

Study 5

Luke 8:1-25

Trending: #hidden/disclosed, #now/not yet, #inside/outside, #privileged/deprived

Big Idea of the passage:

The kingdom of God, as announced by Jesus and embodied in his ministry, was a secret revealed to some and concealed to others. The parable of the sower explained the varied responses to Jesus which must have been a surprise to his disciples.

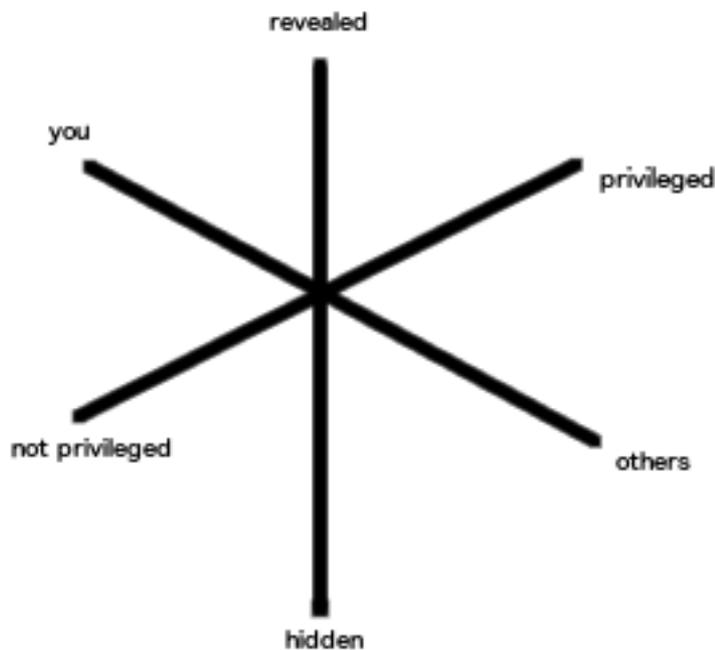
Main application:

We have had the secrets of the kingdom revealed to us through the Scriptures and by the work of God's Spirit making the message of the Scriptures clear to us. Nevertheless the challenge for us is to keep on responding rightly to the word of the kingdom whenever we hear it.

SUGGESTIONS FOR YOUR STUDY

Read Luke 8:1-25 and try the following teaser:

1. Where would you plot Jesus' disciples as a dot on the graph?



2. Where would you plot the Pharisees and scribes?
3. What elements seem to be held in tension here?

The aim of these teaser questions is not to try to resolve the tension but to open up the ideas raised by the events in the passage. If the group members are left with some questions regarding

unresolved tensions at this point in the study then don't stress. Things will become clearer as the study progresses even if as we'll see, not all the tensions will be resolved.

Another teaser:

4. How do we understand Jesus' observation to his disciples when he says in 8:10, "*The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you.....*"? Thus far in Luke's narrative what evidence can we see for what Jesus says here? (See Luke 4:43, 6:20, 7:28, 8:1, 10)

BACKGROUND

Luke seems vague in his time references. He does not seek to give us, the readers, a precise chronology of the events that took place. (See 5:1,17,27, 6:1,12, 7:11, 8:1)

Verses 8:1-3 could well be a description of an extended period of time in Jesus' ministry. It is quite possible that the parable of the sower was a regular feature of his teaching to the crowds. Certainly Jesus tells us that the parables were. (verse 10b)

A prominent theme of Jesus' teaching in this section is that the Kingdom of God is both hidden and revealed at the same time. (verses 10, 17, 25)

Looking back at the events described in the previous chapters we see that this idea captures Jesus' ministry (7:1-10, 31-35, 44-50). Some people, through their actions, showed a deep respect for Jesus and put their faith in him whereas others witnessed the same events. They saw and heard but showed by their actions and attitudes that they neither "saw" nor "understood".

This is unexpected. Who would have thought given the Old Testament expectations about the Day of the Lord's coming (another way of speaking in Old Testament terms about the arrival of the kingdom of God) that it would be not be plain for all to see?

THE PARABLE OF THE SOWER

Thought experiment

5. Can you creatively retell the parable of the sower through the eyes of the Old Testament believer awaiting the arrival of kingdom, ie. where there is only one soil? How does this thought experiment help us in thinking through Jesus' teaching here?

Explanation

The parable of the soils challenges the hearers to hear rightly and to listen carefully. However it is more importantly, a description of what is taking place in Jesus' ministry right in front of the disciples' very eyes.

Even if the disciples were only dimly aware at this point in time of Jesus' importance in God's whole scheme of bringing in the kingdom, they must have been at times bewildered about the negative reactions of others towards him. How was it possible for anyone to refuse God's kingdom once it had appeared in the world (drawn near)? How could the Pharisees even think of refusing Jesus' teaching! In the disciples' eyes this must have seemed tantamount to someone thinking that they could put a stop to the final judgement when it came! Impossible!

The parable of the 4 soils has the brilliant ability to help the disciples of Jesus understand what was going on around them at the time. They must have also been wondering whether Jesus' ministry was failing. The parable therefore serves as a commentary on Jesus' ministry and a very helpful corrective to help them understand the true nature of the kingdom of God, ie both hidden and revealed at the same time. The word of the kingdom does its work in sifting people's hearts.

In once sense there is nothing new here. In Isaiah's day the prophet Isaiah is sent by God to preach to God's people and in doing so the people's hearts would be hardened, their ears dulled and their eyes closed (Isaiah 6:9-10). This was God's intention and plan all along. Isaiah looks forward to the day when there would be a remnant who would genuinely respond to God's word.

Jesus, in the same way, speaks of the kingdom of God and uses parables as the means of doing this. They are the perfect vehicle for achieving this end, ie allowing the truth to be obscured to some and revealed to others. (Luke 8:10)

DIGGING DEEPER (OPTIONAL)

1. Don Carson drawing on G.E. Ladd:

For the "secrets of the kingdom" to be "given" the disciples suggests that to them certain eschatological realities are being revealed. What is revealed is not who Jesus is, the nature of God or the power of love..... rather, the "mystery of the Kingdom is the coming of the Kingdom into history in advance of its apocalyptic manifestation" ... That God would bring in his kingdom was not secret. All Jews looked forward to it. "The new truth, now given to men by revelation in the person and mission of Jesus, is that *the Kingdom which is to come finally in apocalyptic power, as foreseen by Daniel, has in fact entered into the world in advance in a hidden form to work secretly within and among men*".

2. Leon Morris

Secrets are truths that man could never discover for himself, but which God has revealed. ... But *for others* there is sight without seeing and hearing without understanding. They hear the parables, but do not penetrate into the meaning. Parables both reveal and conceal truth: they reveal it to the genuine seeker who will take the trouble to dig beneath the surface and discover the meaning, but they conceal it for him who is content simple to listen to the story. This is plainly the result of the parables, but Jesus says it is also their purpose(*so that...*). Parables are a mine of information to those who are in earnest, but they are a judgement on the casual and careless.

3. Leon Morris

Commitment to Jesus is the prerequisite for a true understanding of Jesus parabolic teaching.

An important underlying question is whether a hearer is able to change from being one soil type to become another, ie how can we become good soil?

6. Is it in our power to receive the word and produce a crop a hundred times more than was sown, ie hear the word, retain it, and persevere in it?
7. If we answer "yes" to this question how are we to think of verse 12, i.e., is a right response possible for the first soil?

A closely associated theme that marries perfectly with this first theme (the kingdom of God come in Jesus' ministry) is that of the hearer of Jesus' words being either on the inside or on the outside. (verses 10, 18).

THE PARABLE OF THE LAMP

8. How might we understand the parable of the lamp (verses 16-18)?
9. What does it teach us about the now/not yet nature of the kingdom? How does this parable modify Jesus' teaching about the hidden nature of the kingdom?

The fact that it would not always be this way. There will be a day when all will be revealed.

10. Verse 18b would at first sight to be outrageously unfair. Why? When we read all of verse 18 and seek to understand it in the light of Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God, how does it change?
11. How then do we situate ourselves as disciples today in relation to Jesus' teaching in this part of Luke's Gospel?

EXPLANATION

Compared with Jesus disciples at the time, we live on the other side of the cross. At the time they, along with some others (the centurion and the woman with the perfume for e.g.) were the ones who seeing, "saw" and who hearing, "understood". We have access to the disciples' 'seeing' and 'understanding' in the Scriptures. In a sense we can say that by proxy, we have been given the secrets of the kingdom of God. More than this, we now have the full story about the kingdom for which the cross plays a central role. Added to this, the work of God's Spirit has been to make these words of the kingdom real to us in such a way as to make us members of the kingdom through faith in Jesus. How privileged we are!

This gives us great responsibility to consider carefully how we listen to the words of the kingdom as we hear them today. Today the words about the kingdom continue to do their sifting work as the gospel is announced to a world trapped in sin. We should not be surprised when we see different responses to the preaching of the gospel. The parable of the soils is still just as relevant today. The varied responses to the gospel should not deter us from continuing to preach the word.

At the same time we need to heed the call of the parable for our own lives. We have been given much but verse 18 sounds a warning. What we 'have' in this verse speaks more about what we value than about what God has given us.

12. Go back and look at the graph in question 1. Where would you place us on the graph?
13. How do we make sure that we keep hold of what we have?
14. Where lie the risks for us in seeing but not seeing and hearing but not understanding? How can we help one another in this?

Pray together about these important truths.

FOR FURTHER THOUGHT

The citation of Isa.6.9f does not mean that "those outside" are denied the possibility of belief. It indicates that they are excluded from the opportunity of being further instructed in the secret of the Kingdom so long as unbelief continues. That the Kingdom has come in an initial phase in the presence of Jesus can be discerned only by faith, which is to say by the grace of God. Jesus' presence, therefore means disclosure *and* veiling; it releases both grace *and* judgement.

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