

In the Name of the Father and of the ☩ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Grace and Peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ and may our Lord and Savior sanctify you in the truth, for His word is truth. Amen

Sexagesima (2021)

Listening to the Word of God

Rev. Toby Byrd

“And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.” As he said these things, he called out, “He who has ears to hear, let him hear . . . As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.” Luke 8:8, 15 ESV)

The Gospel Reading for Sexagesima Sunday, the Parable of the Sower, focuses our thoughts directly on Sola Scriptura, Scripture Alone. Only in holy Scripture, do we find the revelation that God’s Word is the sole source of salvation for man. Thus, in this parable our Lord Jesus opens our eyes and hearts both to the source of salvation and to the reason why so many who *Listen to the Word of God* do not come to faith, or after having come to faith, fall away. So let us examine this blessed parable and hear what our Lord has to say.

Jesus is with the Twelve and some of the women who had been healed of their demonic possession and infirmities, when a large crowd begins to gather. St. Luke tells us those who made up the crowd were from many cities, but they all had one thing in common, they were eager for Jesus to speak to them. Now Jesus could have spoken of any number of things, but He choose to challenge the crowd by telling them a parable about a man who was sowing seed indiscriminately. He was not sowing in a prepared garden with neatly plowed rows. No, the sower simply walked along scattering seed, hoping that wherever it landed, something would grow.

The crowd listened, but how many heard what He said? Jesus, knowing that not all who were listening would hear His Word, says to the crowd, ***“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”*** (v. 8) But there are more than just the crowd in His audience, there are also the Twelve, and it is specifically to them that He is speaking. It is specifically to them that His imperative is directed. Listen to me. *Listen to the Word of God*, because this is the Word, the Good News that you will be sowing, that is broadcasting, not long from now.

Perhaps the crowd and the Twelve were wandering, “Why isn’t the sower a better farmer? Why does he scatter the seed so indiscriminately, not caring where it lands? Did not Jesus say some of the seed lands on rocks, hard soil, and even among thorns. This is hardly ground for producing a crop!” But isn’t this the ground upon which the seed of the Gospel falls, upon sinners and tax-collectors, Pharisees, Samaritans, and Gentiles? Can a pastor expect to plant only in the fertile soil of a believer? Is not the Great Commission of the Church to go into the world to preach the Gospel to sinners, tax-collectors, Pharisees, Samaritans, and Gentiles in the hope that they will hear, be brought to faith, and produce the fruit of faith? Yes, it is. However, in this parable, Jesus tells us not to be surprised when our efforts of sowing do not meet our expectation. Jesus does this in the Parable of the Sower by comparing different types of soils to different types of listeners.

Some who will hear the message of the Good News of the Gospel have ears like a well-worn path, too hard for the seed to penetrate, thus it cannot grow. Others are like rocky soil. The seed takes root, but the soil is very shallow, and the plant quickly withers. Still others are like ground

overrun with thorns, the seed takes root, but the plant is quickly choked out by the cares of this world. But some of the seed falls on good ground and produces an abundant crop, and it is this last group that brings great comfort to the preacher.

At first the Twelve are confused by this parable and ask Jesus what does the parable mean? Our Lord's explanation is clear enough, the seed is the Word of God and the soil are those who hear it preached. But too often the interpretation of this parable is sorely lacking in understanding and when it is explained to others it merely exasperates the problem. So, this morning, let us examine the Parable of the Sower according to the Word of God.

Although there are four types of soil, there are only two types of listeners, those who have been given the knowledge of the mysteries of the kingdom of God, by God Himself, and those who do not know the mysteries. Now you might ask, "What is the mystery of the kingdom of God?" It is nothing less than the saving activity of God in Jesus Himself, because He is God in the flesh, and this truth can only be grasped by faith.

Thus, in explaining the parable to His apostles, Jesus tells them, that in the first case where the seed falls along the path, these do not take root because the enemy, Satan, quickly sweeps up the seed not allowing them to grow. Although they have heard, even received the seed of God's Word upon their heart, Satan never allows God's Word to take root. Through the temptations of the flesh and the world, Satan squashing faith before it can begin. He is God's enemy, and he delights in making unbelievers.

In the second and third cases the seed of the Word of God does produce faith, but it is a faith that does not survive? In one case the soil of the heart is rocky and shallow. Yes, the seed takes root quickly and sprouts into an embryo of faith, there is even great joy in this production, but because of the shallowness of the heart there is nothing to sustain this embryo and as fast as their faith is tested, which the world, the flesh, and the devil love to do, that embryo of faith quickly fades and dies. In the other case the seed of the Word of God also produces an embryo of faith in the hearer's heart, but this faith never matures. Challenged by the world, its riches and pleasures and the burdens of life itself, this faith also withers and fades and finally dies. Thus, the outcome of the first three hearers is death, eternity without God.

But in the fourth case Jesus tells us something miraculous happens, the seed of the Word of God produces faith! When our Lord told the parable to the crowd, He said of this last type of soil, "*And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold.*" (v. 8)

Here is where the parable is often misinterpreted. Many take these words of Jesus to mean there is some innate goodness in man which enables them to accept the Gospel, to make the decision to believe when they hear it. But nothing could be further from God's truth as given us in Scripture. Among men born only of the flesh, there is no good man. The only good man who ever lived was conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Only the God/Man Jesus fulfilled the Law and was wholly obedient to His heavenly Father. Yet even Jesus would not call Himself "good." Scripture tells us that once, "*A ruler asked him, 'Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' And Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.'*" (Luke 18:18-19, ESV) If Jesus would not call Himself good, then why would we suspect that in this parable Jesus is referring to man being innately good? We shouldn't. But so many today believe there is a little good in every man and this goodness is in them from birth. This is not only contrary to Scripture, but also foolish.

Here is how Scripture describes man, ***“They are corrupt, they do abominable deeds; there is none who does good. The LORD looks down from heaven on the children of man, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God. They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.” (Psalm 14:1–3, ESV)*** Furthermore, St. Paul tells the believers in Ephesus, ***“And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience— among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind.” (Ephesians 2:1–3, ESV)*** Thus, in our natural state we are deaf to the Word of God. Those who hear God, hear because God so wills it. Jesus, speaking to His apostles said, ***“To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that ‘seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.’” (Luke 8:10, ESV)***

This is difficult for us to understand. So, we ask ourselves, does not God want all men to be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth, and the answer is, Yes, He does. Well, then why can't everyone hear Him? Truth is, they can. They not only hear Him, but they see Him too. Yet their ears and their eyes refuse to believe what they hear and see. This is why Jesus cries out, ***“He who has ears to hear, let him hear,”*** God gave you ears, use them, listen to Jesus and you will be rescued from eternal death.

Deaf and blind, this is you and me before the seed of the Word of God was planted in our hearts. But this planting was not of our doing, instead it was the result of an absolute miracle, one wrought by God Himself. Our hearts, which by nature are hard paths, rocky soil, or soil overgrown by thorns, were transformed into a soil fit for planting and growing the seed of God's Word. They were made “good soil.” It is God who said, ***“I will give you a new heart, and a new spirit I will put within you. And I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules.” (Ezekiel 36:26–27, ESV)*** St. Paul also reminds us, ***“for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (Philippians 2:13, ESV)*** When the Word of God was proclaimed in your presence, you heard it and received it only because that seed came with the Holy Spirit who overcame your deafness and planted God's Word in your heart. Moreover, He remained to tend the garden, to ensure it was watered by Baptism, cultivated by Holy Communion, and invigorated by the preaching of the Gospel. All this so it would grow and bear fruit with patience.

Thus, devoid of any goodness of your own, God had to make your heart “good,” so that you could hear the word of the Gospel and be brought to faith. St. Paul affirms this, saying, ***“Faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.” (Romans 10:17, ESV)*** So do not pat yourself on the back and think that the soil of your heart was good and that is why you came to believe. No, to think this is contrary to the Word of God, that very Word by which you were saved. So, when Jesus says, ***“As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience.” (v. 15)*** He is explaining the doctrine of election. God gives His grace and His gift of faith to those who hear Him, who *Listen to His Word*. By His gracious, loving, and merciful will, He alone opens the ear to hear. St. Paul reminds us, ***“But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—” (Ephesians 2:4–5, ESV)***

This is the power of the Word of God. It melts unbelieving hearts of stone and turns them into believing hearts of flesh, it changes harden, barren land into fertile soil to receive His planted seed of faith, that it may grow and produce an abundant crop. All glory belongs to God.

This change that God made in your heart is not merely a change in your thinking, it is His revelation brought about by His Gospel. It is more than simply teaching the believer that they are a poor miserable sinner, unable to save themselves, and it is more than information concerning a new relationship with God. It is these things and more. The Gospel focuses your attention on Christ. The saving Gospel is the historical account of Christ, pointing to His dying, His resurrection, and His ascension into heaven for the forgiveness of your sins. Thus, the Gospel produces a change in you, in your eyes, your ears, and your heart pointing them to the One who saved you by His atoning sacrifice on the Altar of the Cross, your Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

In this parable, Jesus never names the sower, because the sower has many names. The sower is the pastor who proclaims the Gospel in all its truth and purity through Word and Sacrament ministry. His sowing is accomplished through the distribution of God's Means of Grace, that which sows the seed of God's Word, which is planted and cultivated in soil made "good" by God alone. It is God who said, ***"so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it."*** (Isaiah 55:11, ESV) His Word, the seed of faith, which He plants, accomplishes what He desires. Salvation comes only through hearing God's Sola Scriptura, His Scripture Alone. In the name of Jesus. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus. Amen.