



GOSPEL FOR SEXAGESIMA SUNDAY

Luke 8:4-15

When a great crowd was gathering and people from town after town came to Him, He said in a parable, "A sower went out to sow his seed. And as he sowed, some fell along the path and was trampled underfoot, and the birds of the air devoured it. And some fell on the rock, and as it grew up, it withered away, because it had no moisture. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up with it and choked it. And some fell into good soil and grew and yielded a hundredfold." As He said these things, He called out, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear." And when His disciples asked Him what this parable meant, He said, "To you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of God, but for others they are in parables, so that 'seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.' Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God. 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. And 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. And as for what fell among the thorns, they are 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. 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."

1. This Gospel speaks about the students and the fruits which the Word of God has in the world. It does not speak about the Law or about human ordinances, but, as He Himself says, about the Word of God which He Himself, Christ the sower, preaches. The Law produces no fruit, just as little as human ordinances do. He establishes four groups of students of the Word of God.

2. The first group are those who hear, but do not understand or pay attention to it [Luke 8:12]. These are not the common people on earth, but the greatest, wisest, and holiest—in short, they are the majority. He is not speaking here about those who persecute the Word or who do not listen to it, but about those who hear it and are students of it, who even want to be called true Christians, who live with us in the Christian congregation, and who partake of Baptism and the Sacrament with us. But they are and remain

fleshly hearts who do not accept the Word, for it goes in one ear and out the other.¹ Similarly, the kernel fell on the path and not on the ground, and remained lying out on the path, for the path was trodden hard by human and animal feet [cf. Luke 8:5].

3. That is why He says that "the devil comes and takes away the Word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved" [Luke 8:12]. This power of the devil not only means that hearts which were hardened through a worldly mind and life lose and abandon the Word, so that they never understand or know it, but it also means that instead of God's Word the devil sends false teachers, who trample it down with human doctrines. It says here both that the seed was trampled on the path and [that it was] eaten up by the birds.

Christ Himself explains the birds as the devils who take away the Word and devour it. That happens when he turns their hearts away and blinds them so that they do not understand or pay attention to it, as St. Paul says, "They will turn away from listening to the truth and turn aside into myths" (2 Timothy 4 [:4]). He understands "trampling" as the human doctrines which rule in our hearts. He also says that salt which has lost its taste is "thrown out and trampled under people's feet" (Matthew 5 [:13]); that is, as St. Paul says, they must "believe what is false" (2 Thessalonians 2 [:11]) because they did not obey the truth [Gal. 3:1; Rom. 2:8].

4. Thus all heretics, sects, and fanatics belong to this group, who understand the Gospel in a fleshly way and explain it however they want according to their own mind. They all hear the Gospel but produce no fruits. Rather, they are ruled by the devil and more harshly oppressed by human ordinances than they were before. It is a terrible thing when Christ says that the devil takes the Word away from their hearts [Luke 8:12], by which he proves that the devil rules powerfully over their hearts, even if they are called "Christians" and hear the Word.

Likewise, it is miserable to hear that they are trampled and must be placed beneath men in their pernicious doctrines. Under the appearance and name of the Gospel, the devil subtly takes the Word from them, so that they never understand it and are never saved, but must be eternally lost, as now our fanatics do in all lands. Where this Word does not remain, there is no salvation, and great works and holy lives do not help, for when He says that they are not saved because the Word was taken away from them [Luke 8:12], He proves quite strongly that not works but faith alone saves through

¹ *es gehet zu eim Ohr ein, zum andern wieder aus.* This expression has the same meaning in German as in English: to hear something without attention and without letting it have any effect on one's attitude.

the Word, as St. Paul says, "It is a divine power to save all who believe in it" (Romans 1 [:16]).

5. The second group are those "who receive it with joy" [Luke 8:13], but they do not persevere. This is also a large group who understand the Word correctly and grasp it purely, without any sects, divisions, or fanatics. They rejoice that they know the real truth and are able to know how they may be saved without works through faith, and, in addition, that they are free from imprisonment by the Law, their conscience, and human doctrines. But when it comes to the point of suffering harm, insults, disgrace, and loss of life or property, then they fall away and deny it, for they do not have enough root and are not [planted] deeply enough. Therefore, they are like the seed on a rock, which quickly springs forth and sprouts, which is good to look at and holds promise; but when the sun shines hot, it withers, for it lacks soil and moisture and has only rock [Luke 8:6]. These do the same. In a time of persecution, they deny the Word or keep quiet about it. They do, speak, and suffer everything their persecutors command or want. Yet formerly they sprang forth quickly and cheerfully spoke and confessed when there was still peace and no heat, so that there was hope they would produce much fruit and advantage for people. These fruits are not only the works but also much more the confessing, preaching, and spreading of the Word, so that many others are converted through it and the kingdom of God is increased.

6. The third group are those who hear and understand, but then fall off on the other side, namely, into the pleasures and laziness of this life, so that they do nothing at all with the Word [Luke 8:14]. This group is also rather large, for though they do not produce heresies like the first group but always have the pure Word [and] though they are not attacked on the left side with adversity and persecution like the second group, they fall off on the other side, for their ruin is that they have peace and good days. For that reason they do not take the Word seriously, but become lazy and absorbed in the cares, riches, and pleasures of this life, so that they are good for nothing. Therefore, they are like the seed which fell among the thorns. Although there is no rock, but good soil; though there is no path, but deeply plowed ground—yet the thorns will not let it grow, but choke it [Luke 8:7]. Thus they have everything necessary for salvation in the Word without using it, and so they rot in carnal pleasures in this life. This is where those people belong who hear but do not restrain their flesh; those who know but do not act accordingly; those who teach but do not follow it themselves. They remain this year as they were last year.

7. The fourth group are those who grasp it and retain it with "a fine and good heart" [Luke 8:15] and produce fruit with patience, that is, those who hear the Word and continually cling to it, so that they would risk everything

and leave everything for it. The devil does not take it away from them or mislead them; the heat of persecution does not do away with them; the thorns of pleasure and the greed of this age do not hinder them. Rather, they produce fruit: teaching others the same thing, increasing the kingdom of God, and then also doing good to their neighbor in love.

That is why He says "with patience" [Luke 8:15], for they must suffer much on account of the Word: insult and disgrace from the sects and heretics, hatred and jealousy with injury to body and property from their persecutors, not to mention what the thorns and the temptations of their own flesh do. It is well called "the Word of the cross" [1 Cor. 1:18], for whoever will cling to it must bear the cross and misfortune with patience and triumph.

8. He says "in a fine and good heart" [Luke 8:15]. Just as a field that lacks thorn and brush and is level and spacious is a beautiful, clean place, so also a heart is fine and pure, wide and spacious that is without worry and greed for temporal sustenance, so that there is room for the Word of God there. But a field is good not only when it is fine and level but also when it is fertile and fruitful, so that it has good ground which abounds in grain, not like a stony or gravelly field. So a heart which has good ground with a full spirit is strong, fertile, and good to retain the Word and to produce fruit with patience.

9. Here we see why it is unsurprising that there are so few true Christians, for the seed does not fall only on good ground, but only the fourth and smallest part does. Those who boast that they are Christians and praise the teaching of the Gospel are not to be trusted, such as Demas, St. Paul's disciple, who finally deserted him [2 Tim. 4:10], or those disciples of Christ who withdrew from Him (John 6 [:66]). He Himself calls out and says, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" [Luke 8:8], as if He would say: "Oh, how few true Christians there are. One cannot believe all who are called Christians and hear the Gospel; more is required than that."

10. All this is said for our instruction, so that we do not go astray, since so many misuse the Gospel and few grasp it correctly. It is frustrating to preach [the Gospel] to those who treat it so shamefully and even work against the Gospel. This preaching [of the Gospel] should be common, so that it is proclaimed to the whole creation, as Christ says, "Proclaim the Gospel to the whole creation" (Mark 16 [:15]); and Psalm 19 [:4]: "Their line goes out to all lands, and their speech to the end of the world." What does it matter to us if many despise it? Nevertheless, it must be that "many are called and few are chosen" [Matt. 22:14]. For the sake of the good ground that produces fruit with patience, the seed must also fall in vain on the path, on the rock, and among the thorns. We are certain that God's Word does not go away without fruit, but it always finds the good field, as He says here that some seed of the sower also falls on the good field, and not only on the path, among

the thorns, and on the stony ground. Wherever the Gospel goes, there are Christians: "My Word shall not come empty" (Isaiah 55 [:11]).

11. It is to be noted that Mark [4:8] and Matthew [13:8] say the seed produced some thirtyfold, some sixtyfold, and some a hundredfold. According to the explanations of all [previous commentators], this is to be understood of the three kinds of chastity—that of virgins, married people, and widows. The hundredfold fruit is ascribed to virginity; thirtyfold, the least of all, to the married estate; and sixtyfold to widows. But that is such coarse, worthless babbling that it is a sin and a shame that it has remained so long in Christendom and has been taught by so many high teachers, and no one has noticed it. In this we can see how many valiant, vigorous, and diligent teachers there have been, how one blindly believed the other, and how God let such great saints and people be so coarsely foolish in these great matters of the soul. In that way He warns us to believe no teacher, no matter how holy and great he is, unless he brings God's pure Word [cf. Gal. 1:8].

12. First, it would be an insult to the Word of God if there were to be no more fruits [from it] than chastity, since St. Paul mentions many others (Galatians 5 [:22–23]). In summary, the Word of God accomplishes everything good and makes us wise, intelligent, clever, prudent, godly, good, patient, faithful, discreet, chaste, etc. For that reason alone, this comment about three kinds of chastity is totally unchristian.

Likewise, the heathen and wicked people who do not have the Gospel or even persecute it still have virgins, widows, and married people. Without a doubt, Annas and Caiaphas were honorably married people [John 18:13, 24]. Likewise, people have virginity, in addition to widowhood and marriage, before they have God's Word, for they are born as virgins. When the Gospel comes, it finds them as virgins, widows, and married people and does not first make them into virgins, widows, or married people.

13. Second, marriage, virginity, and widowhood are not fruits or virtues or works, but three estates created and ordered by God; they are not in our power, but are divine works and creations, as are all other creatures. If it were right to make the estates into fruits, then we would have to say that lordship, servitude, maleness, childhood, and the offices of all were only fruits of the Gospel. In that way no fruits at all would be left for the Gospel, since such estates are found completely apart from the Gospel. Chastity has been elevated because of its great prestige, to the great danger and injury of souls, just as if there were no other virtues to adorn a Christian than virginity.

14. I will say further that chastity is a different and much higher thing than virginity, which is nothing else than that a female has been guilty of no

man.² Nevertheless, it also happens that virgins, because of the nature of their female bodies, not only have desire and passion for men but must also be full of seed and blood in order to bear children and multiply, as God created them, and that creation is not their work but God's alone. They cannot hinder that, but it must happen as God created it to happen naturally, whether children are born or not. But chastity [in a woman] must be the kind of attitude which has no or little desire for men, and has in her body no or little seed [to bear] fruits or children.

15. Now it commonly happens that a wife often does not feel this desire and passion, this flow or seed, for she is freed from that by and through her husband. Moreover, while a virgin has sheer desire with the thoughts in her heart and has seed in her body, a wife has much displeasure mixed in from her husband, so that, as it is commonly said, the highest and best chastity is in the married estate, because there is less passion and desire in that estate, and there is the least chastity in virginity, because there is much more passion and desire in that estate. Therefore, chastity is a virtue far above virginity, for we can still call a bride a virgin, even though she is full of passion, desire, and love for her bridegroom. Chastity soars high over all three estates—over marriage, over widowhood, and over virginity. But if God does not work a miracle, it sinks, and it is greatest in marriage and least in virginity. There are not three kinds of chastity, but three estates of chastity.

16. It is true that if we consider virginity according to its outward appearance, it seems great that she refrains and does not satisfy her desire with a man. But what if someone bears his desire without a husband or wife longer, and [then] satisfies it better than with a husband or wife? Is there not more unchastity where there is greater passion, love, lust, and stimulation than where there is less? Therefore, if it is considered according to passion and stimulation, as unchastity ought to be considered, virginity is more unchaste than marriage. That can be seen easily in the young girls who are virgins, and yet are full of lust and curiosity and think it much greater than it really is. In short, I would be glad to see a virgin twenty years old who had a healthy, normal female body.³

2 In German and Latin, the words for "virgin" (*Jungfrau*, *virgo*) are feminine and thus were used only for women. For male virginity, other terms, such as "chaste" or "celibate" (*keusch*, *castus*, *caelebs*), were used.

3 That is, a body not tormented with lust, "flow," "seed," and the like. In sixteenth-century Germany, the average age at first marriage, which had been increasing since the late fourteenth century, was in the early twenties for women and the middle to late twenties for men. Luther urged marriage by twenty for men and eighteen for women: see Steven E. Ozment, *When Fathers Ruled: Family Life in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 37–38.

17. That is enough about chastity, now that we know that these fruits of the Word must be understood differently and in a wider sense than about chastity. And we know specifically that these fruits are that many people are converted through them and come to the knowledge of the truth. Although works are also called fruits, yet He is speaking here especially about the fruits which are produced in hearts when they are enlightened, believing, confident, and wise in Christ. St. Paul wrote: "In order that I might reap some fruit among you, just as among other Gentiles" (Romans 1 [:13]), and "The Gospel is bearing fruit in the whole world, as it also does among you" (Colossians 1 [:6]); that is, many become alive, freed from their sins, and saved through it. It is the proper work of the Gospel—as the Word of life, grace, and salvation—to release us from sin, death, and the devil. In harmony with this fruit, the fruits of the Spirit then follow, works such as patience, love, faithfulness, etc. [cf. Gal. 5:22–23].

18. That some produce fruit thirtyfold, some sixtyfold, and some a hundredfold is the same as saying that more people are converted in one place than in another, and one apostle and preacher preaches in a wider area and more than another. People everywhere are not equally numerous, they do not produce as many Christians, and the preachers do not [all] preach as widely and as much, but this happens as God has provided and ordered. We can certainly attribute a hundredfold fruit to St. Paul's words, which were preached in the widest area and were preached the most, even though he was no virgin.

19. But what does it mean when He says, "To you it has been given to know the mystery of the kingdom of God" [Luke 8:10]? What is the mystery? If we are not to know it, why, then, is it preached? "Mystery" means a hidden, concealed thing, which we do not know. "The mystery of the kingdom of God" is the things hidden in the kingdom of God, such as Christ with all His grace which He shows to us, as Paul describes Him [cf. Eph. 2:7], for whoever truly knows Christ also knows what God's kingdom is and what is in it. It is called "mystery" because it is spiritual and secret, and it certainly remains that way, if the Spirit does not reveal it. Although there are many who see and hear it, yet they do not understand it. Similarly, there are many now who preach Christ and hear how He was given for us; but that is all still on their tongues and not in their hearts, for they themselves do not believe it or sense it, as St. Paul says, "The natural man understands nothing of the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 2 [:14]).

For that reason He says here "to you it has been given" [Luke 8:10]. That is, the Spirit gives it to you, so that you not only hear and see it but also recognize and believe it with your heart; therefore, it is no longer a mystery to you. But the others who hear it as well as you, but do not have faith in their hearts, do not see and understand it; to them it is a mystery and remains unknown

to them. Everything they hear is nothing else than hearing a parable or a dark saying. This is also proved by our fanatics, who know how to preach much about Christ; but because they themselves do not sense it in their hearts, they rush ahead, leave the true basis of the mystery behind, and are occupied with questions and peculiar things that they have made up. But when things become serious, they know nothing at all about trusting God and finding the forgiveness of sins in Christ.

20. But St. Mark says that Christ spoke to the people in parables so that they could understand it, each according to his ability [cf. Mark 4:33]. How does that agree with St. Matthew, who says that He spoke in parables so that they would not understand it [Matt. 13:13-14]? It must be that St. Mark wants to say that parables serve so that ignorant people can grasp them externally, even if they do not understand them. Afterward, they can be taught, and then understand them. Parables are naturally pleasing to the simple people, and they retain them easily, because they are taken from the common things people deal with. St. Matthew means to say that these parables are of the kind that no one can understand them, no matter how often he grasps and hears them, unless the Spirit makes them known and reveals them. I do not mean that they are preached so that no one will understand them, but that it naturally follows that if the Spirit does not reveal them, no one understands them. Christ took these words from Isaiah (6 [9-10]; Luke 8:10)), where the high understanding of divine providence is mentioned, that He conceals and reveals to whomever He will and has determined from eternity.