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We find in the Epistle that St. Paul is in a pretty tough spot with the Church in Corinth. If you love church drama look no further than the Epistles to the Corinthians. The Corinthian church had gone to some amazing extremes. One man was carrying on quite openly with his father's wife, people were coming to Mass drunk, parish suppers dissolved into competitions over who had brought the best food, and members of the parish were hauling one another into court. And that doesn't say anything about their general disbelief in the bodily resurrection of Christ, their chaotic worship services, and their contemptuous attitude toward St. Paul himself. In today's epistle St. Paul comes as close as he ever comes to losing his composure completely. He has sent the Corinthians one letter already to try to straighten things out, but that hasn't worked very well. He has threatened to come to see them again, and he suggests that it would be better for them if he could come in a friendly and peaceful spirit. And yet, some leaders of the church have continued to make personal attacks on him, and this morning he replies.

What at first sounds like just another braggart clergyman is incredible humility. St. Paul admits that he is diving into folly and playing their own game by listing his persecutions and hardships. But the fact is that, despite all their problems, he loves the people in Corinth as he loves everyone in the church for whom he is responsible. He cannot understand how they can follow people who are hostile to him and hostile to what he has taught them. He describes the church as a bride he has betrothed and presented to her husband Jesus. His affection for them is as tender as what a father feels when his daughter gets married. St. Paul describes the reality of his work in graphic detail-punishment by both Jews and Romans, shipwreck, constant danger, and annoying physical discomfort. He ends his litany this way, "*Beside those things that are without, that which cometh upon me daily, the care of all the churches.*" He seems to be saying, *Shipwreck and starvation are positively pleasant when compared to dealing with people like you.* And he did not have email, a smart phone, or social media!

We might wonder though; how did the Corinthian Church end up in such a mess? How does any church have the problems that they do? There is an old clergy joke which goes something like, if the Church were perfect, there probably would not be a congregation. The uncomfortable truth which we see in the Epistles to the Corinthians is that church problems are only caused by the sinfulness of the people who attend. This is true for any church. In writing to the Corinthians, St. Paul, instead of throwing up his hands, resigning or excommunicating them all, is

desperately trying to save their church. St. Paul has found that the Corinthians were no longer the good, tilled soil of the Gospel parable, but that there was much work to be done. There were the secret and public sins, briars, weeds, and stones, which needed uprooted and cast aside. He encourages them to do the work of preparing and correcting their souls, tilling up the hard ground, breaking up the stones, briars and weeds of sin that have sprung up, so that the seeds of the Gospel can grow and flourish again in them.

This is an important lesson to consider as we approach Lent. St. Paul provides a wonderful example of fortitude and spiritual self-discipline in the face of hardship, while the Corinthian Church and the Parable of the Good Sower help us to take a better look at the work that needs to be done on our hearts and souls this coming Lent. The best way to prepare the soil of our hearts is through spiritual discipline. And while this word 'discipline' may have all kinds of serious and intimidating connotations for us, yet the truth remains that prayer, fasting, the study of Scripture, learning about the faith, help us to till up the rough patches of our hearts. Acts like fasting and setting aside dedicated time for prayer and study help us to cut off and pull up the briars and thorns of our hearts and enriches them so the seed of the Gospel can grow better in them. It was spiritual discipline that helped St. Paul to survive the hardships and persecutions of his journeys and ministry for the sake of the Gospel. It is spiritual discipline which will help us survive the hardships and difficulties of our own lives too.

Ultimately, St. Paul's ministry in Corinth was successful. And yet, we may still wonder why Jesus allows the spread of the seeds of the Gospel far and wide, if He know the state of each person's heart. The answer is found in every flower that blooms in the cracks of the sidewalk, in every abandoned structure covered over by vines. Over time, plants break up rocky ground and overtake the thorns and briars. All that is required is that the seeds of the Gospel continue to be sown in hope, that they continue to be cast far and wide. Today we catch a glimpse of the divine Hope of Jesus Christ. He teaches us this parable to explain how the Kingdom of Heaven works, a Kingdom which operates off the principles of Faith, Hope, and Love. Our great King, Jesus Christ, Himself sows the seeds of the Gospel in good faith on souls good and bad, in hope that something will spring up, that the Church will do the work of helping to prepare the hearts of all mankind, so that more souls will be better able to receive *the spark of the new life of the Gospel*. It shows His Love, that all kinds of hearts have the chance to receive a seed of the Gospel, and it is an act of love to spread such precious seeds over unworthy hearts.

Jesus calls us into this season to work in His vineyard by faith, He calls us to prepare the soil of our hearts to receive His Gospel. It is His great hope that we will do the work, that we will prepare ourselves. And what better opportunity to start than today.