The seed lies on the surface and the birds of the air come to get it. Here Jesus is talking to us about places in which we have either chosen not to change in our life, or patterns we

## **PLACES IN THE HEART**

### **Luke 8:4-21**

have become locked into. In Jesus' day, the path constituted people who were called Pharisees and the scribes, the religious people, who were totally unopen to Him. And of everything He said, none of it stuck in their lives.

But for us, these places in the heart may be simply a mind or heart that does not care for God or receive God. If I were to identify the key thing among Christians that I see as a beaten path where the Word of God is powerless to change us—because of the disposition of the soil of our heart—one of the leading things for hardness in the heart that is unresponsive to the seed of Jesus Christ is bitterness. There are a lot of things that could be named in addition to bitterness but when we have allowed bitterness in our life to develop, it has produced in our mentality and spirit a walked-on kind of mentality and attitude that rejects the seed and rejects love. Because when we are bitter, we are unable to love responsively and naturally.

I feel very directed today by the Holy Spirit to locate one source of the beaten path in our life to be that which comes because of bitterness. Bitterness is like milk that has gone sour. The anger has sat too long. It may be packaged up in a milk carton and look ok from the outside. But when it is poured out, its curdling power is seen. Only forgiveness will break up the path of our life and let the liberating word of Jesus free our hearts and spirits, so that we can be responsive to the Lord, responsive to our families, responsive within ourselves.

In the little book *Will Daylight Come?* there's a marvelous story of how we become enslaved to sin in our life and that only forgiveness frees us. It tells of a little boy visiting his grandparents, who live kind of out in a rural area. They gave the little boy a slingshot. He goes out to practice in the woods and everything he aims at he misses. He comes back to the farm's backyard and sees his grandma's pet duck. He takes the slingshot, pulls the stone back, and gets the duck on the first blow. He panics. He sees the woodpile and he takes the duck and hides it under the

## **PLACES IN THE HEART**

### **Luke 8:4-21**

woodpile. He thought no one was looking. But there was his sister, Sally, looking at him, not saying a word. After lunch that day, Grandma said to Sally, "Let's wash the dishes." Sally said, "Johnny told me that he wanted to help in the kitchen today. Don't you, Johnny?" and she whispered to him, "Remember the duck." So Johnny did the dishes. Later Grandpa asked the children if they wanted to go fishing. Grandma said, "Sally is going to have to help me get supper ready." Sally smiled and said, "Johnny wants to do that." And to Johnny, "Remember the duck." So Johnny stayed while Sally went fishing. After several days of Johnny doing both his chores and Sally's chores, he finally couldn't stand it and went to Grandma and confessed that he had killed the duck. Grandma gave him a great big hug and said, "I know you killed the duck. I was standing at the window and saw it all happen. Because I love you, I forgive you. I wondered how long you would let Sally make a slave of you."

How long will any of us let bitterness make a slave of us? How long will we let anything make a slave of us?

Jesus gives us the word of healing and reconciliation. Some seed falls on the path, and there is a path in our life if there's bitterness. It's possible that our whole life is a path. It's possible that just some aspect of our life is a path. The birds, the power of the evil one, are always hovering to take away the Word that has been sown. Those who have come to Jesus in the last few weeks and months know this pull, that when you give your life to Christ, the enemy comes along and tries to take the seed. He tries to say to you, "You'll never live the Christian life. That's all emotion." He tries to take the Word from you. You know that the only way to resist that is to make sure the ground of your life is open and receptive ground to the Lord. The enemy can't get the seed, if you've taken it in. If you let it lie on the surface and don't anything with it, then it's easy to pick.

## **PLACES IN THE HEART**

### **Luke 8:4-21**

It's the same way when God speaks something to our heart. The enemy is trying to get that seed. Faith operates that way. It scares me to death to start a third service. The enemy works overtime saying, "That's the stupidest and dumbest thing I've heard of." Yet faith is saying to us, "It's right and it's time."

The birds are always hovering to take away the Word that has been sown.

That's one place in the heart, a well-worn footpath that has no receptivity.

### **II. Another place in the heart is where our response to the kingdom of God is only on the surface.**

There is the seed that's sown on the rock, and it springs up for awhile. It isn't as though the rock were lying on top. You have to understand Palestinian soil. Palestinian soil is loaded with rocks. The farmer's not stupid enough to just put the seed on the rock. There is a fine layer of soil on top of the rock, and one in sowing can't discern where the fallow ground is and where the fertile ground is and where the rock is. There is the need to sow not knowing what is underneath the soil.

Some soil has no ability to contain the roots. Jesus here is speaking directly about the enthusiasm of the crowds. He's at the peak of popularity in His ministry. Never will His crowds be larger. Never will people be more enthusiastic. Never will they be bringing more people to Him. He looks at that and says, "It's enthusiasm, but it only springs up for a while. When things get tough, when I start talking about going to the cross and when I start talking to people about bearing their cross and about enduring and persevering, they will fall away."

Our success meter of spirituality can so easily be judged by the size of the crowd. We can assume falsely that great things are happening because suddenly large numbers are involved. It may not be a deep work of God. It may be a superficial work of artificiality and spirituality.

## **PLACES IN THE HEART**

### **Luke 8:4-21**

We received in the church today eighty-three members. I was thinking this morning about how my father in all his fifty years of ministry never pastored a church with eighty-three adult members. I'm not a bigger success than my dad. He was faithful and God judges success by entirely different standards than numbers.

Jesus, here in this particular moment, is warning us about surface spirituality. The spirituality that's quick to ride an idea; that's great on the start but terrible on the follow-through; that volunteers to begin but doesn't persevere to the end. That starts but doesn't finish. He's saying, about surface spirituality, that it is describing enthusiasm without endurance. It describes thrill without trial. It describes contentment without commitment. He is warning His disciples that they were going to have difficulty and they must have better ground than rocky ground, because when you meet the external hardness of life, you need an internal softness to cope with it.

Because if there's internal hardness within you, that hardness will meet the external hardness and nothing will grow.

A rock doesn't keep moisture. The Lord knows the soil of our life needs a spiritual watering system. A watering system of prayer and fellowship with God, through His Word and worship. LeRoy Eims, who wrote *The Lost Art of Disciple Making*, tells the story about driving one day with his family from Fort Lauderdale to Tampa, Florida. Those of you who have been in that region know that it's just filled with orange groves. As far as the eye could see, as he drove that morning, it seemed there were orange trees just loaded with fruit. So when he stopped for breakfast, he ordered some orange juice with his eggs and bacon. But the waitress told him she couldn't bring him any orange juice because their machine was broken. Surrounded by millions of oranges, this restaurant had been reduced to depending upon a machine.

## **PLACES IN THE HEART**

### **Luke 8:4-21**

It's possible that we do the same thing in our spiritual life. That we come to depend upon others for our spiritual food. When they break down, there's not enough water in our own personal discipline to keep our hearts soft to the seed of the kingdom.

### **III. The third place in the heart is one that becomes preoccupied with other concerns.**

Some seed fell among the thorns. Again, it isn't as if the sower was stupid, as if he saw a bunch of thorns beside the side of the road and deliberately cast seed into them. Jesus solves the mystery by saying that the thorns grew up with the seed. The thorn seeds were in the soil. When the seed came, and they both grew up together for awhile, the thorns crowded out the good seed. He identifies the thorns as cares or worries and riches and pleasures. They all have the tendency to choke the activity of God in our life.

Worry, because it immobilizes us. I know this is so. I had a day this week when I was so depressed about some things that I told my secretary, "I'm just going to do some mechanical things today. I'm not into anything contemplative today." I just did a bunch of things during the day. Because when you're depressed and filled with worry, it's difficult to get going. I've learned to give myself some advice. It's no use giving advice to a person who worries because then they worry about the advice you've given. I realize it's difficult to minister to worry. But I like what someone said about worry. When you're immobilized by worry and depression and are sitting there, unable to do anything, ask yourself the question, "What would I do today if I weren't depressed?" and immediately you can think of what you would do, and the trick is to get up and go do it anyway. It's amazing how it begins to lift when you do that.

Worries immobilize or choke our effectiveness. One of dad's concerns was, "When I'm older, how will I make ends meet?" Because he never had a salary that allowed him to set aside retirement funds. I said to him when he was about fifty-five or so, "You love numbers." And dad

## **PLACES IN THE HEART**

### **Luke 8:4-21**

did. I think up until about three years before his death, dad had, from the time he was married until then, kept track of every nickel he had earned or spent. He had it all in logs. He had to on a missionary's salary. He had to keep track of everything. I said, "Why don't you go to junior college, take some courses, and when you retire you can have a little income on the side, helping people with their income tax returns and do some accounting stuff. You'd love it. It would keep you from being bored when you get older." He said, "I'm too old to go to school." I said, "In ten years, if you don't go to school, how old are you going to be? If you go to school, how old are you going to be? Why don't you go to school?" That worry sometimes immobilized him.

A great astronomer said a man who carries a sack of corn on earth can carry easily six sacks of corn if they were on the moon, because the global size of the moon is smaller than earth, and therefore the gravitational pull is less. If you lived in a world whose globe was as large as the sun, you'd find the gravitational pull to be such that to take a watch out of your pocket would be to tug at a weight of 5 or 6 pounds. It would be impossible to lift your arm, because it would be so heavy. And if you lie down, you could never get back up.

It's true in the spiritual realm, that the weight of our burdens depends upon the size that we've allowed our world to become to us. And the larger the world, the greater our burden.

So the Lord says, "Watch lest you become preoccupied with anxieties and worries and depressions. Be sensitive to that. They're trying to choke out your creative life as a person."

On the other hand, riches and pleasures can do the same thing. They can distract. When Jesus talked about riches, He was not teaching in the twentieth century. Perhaps the richest person we find in the Gospels is a rich young ruler, who comes to Jesus and he has this great big choice between following Jesus and keeping his wealth. The Lord laid a particular demand upon him, that he leave everything and follow Him. We call him a rich young ruler.

## **PLACES IN THE HEART**

### **Luke 8:4-21**

I ran across a saying the other day: “How rich was the rich young ruler? He couldn’t ride in a car. He couldn’t have surgery. He couldn’t turn on a light bulb. He couldn’t buy penicillin. He couldn’t hear a pipe organ. He couldn’t watch TV. He couldn’t wash dishes in running water or type a letter or mow a lawn or listen to a stereo or ride in an airplane or jet ski or sleep on an innerspring mattress or a waterbed or talk on the phone. And he was rich?”

From eternity’s values someday, our wealth will be looked at in the same way. I wouldn’t trade places with the rich young ruler for all the money in his world because his money wouldn’t be worth anything in my world. Besides, I have it richer than he had it with all of his money. If you live for the pursuit of money and pleasure, it’s an empty street. You go to graveyards and see that. You see a lot about people on their gravestones, what was important to them. I have yet to see a gravestone on which there was, next to a name, the sign of a dollar bill. Because people don’t want to be remembered for how much money they were worth. They want to be remembered for what they did for others or for family or what their relationships were. The Lord is simply telling us, through this story, “Don’t let concern or anxieties or pleasure and riches crowd out the work of the kingdom in your life and offering yourself in service to God.”

#### **IV. There’s a fourth place in the heart: that’s the good soil, being receptive to God.**

Jesus is now addressing His disciples directly. Matthew and Mark’s Gospels note there are three responses the seed gives. Some brings forth thirty-, some sixty-fold. Luke simply condenses and notes the final product—the hundred-fold. The Word of God is powerful, we ingest it and it produces fruit in our life of tremendous quantity.

Seeing the college graduation yesterday reminded me of my own graduation a few years ago, when my mentor, at our last retreat, handed each one of us a little mustard seed, just a little black speck, actually smaller than a grain of sand. He quoted us the Scripture about faith being the size

## **PLACES IN THE HEART**

### **Luke 8:4-21**

of a grain of mustard seed. I can still see the little seed in my hand, as he told us to go out and invest our life, that from the world's reckoning we were small like that, but if we would plant ourselves in some fertile place God had for us, there would be productivity in our life.

I got to thinking about Jesus' words here and "my brother and my mother are those who hear God's Word and put it into practice." Those who take the Word of God, coming to us in idea form and thought form and through the ministry of the Spirit, the Spirit is seeking to implant the life and the concepts of Jesus into our life. The Lord always comes to us in seed form.

I'd like to have things all at once. I'd like to buy the spiritual house complete and fully furnished. But it never comes that way. We get a construction kit. Or worse than that, a seed. The Lord comes to us, not as a person who is fully formed in us. When I receive Jesus as my Savior, I don't know much about Jesus. I don't know much about the doctrine. I don't know much about what's in this Book. I only know that Jesus has come into my life. He comes to me, not as an overwhelming presence, but often as a seed. And He grows within and He fills up more and more and more of our life.

This story of the kingdom is telling us that there are not only four kinds of hearers, but there are four kinds of soils within each one of us. We need to inventory our life to keep checking whether or not the basis of our life is good soil. Some of the soil of our life is the beaten path. Some of it is the thorns. Some of it is the rocky ground. But some of it is good soil. Much of it is good soil. Perhaps more so sometimes than we recognize, because we're so willing to put ourselves down and so ready to think of ourselves as cut off from the activity of God. But Jesus says, "Good soil will bring forth fruit."

The point of Jesus telling the story is not to lock us into a fatal determinism that says, "All mankind is divided into four classes. Which class are you?" But His point in telling the story is

## **PLACES IN THE HEART**

### **Luke 8:4-21**

that there is something you can do about the soil in your life. If you are the beaten path, you can break it up. If you are the rock, you can shatter it. If you are the thorns, you can root them up. Do something about it. But be the good soil. So He says, “He who has ears to hear let him hear” (Luke 8:8).

### **Closing Prayer**

Our Father, we come to You in prayer today because we believe that You are at work on the soil of our life, seeking to build into that soil that presence which is Yours. We take a moment, Lord, to pray about this message, to see if there is a beaten path of bitterness in our life that makes it impossible for the healing, reconciling work of the Lord Jesus to grow in us. Break up that beaten path and help us, Lord, to find the seeds of forgiveness. Help us to look at our husband or wife or child or friend who has hurt us, and forgive. Help us, Lord, to look back through the corridor of the years to that moment in time, years ago, when a bitter thing happened to us and we have not let go. Help us, in this service, in this moment of prayer, to ask for the plow of the Holy Spirit to come into the beaten path of our dirt-filled life, to break the ground up, the hardness, to break it up and to bring the soft and pliable soil in which the seed of Jesus will grow. Forgive us, Lord, where our enthusiasm runs ahead of our commitment. Help us, Lord, to repair those moments when we have committed ourselves to serve You in ways that we do not follow through. Give us the power of the Holy Spirit to have strong follow-through. Help us as we contend with the anxieties and pressing concerns of life and the siren call of pleasure and things. Help us to know that we are poor if we do not know You and we are wealthy beyond comparison if we are in Your family. Our wealth is in serving You and loving others. It can never be measured by the name brand of clothes we wear or the car we drive or the title deed of the apartment we rent or the home we buy. But our value is in You. Give us, Lord, an open and

## **PLACES IN THE HEART**

**Luke 8:4-21**

receptive heart to You in our life. There are friends here today who have never opened their life to You by asking You to be their Lord and Savior. May their heart be receptive soil in this service, to receive You, to come forward at the close of this service and to say to a prayer counselor, "I want to receive Jesus in my life today." Help all of us, Lord, to have that great, large ground in our life that is receptive to You. In the name of Jesus. Amen.