

### ***A Parable of the Church***

In the name of Jesus, dear friends in Christ: Today I'd like to tell you a story. It happened on a fine Sunday morning in the midsummer – a day very much like today. Some members of the little church had come early to exchange pleasantries and chit chat a bit with their friends – and perhaps also in order to sit for a time in the sanctuary to clear their thoughts in preparation for the worship service. Others were running a bit late. They just managed to slip in before the bell called them to worship; but whenever and however they came, they came together as an assembly – as the body of Christ – to hear God's Word and to sing the praises of him who had redeemed them. And the pastor of the little church was genuinely glad to see each and every one of them there.

So, they sang and they prayed and they listened to the Scripture readings for the day, as was their custom. Then they sang another hymn, and finally they settled back into their pews, for the pastor had taken his place in the pulpit and he began to preach.

He had chosen as his text what is commonly called the Parable of the Sower, which he explained is more properly called the Parable of the Soils because the story is not so much about the one who sows the seed as it is about how the seed is received by the soil in its various conditions. He told the congregation that that's what he planned to spend most of his time talking about: the soil; but first he wanted to spend a few moments talking about the seed itself. The seed, he said, is *all* important because even the richest, darkest, most potentially fertile soil in the world won't produce a thing without it. The soil by itself is inert. It's lifeless. The thing that's alive is the seed. That's what brings life to the soil.

He then explained that the seed is the Word of God and that the soil represents the hearts and minds of people who are exposed to it. To illustrate he reminded the congregation of how the Lord made the first man; how Adam was just damp soil until the Lord God breathed into him the breath of life. In the same way, he said, the Lord breathes the Spirit of life into people today through his Word – which is a living and active being – not a thing; but a *person*. Namely, the Word of God is God the Son. So, it's God's Son, Jesus, who is being cast as seed when the Word of God is spoken. It's Jesus himself who seeks to take root and grow in the hearts and minds of those who hear God's Word.

For that reason, the pastor said, it's vital to ensure that you're getting your seed from a reliable source. Anybody who does any planting knows that some brands simply perform better than others. The companies that make the best seed available are more careful in their preparation; their scientists, geneticists, and quality control people do a more conscientious job. And just as in the old days when snake oil salesmen also sold so-called "miracle seeds" to gullible farmers – seeds that invariably performed poorly in the end – so there are today any number of hucksters passing off as "guaranteed to grow bigger, better, and faster" versions of the seed of God's Word that have in fact been damaged, distorted, or contaminated. They're mixed with the dead pebbles of human reason, the tiny clods of dirt of man's works, and the seeds of false doctrine's pernicious weeds. So, you've got to be careful. Specifically, you want to ensure that the pure seed you use keeps Jesus Christ and him crucified for sin as the main focus of

every message. That's the germ of the seed; if it's missing, nothing good will grow of it. This is what you get when God's Word is proclaimed but Jesus is presented as more of a lord and lawgiver to tell you what to do than he is a Savior who suffered and died for your sin, or when he is presented as a sort of Santa Claus whose only desire is to give you all the toys you want as is taught by the health and welfare gospel preachers. There are many other ways that the Word can be presented such that it is robbed of its power. So the pastor warned his people to be wary consumers, and not to be shy about asking questions and testing the seed that's cast their way to ensure its quality.

Having thus expounded the meaning of the seed and having cautioned his congregation to exercise spiritual discernment so that they accept only good seed for themselves, the pastor then began to explain the different types of soil on which the seed fell. The soil on the path – the soil made hard by the traffic of feet, oxen hooves, and wagon wheels, he said, represents anything and everything that prevents the seed from penetrating the soil. It's when God's Word is spoken but not received by a hearer. And even as he mentioned it, the pastor noted to himself with sadness that more than half of the church's members weren't even present to hear God's Word on this particular Sunday – which, even sadder, was pretty typical. He wondered how many farmers would be happy if they only managed to plant half their fields in a given year; but of course, it wasn't fields he was concerned about here. It was people – Christ's people – who were not receiving Jesus on this day. And though he knew certainly that some of them couldn't be present due to circumstances beyond their control, he also knew that most of those absent simply didn't think it was important enough to bother with. The idea that Jesus Christ himself enters them through his Word, and like he did when he cleansed the temple, overturns and casts out what doesn't belong so that he can take up residence himself in a place now made holy – that idea hadn't really sunk in. Instead, many of them saw the worship of the church as a burden or obligation rather than an opportunity to receive another life-giving helping of Jesus and his Holy Spirit.

But it wasn't only those who weren't there that missed out that day. No, there were a few who, when they saw what the lessons were for the day, said to themselves, "Oh no, not this old story again. I must've heard a hundred times! What more can I possibly learn from it?" They just sort of tuned out and waited impatiently for the ordeal to end. There were a couple others too who had an axe to grind with the pastor. He had offended them at one point by something he said, or something he did or didn't do that they thought he should. Whatever it was, it made them angry; and now the upshot was that the man simply annoyed them. They found fault with everything he did or said. They listened to his messages mostly to find more reasons to dislike him – and so let their anger against the man be a barrier even to the Good Word he proclaimed.

Well, by now the preacher had rambled on, as preachers tend to do. He began to talk about the stony soil and how it was a picture of people who do indeed eagerly receive God's Word – on the surface anyway; but who have rock hard spots under the surface that prevent the Word from sending down deep roots. He said these hard stones represent stubborn and resistant sins that people have and either they don't want to part with them, or they are unaware that they have them. Speaking of the former, the pastor began to list the sorts of sins that Christians often very consciously try to hide in their lives: envy, covetousness, an unhealthy spirit of competition, resentment, substance abuse, *people* abuse, sexual sins like lust and pornography, the list was quite extensive. And as he went through it naming the various sins, now and then someone would shift uncomfortably in their seat or give a little cough behind their hand. Others

felt like shifting or coughing; but were afraid of what that might reveal, so they kept perfectly still and pretended to be un-phased. These secretly cherished sins, the pastor said, are like areas that we've marked as "out of bounds" for God's Word – they are areas in which we won't let the Word penetrate so that its roots can only go so deep, and as a result the life and work of Christ in one's heart is limited, it's confined and crowded, and it's susceptible to being lost. The pastor also mentioned that like stones in the soil, these sins are often not entirely hidden. Sometimes they poke out a bit above the surface where they can be seen by others. They also have a tendency to be exposed whenever the soil is stirred up or disturbed. But unlike stones in the soil, these sins have a way of growing larger if not dug up and cast away.

But all of this has to do with the stones we know are there. The pastor went on to explain that even more insidious are the stones the host is not aware of: sins like pride, legalism, the spirit of judgment that looks down on others, the spirit of complacency that resists inner change and growth in the faith ... so many more that can easily be seen in others but that are not so easily seen in yourself. And as the pastor mentioned these sins, several people found themselves shaking their heads in agreement because they were pretty sure they knew exactly who the other members he was talking about were. And they hoped that those people were listening to what the pastor was saying about them.

Well, by the time the pastor's sermon turned to the topic of the weedy soil, he had been preaching for quite some time. Even as he began to speak of the intrusion of the cares and concerns of the world on the life of Christian, and how disordered priorities can make a person's walk of faith unproductive, several members of the church found themselves looking impatiently at their watches and thinking that it was just about time for him to wrap it up. They did, after all, have important things to do today and this didn't rate very high on their lists. They were in a hurry to slip out too because they'd heard about several ongoing projects that the church was working on, and they were afraid that someone might ask them to help out or, what was far worse – horror of horrors – ask them to head up one of the committees. There was no way *that* was going to happen. They were already spread much too thin as it was with all the other things they had going on in their lives. They certainly didn't have any more time or energy to devote to things the church was working on. Besides, they'd already paid their dues. It was somebody else's turn. So, they thought to themselves, hurry up and say what you've got to say about the good soil, so I can get out of here.

They got their wish because, as it turns out, the pastor had very little to say about the good soil. But what is there to say? The other soils are identified by what they have that's *not* supposed to be there. The good soil is *just soil* without those things getting in the way of God's work through the seed of his Word. So those who were in a hurry left in a hurry. In fact, in their minds they were already running a dozen different places long before they left as they thought of all the places they wanted to go and the things they had to do.

But others were ruminating on what the pastor was saying. At each point in his message, they had seen in themselves one or more aspects of the very problems he was describing. They agreed that they didn't always exercise the best discernment when it came to ensuring the quality of the Word they received. They thought regretfully about the times they had been absent from the worship of the church for no good reason – just lack of motivation, or lack of appreciation for what's really going on there, or

because they didn't want to have deal with the pastor or certain other members of the church with whom they were displeased. They also recognized in themselves many of the stony sins that had been named (along with a few that weren't named), both known sins that they were deliberately trying to hide and even a few of those that are harder to identify – that are, most of the time anyway, hidden even to oneself. And they saw too that very often their priorities were not what they should be – that too much of their time and effort was spent on things that will be lost in time, and not enough spent on the things that will matter forever.

These sat in mournful silence meditating on the depth and magnitude of their failings. And they whispered a quiet prayer confessing their many sins to the Lord. They asked to be forgiven and washed again in the blood of their Savior, Jesus Christ. They also asked for his Holy Spirit to lead and guide them so that they might do better in the future. And then they got up and went forth to serve in their various vocations throughout the week yielding fruit for the Lord, in one case a hundredfold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. The end. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***