

MINISTRY BY MAIL
Lutheran Conference of Confessional Fellowship
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Septuagesima Sunday, February 17, 2019

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(Hymns found in The Lutheran Hymnal, CPH, 1941)

Hymns: 279, 291:1-2, 285, 281, 49.

Lessons: Psalm 119: 88-105, Acts 8:26-39, Luke 8:4-15.

Sermon Text: Mark 4:1-20

Sermon by Pastor Robert Mehlretter

In the name of Jesus Christ, Dear Fellow Redeemed,

When Jesus was on earth, he proclaimed the truth of God's Word. He often spoke in parables. A parable is an earthly story with a spiritual truth, an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. Jesus, the Son of God, was a master in the use of the parables to teach the truth about himself and his work of redemption.

On this occasion Jesus was at the Sea of Galilee. The crowd was so large that Jesus sat in a boat out on the lake and instructed the people who were along the shore. Our sermon text is the first of a number of parables he told on this day. This parable is recorded in three of the Gospels. Mark also tells us that later that day, after the crowd had gone, Jesus told his disciples about his use of parables and the purpose of his parables.

Jesus used examples and illustrations that were familiar to his listeners. They had all seen farmers sow, that is, scatter their seed, and perhaps had even done so themselves. As farmers scattered seed by hand, it was bound to fall on paths, rocky places and among thorns, besides on the good soil prepared to receive it. Notice Jesus begins his parable with the word "*listen!*" and ended it by saying "*he who has ears to hear, let him hear.*" Today, please

LISTEN AS JESUS TELLS ABOUT THE SEED OF THE WORD OF GOD.

1. **The seed falls on different kinds of ground.**
2. ***"He who has ears to hear, let him hear."***

Jesus told his disciples that he was not withholding any truth from them: "*The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of God has been given to you.*" Matthew 13:11. The secrets of the kingdom of God is the good news that God in his dealing with men has now finally sent the one who will be the Savior and Redeemer, and that one is he himself, Jesus Christ. It is called secret because mankind cannot understand the free nature of such a marvelous gift. It is secret because mankind thinks it should pay for or earn such a treasure by doing good deeds and living a good life. Satan has brought about that deception. Throughout the time of the Old Testament this Savior had been promised. Now he had come and begun his work. But there were many things even his closest disciples did not understand at first. Only after his resurrection and ascension did the disciples understand more fully.

However, some who heard Christ would never come to an understanding. In Matthew 13:14 he quotes Isaiah. "[the voice of the Lord] *said, "Go and tell this people: "Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving.' Make the heart of this people calloused; make their ears dull and close their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed."*" Isaiah 6:9-10.

In our text we read "*The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding; otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!'"*"

Is there a contradiction? Doesn't scripture say that God "*wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth*" in 1 Timothy 2:4? Well, during Isaiah's ministry the time had come when God through

the preaching of Isaiah hardened the hearts of many in Israel as a just and righteous punishment. Jesus recognized that a similar time had also come in his own ministry. But nowhere did Jesus say these words of Isaiah applied to every one of his hearers. Nor does Jesus here say that we in our lives today can apply these words to specific hearers. We cannot look into the hearts of people. Only God can make a judgment like that. But we know, as we read in Romans, ***“Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.”*** Romans 10:17. It is only when people hear the Word of God – Law and Gospel – that faith can be worked and sustained in their hearts.

The door for repentance is still open. We, in our human judgment, can never say that repentance is impossible. That is to be God's judgment. So our assignment as Luke records it in the last verses of his Gospel is to ***“preach the good news to all creation”***. Mark 16:15.

Of all the parables in the New Testament this is the one which Jesus explains most thoroughly. His parables were not explained to everyone, but he did explain this one very clearly to his disciples.

Luke is very clear and specific: ***“This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the Word of God.”*** Luke 8:11. In the letter to the Hebrews we learn more about the power of the Word of God: ***“For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”*** Hebrews 4:12.

There are four places where the seed fell. The first is the hard path, the road, where it could not sink down into the earth. It lay exposed to the people who would walk on the path and it was eaten by the birds.

The second place is rocky soil. This could mean rock mixed with the soil and the rocks are totally visible. Some writers think of the picture where a very thin layer of soil covered the surface of rock. This would give the appearance of good soil.

The third place is thorns. Perhaps here there was much soil, even good soil, but what was lacking was the extermination of thorns and weeds. They had been allowed to grow and spread.

And the fourth place is good soil. The seed that is planted here takes root, grows up, and bears abundant fruit. Jesus does not specify what is being planted, although grains like wheat were common. An ear of corn with dozens of seeds is the fruit or result of just one seed of corn. And while a return of 30 seeds on an ear of corn or head of grain seems pretty sparse today, a return of 100 for one is very likely. One kernel of corn can produce one ear of corn. Sometime try counting the seeds found on one ear of corn. It's easy to see how one kernel, and good soil, can yield thirtyfold or sixtyfold or even 100 times what was planted.

Jesus said ***“He who has ears to hear, let him hear.”*** Listen to Jesus' own explanations. ***“Some people are like seed along the path, where the word is sown. As soon as they hear it, Satan comes and takes away the word that was sown in them.”***

This makes us aware of the enemies of God which attack the preaching of the Word of God and the hearing of the Word: Satan, unbelievers, trouble, persecution, the worries of life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things of this world. All these can come between the hearer and the message and rob the hearer of faith. But preachers and Christians alike can take comfort in the fact that even if the Word of God which we tell to others appears to have no fruit, God's Word never returns to him useless, empty, void. Isaiah assures us: ***“As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”*** Isaiah 55:10-11.

All we Christians are called upon to do is to sow the seeds. We are not responsible for the harvest. The good soil produces fruit from the seed, and it will not all be the same. Despite all opposition there will be a harvest.

This parable warns all of us who hear the Word to be on guard against everything that would seek to rob us of becoming a fruitful field. The Words Jesus spoke to the multitude also apply to us: ***“Listen!... he who has ears to hear, let him hear.”*** Our ears too are God's gifts.

Matthew explains the seed that fell on the path this way. ***“When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart.”*** Matthew 13:19. This hearer hears the Word of the kingdom and does not understand. The words ***“does not***

understand it” are very important. The hearer does not understand it. He does not see that he has any relation to the kingdom of grace that the Word proclaims. He may not even understand or recognize his sinfulness. The seed of the Word of God must include both Law to show us our sinfulness, and the Gospel to show us our Savior from sin. Everything that speaks about sin, about redemption, about holiness, cannot be understood by the natural man. The phrase ‘hardness of heart’ certainly could apply here, in the same way that the path is hard. Every human being’s heart without the work of the Holy Spirit is hardened against God and his Word. Scripture speaks about the devil snatching up the seed, taking it away. The devil sends his evil angels in the form of evil thoughts, worldly lusts, and other wickedness and by their help immediately takes away the Word that was sown in the hearts.

“Others, like seed sown on rocky places, hear the word and at once receive it with joy. But since they have no root, they last only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, they quickly fall away.” In Luke we read: ***“Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.”*** Luke 8:13.

This is not a person stubbornly rejecting the truth, but one lacking in earnestness. This is the same attitude found in many of the people in the great multitudes who followed Jesus. The troubles and afflictions which would’ve strengthened true faith cause a merely temporary faith to fail. Such people do not have the roots that our hymnal speaks of: “How firm a foundation, ye saints of the Lord, Is laid for your faith in His excellent Word!” (The Lutheran Hymnal 427:1) The people described as rocky places have no depth. We read in Colossians about the depth and growth of believers: ***“So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught, and overflowing with thankfulness.”*** Colossians 2:6-7.

“Still others, like seed sown among thorns, hear the word; but the worries of this life, the deceitfulness of wealth and the desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.” In Luke we read: ***“The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life’s worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.”*** Luke 8:14. In this case, the confession or profession of a spiritual life is kept for a time, but the temptations of the world come into one’s life and choke out the Word of God. Christ specifically names two things: the cares of this world, and its pleasures. These are the thorns and briars that strangle the life of the soul. What God offers and promises is perhaps felt to be good, but also what the world promises is felt to be equally good. Here you have an example of trying to serve God and Mammon, that is, God and Money. God and the world. You just can’t serve both. Luke warns us: ***“Be careful, or your hearts will be weighed down with dissipation, drunkenness and the anxieties of life, and that day [that is, judgment day] will close on you unexpectedly like a trap.”*** Luke 21:34. Paul writes to Timothy: ***“People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction.”*** 1 Timothy 6:9.

Then our text tells us of the seed growing in good ground. ***“Others, like seed sown on good soil, hear the word, accept it, and produce a crop--thirty, sixty or even a hundred times what was sown.”*** Luke tells us: ***“the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.”*** Luke 8:15. Notice that Jesus does not explain here how we become good soil. Certainly we do not become good soil by ourselves, or because of anything good within us. By nature we are lost in trespasses and sins. It is God’s grace that opens our hearts to hear and believe the Word and enables us to bring forth the fruits of faith. How can any heart be called good before the Word of God and the Holy Spirit have made it so? We must be careful that we do not attribute anything good to man, who by nature is sinful and unclean, as we admit in the public confession of sins. This is completely and only the work of the Holy Spirit.

So how is the Word of God growing in your lives? How are you treating the seed of the Word of God? We pray that you all may listen and hear the Word of Jesus, which is the only way to eternal life. God grant it. Amen.