

Sermon Sexagesima 2016
January 31, 2016
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Luke 8:4-15
The Word of God Has Power for Salvation

Jesus uses this parable to describe the incredible value and power of God's Word. The sower sows seed. Jesus says that the seed is the word of God. Jesus is painting a vivid picture of a preacher proclaiming God's word indiscriminately. He leaves no ear unaccosted by his message, just as the sower leaves no ground void of his seed. And this word, Christ tells us, has the power to create faith in the heart and give eternal life! This is the constant message of the Bible. God's Word is powerful! By it the heavens and the earth were made out of nothing. And this word, so disregarded by the world, has the power to create Christians out of unbelievers and give life to the dead.

God spoke through the prophet Isaiah: (55:10-11)

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, 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.

God's word accomplishes what God intends it to accomplish. And what is that exactly? To create faith and save souls. When God's word says, repent and believe in the Gospel that Jesus Christ, the true Son of God became man and died on the cross for your sins and forgives you by grace, the Holy Spirit works through those words to create in your heart faith. Faith grabs hold of the promise of forgiveness. It believes it! And as Jesus says in John 3:16, "whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life."

The Gospel is a word. It's a message. But it's not a political ad filled with empty promises and half-truths. The Gospel message is *powerful*. Saint Paul writes, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith, as it is written, 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" (Rom. 1:16-17). It is the teaching of the Gospel, which Paul says will save both the pastor and his hearers (1 Timothy 4:16). For this reason the Apostle also writes to Timothy, "Preach the word, be ready in season and out of season; reprove, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching." (2 Timothy 4:2)

The Wednesday School children learned this past week that the Kingdom of God comes when God sends his Holy Spirit, so that by his grace we believe his holy word and live godly lives here in time and thereafter in eternity. That is how God's kingdom comes, through his word, preached and believed. Where God's word is believed, there God reigns supreme. But, we must remember this *world* is already occupied. Satan has laid claim on the earth. He has laid the foundation of *his* kingdom and will not give up without a fight. And Jesus warns us of this in his parable about the sower.

The sower throws his seed on four types of soil. First, along the path. These are they, Jesus says, who hear the word of God preached, they hear that they are sinners in need of a Savior, they hear that Jesus is the one true Savior, who forgives sins, yet Satan snatches the word from their hearts (and this is important), so that they *may not believe and be saved*. Satan doesn't want them to believe in Jesus, because he doesn't want them to go to heaven. If they were to hear God's Word and *believe* it, they *would* be saved and have everlasting life with their beloved Savior! But Satan, that vile murderer, takes it away

from them! He causes them to stumble to hell! The person hears the word of God preached, just like you and me, he understands the words in clear English (or whatever language he speaks), yet, he does not believe it. He treats it like most of you I'm sure treat the 100th presidential campaign ad you hear: in one ear and out the other. They're bored with it. It doesn't mean anything to them. The sower throws the seed: Take it or leave it! And they leave it; wander somewhere else in search of something more valuable. It seems like such an uneventful thing, but it is the event of which Saint Peter warns, "Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour." (1 Peter 5:8) And this is how the satanic foe devours you, he snatches the word of God from your heart like birds devouring seeds on the side of the road.

The second group, who hears the saving word of God, is like the seed that falls on rock. This group is even more tragic than the first, because they actually receive the word with *joy!* That means they *believed it!* They were happy to hear of their Savior. They were glad to hear that God forgives their sins freely for Christ's sake! They had the hope of eternal life in their heart! They were Christians! Yet, appallingly, their faith had no root, so it withered and died. That which brought their souls peace faded away, because, as Jesus says, they had no moisture. They heard the word, but they did not keep hearing it. Without frequent watering, a plant dies. Without frequently hearing God's word, faith too shrivels and dies.

The third group is the most tragic of all. The first two are short lived. They were either never Christians or only for a short time. What they've lost does not occur to them. But the third group not only hears God's Word, and gladly believe that Christ is their true

Savior, that their sins are forgiven by his blood on the cross, and that God is their heavenly Father, who takes care of them both in this life and in the one prepared for them in eternity, but they actually take root! Their faith grows, for a while. For a while they continue to hear God's Word and they continue to believe it! Yet they are not alone. Cares, riches, and pleasures of this life grow up next to them and get bigger and healthier, like an overgrown brier bush, until finally they choke the word of God and faith from the Christian.

This last group is by far the most disturbing. Jesus paints a picture of actual Christians, who lose their faith and with it eternal life, because they are distracted by things of this life. Cares, like money, food, clothing and bills. They think more about the cost of living than their faith. Some of these cares can be very serious! A spouse dies. A child is deathly sick! You are hit with depression! You lose your job. But Satan doesn't fight fair! He'll take your trials and suffering and kick you when you're down. He's a predator. He doesn't follow the rules of combat. Satan doesn't care if your load is heavier than everyone else's. He'll use those troubles to block out God's Word from your ears and heart, to kill your faith.

The old evil foe knows how to choke the rich too. He loves to turn money into a god, to be revered, loved, and trusted in as a holy idol. And he is successful. Many are chocked by the love of money. Pleasure too can choke people's faith. Not just immoral sensual pleasure, but honest, innocent fun. Sports, music, and drama are all noble endeavors, but when they take center stage and God's Word is placed on the bench, faith gasps.

This isn't a hypothetical situation either. Jesus witnessed all three of these groups among those to whom he preached. Most famously, Judas Iscariot betrayed Christ for earthly wealth. St. Paul in one of his letters to his protégé Timothy writes of the desertion of one of his disciples, "Demas in love with this present world" (2 Tim. 4:10) And people continue to leave the faith today for cares of this world.

This message is disturbing, yet it's an important warning. The devil, the world, and our sinful nature will not gladly hear God's Word. They will set up idols to replace it, to kill faith, so that you won't be saved. For this reason Jesus gives the warning just a couple verses after our Gospel lesson, "Take care then how you *hear*, for to the one who has, more will be given, and from the one who has not, even what he *thinks* that he has will be taken away." (Luke 8:18) This means that those who cherish the word of God in faith will receive even more, eternal life in heaven. But those who do not have faith will lose even what they think they have, mainly their lives.

Martin Luther warns, "Listen to God's Word while you still have it; the time may come when you would like to hear it, but it may not be there for you." Dr. Luther isn't being a typical doomsayer. He's preaching God's Word. God spoke by the prophet Amos, "'Behold, the days are coming,' declares the Lord God, 'When I will send a famine on the land— not a famine of bread, nor a thirst for water, but of hearing the words of the Lord.'" (Amos 8:11) There is no worse famine than a famine of God's Word, because without God's Word there is no faith or salvation. And this prophecy has come true not only for individuals, who rejected God's word their whole life, but to entire nations. Just look at the atheist communist and Muslim nations that ran Christians and Christianity out of their country. Many people now live behind borders where the

preaching of God's word is more rare than rainfall in the Arabian Peninsula. So Jesus' warning rings clear: listen to God's Word!

And yet, this parable of our Lord brings *good news*. In the fourth and final group, the seed falls on good soil. That means those people heard the word of God. They confessed their sins and believed that God forgives them freely for the sake of Christ's death and resurrection. And they keep on hearing and believing. Now they still have trials like the others. They struggle with cares of this world, wealth and lack of wealth, sickness, death, depression, and fun. And Satan strives to devour the word of God from their heart every chance he gets. Yet with a beautiful heart purified by God's Holy Spirit they continue in faith with patience.

Yes Satan will rave and moan. Yes many will hear the word of God, but reject the saving faith. But God's Word does not return empty. That is a promise. God's word must and does create saving faith! And it sustains saving faith! The Gospel is the power of salvation to everyone who believes and as Saint Paul says, "faith comes by hearing and hearing from the word of Christ." (Rom. 10:17) So pray that God's kingdom come to you. That is, pray that God would send his Holy Spirit, so that you will not only hear his word, but *believe it*. God's Word is powerful to save, because it gives you Jesus.

Our Savior did not tell us this parable for us to believe that his word is weak! The world sees God's word as dead birdseed. But God's word has the power to save, to make strong what is weak and alive what is dead. Through God's word works the Holy Spirit. He comes with a hoe to break up the solid ground, which is too stubborn to listen to God's Word. He works the ground and adds water and fertilizer. He uproots the thorn bushes with a spirit of repentance and drives away the birds with prayer. The good,

faithful soil does not produce fruit, because it is strong, but because it is weak. The good soil is the heart that has been shown its weakness and sinful condition. It is the heart that can't boast of its strength, or righteousness. It is the heart brought low by the Law and made sorry for its sins, yet brought to life through the Gospel. The word of God has power to save *you*.

Christ Jesus died and was buried in the ground like a seed. Yet he sprouted to life on the third day, bearing fruit one-hundredfold. So even today, the seed of Christ's resurrection continues to be sowed wherever his word is preached. And it will grow into faith. You who believe in Jesus' resurrection from the dead will experience the power of his resurrection. The word of God, which takes root in your heart even today will raise you from the dead to live with Christ Jesus in heaven forever. This word is true and it is powerful! He who has ears to hear, let him hear.

Amen.