

Sometimes when we as Christians look around, we can't help but ask, "What's gone wrong?" As our culture seems to swing from Christian to indifferent to anti-Christian, as our congregations seem to shrink, as our family members wander away from the faith, we ask, "What's gone wrong?"

Jesus knew we would ask this, as He is the Lord and knows the hearts of all men. And Jesus loves us and doesn't desire to leave us in the dark on this question. Hence, our parable this morning.

Jesus speaks of the spread of the Word like a sower scattering seed, and through this describes the various problems the Word encounters. Yet while the Word encounters problems, we also hear in that Word that the Word contains the solutions to those problems. So, to the parable.

The first place we hear this seed landing is along the path, where it is trampled underfoot and then the birds of the air come and eat it all up. In a parable, we often ask, "what does this mean or represent?" and in this case Jesus tells us directly. He says, "The ones along the path are those who have heard; then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved."

Here, the Word has been scattered to those who seem completely unreceptive to it. It seems to hit their ears, their hearts, and bounce right off. And worse, that Word is regarded as something to be trampled underfoot, not worthy of any attention, much less respect.

This part of the parable makes me think of a repeated event in college. The Gideons would come to the University of Wyoming once a year and hand out New Testaments. They were very polite, never pushy or confrontational, just asked if you wanted a New Testament. And if you said no, they'd wish you a good day and God's blessings and that was it. Nothing forced on anyone.

Yet many students would, out of spite, take a New Testament, or several by visiting multiple men around the campus, and then throw them in the trash or in the gutter or other places. Why? Because the hardened, sinful heart is not content with just ignoring God's Word. It seeks to mock it, to revile it, to publicly trample it underfoot.

Yet apart from that Word, the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ, there is no salvation. There is no other path to the Father, no other door into heaven. And so, if those who mock and deface God's Word do not repent and believe the Gospel, they will end up in hell when they die. Jesus is clear on that in the parable, stating that such people "may not believe and be saved."

And as Christ also makes clear, the Word, here the Gospel call to repent and believe, will not go out forever. There comes a time when God, knowing that a person is hardened beyond repentance, withdraws His hand, allowing the devil to come and snatch away the Word from the person's presence.

This doesn't mean that the person will not be judged according to that Word when they die, for they most certainly will, but rather that the call to repent and believe will no longer be sent to them.

The second place the seed lands is on the rock. Jesus explains this situation in this way: "The ones on the rock are those who, when they hear the word, receive it with joy. But these have no root; they believe for a while, and in time of testing fall away."

This is very similar to the seed scattered along the path, landing on a hard, seemingly impenetrable surface. A rock might have some cracks or crevices, enough for a little moisture to stay in and allow the seed to sprout. However, there's nothing beyond that. Hence, Jesus speaks of these as having no root.

The Gospel of Christ comes to a person's heart, and by God's grace he believes. However, this faith is very shallow, very superficial. The person's heart is like a rock, hardened with idolatry. They are unwilling to let that Word sink in, to put down roots, because that would require breaking down whatever idols are in their heart. Being a Christian is just a surface thing, not something that is at the core of who they are.

When a time of testing comes along, especially as St. Mark records in his account of this parable, persecution caused by the Word, that faith quickly withers and dies. Faced with the heat of the world's displeasure, the loss of comfort or having nice things, the person would rather just let this faith die off.

After all, it's not an essential part of him, just something on the surface that doesn't ultimately matter. The idols in the heart, the rock, that is what the person truly cares about, and so if the little plant has to be uprooted and tossed, it's no big deal. The thing is, though, that when belief dies, so too does their salvation.

The third place seeds land is among the thorns, which Jesus describes as "those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature." Here, the Word goes into the heart, and it sprouts and puts down roots and begins to grow.

However, other things are growing in the heart as well, which Jesus describes as the cares and riches and pleasures of life. Rather than trust God, that He will provide all that's needed, this person is filled with cares and worries about this life, thinking that it's up to him to take care of himself.

And how does our sinful self usually think these cares can be handled? Riches! If you have enough money, you won't have any worries. So then, pursuit of money becomes the main thing, what you put most of your effort into.

Once you have plenty of money, what's the thing to spend it on? Pleasures! You'll be tempted to think that, if you've worked hard and earned what's yours, then you should spend it on yourself! Enjoy life, because being happy is the main thing.

Now perhaps someone would say that that he'd never totally give himself over to the thorns Jesus speaks of, to cares and riches and pleasures. He can split his time and talents between what God wants – the good seed – and what he wants – the thorns. Do the church stuff on Sunday, chase after the things of the world on Monday through Saturday.

The thing is, as you probably know, you can't raise weeds and good plants together. Weeds by their nature will crowd out and kill off other plants. The thorns will choke out the good, as Jesus says. This is just as our Lord teaches elsewhere, that you cannot serve God and wealth, God and the things which wealth affords. If you do not curb those sinful desires, if you don't pull out the weeds in the garden, the good fruit will be choked out and die.

Now so far this has been a rough parable. Yet not all the seed lands in such hostile places. Some lands in good soil! As 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.”

When the Word lands in these hearts, it finds fertile ground. The Word is held fast, treasured, clung to, and by the Holy Spirit’s power grows and flourishes in such a place. The Good News that Jesus Christ has won eternal salvation for that person and given it as a free gift bears fruit, both saving faith, which clings to Christ alone for hope, as well as fruits visible in this life. This would be things like the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

This takes time, patience, as the Lord says, for the faith continues to grow and mature and bear fruit throughout a person’s life, until God in His perfect wisdom knows just the right time to bring in the harvest.

And again, in this good soil, the Word is shown to produce a crop a hundred times greater than what was planted. Through faith working in one person’s heart, the Word is spread to countless people throughout the course of his life. You are used by the Lord to spread His Gospel, to share the Word that you have been given.

As you live as Christians, with that Word in your heart and on your lips, sharing that Gospel with others, it can be rather frustrating or disheartening. You consider the times you speak with others about the Word and wonder if it’s just bouncing off their hearts or being choked out by weeds before it even has a chance to sprout.

And then we look inward and ask the same things of ourselves. It isn’t as though we have only pure, rich soil in our hearts. Every person in fact has places that are so hardened as to be like a path, others places where our idols form rocks we aren’t willing to let be broken up, still others were we harbor patches of weeds, earthly cares and desires we struggle to pull out.

Why cast the seeds when so many of them will never bear fruit? Why speak the Word, or hear it ourselves, when it often seems to be a lost cause?

The answer, the hope that we are given, is the fact that the Word is not just empty words, but that which contains the power of God. The seeds are no mere seeds, but contain the ability to transform whatever soil they land on. With each of these locations, each of these problems that the Word encounters as Jesus describes in the parable, the Word also holds the remedy.

Consider the first place the seeds land: along the hardened path, so compacted that nothing can seem to penetrate the surface. What to do about that? Well, in the Word, specifically Hebrews 4, we are told, “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.”

There is no heart so hard that the Word of God cannot open it up. Wielded by the Holy Spirit, the Word is able to open up furrows in the hardened heart, to cut through it and expose good soil in which the Word can grow. This will be painful, as the Word has to cut deep to break through the stubbornness and pride, but it is necessary.

As the Spirit uses the Word, He is able to find the places in a person's heart where it is most effective. We might feel like we are beating our heads against a wall, but as the Scripture says, the Word is able to pierce clear to the thoughts and intentions of the heart. So don't lose hope, or think that it's up to you to find just the right thing to say at just the right time. It is God who pierces through hard hearts by His Word.

What about those places in the heart that are like a rock, filled with stones and even boulders of idolatry? Again, the Word has the answer. Here, from Jeremiah 23, God says "Is not my word like fire, declares the LORD, and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?"

Jeremiah spoke God's Word to a people obsessed with idols. There were idols in homes, idols in public places, idols in the temple. Even the temple itself had become an idol, with the people ignoring God's Word and claiming that, because they had this physical building in their midst, God would never let Jerusalem fall.

To such people, Jeremiah spoke harsh, stern words. Only words such as these could have a chance of breaking the rocks of idolatry into pieces, that the living Word might once more take root. In all times, including our own, God's Word must often be like a hammer. We'd like to only hear soft, nice words, but sometimes it is only God's Word crashing down on our idols that will bring us back to Him.

God doesn't speak to us like this because He is an angry, wrathful God, but because He wants to save us from the destruction that idolatry brings. God is love, and sometimes the Word He must speak is tough love.

Third, we have the seeds scattered among the thorns of cares, riches, and pleasures. To these, God's Word says several things, such as Christ's words from Matthew chapter 6. As I mentioned before, Jesus says, "You cannot serve God and money."

Here, and in other places, He warns us about the dangers of the pursuit of riches and pleasures. Not that riches and pleasures are inherently evil in themselves – they can very well be blessings from God. However, they also easily become idols, and pursuing them can all too quickly take precedence over pursuing the things of God.

And so Christ also says in Matthew 6, "seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness." The stuff of this life will perish, but treasures laid up in heaven endure forever. The weeds might have pretty flowers, but it is the wheat that the Lord will gather into His house at the Last Day. Don't let yourself be weighed down and distracted by the cares of this life, for as Jesus says, "your heavenly Father knows that you need them all" and "all these things will be added to you."

Waiting for these things requires the gift of patience, which Jesus speaks of when talking about the seeds in the good soil. When the Lord grants us good soil, a love of His Word and a desire for His gifts, we can sometimes become impatient.

We rejoice in what our God gives us, and we wonder why other people aren't rejoicing, or why they seem indifferent. Or we are filled with zeal and devotion at one point, but then as time goes on and we keep fighting the same temptations within ourselves, that zeal and devotion seem to wane.

It's in these times that the Word speaks to even those with good soil, offering encouragement and strength. Consider the words from Isaiah 40. "He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength. Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint."

Those who wait for the Lord, who hold His Word in their hearts with patience, He will give the strength necessary to endure, and not only endure, but bear fruit so that others may be blessed.

As the Lord works through His Word, He will create good soil from the hard, rocky, weed-infested soil of hearts. He will do this in our hearts. He will do this in the hearts of others.

As you consider all the different places the seed of the Word can land, and all the different ways in which the Lord works through that Word to correct and form the hearts of all, keep in mind what we heard in our Old Testament lesson. The words there from Isaiah 55 are a wonderful summary and a great comfort God speaks to His people concerning His Word. Our Lord promises, "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 cannot and will not fail. It contains His almighty power and is guided by His unfailing love. You don't have to worry about trying to get each seed you spread into just the right spot for it to work. The Lord will take care of that. Simply cast the seed of the Gospel wherever you are given the opportunity, just as Christ has cast and continues to cast it throughout the world. Our God is faithful. His Word never fails.

In the name of Jesus, amen.