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THE LATEST DIRT ON DIRT  
Luke 8:4-15

INTRODUCTION

I have mentioned before that a dead battery is the reason Laurie and I got married. The day before we got engaged we decided we needed to break up. But that next morning when I went out to drive to school my car wouldn't start. I couldn't believe it wouldn't start because I had just put in a new battery. Was it the starter or the alternator that was at fault? I messed around trying to figure out what was wrong, to no avail. In the end I had to call Laurie to ask for a ride to school and that led to a conversation on our way that ended with us deciding we wanted to get married.

The one thing I never considered that morning was that I might have a dead battery. The battery was brand new so I didn't think there could be anything wrong with it. I was eventually to learn that the problem was, in fact, a defective battery. I have been thankful ever since for that faulty battery.

Do you ever wonder why so many people do not believe in the good news of Jesus Christ? So often Christians fear that the problem is we are not presenting the message as effectively as is needed or there is something else that is causing the problem. The one thing we often don't consider may, like my dead car battery, in fact be the problem. We will see that today as we look at a parable Jesus told in Luke 8:4-15. This is a familiar parable that comes at a critical juncture in the ministry of the Lord Jesus. It has an important reminder for us today.

PARABLES REMIND US OF A CRUCIAL TRUTH

Did you happen to watch the television show *Lost* when it was on? It was quite the phenomenon. It was well written and was given many awards. It had great characters that drew viewers in and a plot so full of twists, turns and mysteries they never knew quite what was going on. The story generated all kinds of buzz and boat loads of theorizing and speculation about what it meant and where it was going. The show could be more than a little frustrating because it never seemed to provide answers, just more questions. But finally after 6 seasons the producers promised a conclusion that would bring it all together. After I watched the promised finale I said, "That's it? That's the big ending?" I was annoyed. Most of

my questions weren't answered and the ending was very unsatisfying. That's sort of what happened with Jesus at this point of his ministry.

Imagine that you have been hearing about a person who is traveling widely to speaking engagements and is drawing big crowds wherever he goes. He is generating a big time buzz. You hear from one person after another who has heard this person that he is a terrific communicator and that he has amazing insight. He says things that no one has ever heard before. He makes God come alive to people and gives them hope they've never had. There is talk that he is transforming lives.

Eventually this man comes to your area and you have an opportunity to hear him speak. You are a little skeptical, but you are anxious to see what the big deal is. So you go to hear him speak. He stands up and begins telling a story. He is a wonderful story-teller so he draws you in. He says a man goes into farming as a career. Since you live in a primarily agricultural area this immediately connects with you and others in the audience. In his story this farmer does what any farmer would do. He goes out into his field and begins planting seed. In many cases the crop fails because the soil is poor and the seed doesn't grow. But there is good soil that supports the seeds and produces an abundant crop.

You are totally with the speaker. He has you anxious to understand where he's going with this. You sense he has something you need to hear. But when he gets to the end of the story he says, "If you have ears to hear what I'm saying, use them." Then he walks off the platform. That's it. End of speech. You are dumbfounded. He stands up, tells a little story then just walks away. What was that all about? Like my reaction to *Lost* you think, "what was that supposed to mean?"

Verse 4 says "a large crowd was coming to Jesus from town after town." People flocked to hear him speak, but all he did was tell this story and leave them scratching their heads. Luke tells us that the disciples asked Jesus what the parable meant. But in his account of this incident Matthew informs us that they also asked "Why do you speak to the people in parables?" (Matthew 13:10). In other words, these people came from miles away to hear you speak and all you did was tell them a story. Why did you do that?

Jesus answered in Luke 8:10, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you, but to others I speak in parables, so that, 'though seeing they may not see; though hearing they may not understand.'" There are several important thoughts in that statement. First, the kingdom of God has secrets.

These are not secrets in the sense of top secret, classified information. It is not the sort of thing where Jesus could tell us but then he'd have to kill us.

The word translated secret here is the Greek word *musterion*, from which we get "mystery." It is not a mystery we have to investigate and figure out like in mystery novels. It is a truth which we can *never* figure out on our own. It is something we would not know unless God revealed it. We all have our mysteries. When Laurie and I were first married there was something about her that I thought was a little strange. She didn't like steak. She preferred waffles. I thought that was unusual, but it did make it cheaper to feed her. Once we were taken to a nice restaurant that didn't offer waffles on their dinner menu, but they did have steak. Somewhat reluctantly Laurie ordered a steak, and she loved it! She then revealed the mystery. Her father was a chemist and he was hyper about bacteria in food. So he insisted that any meat they ate be thoroughly cooked, and by thoroughly I mean burnt offering. The only steak she'd ever eaten bore a striking resemblance to a charcoal briquette. When she ate that steak at the restaurant she found it delightful. The only way I understood the mystery of her steak aversion was that she revealed it. There are a number of things about the kingdom of God we will never understand unless he reveals them.

If you study some of the bright lights of the age of enlightenment you might encounter some of their discussions of "natural religion." The idea was to come to a religious position purely on the basis of human reason. They wanted to take revelation of God's truth out of the equation. You actually can get some sense of God that way. Using only your human reasoning you can deduce the existence of a creator through the order of the universe and the existence of morality. But there is a lot about the kingdom of God you will never get to. There are mysteries we will only know if God reveals them to us.

Jesus tells the disciples that it has been given them to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God. But the majority of the people are not going to learn those mysteries. Instead of telling them the mysteries Jesus said he was going to tell them these allegorical stories we call parables. The secrets of the kingdom are revealed in the stories, but the people by and large aren't going to get it. They'll hear the stories but go away scratching their heads, asking "what was that all about?" and dealing with a nagging worry that maybe they're missing something.

In verse 10 it sounds like Jesus is saying he is speaking in parables with the purpose that though people will hear they won't understand. There is a little Greek word translated "so that" in verse 10. It most frequently was used to introduce a

purpose clause, and that's how the translators have it here. However, the word occasionally was used to introduce a result clause, and that's how I think Luke intended it in this passage. So you could translate verse 10, "I speak in parables with the result that though seeing they might not see." He's saying what is going to happen is that people will hear the story that holds truth about God's kingdom, but they won't understand what that truth is. They'll hear the story but not get the mystery. Hearing they will not hear.

There is a statement in verse 18 that explains what is going on here, and it is a very important principle. "Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more: whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken from him." In Matthew's account of this story Jesus made that statement in his explanation of why Jesus was telling parables. It is an enormously important principle about how God works in regard to the kingdom. To those who have, more will be given. That strikes us as wrong. We tend to think it ought to be that those who *don't* have will be given more and those who already have will not be given more. Even things out a little.

Doesn't what Jesus says sound kind of unfair? In our first ten years of marriage there was something that we encountered that irritated me. It's now sort of coming back to annoy me again, only on behalf of my children. Laurie and I were struggling along financially on one very modest income. One thing that seemed unfair was how much of our income went to Uncle Sam. We were never able to itemize our deductions on our income tax because we didn't make enough money to be able to buy a house and get the interest deduction for a mortgage. Had we been able to buy a house we'd have been in much better shape. But we couldn't buy a house because we didn't have enough money. We were being penalized for not having enough money to buy a house. The system was set up so that if you didn't have much money they took a greater percentage of what you made away. That just seemed wrong and unfair to me. If I made more and could buy a house then I could keep more of what I made. The more you had, the more you could keep. Man that annoyed me. But doesn't this sound like that? The ones who have will be given more and the ones who don't have much will lose what they have.

It sounds a little jarring, but it makes sense. Those who have listened and gained some truth because they accepted and believed what they heard, will be given more. They are responding to what they hear, so they are given more truth. That's just reasonable. Suppose you came to our house for dinner. Laurie serves you one of her terrific enchiladas, but you hardly touch it. Would it make any sense for her to say, "Oh, let me give you some more of that enchilada to eat"? Of course not.

She would only offer you more if you had eaten what you'd been given. To those who eat up what God serves them, more will be given.

On the other hand consider a person who hears what Jesus has to say, maybe accepts a little of it as true, but mostly rejects it. He is the guy who took one bite of enchilada and decided that was all he wanted. What's going to happen to his enchilada? Laurie, disappointed that he didn't find it appetizing, will take it away. At some point that guy is going to lose even the little he had grasped because he is going to conclude that Jesus is a crackpot or at best has gone off the reservation. Why pay attention to him? That guy ends up with nada.

So Jesus tells stories. Those who have accepted that he has the truth will see the point of the stories, or if they don't they'll ask him to explain because they are hungry for his truth. Those who aren't buying Jesus hear the stories and think, "what a waste of time. Who needs that?"

Why was Jesus doing this? He doesn't say, so all I can do is give you my best guess. In part I think he was buying time. He was just telling his parables to tamp down the reaction to him. He knew he was going to be rejected, but he needed time to teach his followers and to reach the people who were open. So he told his stories, knowing those who had little would just turn him off, but others would long for more.

So there is an arithmetic principle we need to learn. In the spiritual realm we are always either adding or subtracting. God's truth inevitably causes something to happen. You will be gaining or losing always.

#### THIS PARABLE ADDRESSES ONE BIG ISSUE

This parable represents a turning point in Jesus' ministry. In the context in Matthew's account it is very clear. Matthew 12:24 says, "When the Pharisees heard this, they said, 'It is only by Beelzebub, the prince of demons, that this fellow drives out demons.'" Jesus was saying some things that were very different than the established leaders of the nation, the Pharisees, and called into question their whole theological system. In fact, the Sermon on the Mount was a direct, frontal attack on them and their theology.

In the overwhelming majority the Pharisees rejected Jesus. In the minds of the Pharisees Jesus was wrong, but worse, he was a threat to their position because people were flocking to him and many liked what he was saying. But the Pharisees had a problem. Jesus was doing supernatural things and they could not deny it.

Everyone saw the miracles. It would have been ludicrous for them to claim they didn't happen. They had to acknowledge the things he was doing were supernatural. But if they admitted Jesus was demonstrating he had the power of God how could they then turn around and reject and attack him? So they had to say that the works he did were supernatural but they weren't from God. That left them only one alternative. His power was supernatural all right. It was from Satan.

When they went to that extreme it was clear to Jesus and to everyone else that they were rejecting him and nothing he could do was going to change their minds. This led to a problem for some of Jesus' followers. They had been astounded by the miracles Jesus did and had been totally changed by the things he said. His teaching was powerful and transforming. At one point in John 6 Jesus said some really confusing things that turned some people off. They began leaving him. In verse 67 Jesus asked the disciples if they wanted to leave too. Peter answered in verse 68, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life?"

No one had ever said the kinds of things Jesus said. No one had ever had such a message of mercy, grace, hope and life. The Pharisees certainly didn't have that kind of message. If the disciples went back to them all they got was more rules, more failure, more condemnation. The disciples were thrilled with what they heard from Jesus. But this left them in a quandary. Why didn't the Pharisees accept Jesus and his message? It was so powerful, yet the most knowledgeable of all the people in Israel were rejecting it. How could that be? In fact, though the crowds coming to Jesus were large, the majority of Israelis were not enlisting in his cause. Why not? Of course the implied question behind that is, are we missing something? Is there something wrong with Jesus and his message and we're just not smart enough to see it?

Don't you find that to be a question that nags at you? The truth of the gospel seems compelling to me. Why is it not more obvious to others? While some polls and surveys indicate that between 30 and 35% of Americans are evangelical Christians, a recent study by Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith that aimed at more clearly identifying those who really believe and follow Jesus pegged the figure at 7%. That seems more consistent with what I see going on in our society. If that's accurate, that means that for every person who really believes in Jesus in our society, there are more than 12 who do not.

Harvard is arguably the top university in the nation. Many of the smartest people in our country go to school there. There are 6,400 undergraduate students there, but when you add graduate students some 20,000 people are enrolled. Though there

has been something of a resurgence of Christians there, as far as I can tell the number of people in Christian groups there is still under 200. That is an awfully small percentage. It's less than 3% of the undergrads and 1% of the overall population there.

The obvious concern for us, as it might have been for Jesus' first disciples, is why don't more people believe? Are we kidding ourselves and missing something obvious? If the gospel is as true and compelling as it seems to us, why don't more believe? Is it because people smarter than us can see the holes in it? Can they see what we do not, that it clearly is not true? The obvious implication if they can is that there is something wrong with the gospel of Jesus.

Jesus explained his parable and that explanation helps us understand what was happening in his day. The seed represented the word of God, the message of Jesus Christ. That seed landed on different types of soil.

There is hard packed ground along the road next to the field. That ground is so hard the seed never penetrates it so it never takes root at all. That soil represents people who immediately reject the message of Jesus. They want no part of it. They could not be less interested. Lawrence M. Krauss is an ardent atheist, a physicist and the author of the book, *A Universe From Nothing*. He enthusiastically preaches the gospel of a universe that came from nothing and claims physics makes such a thing possible. But Dr. Krauss gives himself away. He says, "I can't prove that God doesn't exist, but I'd much rather live in a universe without one." His heart is hard. He doesn't want God to exist because he doesn't want to answer to God. So the gospel lands on that hard soil and never takes root. I think the implication is that the Pharisees and other powerful religious leaders were that hard ground that would not allow the seed to penetrate.

Some of the seed lands on dirt under which there is hardpan. The root can penetrate a little, but there is no good soil, no moisture and no nutrients to sustain it. So the seed appears to take root, but it doesn't last long. It quickly dies out. We've all encountered people who seem to believe the gospel and respond, but a month later they're gone. The seed never really took root in that soil.

The third kind of soil was decent. The seed was able to take root and the plant began to grow. But the crop is not all that grew in that soil. Along with the crop weeds grew. We have some of this soil in our yard. In this case the weeds were so virulent they took over. They sapped all the nutrients from the soil so that the crop was choked out. Jesus identified the kinds of weeds that might grow in this

spiritual soil. Life's worries, its riches and its pleasures are the weeds that compete with the seed of God's Word.

Isn't it interesting that both the good and bad of life can choke out the gospel? We have all known people who became stressed and worried because of life's pressures, who prayed but were disappointed when God didn't answer as they felt they needed. As a result sometimes those people quit trusting God. They simply fall away. It's no secret that the other end of the spectrum is heavily populated. We become so occupied with the idea that having good stuff will bring us the life we want that God begins to seem irrelevant. Which is better, to know God and be poor or to have millions of dollars, fame, a vacation home in Hawaii or at Aspen or both? Our world is convinced that having the riches and pleasures is best by far.

That idea about riches and pleasure is at odds with the facts. Kathleen Vohs, a professor at the University of Minnesota, in her studies has discovered that even the mere suggestion of getting more money makes people less friendly and less sensitive to others. An article in the *Boston Globe* a year ago (2/19/2012) said, "As a mounting body of research is showing, wealth can actually change how we think and behave—and not for the better. Rich people have a harder time connecting with others...they are less charitable and generous. They are less likely to help someone in trouble...Money, in other words, changes who you are." In other words, the riches and pleasures of this world does not deliver the life that it promises to bring us.

Of course there is the final kind of soil. It is good dirt, full of the moisture and the nutrients necessary to allow the seed to take root and grow. In this soil the seed sprouts, grows, matures and produces an abundant crop. Jesus says it produces a 100 fold.

So there are different kinds of soil. How does that answer the question Jesus is addressing? The point is *there is nothing wrong with the seed*. Do you blame a seed for not growing in rock? Do you think it is defective if weeds grow up and choke out the seed? The problem is not the seed. That is demonstrated by the fact that the seed produced a huge crop in the good soil. The seed is fine. The fact that the Pharisees and others didn't believe is not due to a weakness or flaw with the seed. It was because of what was in their hearts. The same is true today.

## IMPLICATIONS

DON'T FRET ABOUT OTHER SOIL



It is increasingly easy to feel ostracized and marginalized in our society. The prevailing mindset of our culture is dominated by the god of this age, which means we are going to be in the minority and quite likely will be ridiculed and scorned at times. This makes it easy to question whether what we believe is the truth.

Remember the lesson of this parable. Just because there is hard soil that doesn't support growth does not mean that there is something wrong with the seed. It is essential to be aware that the dominant view of our culture can become a weed that can choke out the seed's growth in our lives.

In their book, *Scorecasting*, Tobias Moskowitz and Jon Wertheim address a number of interesting questions about sports. One of them is why is there a home field advantage? In almost every sport home teams fare better than visiting teams. Why? They look at a number of factors, but in the end analysis reveals there is one cause of this home field advantage. It is bias on the part of officials. Without even knowing it or intending it, officials who seek to be impartial are influenced to favor the home team. In the National Hockey League home teams get 20% fewer penalties than visiting teams. In the NBA visiting teams are called for more fouls than home teams. In the NFL home teams receive fewer penalties than visitors. In Major League Baseball home teams have fewer strikeouts called on them and receive more walks than visiting teams. The more crucial a call is, the more it is likely to go the way of the home team. This is because though they don't want it, though they don't choose it, officials are swayed by the home crowd. Psychologists Muzaffer Sherif and Solomon Asch have both shown that humans cannot help but be swayed by the opinions of other people.

The point is that in the world around us we are going to be in the minority and it is terribly easy for us to compromise as a result. We need to remember the lesson of the soil. The seed is good, the truth is the truth, even if others reject it. We need to resist the influence of the majority and not let it choke out our faith.

A corollary of this is that we have great freedom. We are to sow the seed. We cannot tell by looking at people or even listening to them what kind of soil they are. Our responsibility is not to make them be a certain kind of soil. We cannot change that. But we can sow the seed.

#### DON'T STOP UP YOUR EARS

Remember the reason for parables. Those who have will be given more, those who do not have will lose even what they had. In other words, you are either adding or subtracting spiritually at all times.

God is pouring his grace and his truth out to you on a daily basis. Never stop listening and responding to what God has to say. If you stop listening, if you refuse to respond to God's call to you, you are moving backward. So keep your ears open and your heart tender so the seed can take root and grow in you.

### DO LET THE SEED WORK

In her book titled *Seeds*, Dr. Sasha Vukelja wrote, "Seeds look lifeless, but inside is great potential. When you buy a packet of seeds, you're not buying the little brown things inside, you are buying potential. You are buying the picture of the beautiful yellow daisies on the package. And with the right soil, those seeds will realize their potential."

The Word of God, the message of hope, of forgiveness and God's love given by his grace in Jesus Christ, is powerful. 1 Peter 1:23 says, "For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God." God's word is living and enduring. It is alive and powerful.

We can let the seed get choked out by the stuff of this world, whether it be worries or the pursuit of riches and pleasure. What is really scary is that it is easy to let materialism masquerade as something spiritual and fulfilling. Neurologists have had people recall or experience prayer or times when they felt close to God as they scanned their brains. A particular portion of the brain, the caudate nucleus lights up as they experience communion with God. Another group experienced the same thing. It was people exposed to material possessions. As they were shown images of highly desired new brands and products the exact same area of the brain lit up. The riches of this world can imitate the reality of knowing God, with the result that since they are more tangible can choke out the real crop that the word of God should produce.

Lynne Spears has written a book titled *Through The Storm*. The storm she refers to is exactly what so many think will produce the life they want. It was the storm of success, wealth and fame. In the book she says that those things, which so many pursue desperately, were like a tornado that tore her family apart. You are probably familiar with at least some of the story. Her daughter is Britney Spears, whose life completely unraveled because of her success and fame. That storm also impacted all the other members of that family. Lynne wrote in the book that her deepest desire now is that her children would return to their faith, a faith that got choked out by riches and fame. She says of Britney, "Someone told me once that no one is immune to prayer, no one is so rich, so famous, so lost, that she is outside the

power of petitioning God on her behalf. So I move toward God and pray for fresh eyes and fresh faith to see his hope for my child. She is not out of his reach.”

Yes, her case is extreme, but not uncommon. Miley Cyrus appears to be on the same trajectory. Why would we think that what failed to produce life in Britney but instead choked out her faith would not do the same to us?

This seed of the word of God will produce fruit. It will produce a crop that is way larger than the seed itself. What is the fruit it will produce? Philippians 2:16 calls this word, “the word of life.” If you plant watermelon seeds, what would you expect them to produce? In our case, nothing, because we’d kill them, but a decent farmer with decent soil would expect them to produce watermelons. If you plant apple seeds, what would you expect them to produce? Apple trees that would yield apples, of course. If the seed that is planted in us is the word of life, what should we expect it to produce? It should produce life, should it not? If that seed has taken root in you, let it work. Trust in God’s truth in your life, and watch it produce the crop you most desire, the crop of love for others, joy in God’s love for you, peace with God, yourself, others and the world around you, patience, kindness, gentles and all the rest.