

In the parable of the sower and its explanation, Jesus teaches about the connection between two important members of our body: our ears... and our hearts. The word of God is never sent to us so that it may go in one ear and out the other. Rather, it is to enter in our ears and be planted in our hearts.

Like last week, we're confronted with a question: how do we respond to this gracious act of God's sowing His word in our hearts? The words of Jesus contain both stern warning and comforting hope. As followers of Jesus, let us heed His words: "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

When it comes to this parable, two things should probably be stated at the beginning. The first concerns the types of soil – or the conditions of the heart – spoken of in this parable. It's important to note that most, perhaps all, people aren't just one type of soil. You aren't only the rocky soil, or the thorny soil, or the good soil. For each of us, there are different parts of our hearts, different areas of our lives, where we reflect the different kinds of soil.

Many people might have one particular kind of soil that predominates, and it might shift from one to the other as life goes on. In fact, we pray that it does – more on that in a moment. The point being that you aren't just one type of soil, and always that type, and therefore perhaps in a hopeless state. God's word has hope and promise for all!

The second thing to point out is that this parable doesn't go against grace or the Biblical teaching that you are totally saved by the working of God apart from anything on your part. Salvation is still completely the work of God alone.

In grace, God scatters the seed, the word of God, into your hearts. In grace, God is the one who causes the seed to sprout and grow and bear the fruits of faith. And as I'm sure you've seen with your own eyes, God causes plants to grow in some pretty unlikely places – pine trees growing out of fissures in rock faces, flowers blooming on cacti in deserts, weeds forcing their way up through tiny cracks in concrete.

Yet this gracious action of God doesn't mean that we just ignore the word when it comes. A farmer wouldn't just drive around in his fields randomly throwing seed out the window and then say, "God'll make it grow if he wants. I'm going on vacation for a few months now." A rancher doesn't just turn his cattle loose in a pasture and figure, "If God wants me to succeed, he'll keep them alive. Besides, the fences were all pretty good a couple years ago, and I'm pretty sure the tank out there's still getting water."

No – farmers and ranchers put a lot of effort into their labors, even though they – and all people – are finally at the mercy of God to make those labors successful. So it is when it comes to hearing God's word. Jesus says, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear!" for a reason.

Part of that reason is a stern warning. Though we are freely given faith by God's grace, we are also able to reject it. Christians can and do lose their salvation. That's what Jesus teaches as He describes the first three types of soil.

In the first example, there are people whose hearts resemble the compacted, hardened soil of a path. Here, walking in the ways of the world have so trodden down that soil that it is hardened into ground that will not even let the seed in. These are those who are so conditioned by the world and its way of thinking that they hear God's word but then immediately reject what it has to say. They "just know" it's wrong, or outdated, or hateful, or whatever, and so they won't even consider it.

Though God is incredibly patient, He won't allow His word to suffer shame and mockery forever. For these people, the Lord eventually allows the devil to come and take the word away. God knows, as He did with the Pharaoh at the time of the Exodus, when such a person will never accept the word, and so He finally gives the person over to the destruction that he has asked for.

Next come those with hearts like rock, or rocky soil. Like a seed landing in the thin soil over rocks and quickly sprouting, this is the word landing on hearts that immediately rejoice in it. The promises of God, the love of God, the fellowship of the Church, these all bring great joy to a person. But when the word tries to sink deeper, to put down roots into the person's life, it encounters idols and an unwillingness to change to allow faith to grow.

As long as God's word sounds nice and is just happy passages and pats on the back, it's fine. But when the word confronts sin and calls for repentance and change, then it's not permitted to go any further.

The thing is, though, God is clear in His word that the life of a Christian isn't one of constant ease or affirmation. Our Lord calls us to grow in faith and in godliness in this life. He does this so that we will be strengthened to resist the devil's attacks. If we refuse to grow in faith, refuse to remove those rocks and idols that hinder growth in the Lord, then when persecution and hardship come, saving faith may perish.

This is similar to the third type of soil – that with the thorns growing in it. As Jesus says, these are the cares and riches and pleasures of this life. These are the things that the world – and our sinful flesh – tell us are truly important. These are the things that will supposedly give us happiness and fulfillment, or on the other side the things that we cannot do without, that are absolutely essential.

They take all sorts of different forms in different people's lives, but they all have one thing in common: unchecked, they will eventually strangle and kill the faith which God has planted in our hearts. They take up more and more of our time, our concern, our desire, and meanwhile the Lord and His gifts get pushed further and further down the list. If they aren't cut back, they eventually choke out souls. This is what Jesus teaches in the Sermon on the Mount when He says, "You cannot serve God and money."

Yet after the warnings, Jesus speaks of a fourth type of soil. He says, "they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience." Here is the idea of soil that has been cultivated and made ready to receive the seed. When the word comes, faith

grows readily, for it finds a heart that clings to it, holds it deep inside, treasures it above all else. Roots are able to grow deep; no other weeds are there to compete for the sunlight and moisture.

It takes time, but this soil eventually is transformed by the seed into a rich field. These are hearts that, with time, grow with strong faith, plentifully bearing the fruits of faith, including love of God and care for neighbor.

These are the different ways in which the heart is described by Jesus. What, then, do we make of His description? How do we rightly hear this parable? Think back to the two points made at the beginning of this sermon.

First, in each of our hearts, they are almost certainly places that resemble the different soils of the parable, and that these can be changed and improved. Jesus doesn't tell the parable so that we can figure out which kind we are and then either fall into despair or become complacent in being "good soil." No, He tells it so that we might consider these things and then ask for Him to transform our hearts for the good.

And as to the second point, we know that God in His grace and love desires earnestly to do that very thing! He sends out His seed, His word, always with the desire to increase our faith. And as He promises in Scripture, He works through that word to bring about that change. From Isaiah, we heard about how God makes the land – and hearts – bring forth fruit and sprout, how he replaces thorns with cypresses and briars with myrtles, wiping away sin and transgression and granting fear, love, and trust in Him.

In thanksgiving for this grace our Lord shows to us, we respond as diligent farmers seeking to make the land as fertile for the seed as possible. We strive, by the strength God gives us, to make our hearts all the more receptive to God's word. What does that look like? This parable serves as a guide.

Perhaps there are places where your heart is hardened against God's word. Again, not the whole thing, but maybe part. Maybe there are those things that the Bible says that you hear but just instantly dismiss as just impossible or incompatible with life in this day and age or whatever. These are often areas where being in the world and walking in its path has caused the soil of your heart to be compacted by those repeated footsteps, the way that life "just is nowadays."

When you encounter those, pray that the Lord would use His word, sharper than any sword, to cut down into your heart and break up that hardened area. Now, this may be extremely painful, having to reconsider things you've always assumed. But letting God's word do its work will always be a blessing, even if it hurts at the time.

Likewise, when the word exposes those rocks, those idols in your life that would prevent the growth of faith, ask for God's help to break them up and pull them out. This, too, can be very hard. The rocks might be big, and they may have been there for a long time. It might be something that you value quite a lot in this life, something you've put a lot of time or effort into.

Or it could be a lot of little things, which individually don't seem like such a big deal, but there are so many that there really isn't any room for God's word to put down roots. We might even think

the rocks are valuable, and shiny, and give our lives meaning. But the thing is, rocks are dead, like the ancient idols of wood and stone that the people of Israel were tempted to bow down to. Our idols are just as dead, just as incapable of producing spiritual, eternal fruit. All they do is weaken us for the when persecution and trials come, which they certainly will.

Yet when we pull these out, the Lord will replace them with soil that is good and receptive, regenerating that part of our heart to love Him all the more and cling to that which truly does matter and lasts forever.

In addition to the rocks, strive to cut down and tear out those weeds in your lives that would strangle your saving faith. Our Lord gives us many wonderful blessings in this life, including riches and things we find pleasurable. Yet remember that every idol starts off as something given from God. As Christ says, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness." When the word and the Holy Spirit bring to your attention that something is interfering with that, then cut that weed back, before it spreads and chokes out your faith.

And when the cares of this life seem overwhelming, remember the promise Jesus gives immediately following those words: "... and all these things (your worldly needs) will be added unto you." The Lord knows what you need, and what your loved ones need, and He will not fail to provide. As you tear out those weeds and let the word grow, you'll find that one of the fruits it bears is peace, because relying on God is to rely upon that which is absolutely sure and certain.

As, by God's grace and strength, your heart is made more and more into fertile soil, seek always to plant it with God's word, rather than letting it lay bare. And know too that it will take patience to see the effects, the fruits. Don't fall into despair if or when it doesn't seem like your efforts are doing any good. Think of all the saints in the Bible who had to wait patiently for God to bring about the fulfillment of His promises: Abraham and Sarah waiting for the birth of Isaac, Joshua having to wander through the wilderness for an extra forty years, Simeon waiting in the temple to finally behold the Lord's Christ before he died.

For every one, the Lord provided the patience necessary. And for every one, the Lord's promises were always fulfilled, resulting in blessing greater than originally imagined. As the Lord was faithful to His people of old, He will be faithful to you as well.

The Lord has given you ears to hear; let them hear. Ask the Lord to reveal areas of hardness or idolatry in your hearts, that He may transform them to love Him all the more. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, striving always to hold it fast in your hearts so that in His time, He would bring about the fruit of eternal blessing in you. You have His promise that His word does not go out and return empty.

In Jesus' name, amen.