

Home Group Leaders Discussion Guide

Luke 8:1-15

(8:1-3)

In this passage we encounter one of the unique aspects of Luke...the support of Jesus' ministry by some women. Practically speaking, one does wonder how an itinerate rabbi and His disciples took care of logistical issues like eating, lodging, etc. Luke provides the answer. Mary, Joanna, Susanna, and many others helped to *"support them out of their own means."* (8:3). Luke is known, more than the other Gospel writers, to highlight the least likely people. He is counter-cultural in this aspect. As we know, sadly, women were viewed as second-class citizens, at best, in Biblical times. But Luke goes out of the way to draw positive attention to women and other marginalized people. Why? Because he understood the social implications of the Gospel. Barriers that people have a tendency to raise between one another, the Kingdom knocks down. These ladies will be mentioned again in the climax of the Gospel...the resurrection...as the first witnesses of the resurrected Jesus (spoiler alert☺). This is one of those little "proofs", if you will, that the story of Jesus' resurrection is true. No one in their right mind, if they were trying to convince someone of something back then, would ever use women as credible testimony. If the Gospel writers were making this story up, trying to deceive people, they would never use women as the first witnesses.

For those who claim that the Christian faith is male chauvinistic apparently don't know the story very well. While it's true that throughout Church history chauvinism has, sadly, ruled. Such behavior and attitude is not consistent with the Biblical witness and ought to be repented from.

The fact that these women could travel around with Jesus and support Him and the disciples out of their own means, means that their means were pretty substantial.

Q. Have you ever heard someone speak disparagingly about the Christian faith and its treatment of women? How did you respond? (Or what did it cause you to think/feel.)

Q. In what ways do you think Jesus upholds and honors women?

(8:4-15)

All 3 synoptic gospels share this story (see Matthew 13:1-23, Mark 4:1-20...I'd recommend familiarizing yourself with the other writer's versions). So why does a farmer, any farmer, sow seed? There's only one correct answer to the question. Farmers sow seed to produce a crop. No other reason. The seed in the parable is the word of God (or "message of the kingdom" in Matthew, or what we might simply call "the Gospel").

We all know the story: Jesus outlines 4 different types of soil, representing 4 different responses to the Word/Gospel (which is really 4 different heart conditions), with only one type, the “good soil”, producing the desired outcome.

(At this point, I’d like to draw your attention to the discussion guide of Luke 6:43-49, for a reminder of the important role the “heart” plays in the Bible.)

What we see in this passage is that Jesus is a “realist”. He understands that only a fraction of the people who hear the Gospel will actually end up in a desirable way. I will often times see fellow pastors post on Facebook about the “decisions” or baptisms or the number of people who came forward at the end of a sermon. They are obviously pleased and happy at the responses of the people. But when I read this passage, I can’t help but think to myself, “Well, that’s good...better than the alternative (the first type of soil)...but time will tell.” We must remember that seed is sown so that it will yield a crop. Simply not being the first type of soil, or not being the first heart condition—a hard heart—isn’t good enough, alone isn’t the desired outcome.

The second and third soils mentioned should cause us pause. It seems to me, that too many churches are happy to accommodate people who represent the 2nd and 3rd type of soil (the shallow heart in which the Gospel doesn’t really take root, or the divided heart that is easily choked out). In fact, these might be the vast majority of church-goers in the US: people with little root that fall away when trouble, persecution, or testing comes; or people who are choked out by life’s worries, riches or pleasures, and do not mature.

But, again, Jesus knows this, it does not surprise Him. All three synoptic Gospels mention that this parable was spoken to a large crowd. It’s as if Jesus was saying, “I know not all of you are tracking with me, or will continue to track with me.” And it’s also like He’s preparing the disciples for that reality as well.

All three synoptics also quote from Isaiah chapter 6. A typical question that spawns from Isaiah 6:9-10 is, “Wait. Is God saying He doesn’t want people to see, hear, understand, and turn and be healed?” While the wording, on the surface, can illicit such a question, it’s really an issue of God/Jesus understanding the heart of the people...again, understanding the reality of the situation. And by drawing upon Isaiah, Jesus was wanting His hearers to identify with the Israelites as described in Isaiah. For example, in Isaiah 29:13-14 it reads, “*The Lord says: ‘These people come near to Me with their mouth and honor Me with their lips, but their hearts are far from Me. Their worship of Me is made up only of rules taught by men.’*” Like Isaiah to the ancient Israelites, so Jesus was saying, “Don’t fool yourselves...many of you are not producing the fruit I desire for/of you.” The fact that many people scratched their heads at Jesus’ parable is evidence of their calloused, stubborn hearts. And a calloused/stubborn heart, when tested will fall away (2nd soil), or when presented with other options will also not yield kingdom fruit (3rd soil).

By contrast, “good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.” (8:15 NIV) To “retain” means to really take hold of something, in this case the Word. A noble and good heart can properly assess the value of the message of the kingdom, and can realize that it’s the best thing ever. In Matthew’s version of this parable, he actually presents a series of parables together. Two of which are the parable of the hidden treasure and the parable of the pearl of great price (see Matthew 13:44-46). The point of each of those parables is that the Kingdom of God is of such great value, that anyone with proper discernment (a good and noble heart we might say) will sell everything they have to attain it. This is the proper reaction, and the condition needed, to be fruitful/produce a crop.

- Q. So as we consider this parable of the sower/soils some questions that bubble up are: What type of soil am I? What are the conditions that make someone good soil, or what are the ways to cultivate good soil? What does producing a crop even mean?**
- Q. How do we get a good/accurate gauge into the true condition of our heart? How do you, personally, go about keeping good tabs on the condition of your heart? What are the indicators for you that things might not be right/good?**
- Q. Think back to your life 5 years ago (or may 10), how would you describe your heart condition then compared to now?**

As I consider our context (early 21st century United States, in an increasingly post-Christian culture) I can’t help but focus on the 3rd type of soil, where the seed is choked out by life’s worries, riches, and pleasures. At least by my observation, the American church seems to most resemble this condition—the divided heart, easily distracted by various idols, and the false promises they present.

- Q. Do you agree with this assessment/observation? How can we protect ourselves from idolatry that’s all around us?**
- Q. Can you think of people that you’ve come across in your life that fit each of these conditions? (Describe)**

It seems that this particular condition rears its head in many times and places. In Revelation 3 Jesus warns the church in Laodicea of a similar condition: “*These are the words of the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the ruler of God’s creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other. So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of My mouth. You say, ‘I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.’ But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes so you can see.*” (Revelation 3:14-18)

As we wrestle with our own heart condition and the general, pervasive, collective heart condition of our society, I think Psalm 73 might be helpful. In this psalm the psalmist is wrestling with envy of the wealthy and the wicked. When he took his eyes off of God and focused on the world around him, he was grieved and oppressed and dumbfounded at the pride and injustice he saw...and honestly a tad envious at how good some have it, but burdened for those who struggle. But when he turned his eyes back to God, or as he puts it, *"till I entered the sanctuary of God"* (Psalm 73:17a), then proper perspective was restored. Then he could declare, *"Whom have I in heaven but you? And earth has nothing I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever."* (Psalm 73:25-26)

To conclude, what is the fruit/crop that the sower is desiring? If the seed is the Word, what type of fruit would that bear? In a word, Christlikeness (both in character and in purpose). The word of God sown into the hearts of people produces people who become more and more like Jesus. We will resemble Him in character. And we will emulate His actions. Jesus is always seeking the Father's glory in who He is and what He does. So we will do likewise.

Q. How have you seen fruit born in/through your life?

Q. What has "retaining" and "persevering" been like for you?