

Prayer

Almighty God and heavenly Father, we rejoice to be Your children. You have led Your people through centuries of human development and strife, and You have empowered them by Your Spirit to maintain their witness to You, the one and only God who made the world and loves it. May we who are Your children today continue in our task of witnessing faithfully to Your power and Your redeeming Love, for the sake of the future of the world and all people. AMEN

Prayer Suggestions

Prayer ideas

Be quiet and let yourself be still before God. Is there any part of your Christian life which raises questions in your mind? Perhaps something you do not understand? Bring this to the Lord in prayer.

On-going prayers

- **Pray for the ministry of God's people on TV:** Pray for presenters and preachers who appear of television, some of them on their own television shows. Pray that God will bless these people with wisdom and love for the people to whom they minister.
- Pray for the victims of crime, especially those that have been in the news recently
- Give thanks to God for the assurance of sins forgiven and for the proof of God's love

Meditation

Glory be to God on high
Praise Him who we find in Jesus Christ

Give Him the honour due His name
as Creator of the world and everything in it

Know that He is with us in Jesus Christ
The Saviour who has come to be our friend

Follow the cloud and fire of His guidance
through the easy and difficult pathways of life

Accept what He has revealed about how His world works
and keep to the ground rules of life He has given

Read the Word and listen to His voice
receive His blessing in fellowship with others

Worship the Lord in Spirit and in truth
For He will come in glory to bring you home

Glory be to God on high
Praise Him who we find in Jesus Christ

Bible passage - Luke 8:1-8

¹ Soon after this, Jesus began to travel through towns and villages preaching and proclaiming the good news of the Kingdom of God. The twelve were with Him, ² as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and sicknesses: Mary (called Magdalene) from whom seven demons had come out, ³ and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their own resources.

⁴ When a great crowd had gathered, coming to Him from town upon town, Jesus said in a parable:

⁵ 'A sower went out to sow his seed, and as he scattered the seed, some fell on the pathway and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air ate it up. ⁶ Some fell on the rocky ground, and when it sprouted, it withered because it had no moisture. ⁷ Other seed fell among thorns, and the thorns grew with it and choked it. ⁸ But some fell into soil that was good, and it grew and produced a hundredfold.'

As He said this, Jesus called out,

'Listen, you who have ears to hear!'

Bible Study

Review

Everything was ready. In the first seven chapters of Luke's Gospel, Jesus had preached, taught, and performed deeds to show that He was the Messiah. He had also chosen twelve companions to accompany Him and show the Jewish people that God was doing something new through Him. So Jesus now gathered His followers into a compact and self-sufficient group who would travel with Him around the countryside of Galilee on His mission to spread the Gospel.

From the early days of the church, Luke 8 has been regarded as a model of the missionary work done by Jesus. If you read through it all, you will find that after gathering His team, Jesus travels around the Galilee region delivering His most famous parables (e.g. the parable of the sower – 8:4-8) and performing works of power. His miracles include stilling the storm (8:22-25), the deliverance of Legion (8:26-31) and the healing of Jairus' daughter and the woman with a flow of blood (8:40-56). Each part of the chapter contains a powerful example of the Gospel message in word and deed, and each story is worth our careful attention.

So the first few verses of our passage today set the scene as Jesus prepares for His mission around '*towns and villages*' (8:1). He has already chosen the twelve disciples, but now we gain a glimpse of Jesus' intent to draw them into His work and mission. From now on, they must travel and work with Him as He proclaims the Gospel (8:1). The time would shortly come (in the next chapter, 9:1f.) when Jesus would ask them to do what they had seen Him do. But for the time being, their duty was to learn from the Master.

Luke, alone amongst the Gospel writers, describes the women who came on Jesus' mission. Three are named, and their total is perhaps more than the twelve; Luke says there were 'many others' (8:3). The leader of the group is Mary Magdalene (i.e. Mary from Magdala). All four Gospels identify Mary as a primary witness to the resurrection, but the little we know about her background comes from Luke, who reveals that Jesus had done a dramatic work in her life; she had been delivered of '*seven demons*' (8:2). Tradition says that Jesus saved her from immorality, but no Biblical text says this. Nevertheless, she showed her great thanks to Jesus by dedicating herself in His service. Nothing else is known of Susanna or Joanna, but Luke reveals that together, the women provided for the whole group from their private means (8:3).

It is perhaps unsurprising that the parable of the sower should come next. It is a highly memorable parable, and it is a prime example of Jesus' great gift of being able to draw Kingdom truth from common observation. It is also appropriate for a Gospel passage about Jesus' mission, because it describes beautifully the consequences of spreading the Good News of God's Kingdom. We will not study the details of this parable today, because in tomorrow's reading we will study Jesus' own interpretation of it (8:11-15). It is hardly right for us to guess at the parable's meaning without reading what Jesus said about it Himself!

The parable of the sower seems straightforward enough, but we need to be clear about what the details represent. Clearly, the sower is someone who spreads the Good News, the seed is the Gospel, the pathway is life itself and the different features of the land are its complexities. Then at the end of the parable, we find a dramatic conclusion, a feature typical of many a short story. This is surely the 'punch line', around which the whole story revolves. Here, the parable describes the problems of life that make it difficult for the Gospel message to take root. But the end tells us that where it does, the results can be dramatic! A wheat harvest of a hundredfold was virtually unheard of! The point is this; God is able to do spectacularly more than can be imagined.

Of course, tomorrow's reading will challenge us with yet more from this parable. But the progress of Luke's Gospel seems clear. Jesus, the disciples, and all His followers including women were ready to do God's work. The Gospel was to be preached to the whole Galilee region.

Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- What can we learn about Jesus' first mission from this passage of Scripture?
- To whom does Jesus deliver the Parable of the Sower, and why?
- The theme of response to the Kingdom of God, found in the Parable of the Sower

Notes on the text and translation

V1 **'Jesus began to travel through towns and villages'**

Other translations:

'Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another' (NIV)

'He went on through cities and villages' (NRSV)

Each translation attempts to convey the sense of the Greek here, which speaks of Jesus travelling around in an organised and systematic manner. The Greek word 'polis' refers to a town or city. There is no word in Greek to delineate between a small town and a large town.

V4 **'when a great crowd had gathered, coming to Him from town upon town'**

Other translations:

'While a large crowd was gathering and people were coming to Jesus from town after town' (NIV)

'When a great crowd gathered and people from town after town came to Him' (NRSV)

The words used in this verse link with those used in verse 1. This suggests that those who gathered came from the towns that Jesus visited on His tour of Galilee. The Greek contains an expression that is typical of the day but does not translate well into English, hence the differences between the Bible versions. My translation attempts to keep the verse as simple as possible.

Going Deeper

What can we learn about Jesus' first mission from this passage of Scripture?

Up to this point in Luke's Gospel, Jesus has moved around only casually, according to His circumstances. The Greek words found in verses one and four (see note above) indicate a shift, and from now on, Jesus' movements are purposeful. This is the beginning of what may be called Jesus' itinerant ministry.

Some established churches, notably the Methodist church, practice a form of itinerant ministry in which ministers are required to submit to the idea that their ministry is not located where they live. The principle of itinerant ministry is not merely of practical expediency, it comes from the Bible, and specifically here in Luke's Gospel, which so clearly highlights this aspect of Jesus' work. Following this pattern, the Methodist minister must preach the Gospel in more than one place, and be ready to move around. The founder of Methodism, John Wesley, practiced a form of itinerant ministry in which he moved around day by day and preached where ever he stayed. In past generations, Methodist ministers moved frequently, year after year, but it is more common for them to stay perhaps 7 or 10 years in one place today, so some within the church are concerned about whether it truly retains the principle of itinerant ministry.

In order to put His plan of itinerant ministry into practice, Jesus needed His disciples. He brought these, but Luke shows more interest in the women here in this passage. We have already mentioned Mary Magdalene as the probable leader of the women, but the other interesting woman is Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza. A position in Herod's house was lucrative, and it is fair to assume that the wife of a steward had both influence and access to resources, which is why she is mentioned.

Most people imagine that Jesus travelled through the dusty desert regions of Judea alone with His twelve disciples. We should perhaps accept that this mental picture may be wrong, and that along with the twelve disciples, there was a similar perhaps larger group of women and others who travelled with Jesus' group. This was a sizeable mission. Jesus was able to command the efforts of a considerable number of people well able to advertise His presence within a town, and marshalling a crowd.

Jesus gathered His disciples and prepared for His mission in a very practical way. Provision was made for all by the inclusion of the women. Joanna, and perhaps others, were able to channel personal resources into keeping Jesus' mission afloat. God would provide for His work, but He did this in practical ways and through people who had the resources. Today, no church can embark upon mission without examining the practicalities carefully, and making sure that proper provision is made for those who do God's work and the work of the church.

To whom does Jesus deliver the Parable of the Sower, and why?

We might imagine that the parable of the Sower was spoken by Jesus to a large crowd as described here in Luke's Gospel. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus is pictured delivering this famous parable while standing on a boat at the edge of the picturesque Lake Galilee. It is worth reconsidering this mental picture however,

because there is good reason to think that the parable was used by Jesus on more than one occasion, and was perhaps the centre piece of some of His teaching.

Again, verses 1 and 4 are the clue, and when you put the two together, they give a rather formulaic picture of Jesus addressing crowds from all the towns on His mission route. It is possible that this was Luke's way of saying that the parable was indeed preached in every place Jesus went. But there is more for us to consider. Tomorrow, we will read Jesus explanation of the parable of the sower, which was given to the disciples in private at a later date. So the parable was not just delivered as part of Jesus' teaching, it became the subject of detailed conversation amongst the group of people travelling with Jesus. It was important that Jesus explain this parable to those with Him, for unless they understood what He was saying in this parable, they would miss the point of the mission.

Lastly, Luke reports that after Jesus concluded the parable, He called out, 'Listen you who have ears to hear!' (8:8). Matthew (13:9) and Mark (4:9) have Jesus saying the same thing, but the phrase just runs on from the end of the parable without the emphasis placed on it by Luke. Why then did Luke emphasise this by having Jesus 'call out' these words (8:8)? If the presentation of the parable here in Luke is as formulaic as I have suggested, then this represents Jesus strong wish that everyone hear this parable, get to know it and apply it. In this way, Luke projects this whole parable as if advocating it to his reader. It holds invaluable secrets of God's work in this world, for all who will read and pay attention.

The theme of response to the Kingdom of God, found in the Parable of the Sower

The first thing we should know when reading the parable of the Sower is this; it was standard rabbinical teaching of Jesus' day that the Word of God was like seed. This was a simple and effective illustration of how God worked in both the individual and within society at large, explaining the fact that sometimes it seems dormant and produces little that can be called 'results', and yet at other times God seems highly active in the world. Of course, a seed goes into the ground and dies before it grows and produces fruit. Jesus refers to this rabbinic illustration not just here, but also in the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the 'wheat and tares'. Here, however, Jesus takes this great teaching and reproduces it in a remarkable new way with added emphasis!

The new factor in this illustration is the inclusion of the land. The seed is sowed, and Jesus says little about who the sower is or the nature of the seed; He takes this for granted. His main concern is that the seed does not grow in a uniform manner, and this is not because the seed is faulty, rather, the ground is varied and contains the means of hampering God's work. In this parable, Jesus explains that the world will provide a number of impediments to the growth of the Kingdom, and He lists them as the following

1. *Obstruction and destruction.* In the first part of the parable (8:5), the seed falls on unyielding ground where it is destroyed in a number of ways. Jesus says more about this in tomorrow's reading, but we can easily see that Jesus was concerned about those who reject the message of God's Kingdom out of hand, and the reasons why they do this. Of course, the people of His own day who rejected His message were most obviously the Pharisees. Jesus seems to say that the Kingdom of God will not grow where such opposition to God's Word exists.
2. *Withering.* This second part of the parable bemoans the fate of God's Word on ground that is barren and unable to give root to the seed. The seed begins to grow but soon withers and dies (8:6), but what does this mean? In Israelite history, the picture of rocks and lack of moisture suggests the time when God's people came out of Egypt but endured forty years in the wilderness because of their stubborn self-centredness. Of course, the Word of God cannot grow in the heart if it is consumed by self-centredness, whether this is individual or collective self-centredness. This is one good reason why the Israelites struggled in the desert and why the Kingdom of God does not grow today.
3. *Choking.* The third part of the parable is the example of ground where the seed is on the receiving end of aggression, for other plants around the seedling grow with it and choke it (8:7). One of the common themes of Jesus' teaching is the opposition that will be shown to the Gospel in the world. This is not merely a 'Jewish' matter, as if the finger can be pointed at the Pharisees again, it is a matter of general truth. Jesus knew that the work of God's love in this world would be opposed by those who found it threatening, and He warned His disciples from the beginning that they would suffer persecution, wherever the Gospel was preached.
4. *Growth in good soil.* The last part of the parable tells the good news that there will always be good soil where the seed will produce a super-abundant crop (8:8). At the moment, Jesus does not elaborate on what this good soil is, and it will become evident in the course of Jesus' ministry that good soil is a receptive heart that does not reject God's Word, replace it with self, or fight with it. In those days, a farmer might expect a good crop of ten fold or perhaps fifteen fold. Despite claims to the contrary, there is no real evidence that farmers of the day could obtain anything like a hundred

fold gain with any crop. God's Word therefore produces miracles, and that's from the mouth of the Messiah!

Application

It is surely worth looking at Jesus' methods of mission, and examining whether it is appropriate for today. There is no doubt that God's mission is accomplished through the everyday lives of Christians as they witness to their Lord in word and deed. However there are times, just as there were in Jesus' own life and ministry, when a concerted effort is required, and typically, Christians call such effort a 'mission'. For cultural reasons, the term 'mission' may not be the best to use today, but it does describe the sense of purpose that draws people together to focus on something that must be done. At best, a Christian mission involves a gathering of God's people who are committed to doing His work. This will include people like the disciples, who were called by God. It will also include those who offer themselves to the task out of gratitude, like Mary, and those who come to do the necessary work to maintain a team of people in their activity. Most importantly, it will include the preaching of the gospel, represented in this passage of Scripture by the Parable of the Sower.

The parable bears all the hallmarks of one that was well known even in Jesus' day, and one that Jesus may have used on a number of occasions because it was effective. There is no reason why a preacher or evangelist today should not repeat a good story or illustration, if it will explain the Kingdom of God properly and well. Frequent sermons preached about different subjects can be misunderstood or forgotten, but a well chosen story with a clear point is memorable, and can stick in the mind for a long time. Providing, that is, that the illustration is not repeated unduly or overplayed. Perhaps the evangelist should aim to find and use such stories well rather than seek to impress Christian audiences by rhetorical skill.

People will often remember the parable of the Sower by recalling the different grounds and the way that the seed responds to each ground. I suggest that first and foremost it is worth remembering the end of the parable. God's intention is always to produce a great harvest from the work He commissions, and it is He who puts the seed in the right soil to produce 'a hundredfold'. When true revival has come upon the church in generations past, it has proved impossible to count the people involved. The movement of God's Spirit has always proved too fast for computation, and sometimes vast numbers of people have responded by faith to the call of the Gospel. Why should we not expect such great things in our own day? Indeed, they may be happening but we do not know! We must have confidence that God is able to do far more than we ask or pray, and our prayer must always be that the Gospel will become effective in our own time. God is always at work, and His people must be ready to hear His call to mission.

Discipleship

Questions (for use in groups)

1. What does God call his people to do, in order to declare the Kingdom of God today? Are all God's people called to mission?
2. Why does Luke include so many stories about women within his Gospel? How important is this for the witness of the Gospel today?
3. If one seed produces a hundredfold, what does this mean for the mission of God's church in the world today?

Personal comments by author

Throughout my Christian life, and my experience as a Christian minister, I have been aware that Christ calls me to 'sow seed'. It is not that I tried to angle my words in such a way that I drop Christian faith or the name of Jesus into every conversation I have; it is more that I am aware that my words count. Because I am a Christian, what I say matters within the Kingdom of God, which is here and now, so I try to speak in a manner that is honouring to God and representatives of the values of the Kingdom. In this way, I commit my words and deeds to the Lord, and pray that He will use the seeds dropped into the ground, and produce a great harvest. I know full well that I will most likely never see the harvest of my own sowing. But that is how it should be.

Ideas for exploring discipleship

- *Have you ever done something for the mission of God Church and for his Kingdom? It may be that you have attended church and done your best to do what is right as a Christian, but have never done anything that you feel contributes to the work of the proclamation of the Gospel. Look out for opportunities to do something positive, however small. Size is not important, positive commitment is.*
 - *Gather together with other Christians, if at all possible, to pray for revival and renewal in your homeland. Pray that God will send evangelists who can speak effectively to the people of your generation about God's love and eternal salvation.*
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Final Prayer

Dear Jesus, You had a wonderful ability with words. Send Your Holy Spirit upon Your people today, and give Your servants the necessary abilities to speak Your Word with clarity in this generation. Work in power among us we pray, so that the Gospel will become effective through our words and through our deeds, and to the glory of your eternal Name. AMEN
