

Sexagesima (2025)

Coming back from Savannah yesterday, I listen to a Billy Graham crusade from 1958. It was good to hear Mr. Graham's voice . . . not the older, more mature one of later crusades, but the young, vigorous one of his earlier thunderous days.

I regret never having been able to attend one of his crusades in person, but I saw my share of them on television. It was part of growing up Southern!

It must have been thrilling to have been at one of those mass meetings with thousands coming from miles around to hear the word of God preached. I'm not sure you could draw such crowds today for that purpose.

The most thrilling part of those meetings came at the end when Mr. Graham invited those wanting to give their allegiance to Jesus to come

forward. And thousands did as “Just as I am” was played and sung.

Those who attended those crusades heard the call of the Gospel. But what kind of hearers were they?

Would the commitment of those who responded to Mr. Graham’s invitation last? Or was it temporary and fleeting?

Jesus gives the answer in the parable we have before us this morning – the parable of the Seed and the Sower.

Here we learn that there are a number of ways of hearing the word of God.

In this parable, four types of soil are highlighted. Each represents states of the human heart.

As today's reading opens, we find people coming from miles around to hear Jesus preach, just as people came from miles around to hear Mr. Graham preach.

They recognized Jesus as a great teacher and healer. Some may even have wondered if He was the long-awaited Messiah.

They were enthralled with His words, but again *how* were they hearing them?

Was it in a superficial manner? Was the seed really penetrating the soil of the heart? Was there genuine commitment to follow Jesus wherever He led . . . all the way to cross if necessary? /// Time would tell.

The main point of this parable is found in the words: **Beware how you hear.**

That admonition and warning remains right down to this present day. You and I must be

careful how we hear God's word as it is set before us in services of public worship.

Is it with boredom? "I've heard this one before."

Or is it with mild curiosity? "That's interesting. I'll give it more thought when I have time."

Or it with a burst of enthusiasm, but of the sort that soon wains?

Or, is it accompanied with expectation and faith? Does it lead to wholehearted belief and doing?

I dare say we have all heard the parable of the Seed and the Sower many times. It needs little explanation, not the least because Jesus Himself explains it later in the passage to the disciples.

Let me stop here and say, if you ever find yourself where the disciples found themselves that day . . . not understanding something. By all means, do as they did, seek clarification.

That clarification may come directly through the witness of the Holy Spirit, or it may come through a fellow Christian. Regardless, obey Jesus' command: **“Seek and ye shall find.”**

Returning to the Parable of the Seed and the Sower, familiar though it be, it is good to revisit it from time to time.

After all, it speaks not only to what was going on in Jesus' day, but what continues to go on today.

As we look at it, I want to highlight something very obvious: **The problem was not with seed.**

There is nothing in the story that would suggest that the seed was anything but the best. After all, the portion that fell on the well-cultivated ground produced an extraordinary crop. **“It bare fruit an hundredfold,”** the text tells us.

There is here an application we should not miss. /// It is this. You and I have been entrusted with the same seed, the Word of God. It may look weak and insignificant, but it is in fact the most powerful thing in the world.

It can do what gunpowder and all the devices at the disposal of despots cannot do. It can bring about more than an outward conformity: it has the ability to change people from the inside out. Indeed, it can reorder whole communities for the better.

Such was the case following the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. That seed

through the preaching of the apostolic church, radically changed the ancient world.

For one thing, life which had been cheap and dispensable began to be seen as precious and worth guarding.

Roman law, religion and indeed the entire ethos of the ancient world saw nothing wrong with abandoning unwanted newborns. They were regularly placed on the garbage dumps of cities.

Even the refined and educated Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero, who lived in the century before Christ, wrote: **“Deformed infants shall be killed.”**

Commentators note that ‘deformed’ could mean either born with some abnormality or of the wrong sex . . . “I wanted a boy and got a girl.”

What did Christians do? They rescued those unwanted babies and raised them as their own. If they died, they gave them a decent burial.

Why did they do this? /// Well, because the teachings of Jesus led them to believe life came from God and was therefore precious. As the Christian faith spread, this became the dominant view of civilized men and women.

Another example of the power of the good seed comes in the 18th century in England when two brothers – John and Charles Wesley -- set out to change the world of their day, a world of nominal religion, poverty, vice and hopelessness in both town and country.

The only resource at their disposal was the good seed of the Gospel.

What was the outcome? Well, as the Gospel came in, vice went out. The poor were viewed

in a new light and given a new dignity. Societal changes came about which improved their lot.

Some historians have gone so far as to say that the revolution that followed in the wake of their preaching saved England from the sort of revolution which brought so much bloodshed in France.

Whether or not that is a fair reading of history is open / to / debate. What is not is that positive change came about as a result of the preaching of these two brothers.

And, if you know your history, the good seed sown in Britain by the Wesleys also came to be sown on this continent. The preaching of George Whitfield, a contemporary and friend of the Wesley brothers, brought about a great religious revival on this side of the Atlantic. It came to be known as the Great Awakening.

My point: the Word of God represented by the Seed in today's parable is powerful.

“For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword,” we read in Hebrews 4:12.

It can change your life. It can change members of your family, people in your neighborhood and the world.

As we look out on our world today, there is plenty of reason for discouragement.

In addition to wars and rumors of war and economic concerns, there is apostasy in many of our churches.

In some, the faith and practice of the Bible and the ancient church has been discarded and replaced by the zeitgeist of the age. What Paul calls in Galatians ‘another Gospel’ is being preached.

In others, the Gospel may not have been thrown out entirely but has been pushed to the side as entertainment has taken center stage.

More than that, there is an overall decline in faith and practice in the United States. More churches are closing than are opening . . . and less than 50 percent of Americans now claim to be members of a church.

What should we do? Throw in the towel? Say the battle is over? Admit defeat? No!

First, we need to remember we have good seed. Shifting metaphors, we have the weapon which overcomes the world.

Secondly, we need to be familiar with that weapon. That is one reason we come together Sunday by Sunday. We come to be instructed from God's Word Written and then sent back out into the world.

Thirdly, we need to encourage one another. We need to stand together, not only with members of our own ‘tribe’, but with members of other tribes who have a Gospel focus.

Finally, we need to seek and receive our power from on high and not rely on our own meager human resources. In the words of George Duffield’s hymn:

The arm of flesh will fail you,
ye dare not trust your own.

In closing, the parable Jesus delivered 2000 years ago has now been handed to you and me. Let’s receive it. Learn from it. And most important of all: act on it. Act on it by going out ourselves and sowing the good seed.

Not all will come up and bring forth fruit, but some will. So don’t despair, get busy!