

God's Word does God's Work

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[0 : 00] While returning to that passage in Luke's Gospel, I wanted to begin with a story. Some years ago, there was a new church in Edinburgh, which I won't name, but which Susie and I know very well.

And in the early days of this church plant, the guy who was planting the church, he created a sort of trendy promotional video to set out the vision for what this church would be all about. Come and join us, he said. In return, we can offer you challenges, frustrations and disappointments. All inevitable aspects of Gospel ministry.

But we can also promise you the opportunity to be involved in an exciting work that longs to bring glory to God and see lives changed for eternity. Now, that's the way to sell a new church, isn't it? Come and join us and find new challenges, frustrations and disappointments in life. Who wouldn't leap at the opportunity for more of that? Of course, we do long to bring glory to God and to see lives changed forever.

[1 : 11] We are excited about the Gospel going out for all kinds of people to hear it and to become part of God's family. I wonder, how are you finding the challenges, frustrations and disappointments?

I wonder, do you ever find yourself thinking, is this really what I signed up for? Whose idea was this? Well, you might think that such a set of glass half-empty expectations could only be found starting a church in Scotland.

But here in Luke's Gospel, we find this very down-to-earth picture is actually Jesus' own vision for Gospel ministry. That's what Jesus is giving us here in this parable or story about a sower sowing seeds in a field.

This is as close as we get to a vision-casting session with Jesus. And what does that look like? Well, it looks like a farmer who goes around scattering lots of seed in a field.

And the seed lands in different kinds of soil, and the results are hugely varied, aren't they? From nothing growing at all, plants that wither up in the sun, plants that get crowded out by weeds.

[2 : 26] And of course, some of the seed falls in good soil, and eventually it produces an enormous harvest. And then Jesus turns to his disciples and says, That's what working with me is like.

See, the absolute key to understanding this parable is in verse 11. Would you look there, please? The seed is the word of God.

See, this parable is about the Gospel going out into the world. Jesus came with good news of the kingdom of God, we read. He said the king promised for ages by God had at last come.

That king was here to bring rebels to God, to give new life. To be a light to those in darkness, to set free those held in chains by sin. And he said he was that very king.

And yet, this very messy picture of the sower in the field, well, this is the picture Jesus chooses to describe his work on earth. It sounds average, doesn't it?

[3 : 26] It sounds too real. In fact, it looks much better on the ground. We're told a great crowd was gathering. People from town after town came to him. But Jesus is describing what is really going on in the hearts of the crowd.

And actually, it's far more challenging and frustrating and disappointing. So Jesus takes us in two directions with this. Firstly, that we take the word out.

He's giving his disciples a clear picture of the reality of being committed to the word of God, doing the work of God, so that they are not surprised when it doesn't seem to be working.

Secondly, he talks to us about taking the word in. Take care then how you hear, he says. Whatever you think that you have understood, make sure you take that gospel to heart yourself.

So we're going to look together at taking the word out and taking the word in. Both of these are vital because the word of God guarantees an eternal harvest.

[4 : 35] Verse 8, Jesus said, Some seed fell in the good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold. These are those, he says, who hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart and bear fruit with patience.

Many, if not all of us, know the reality of that this evening. That the word of God does indeed change lives for eternity. The gospel is how God builds his kingdom and brings people into his family.

So we must take the word out and take the word in. Firstly, then, taking God's word out. Well, if you've ever tried to grow anything in a garden, you probably know there's more to it than simply chucking seeds around and waiting for things to grow.

I tried to grow some things growing up in London. The soil is very heavy, clay, claggy, gets waterlogged. Some stuff worked, most stuff didn't.

It wasn't easy. If only it was simple as throwing some seeds in and getting a nice tasty salad. And yet, that method, it seems to be working quite well for Jesus.

[5 : 46] Notice in verse 1 what he's just been up to. Soon afterwards, he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. So Jesus is going to places big and small, bringing good news from God.

Jesus sums that up in the message he gave from the scroll of Isaiah. He says it's the news that now is the time of God's grace. Now, God was delivering on all his great promises through the ages because his promised King Jesus was here.

Time for people to have their sins forgiven, to be set free from the power of darkness and sin and death. This is good news, isn't it? That we can put our trust in Jesus and be saved.

So Jesus is sowing that seed. He's spreading that word from God. And it seems like Jesus has got some pretty good-looking results. Verse 4, a great crowd gathering, people streaming to him from town after town.

Everyone seems to be coming after Jesus. Now, is that the picture we should expect when the gospel is really going out?

[6 : 56] That when we are properly on mission, people should be coming en masse to Jesus. That church growth should be exploding off the scale. Isn't that where we would truly see God's power in Scotland today?

Well, if that is what we should expect, we could easily look around, couldn't we, in Aberdeen or any other city in Scotland, and ask ourselves, well, where have we gone wrong?

Where are all these people? Where is all this growth? Has the glory actually left us? But no, Jesus doesn't leave us under any illusions.

He has a far less optimistic view of this crowd. See, what's really going on here? As the crowd is gathering, he begins one of his most famous parables.

Now, a parable is a story that teachers would use to compare two things. And so as Jesus is watching this crowd coming together, he begins to tell this story.

[7 : 58] Look what I have been doing. Look what all this is about, he says. It's like this. And he describes it using a picture. A sower went out to sow his seed. That's what we've seen.

Jesus has been up to. But what happens then? Well, he says four things happen. As he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot.

And the birds of the air devoured it. So straight away, this seed gets nowhere. It doesn't grow at all. Some seed, he says, grew on the rock.

And as it grew up, it withered away because it had no moisture. So this seed, it seems to get somewhere. But it's growing without soil on a bare rock. And it withers away.

Some, he says, fell among thorns. And the thorns grew up with it and choked it. So this seed, it gets a bit further. But it's smothered by the weeds and the nettles. And it doesn't give anything. Fourthly, some seed fell in good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.

[9 : 00] Finally, then, this seed does grow. And of all the seeds, this is the one that produces the vast harvest a hundredfold. So Jesus is saying, this crowd, it's like this kind of field.

But you know, how does all that stuff with the different soils and the birds and nettles look anything like what's happening on the ground? The crowd, it doesn't seem quite as complicated as all that.

But that's just the point. All these people have heard Jesus' message, the same message. And here they all are, town upon town.

They seem to all be growing after Jesus. And yet, in their hearts, where we cannot see, they're all in all kinds of different places. Some are hardened. Some are softer.

Some have no space for the word to grow. Some are ready to hear the good news. Others are not. Some have already taken Jesus' good news to heart.

[9 : 58] Many haven't. And yet, they are all here. And Jesus, who sees every heart, well, he isn't celebrating the fact that simply he can draw a massive crowd.

Jesus, that's not a measure of success because he knows there's much, much more going on with people than meets the eye. You know, this parable shows us the spiritual landscape that we are working in, in a way that we really struggle to see on the ground.

You know, we can only work with what we see going on around us, can't we? And that's just part of being human. It's not a problem. Our ability to perceive what's really going on below the surface is limited.

But that doesn't stop us constantly, instinctively looking around us for ways to judge whether we're succeeding or failing in our witness. So for us, a few more people around on a Sunday, friends seem to be taking an interest.

Well, that feels like success. But people drift away. Church is a bit less busy. Friends lose interest and we start thinking, well, where have we gone wrong?

[11 : 08] Might feel like we're failing in some area. But what Jesus is pointing out is that that is a very limited picture of what is really going on. If we take numbers as a sign and try to form conclusions about whether we are succeeding or failing, well, we'll just end up disappointed, disheartened, worn down by a constant sense of failure.

Because the gospel always produces mixed results. That's what Jesus is saying. That's not failure on our part. In fact, if we experience mixed responses to the gospel, then that experience lines up exactly with Jesus' experience.

Mixed responses. And Jesus most definitely didn't fail. Here Jesus has graciously given us a glimpse of the reality that only he truly sees as he looks at the mission field.

As he reminded the prophet Samuel so long ago, the Lord sees not as man sees. Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.

He's throwing us the blueprint, so to speak, so that we will stay steady and faithful and on task with the gospel. Jesus is teaching us not to judge our gospel witness by the way things seem, especially when the results maybe seem disappointing.

[12 : 33] We live in a time in Scotland when people are not flooding to Jesus from town after town. So we need to get this truth into our bloodstream so that we don't think less of the power of the gospel or the value of our witness to it.

Notice the very first thing that Jesus points out is actually something that we are prone to lose sight of altogether. That we have an enemy who we cannot see.

Verse 12, some people hear the gospel and the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts so that they may not believe and be saved. How often do we forget that there are powers at work against us when we share the gospel?

New people have all kinds of weird and wacky ideas, don't they, about what the devil is up to. But what he does is deadly serious to lead people away from Jesus.

He's in the business of snatching the good news from people's hearts. And unless we remember that's what he's doing, then we will grow discouraged and confused when our witness doesn't seem to be making an impact.

[13 : 42] But if we are faithfully taking the word out, sowing that seed, then that lack of impact, it's not because we've failed and it's not because the gospel has failed.

Sometimes, says Jesus, it's because there are more players on the field than we know. Satan's days are numbered, his head will be crushed. But until then, Jesus is reminding us that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.

There is more that goes on than meets the eye. So if you are sharing the gospel and not seeing an impact, don't lose heart. Don't lose heart, but pray that the devil's work would come to nothing.

And keep sharing that word. Now, sometimes we do see an impact. You people do respond to the gospel. But even then, we need to be prepared for even more going on in people's hearts than we

realize.

And this is really disappointing stuff. Verse 13. The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But they have no root. They believe for a while.

[14:58] And in a time of testing, fall away. So sometimes you find people do seem to believe the gospel. At first, it's so fresh.

It's exciting. It's full of joy. But in time, it turns out that change is only surface level. It's cosmetic.

The good news is good for a while, but eventually the shine wears off.

And the cost of following Jesus goes up. And they fall away. And in these cases, the gospel had never really been taken to heart. They had never rooted their faith in Christ.

So when the good feeling goes, there's no faith to keep going. And then there's the seed, verse 14. That fell among the thorns. They are those who hear.

But as they go on their way, are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life. And their fruit does not mature. So sometimes people may take an interest in the gospel.

[15:57] They seem to put their faith in Jesus. But Jesus is simply one of the things that they trust in and love. Other loves, desires are already crowding out the heart.

And it's not necessarily even the obvious sin issues. Who says Jesus? It's the everyday cares and riches and pleasures of life.

The love of a nice lifestyle. Or nice things. Or nice comforts. Or even the everyday cares. That weigh on people's minds. Whatever it is, the gospel doesn't have room to take hold and grow.

Notice he doesn't even say the plant dies. But simply their fruit does not mature. There's no faith in Christ there. But this person may still end up holding on to whatever idea of faith.

Or whatever kind of belief they think they have. Now Jesus is saying both of those are results of people hearing the gospel. And in real life, if we know people in those situations, that is super disappointing, isn't it?

[17:05] It's heartbreaking to see people fall away. Or to have a wrong idea about Jesus and just keep going with it. It seems like what they have is life.

But Jesus is saying, no, at heart, there's always something else going on. God's word isn't really bearing fruit in their lives. The message hasn't been taken to heart. But the reason why Jesus explained this to his disciples is that they would be ready when that happened, when they shared the gospel.

We should not expect our gospel witness to have simple, straightforward results. Sometimes the results will be painful. And so then our confidence in the gospel may begin to waver.

We may doubt whether the gospel is really that powerful. Over time, discouragement in our witness can lead us to question whether it's the real deal. But Jesus takes this head on.

God, he says, is always working powerfully through his word. Look at how Jesus explains these mixed results from verse 9. He says to the disciples, to you, it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God.

[18:21] But for others, they are in parables so that seeing they may not see and hearing they may not understand. See, those mixed results are not by accident.

It's not a failure on God's part. But there are two things going on. For the disciples, Jesus' followers, as they hear the gospel, Jesus says the truth is being given to them.

The secrets of God's kingdom are opened up by God. Those secrets, it's not some kind of elite knowledge or special rituals. It's meaning truth about God that we have no access to by ourselves.

We can't work it out. He needs to tell us. That's God's work. We get to know God because he shares himself with us. But for others, something else is going on as they hear the gospel.

The truth about God is still hidden. It's all in parables, all in pictures. Jesus says there's a reason why it's like that, verse 10.

[19:21] So that seeing they may not see and hearing they may not understand. And that's God's work too. The gospel softens some and hardens others.

Some are drawn in. Others turn away. The gospel divides the world. But God's word never fails. We take the word out, but the results belong to him.

We need to remember it's all God's work. We can't set performance standards for God, his purposes, the way he brings things about in his own time, in his own way.

It was something that Isaiah found early in his ministry. See, that little quote Jesus uses there in verse 10. It comes from chapter 6 of Isaiah, where Isaiah has made a spokesperson for God, a

prophet.

But the job was not what he expected. God asks, whom shall I send? Who will go for us? Isaiah famously says, here I am, send me.

[20 : 28] Then Isaiah gets his job description. Go and say to this people, keep on hearing, but do not understand. Keep on seeing, but do not perceive.

Oh, Isaiah says, well, how long do you want me to do that? And the Lord says, well, keep at it until the land is empty and all the people are gone.

See, that didn't probably look or feel much like the power of God. Isaiah was being called to share a message that was going to turn people away en masse.

But God was at work. Because ultimately, his purpose was in turning his people away into exile, was ultimately to bring them back to him. See, God is doing work through his word going out in ways that we cannot see or understand or even imagine.

So it's not as if the word of God has ever failed. There's no problem with the seed, the gospel that we are sowing. But the results always belong to him. We are not in charge of the harvest.

[21 : 35] We're not even in charge of the soil. We're simply given the seed to look after. So we plant, we water, but God gives the growth.

So the question for us is, are we still committed to sharing the gospel, whatever kind of growth or non-growth God gives? Are we always purposely looking and praying for opportunities to sow that seed, to share that gospel in our lives?

Who are you praying for? That God would bring them from the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of his son? Who are you hoping to share this good news with this coming week?

Because God is at work in the world through his word, even where we don't see it or expect it. The gospel in Paul's words is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

God's word is how lives are changed for eternity. We see that in verse 15, don't we? 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.

[22 : 48] Some hear the gospel and do take it to heart. Lives are changed forever. The evidence of that is here in this room this evening, isn't it?

And all around the world where God's people are gathered in worship of him in the name of Jesus tonight. For those who take God's word to heart, the result is a faith that perseveres to the end, trust in Jesus that leads to eternal life.

That is the fruit of the gospel. And so for us, we need to be confident that the gospel is the real deal. Let us stay on task when it comes to sharing this good news about Jesus, even when it's really tough.

Let's get alongside each other and pray for one another, encourage one another in this. We need to be patient and long-suffering as we take God's word out into our communities, our workplaces, our schools, our homes.

Because a realistic expectation of sharing the gospel is that it will be challenging, frustrating, and disappointing at times. And yet we shouldn't be discouraged when things look disappointing.

[24 : 03] We must stay on task. Because Jesus assures us that it is through sharing the gospel that God gives new life. God's word really does do God's work.

But then if that's true, if this is God's work, if the results belong to him, then doesn't that take away anyone's personal responsibility for taking it to heart, for trusting Jesus?

Well, no. Because secondly, and more briefly, Jesus has a message for those who hear the good news. So while his followers need to take the word out, his hearers need to take the word in.

In one of the houses that I lived in as a student, the blinds were so bad that at this time of year, especially, the sunlight would just flood through even when they were closed.

And to try and block out the light, I used to hang a big blanket over the blind. But on a sunny morning, even that didn't work. The sunlight still bled through and woke me up.

[25 : 04] And Jesus is saying that's what it's like trying to put off the question of whether or not we've actually taken his good news to heart and taken hold of his forgiveness.

Like the sun streaming through in the morning, it is useless to throw a blanket over the blind and pretend the morning isn't here yet. See verse 17, for nothing is hidden that will not be made manifest, nor is anything secret that will not be known and come to the light.

See, Jesus has been talking about realities of the heart that we don't obviously see. Ultimately, though the results of hearing the gospel are hidden now, a day is coming when those hidden realities of the heart will be seen.

The truth will come to light about where we stand with Jesus. And so Jesus gives this warning about how we hear, what we do with his words. Take care then how you hear.

Take care how you hear. If we are hearing the word, but not putting our trust in Jesus to be rescued, that won't stay hidden forever, he says.

[26 : 12] Take care then how you hear. Do you feel the force of that warning? Jesus doesn't want us to fall away in a time of testing. Jesus doesn't want us to trust in him to be choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life.

Jesus wants us to hear his word and take it to heart and bear fruit with patience. That is how we are rescued. Not by anything that we do or do not do, but by hearing with faith.

So how do I know if I've heard Jesus carefully enough? Well, if you love Jesus and you trust him and his finished work, if you've turned to him and you're following him, that is the fruit of the gospel. If that's you this evening, take heart. Give thanks to God for his grace in your life and go from here full of joy. Jesus isn't saying this to make us panic about whether or not we have heard him rightly. But he is warning all people that it is not enough to hear the message of the gospel and not do something about it. Hearing his word and letting it wash right over us without taking it to heart, it does not lead to life.

[27 : 29] So if you're not sure about where you stand with Jesus tonight, don't do nothing about that. Come and find me or someone from church afterwards. We would love to talk to you about that.

Because this question, it can't be put off forever. Take care then how you hear, says Jesus, for to the one who has, more will be given. And from the one who has not, even what he thinks he has will be taken away.

In the end, there is no halfway point. For those who trust in Christ, more will be given, he says. But those who don't trust in Jesus are left with nothing on that day.

Even what he thinks he has will be taken away. That separation will be final. So you've been using this farming image with the sower and the seed and the field.

And I wonder if there's just a hint here of the harvest at the end. The way that John the Baptist saw Jesus earlier in this gospel. His winnowing fork is in his hand.

[28 : 33] To clear his threshing floor, to gather the wheat into his barn. But the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire. That is what Jesus will do when he returns.

The gospel does divide today. But when Jesus comes again, that division will be final. Nothing will be hidden. Nothing will be mixed. That is a scary thought.

But only truly, if you haven't trusted Jesus. And taken hold of his promise of forgiveness and eternal life.

Because the gospel does bring us eternal life. And on that day, he will come and gather all who have ever trusted in him for forgiveness. And we will be with him forever.

And it's for that reason that Jesus graciously warns us. Take care then how you hear. He called out to everyone who would listen. He who has ears to hear. Let him hear.

[29 : 35] This is a gracious call for us to come to him and take hold of him tonight. And it's an incredible offer. Because finally we see the beauty of what Jesus is doing.

Do you notice finally what he says about those who take his gospel to heart? In verse 21, he was told, Your mother and brothers are standing outside desiring to see you.

He answered them, My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.

Jesus finishes with a family portrait. This is how Jesus sees those who trust in God's word today.

As his very own, closer to him than his own flesh and blood. What the gospel holds out to us is to be adopted into the family of God.

He looks at his church and says, These are my people. What we see today, great as it is. It's only a hazy reflection of the reality that one day we will see in high definition.

[30 : 38] God's word brings us into God's family. Into the love of Father, Son and Holy Spirit from eternity. This is the incredible power of the gospel that we should be called children of the living God.

The gospel is the real deal. So let me encourage you this evening. Take the word out, even into the very hardest places in your life. And take the word in.

Take it to heart. The forgiveness and eternal life that Jesus holds out this evening. Let's pray together. God, our Father, we thank you for your gospel.

We thank you for what Jesus preached, that he had come. That we might come to him and find forgiveness and new life. Father, we thank you that you have been at work in so many of our lives to that end.

That you have brought us to the Lord Jesus Christ. You have made us part of your family. Not for what we have brought to you. But for all that you have done for us.

[31 : 48] Father, out of that thankfulness, we pray that you would give us hearts that long for others to share in that joy. Lord, we pray for opportunities in our lives this week to speak about the Lord Jesus.

Lord, perhaps that is challenging. We pray, Lord, that you would keep us confident in your gospel to do its work. Lord, we pray for those in our lives who do not as yet know you.

Perhaps members of our own family, friends of ours, colleagues, loved ones. Dear Father, how we long for them to belong to what you are doing.

To belong to the new creation. To belong to Jesus. We do pray that you would please be at work in their lives for that end. We ask in Jesus' name.

Amen. Amen.