



Week 6: The Dirt Is the Difference

Luke 8:5-15

GOAL: To grow in our desire and ability to hear, receive, understand, and obey God's word.

CHECKLIST

- Prepare for your group meeting by praying for yourself and your group (feel free to use the prayer below) and reading through this Leader's Guide.
- Invite your group to the Church Family Gathering this Wednesday night, Feb 28, from 6-7pm. Dinner and childcare are provided.
- If desired, print copies of the handout ("Information vs Formation") referenced in this lesson and attached in this week's leader email to distribute to your group.
- Take attendance in Planning Center, including guests/new members. Help new members register for your group using the QR code in your room or at vrbc.net/grow.

PREPARING THROUGH PRAYER:

Lord Jesus, thank you for sharing the treasure of your word with me. Help me to receive it and value it as "a lamp for my feet" and "a light on my path" (Psalm 119:105). I confess that sometimes I allow sinful habits, distractions, busyness, and competing priorities to impede my receptivity to your word. Would you grow in me a desire to receive and obey your teaching? Help me to pay attention to the condition of my heart, so that through your word and your spirit I can experience you fully, and the fullness of life that you offer to me. Amen.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching. Hebrews 10:24-25

CONNECT

- Use this time to connect with your group relationally - both formally and informally.
- Invite your group to share one way that they have seen God at work in the past week, and one way they're praying for God to move in the week to come.
- Spend time praying for your group members and for your time together today, including any praises or prayer requests from your previous conversation.

COORDINATE

Spend a few minutes covering any details the group needs to know:

- Feb 28 - Church Family Gathering from 6-7pm. Meal and childcare provided.
- Mar 6 - Pray First gathering from 6-7pm. Childcare provided.
- Mar 10 - No VR Kids or VRSM Grow Groups.
- Mar 28, 7pm - Table to the Cross service. Ask your group to attend and sit together.

DISCUSS

- What stood out to you from the Growth Guide readings this week? How did the Holy Spirit speak to you during these times of reading and reflection?

Leaders: *We're asking a question like this each week as a way of encouraging people to spend time regularly reading and reflecting on God's Word, and to give them an opportunity to share how God is speaking to them and process it together. You can help this to be a fruitful conversation by reminding your group members to bring their Growth Guide with them to your meeting so they can refer to their notes, and by leading the way in sharing.*

- Pastor Caleb used the example of the "mosquito tone" to show that the same sound could be heard variably (or not heard) by people of different ages. What are some other examples of where conditions make the difference on how something is received?

Leaders: *Your group will likely think of several different scenarios, but here are a few ideas:*

- *Investing the same amount of dollars in the stock market can generate wildly different returns based on market conditions at the time.*
- *A teacher who presents the same material to all 30 students in his class will not have the same rate of learning and retention from each student.*
- *A coach or athletic trainer may teach the same skills to a number of players, with varying degrees of successful results.*
- *And a silly example: a curly-haired person like me (Amy) will have a lot more volume in a humid city like New Orleans than in a dryer climate like Dallas – same hair, different result!*

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- Have you ever coached a team or taught a class? What makes a person particularly coachable or teachable?

Read Luke 8:5-15.

- Which type of soil reflects your heart right now, and why? Can you recall seasons in your life when the condition of your dirt varied?

Leaders: *In verses 5-8, Jesus describes four types of soils where the farmer generously and liberally sowed his seed:*

- *The well-worn and hardened footpath*
- *The rocky ground*
- *The thorn-choked field*
- *The good, fertile soil*

In verses 11-15, Jesus compares each of these soils to the condition of a person's heart as they hear and receive God's word. Jesus is not talking only of the first time someone hears and responds to the gospel. Instead, he's talking about how God's word helps us to thrive in our day-to-day lives. Jesus wants us to consider how we regularly receive God's word, mature, and bear fruit. Help your group to do a little honest self-examination on the receptivity of their heart right now. We will examine the causes in a moment, but for now, help them to focus on the "diagnosis." It may be valuable to notice and reflect on times in our lives where our hearts have been like each of these four types of soils.

- Read Luke 6:46-49 and Hebrews 4:2. What do these verses tell us about how we do or don't receive God's word? What obstacles (like rocks in the soil, or thorns in the field) need to be removed from the soil of your heart in order for you to put God's word into practice and bear fruit?

Leaders: *This is an opportunity to make it personal and apply what we are learning. A crucial part of hearing and receiving God's word is to respond in obedience and allow God's word to bear fruit in our lives. These verses from Luke 6 and Hebrews 4 warn that groups of people who hear the same message from God's word can have vastly different responses. When we put God's word into practice, we can have a steadfast faith that will withstand life's difficulties and hardships. When we don't put God's word into practice, we render it as of no value to us and we are subject to "collapse" (Luke 6:49).*

When preparing a garden or field for planting, the rocks and obstacles must be removed first (this question), before you begin to amend and enrich the soil with fertilizer and nutrients (next question). So what are some of those potential obstacles that are keeping us from fully receiving God's word and putting it into practice? Your group will likely have no shortage of ideas, but here are a few to get the ball rolling:

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- *Busyness, allowing other things to crowd out our time for hearing and responding to God's word*
- *Shallow commitment, or a superficial interest in things of God without a solid foundation of faith*
- *Worldly distractions, such as phones or TV or social media*
- *Misplaced priorities, like an excessive focus on material wealth, career pursuits, or achievement*
- *Persecution or opposition, or even facing difficulties or social pressure*
- *Anxiety and worry. A constant preoccupation with personal concerns or having our needs met may leave little room for growth in trusting God and his word.*
- *Unhealthy relationships or associations that lead people away from their faith, including peer pressure, negative influences, or being surrounded by people who do not support your spiritual growth*
- *Intellectual doubts, or being uncomfortable with the mystery and sometimes ambiguity of Scripture that can cause us to give up or not trust God's word*

We can ask God to help remove these obstacles from our lives. Our part, then, will likely involve self-examination, confession and repentance, self-discipline, and the accountability and support of our family or brothers and sisters and in Christ.

- What are some ways we can improve the soil of our heart to make it more receptive to the seed of God's word?

Leaders: *First of all, let's acknowledge that we can't change on our own. Our best efforts will produce results that can only be superficial and temporary. True transformation happens as you keep company with Jesus. We can't make spiritual fruit grow. Our role, using Jesus' planting analogy from this parable, is to prepare the soil and nurture the seed. One significant way we can do that is through spiritual disciplines. Here's how Ruth Haley Barton describes that process:*

*Spiritual transformation...comes from partnering with the Trinity for change. That doesn't mean we give the Holy Spirit an agenda or a demand. We give a desire. We bring our ache for change, our longing for belonging, our desperation to make a difference. Then we keep company with Jesus by making space for him through a spiritual discipline. Our part is to offer ourselves lovingly and obediently to God. God's part is to work within us and our desires doing what He alone can do. Our desires don't obligate the Holy One. God is free to come to us in spiritual disciplines as he wills not as we demand. But unless we open ourselves to him through spiritual practices we will miss his coming altogether.
(from <https://transformingcenter.org/2005/11/from-desire-to-discipline/>)*

Encourage your group to brainstorm some of the spiritual disciplines (or practices, or habits) that can make space for spiritual growth. Here are some ideas, including several specifically about how we receive God's word:

- *Attentiveness to the Holy Spirit*
- *Regular times of prayer that include both speaking and listening*

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WEEK 6

- *Engaging Scripture not just for information but for transformation. This typically involves reading smaller sections, asking and listening for what the Holy Spirit is saying to you through the passage, and then responding in obedience.*
- *Reading Scripture not just individually but in community (as you are doing now!)*
- *Memorizing Scripture. The Bible Memory App is a great tool, as is the Lectio for Families app (a devotional app for families that includes weekly Scripture memory).*

Reading Scripture for transformation can be an important shift, even for those who have been in church or following Jesus a long time. In the Grow Group leader email this week, we are including a one-page handout that addresses this more fully. Consider printing these and handing them out to your group, and using it to further enhance your conversation around this topic. After giving the group a moment to read the handout, you might ask them to describe in their own words the difference between informational and formational reading. You could also ask them to share what benefits a formational approach to reading Scripture could have on the “soil” of their heart and their spiritual growth.

- What positive differences can God’s Word make in our own lives, and those around us?

Leaders: *Scripture itself tells us about the positive differences it can make in our lives. Think about 2 Timothy 3:16-17: “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” From this one Scripture alone we see the benefits of showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to live God’s way, and equipping us for the good tasks God has for us.*

Reading, reflecting on, being formed by, and memorizing Scripture also helps us renew our minds and understand God’s will (Rom 12:2), fight temptation (Matt 4:1-11), and live in obedience (Psalm 119:9). Your group will likely think of many other positive differences God’s word can make in our lives.

Not only does God’s word have a positive impact on us, it can also enhance the lives of those around us. 1 Thessalonians 4:18 says, “Therefore encourage one another with these words.” Many of you probably know someone who regularly shares passages of Scripture, even in the shortest of conversations. What a treasure! As we share God’s word with our friends and family, they receive the same blessings we have discussed above.

Returning to Jesus’ analogy of planting and bearing fruit, when a plant bears fruit, it can have an exponential effect. The fruit not only directly produces benefits, but then the fruit produces new seeds, which God uses to plant and produce brand new crops. What a beautiful picture of how God’s word multiplies to produce a bountiful harvest in our own lives and the lives of others!

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PRAY

Leaders: Use the prompts below to guide your group through this exercise. You can read the final closing prayer yourself, or ask another group member in advance to be prepared to read it aloud.

We are going to do a prayer exercise together that will involve some imagination, reflection, and silent prayer. I invite you now to find a comfortable position, close your eyes, and allow your mind and heart to become aware of the presence of God's Spirit with you.

[Pause for 10-15 seconds, allowing your group to prepare for this time of prayer.]

Picture Jesus as he prepared to deliver the parable of the soils. Luke 8:4 tells us that a large crowd was gathering. People were coming to Jesus from many of the surrounding towns, so that a diverse group of people stood before him. Imagine yourself there, standing with the crowd before Jesus. Knowing what he is about to share, Jesus examines each person before him, seeing into the conditions of their hearts.

Now, in the silence of this moment, ask Jesus, "How do you see me? What is the condition of my heart? How receptive am I to what you are teaching me?" I'll give you a moment to listen for Jesus' response.

[Pause for at least 60 seconds.]

As Jesus finishes explaining the parable to his disciples, he says in verse 15 (reading now from the New Living Translation), "...the seeds that fell on the good soil represent honest, good-hearted people who hear God's word, cling to it, and patiently produce a huge harvest."

Pray now that God would increase your hunger for God's word, and to help you to cling to it.

[Pause for at least 30 seconds.]

Now I invite you to ask in prayer, "Is there anything that is blocking the soil of my heart from receiving your word, or choking it and preventing it from bearing fruit?" I'll give you a moment now to listen again for Jesus' response.

[Pause for at least 60 seconds.]

Please join with me now as I close us in prayer: Lord, inspire us to read your Scriptures and to meditate upon them day and night. We beg you to give us real understanding of what we need, that we in turn may put its precepts into practice. Yet we know that understanding and good intentions are worthless, unless rooted in your graceful love. So we ask that the words of Scriptures may also be not just signs on a page, but channels of grace into our hearts. Amen.

(This prayer is attributed to Origen, one of the most influential Christian theologians, who lived from 185-253 in Alexandria, Egypt. It is available in "Every Moment Holy: Volume III," which is an excellent series of books with prayers for every occasion. This one is titled, "A Liturgy for Meditation on God's Word.")

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