

Communion Friday

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Date: 02 November 2007

Preacher: Fergus MacDonald

[0 : 00] I would like you to turn in your Bibles to the second passage we read from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 8.

Luke's Gospel, chapter 8, the well-known parable of Jesus, the parable of the sower. And we'll look tonight, trusting the Lord to lead and guide us as we think of this parable and its significance for each and all of us.

Jesus began his parable by saying, a farmer went out to sow his seed. In a sense, that is an illustration of what Jesus himself was doing at that particular moment in his ministry.

For we read that people were coming, in verse 4, that people were coming to him from town after town. Jesus was no longer teaching his disciples in private.

He was out in the public square. He was speaking in the public place. He was speaking to the whole community.

[1 : 13] Perhaps today, the equivalent would be to speak on television and to communicate to a large number of people.

And that's what Jesus is doing here, because we read that a large crowd was gathering, and people came to him from town after town. And Jesus emphasizes in this parable two things.

First of all, he emphasizes his message. His message is the word of God. And that word, around which we are gathered tonight, is the seed of the kingdom of God.

God's kingdom, or God's kingship. God's kingdom, or God's kingdom, or God's kingdom, or God's kingdom of God.

And we submit to his kingship, when we submit to his word. And so, there's a strong focus here on the seed.

[2 : 18] The seed is the word of God, says Jesus. But there's also a focus here on the soil. And what Jesus is focusing particularly on in this parable is not his preaching so much as the people's hearing.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear. He interjects in the parable. And as we gather around God's word tonight, our responsibility is to hear.

We are called to be hearers of the word of God. And this parable helps us to understand the kind of hearers that we are.

What kind of soil are we? There are four types of soil that are detailed in the parable. They're well known to us all. There's the path.

There's the rocky ground. There's the thorn bushes. And there's the good soil. We read that the seed that fell upon the path, it didn't last long.

[3 : 34] The birds didn't pick it up. It was trodden underfoot by people who were passing by on this thoroughfare. The rocky ground was really ground which was very shallow with a hard rock underneath.

There was no depth. The seeds there sprang up quickly. But they did not last. When the sun came out, they were scorched and they withered away.

The thorn bushes, the thorny soil, was an area of a field where there were many bushes and where there were many weeds.

And these weeds and bushes grew up with the seed and choked it.

And finally there's the good soil, which Jesus tells us brings forth a harvest of a hundredfold. Now Jesus here is giving us this, what we might call a model.

[4 : 40] A model of hearing. I suppose today people might speak of it as a communication model. Because communication is two-way.

It is not simply sending a message. It is also receiving a message. And the focus here is on how we receive the good news of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ.

There's a lot of popular or technical theories today about communication.

How do people communicate? How do people receive a message as a branch of communication that's called reception studies? And it's interesting that one of the key theories, which perhaps in the view of many people who are specialists in this area, was a turning point in the second half of the 20th century in the development of communication studies in the United Kingdom, was a model which was produced by a West Indian called Stuart Hall, who came to Britain and settled here and taught in the University of Birmingham.

And he said that people make different readings. He used the term, used the metaphor of reading for reception, whether you're watching a film or watching television or reading a book, he would say we make our own reading of that text.

[6 : 19] The word text is used not only of what is written, but of what is communicated in different forms. And what Hall said was, he said that he made a distinction between three different types of reading.

First of all, he said that is what he called the preferred reading, that is, from the point of view of the sender of the message, that if we make a preferred reading, then we capture the message as the person who sent it to us means us to.

And there's a sense in which that is exactly what happened in the case of the good soil in the parable. The people represented by the good soil, they received the word, and they retained it, they believed it, and they obeyed it, and they persevered in their faith.

But Hall also spoke of what he called an oppositional reading, where people reject the message and say, no, I don't accept this message in any way at all.

There's a sense in which what he describes as an oppositional reading is exactly what happened in the case of the people who were like the pathway, like the wayside.

[7 : 42] They did not retain the message, they rejected it, did not take root at all in their hearts. It was either snatched away or it was trampled underfoot.

But Hall said there's a third type of reading which comes between the preferred reading and the oppositional reading, which he called a negotiated reading, where people negotiate their own meaning and accept part of the message, but negotiate with the message until they come to a level in which they can and are ready to accept it.

And that's precisely what we see in the rocky ground and in the thorn bushes. We see people there receiving the message, yes, but on their own terms.

And so they negotiate downwards. They negotiate the message and seek to come to some compromise with the gospel.

Of course, there are many factors which encourage us to do this, which encourage us to negotiate with the gospel. And Jesus details these here in the parable.

[9 : 01] He speaks about the opposition that those who are typified by the rocky soil, when persecution comes, it's like the sun. Things become too hot.

They give up. And the plant, the plant withers, the interest in the gospel disappears. There is opposition today in the world in which we live.

We live in a world in which many people are opposed to the good news of Jesus Christ. We're, in fact, living in a world where some people are so committed to a secularized view of life, in which God doesn't matter, in which God is put to the margins, that any talk about spirituality of any kind is dismissed.

I was reading a report just a few weeks ago by a lady who did some research in the University of Nottingham among people who are, call themselves spiritual, but who do not go to church.

And there's an interesting number of people who put themselves in that category. They're spiritual in the broad sense of the term, although often they're spirituality, they're looking into themselves, they're looking to the self rather than up to God or to Christ.

[10 : 23] But they're interested in spirituality. But most of them said to her, we don't want to talk about this. We don't want, we're embarrassed if other people know this.

Similarly it is with many Christians today. We much prefer that people don't know we're Christians. We keep quiet. We don't nail our colors to the mast.

We don't take the opportunities that God gives us to witness to him. There's opposition. And opposition is one of the key factors that encourages us to negotiate the gospel down to our level.

But then, there's also other things, other factors. Jesus here speaks about anxiety in talking about the thorns. He speaks about the problems, life's worries.

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. We live in a world in which many people are burdened by anxiety.

[11 : 36] And anxiety can become a barrier to the gospel. Some people in their anxiety are driven to the gospel to look for relief. But others are prevented from it, are separated from it.

And Jesus here makes clear that anxiety can be a means of diluting the gospel and bringing it down to our own level.

He goes on to speak about riches. He also, he said, riches are like thorns that choke the word. Now, it's not perhaps riches as such, but a love of riches and an ambition to be rich or even if one is rich, a kind of miserly attitude towards our riches.

Now, we live in a very much in a materialistic society in which we are today being encouraged to be greedy. The Daily Telegraph a few months ago had a leading editorial which is entitled Greed is Good.

Donald Trump who has been visiting Aberdeen in recent times was reported in the Scotsman a few months ago saying, you can't be too greedy.

[12 : 59] We're living in a culture where we're being encouraged to be greedy and that is militating against the gospel. You perhaps know the well-known anecdote about J.D. Rockefeller the American oil millionaire who was asked how much do you really need?

And he was a multimillionaire and his reply was just a little bit more. He was one of the richest men in the world. He still wanted more.

He didn't have enough. And how this what Jesus calls the deceitfulness of riches the deceitfulness of riches can hoodwink us and encourage us to negotiate down to compromise our commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ.

And Jesus also speaks of life's pleasures. we live in a society which is a huge entertainment industry.

You think of the amount of money that is spent on entertainment. It's absolutely fantastic. We live in the society where even in the BBC and in the IJV they've got laughter machines.

[14 : 23] You know in these comedy programs the laughter is synthetic. but it's got to be there. And people lap it up as if it is real.

Obviously the Lord means us to enjoy ourselves but when pleasure becomes an all pervasive influence in our lives then it becomes an idol.

It becomes an adversary of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. It's interesting that Jesus seems to make a distinction between these two types who negotiate the gospel in the center.

Those in the rocky soil and those who are represented by thorns. Those who are represented by the rock, he says, are not saved.

But he doesn't say that about those represented by the thorns. And he speaks about them receiving the word and he says there's growth. But the growth is stifled, the growth is choked.

[15 : 37] And is that not a real danger in our spiritual lives that our spiritual life can be choked, it can be suffocated by the deceitfulness of riches, by the life's worries and pleasures.

believers, these things which have a place, a legitimate place in our existence, but yet which compete when they compete with the gospel, become idols.

And so Jesus is here warning us against negotiating the gospel down. Now we tend to live in a kind of negotiating society, and there's some sense in which that's a good thing because we look for a means of getting on with other people.

But Jesus tells us that there's no negotiating the gospel. gospel. We cannot, we must accept his terms or reject them.

There is no halfway house. We must give ourselves to him. And that's how we are to hear the gospel. We are to hear the gospel in a way which, in which we respond.

[16 : 56] Not simply nod the head, but we do the gospel, we obey the gospel, we live out the gospel. That is what biblical hearing means.

And that's why it is so important for us to heed how we hear. Now, Jesus himself gives us an example of this.

He lived as someone who heard and obeyed the word of God. We see that especially in John's gospel, chapter 8, verse 47, where Jesus describes himself as someone who hears the word of God and who does it.

He who belongs to God, he's speaking of himself here, John 8, 47, he who belongs to God hears what God says. Jesus is saying that he is the model that has been given to us.

He lived his own life on earth in his humiliation as a life of faith. He lived in response to the word of God. He lived as one who heard the voice of his father and obeyed the voice of his father.

[18 : 23] God. And he has given us a model as to how we ought to respond, how we ought to hear the word of God.

And so we are called in the church of God to be a hearing community. Someone has said that the church is an acoustic community. When we speak of the acoustics of a church, we often think of acoustics in the sense of sound.

But there's a deeper sense in which we need to have good acoustics. The sense in which we are able to hear what God is saying to us through his word so that his word is not a dead letter.

That his word is a word through which he speaks to us. That God's word comes alive. God's word doesn't stay in the page. God's word speaks to us.

We hear the word of God. And how important it is as we prepare to remember the death of the Lord Jesus Christ, that we do so in response to the word of God.

[19 : 39] And we do so in a way which does not compromise the gospel, in a way which does not negotiate, but in a way which commits our lives to it just as Jesus committed his life to the word of his Father.

And so the challenge for us I believe is to move out of these two central categories. Indeed if any of us are in the first category we need to move out of that too.

That the two central categories in the parable, the middle two and the four categories of soil, seem to be the type of situations that we find not only in the world but also in the church.

And we need to ask God to move us out of, out from the rocky soil, out from the thorny soil, into the good soil. soil. So that what we have here may be in fact a scale.

And God wants to move us out of the negotiating zone. He wants to move us into that good soil where there is a total commitment to the word of God and where we do not compromise, where we do not negotiate, and where we take God at his word.

[21 : 10] so that as we read the word of God and as we hear the word of God, we make not a negotiated reading but a preferred reading. We do what God, the author of the word, wants us to do.

That is what it means to hear the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Paul Récure, a French scholar who worked in America as well as in France and who died I think a year or two ago, used to speak about the importance of having a second naivety when we read the Bible.

He said it's easy for us to get into an analytical mode and we analyze the text and we get to understand the meaning of the text, but we don't experience its power.

And he speaks, he compares that with a naive coming, you know, when we first hear a story, when we first perhaps see a film or first read a story, we're moved by it. And he says we need to ask God to get us back to that point, a second naivety, where we simply hear the word of God, where we're not concerned primarily with analysis, but we're concerned with hearing what God is saying to us, asking ourselves, what does God want me to do?

What is God's message to me through this word? What is he by his spirit saying to me today? I think that's what Jesus himself knew in his own experience.

[22 : 55] Remember how in the garden of Gethsemane, he prayed that the cat might pass from him. That was his preference.

even Jesus was tempted to negotiate that. He said, not my will, but yours be done.

And he came to that point where he said the Father's will must be done. And that is the point that God, I think, wants us all to come to.

He wants us to get to that point where we say, not my will, but yours be done. We are called to be members, children of the kingdom of God.

In the 12th chapter of this gospel of Luke, in verse 31, we are encouraged to seek God's kingdom. We're encouraged to seek his kingdom and all other things will be given to us.

[24 : 01] put God's kingdom, God's kingship first. And there's a sense in which we're called, therefore, not simply to be an acoustic community, but we're called to have signs of the kingdom.

We're called upon to exhibit the kingdom, not simply to witness to it with our lips, but to testify to it with our lives, so that we become signs of the kingdom.

Little flock, said Jesus, that God has given you the kingdom. He's given us the kingdom in order that we might manifest the signs of the kingdom.

And the key sign of the kingdom is submission to the king. He is the king of kings and lord of lords. And therefore, a key sign of the kingdom is to refuse to negotiate, to refuse to be lured into negotiation by opposition, by worry, by riches, and by pleasure.

To put God's kingdom first, God's kingship first, the kingdom of God. Now, often we think of the gospel as if it were a contract.

[25 : 26] And contracts can be negotiated. But God is not offering us a contract. He's offering us a covenant. And a covenant is a very different thing.

This said Jesus, when he instituted the Lord's Supper, this is the covenant, the new covenant in my blood. This is the new covenant at the cost of my blood. This is what I'm offering to you, he says to us.

He's offering us a covenant, a new covenant. Now, there's a strong link between the covenant and the kingdom. In fact, we go back to the Old Testament and we look at the models of the covenant, especially the Mosaic covenant and the Davidic covenant.

We see there a lot of similarities with secular covenants in the different cultures of the ancient Near East. And the model that was chosen by Moses, the model that was chosen by the prophets, was a model of a covenant between a great king and a vassal.

Now, the vassal was not in a position to negotiate. The vassal could only say yes or no. He was a vassal.

[26 : 47] And God comes to us and he is our great king. we are his vassals. We are in no position to negotiate.

We are in no position to ask God to compromise. He asks us, he invites us, he commands us to surrender unconditionally.

And as this weekend we remember the great love of the Lord Jesus Christ who gave himself without reserve for us, surely, surely an appropriate response from us, the only appropriate response from us, is to give ourselves to him without reserve.

To make a total surrender, an unconditional surrender. During the Second World War, in the North African campaign, the German General Rommel, wanted a compromise.

As Field Marshal Montgomery said, my terms are unconditional surrender. And that's God's terms with us.

[28 : 05] Unconditional surrender. Just as the Lord Jesus Christ gave himself to the Father's will unconditionally, God's will be.

So he is inviting, commanding, urging, exhorting us to give ourselves to him without reserve. And so we're called in this sense to be a sign of the kingdom, a sign to the world that the kingdom is coming, that the kingdom has come and is coming and will come, that God's kingship will prevail, that sin and evil and injustice and corruption will not have the last word, but that God's kingship will prevail, God's will shall be done.

He who belongs to God, said Jesus, describing himself, hears what God says. And although Jesus was there describing himself, he's also describing those who are his followers.

If we belong to God, we will hear what he says. And hearing for Jesus means doing. We see that quite clearly from this parable. It's not simply nodding, not simply ticking a box.

It's making that total commitment, that unconditional surrender. In Psalm 40, the psalmist said to the Lord, my ears you have pierced.

[29 : 46] The psalmist is there referring to his hearing the word of God. You've given me ears to hear you, is what it means.

that the psalmist suggests that it had been a painful experience. And it's not always easy to come to that point where we can say with the psalmist, I have come to do your will.

prayer. And perhaps we need to ask God to pierce our ears, to break through the hard shell that is inhibiting our spiritual hearing in order that we might be hearers and doers of the word of God.

And so may God grant that as we are gathered this weekend around God's word and at his table. That we may be conscious that we are here because the Lord Jesus Christ gave himself to the Father's will for us without reserve.

And he invites us out of gratitude, out of thanksgiving, to give ourselves likewise to him.

[31 : 09] Not to negotiate, not to surrender, to remember that he is our great king, that we are his vassals.

May God grant that tonight each one of us may be brought to that point where we echo, repeat the prayer of the Lord Jesus Christ, not my will, but yours be done.

Let's bow our heads in prayer. Our gracious Lord and God, as we come before you, we come to thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ. We bless and we praise you that he gave himself for us without reserve, that he held nothing back.

Forgive us, O God, if we are so reserved. Forgive us if we want to negotiate. We pray that you will bring us to the point tonight of unconditional surrender, that you will enable us to give ourselves utterly and holly to you, to bow down before you, to fall prostrate before you.

O Lord God, we just pray that you will enable us to acknowledge you as our great king. And may we, in this sense, show signs of your kingship in our lives.

[32 : 23] Grant, O God, that others may see that impact that your kingdom has made in us, that we may so live, that we may become living signs of the kingdom of God.

We pray that you will bless us this weekend, that you will really speak to us through your word, that you will break through our hardness and bring us out of the rocky soil, out of the thorny soil, into the good soil.

Grant, O God, that as your word touches us this weekend, it may bear fruit, and that there may be a harvest a hundredfold, we thank you for the enormous potential of your word.

And we just pray, Lord, that we may see that potential being realized in our lives as individuals and as a congregation this weekend and in the days that may lie ahead. We ask these things for the forgiveness of all our multiple sins.

In Jesus' name, Amen.