



St. Stephen's Traditional Episcopal Church

11856 Mays Chapel Rd., Timonium, MD 21093

The Sunday called Sexagesima, January 27th, 2007

✠ **In The Name of The Father and of The Son
and of The Holy Ghost. Amen.** ✠

The parable of the sower is better named the parable of the soils. A gardener would walk along strips of land heedlessly throwing seed. It fell into different kinds of soil. Jesus explains the connection the soils have to the spiritual life. The seed is the Word and sometimes it falls on footpaths. This is like seed that falls on hard hearts. It's snatched away before it has time to penetrate to the heart. Some who hear the word are like soil with great promise, but no depth. A little trial comes, they're offended by something, and they abandon it all as a waste of time. Others hear the Word and show signs of real, authentic faith, but then the cares and the riches and the pleasures of life come along. They neglect prayer and the Word. Their cluttered lives have no room in it for the Savior. The *good soil* is the mind and heart that is prepared for the seed and fruit is borne. They patiently endure, Jesus says in verse 15. They overcome every obstacle and every hindrance and persevere in faith right through to the end.

Now let's back up for a moment. Jesus says to the disciples that they had been blessed with knowledge of the *secrets or mysteries of the kingdom*, while the rest heard nothing but *parables*. The reason, he says in verse 10, is so they won't hear and understand.

People are always complaining about this gospel, and especially about those who preach it, that obstacles exist which make it very difficult for ordinary folk to understand it and respond to it. Some common complaints are that miracles are just impossible for modern man to accept because of the advance of science and knowledge in general. On the other hand, people may be willing to accept the possibility of miracles, we live in a very spiritual age, but how can you expect them to believe that Jesus Christ is the one full and final disclosure of God to the world. Jesus is fine, but as one way among many others.

The way, the truth, and the life..., well that's just not reasonable.

What is needed, we are told, is the message of Jesus. And then we are reminded of the parables, as though we had forgotten them. What Jesus did, we are told, was tell stories. They were very simple. They were about ordinary life. He didn't use language like justification and redemption and salvation. He hardly talked about sin, we are told. He simply told stories about nature and about love and kindness, and everyone understood. It was all so simple. That's what we have got to get back to. None of your theology. None of your doctrine. None of this stuff that came out of the Reformation.

What is amazing about this, of course, is how it flies in the face of the very Scriptures to which these people appeal, particularly, the parables. The fact is, my friends, when the enemies of our Lord understood them they were furious at Him. Jesus did not use parables to make the gospel easy. Let me refer you back to that tenth verse, *To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God*. The gospel, my friends, concerns a kingdom which is a mystery. The word means something that cannot be known by anyone unless and until it is revealed.

The problem with those who do not understand the gospel and refuse to believe it is this. It is not because of science, it is not because the gospel is irrational or unreasonable. The problem is how people hear it, and how people receive it. There are hindrances to entering the kingdom of God, but not in the gospel itself as much as in the minds of those who hear it.

The principle is this, how you hear the gospel will determine what you hear. Actually, this is the case

for everything in life. Any teacher will tell you, there are students who never get it, but it's not because the subject matter is impossible to understand; it's because of how the student listens and studies and approaches it.

There is the problem of intellectual pride. You see it with people who hear this gospel and they decide before they hear one word that it is all rather trite. It comes out of a pre-scientific age. People believed in demons and evil spirits when the Bible was written, and we know with modern psychology at our disposal that there are no demons. No-one can rise from the dead. It's all foolish. Intellectual pride! And it makes it impossible for the gospel to be heard. It's snatched away before it has a chance to have an effect.

There is also the problem of moralism and of moral pride. This is the individual deeply offended at being called a sinner. They imagine that when the Bible talks of righteousness it means being a decent person.

There are other hindrances too. What about the person who listens for the wrong reasons. What can the gospel do for me? I have these problems I want solved. Can Christ solve them? Can He meet my needs? Can He help me feel better about myself? Can He deliver me from my diseases so that I need not worry about pain and suffering anymore? There are people I have met who came to the gospel as a kind of sop to the soul—a cure-all. When things did not go well they became angry and dismissed it all.

But what does the good soil look like? How does a person *hear the message* so as to *obey it*? Let me conclude this morning by answering that question, and the first thing is, listen to it with an open mind willing to learn and listen. If you come to this gospel declaring up front what you can believe and what you can't then it will do nothing for you. Read the gospels with an open heart. Ask the Holy Spirit to speak to you through them. Ask Him to reveal Christ to you. Ask Him to make the Scriptures plain.

That leads to the second thing, we must hear it humbly. I recall many years ago a debate on Public Television about the existence of God. Again and again I heard the atheists protest their offense at the notion of a supreme being in control of life. It wasn't so much that science disproved or made the existence of God impossible. It was that the very idea of God was an offense to their pride. There's your problem. This is why the seed of the word makes no impact on so many human lives. We want to be in control. We like to think we are in charge. We yearn to be gods in

this world. That was the first temptation and it has proven the most potent poison of the soul ever since. Ye shall be as gods. You can determine your own destiny. You can be in control. But it's a lie, and if this gospel is to profit us at all this is one of the things that must go. We must humble ourselves, humble our minds, recognize there is much about life we cannot fathom or comprehend. We need help. We need light. We need the mystery to be revealed.

The hindrance, my friends, are not the miracles or the exclusive claims of Christ. It's the pride of the human heart. It's the unwillingness to recognize our ignorance. This was the problem with the scribes and Pharisees. They were the men who knew, the professionals, the theologians, the men of letters and of learning. But they knew nothing. Jesus said to them on one occasion, *You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life. But they speak of me.* They were unwilling to see it. They closed their minds and exalted their hearts, so that not even the miracles he performed had any effect on them. It just made them angrier and more and more bitter!

Then, finally, those who receive the Gospel and show fruit for it not only have open minds and humble hearts, they also have ready wills, ready to obey the Gospel they hear. There are commands to the Gospel. It says, *Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.* That's a command. It's not one idea among many others on how we might live the good life. It's the word of the Creator who demands righteousness from the creatures he has made in his image, and who sent his Son to provide it as a free gift to those humble enough to receive it with the open hands of faith.

It also urges us to *repent*. That's the first word that came through the mouth of Jesus. *Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand.* Repentance makes faith authentic. Without it faith may be nothing more than head-knowledge. True faith is heart-knowledge. We believe from the heart, and a part of our believing involves sorrow for sin and a desire to be saved from it. We recognize that sin is exceedingly sinful, and we are sorry not because of the consequences it brings so much as what it does to God. It grieves the heart of God, it is an offense to God, and the fear of the Lord, my friends, really is the beginning of wisdom.

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN.