

✠ Jesu juva ✠

PATIENT PERSEVERANCE

Exodus 17:1-7; I Corinthians 9:24-10:5; Matthew 20:1-16

Grace, mercy and peace be unto you from God the Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen

It's always a little easier to understand the meaning of a story when the author of the story sits you down and explains it to you point by point. That's what we find Jesus doing for His disciples today as He explains to them the parable of the Sower. To them, He said, it had, "been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest it is given in parables, that 'Seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand.'" And to us, now this parable is given, not so that we may be confirmed in a lack of hearing and seeing due to unbelief, but so that we too may know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, and by such knowledge grow in faith.

So let's take a closer look at Jesus' explanation of this parable. First and foremost, the Word of God is the seed that is given so that people will be brought to faith and bear the fruits of faith. This seed of God's Word has the power within it to accomplish everything for which it is given, as we heard today in Isaiah 55. It is not the hearts of the hearers that causes faith to come into being or to grow. It is the Word of God itself, a Word which is delivered into the heart whereby the Holy Spirit creates faith and sustains it in a person.

But in this parable we find people in four different circumstances. In three of these circumstances faith either is not produced or fails. In the first condition, the heart of the person is so hardened by unbelief that they reject the Word of God outright. These, when they hear the Word of Christ proclaimed and confessed will not allow the Holy Spirit to work upon them. And the devil is at work there also, helping to convince them that this Word of the Lord is nothing but myth and foolishness. And so by their own willful rejection of Christ they come to condemnation and are not saved.

In the second condition, the Word is eagerly received at once, but the new-found faith quickly fades away because it is not well rooted in them. These, though they have received the Gospel, do not nourish their faith with the Word of the Lord as they should, or are not nourished by those who are charged with teaching and catechizing them. Their faith is a shallow, surface level faith, often misinformed, and cannot stand up to the struggles the soul must endure in this life if it is to remain faithful to Christ.

In the third condition, the Word is again received unto faith, but then the person lets other things take priority over the faith, over Christ that is and the person's

life with Him. And over time this faith, which again is not nourished, but is left to idle while other things are pursued, fades and dies.

The last condition is the only one in which we should wish to find ourselves. The one that hears the Word of the Lord and keeps it and bears fruit. In these the Word of the Lord is not just received once or even once in a while, but defines them and nourishes them continually as it is continually received. The Word changes their hearts from being cold and hard to warm and living, from being perverse and lowly, to being noble and good. In these the Holy Spirit, through the Word of Christ, remains active. In these hearts Christ Himself dwells and His works show forth in their works. That is where we want to be.

Easy enough right? Just keep coming to church, hear the Word of God, and you're good to go. Well, if it were that easy, we wouldn't see the two conditions where people fall away from faith. There is an important word in this explanation Jesus gives that must not be neglected. That word is translated here as "patience". "But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience." The original Greek word here actually means quite a deal more than just being patient, as if this faith were patient because it was peacefully waiting for heaven or such. The word has more to do with perseverance than with simple patience. Patience is part of it, of course, but it is patience under fire, a stick-to-it-iveness even when one seems to be failing, a steadfastness in the face of doubt and temptation, and persecution. This is what those in the fourth condition, the condition of faithfulness, do.

And this is what you must do if you wish to remain in the faith you have been given and reap the eternal blessings of salvation. The life of faith is rarely an easy one; for the same things that cause others to fall also come against you. The devil does not sit back and say "Oh, I won't waste my time with this one, because he has a noble and good heart and keeps the Word of Christ, I'll move on to easier pickings." Quite the contrary! You who have received the Word and are keeping it are his main targets! And he will do everything in his power to turn you from the life of faith so that you harden your heart to Christ's Word and give up the grace He has bestowed upon you by rejecting the Gospel.

And your old sinfulness, your old flesh, will also fight against faithfulness, even using a mask of zealotry and a prideful piety to do so, turning you away from a simple trust in the Word of God, or a desire to grow in that Word, to something of your own making. The old Adam within you wants you to have a shallow faith for a shallow faith will not persevere patiently, but will give up in despair in the face of temptation and doubt.

And then there's the temptation of worldliness, to put the pursuit of this world's treasures, honors, pleasures, or what have you, ahead of your faith; to focus on these things and let your faith languish and slowly pass away through neglect; or to be so consumed with worries over or plans about the things and issues of this life, that Christ's Word seems to have no bearing or importance when compared to these pressing concerns. And then the Word of the Lord which saves you and

the faith you have received seem to be without meaning on the one hand or without any real value on the other. And faith weakens and perhaps dies altogether.

The life of faith is not an easy life. And it is not a life in which you see instant results from having faith. If it were it wouldn't be called a life of faith; for faith is a trust in things which are not seen, not in things which are easily seen and measured through your experiences. And with these enemies attacking you at various points in your life, the life of faith can be very hard; for often it is when you are trying your hardest to be faithful that you find yourself struggling and failing. And that is because it is at such points that you are most under attack by the enemies. And it is often when you feel yourself most in need of help that it feels like God has abandoned you because the help you desire doesn't appear to come. And you are left struggling and suffering. But the struggle and the suffering are actually signs that you are actually in the faith and that the Holy Spirit is at work in and with you.

Look at St. Paul's life as an example to you. Today we heard how Paul suffered so greatly as an apostle of Christ. He was whipped, beaten, stoned, shipwrecked, marooned, always in danger of being attacked, arrested, betrayed, or killed. He was constantly travelling, often hungry, sometimes cold, sometimes without shelter, lacking sleep, lacking proper clothing. Moreover he was anxious for the well being of the churches under his care; an anxiety shared by most pastors; had he taught them well enough, had he been faithful, had they heard and believed as they should, could he do more? And then there is this mysterious affliction which he calls a thorn in his flesh, a messenger from Satan to buffet him.

Now I ask you, was Paul beloved by Christ? Of course he was. Was he a man of great faith? Yes he was. Did he accomplish great things in the name of Christ? Did he bear much fruit? Yes he did, more than any other apostle he claims. Did God hear Paul's prayers. Yes, God certainly did. And yet Paul suffered. And he was not always relieved of the things over which he prayed. And so with this thorn in the flesh, he prays three times for its removal and it is not taken away. He finds no relief from it. But instead the Lord says to Him: "My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness." And with these Words the Lord turns Paul from a focus on his suffering and struggle to a focus on the grace He has received, a focus on the Word of Christ for him, the Gospel that saved him, and that will save us too if we persevere in hearing and keeping it. By this grace of Christ, Paul was made to patiently persevere in both the Word he had been given and the work he was called to do

One of the pastors of the early Church, a man named St. Gregory of Nyssa, once preached on this: "the higher anyone ascends in virtue, the harder will this world bear down on him; for the more the love of the heart turns from this present life, the more the opposition of this same world mounts up. Hence it is that we see so many strive after, and do, that which is good; yet they sweat under the burden of afflictions. For though they have turned away from earthly things, they are yet harassed with increasing tribulations. But, according to the word of the Lord, they shall bring forth fruit in patience, and after their time of tribula-

tion, they shall be received into rest above; because they have borne their cross in patience.” And that’s just what Christ said those who are the good soil in our parable today do; they hear the Word, and keep it and bear fruit in patient perseverance.

And so where do we turn that we may persevere patiently in the faith? We turn again to the source of our faith and to the power that saves us, to the Word of God. Jesus whole point in telling this parable is to turn us to this Word, to teach us to continue hearing and believing it, to cause us to seek it out and hold tightly to it. For in the Word of God we find the power of God to create and sustain faith, a power which is not dependent upon us, but is inherent in it. Again the Lord promises us through Isaiah: “My word... that goes forth from My mouth; it shall not return to Me void, but it shall accomplish what I please, and it shall prosper in the thing for which I sent it.”

His Word is the only power that can keep us safe from the enemies around us. In the parable, those who have no faith or who loose faith fail because they relinquish the Word of God or let it die within them. But you, O Christian, you must hold fast to this Word and let nothing and no one take it from you or turn you from it, whether it be the forces from within you or those from without. And as you struggle to persevere, you must turn again to His Word for strength. We see this in today’s Introit chant where the Psalmist has cried out in distress: “Awake! Why do you sleep, O Lord? Arise! Do not cast us off forever for our soul is bowed down to the dust...” But what does the Psalmist do? Does he retreat in despair? No. He returns to the Word of the Lord, to that which He has heard and knows to be true: “We have heard with our ears, O God; Our fathers have told us the deeds you did in days of old... You have saved us from our enemies, and have put to shame those who hated us.” And so you must run back to the Word of the Lord too, to the Gospel of Christ Jesus, to the Word of His death and resurrection, by which you have been saved and your enemies defeated. You need to hear the Gospel continually so that your faith is reinforced and grows. And the Gospel is a powerful living ally which fights the enemies and their false words concerning us and our fate. For herein the Holy Spirit is at work, a Spirit more powerful than the enemies.

This Word must be at the heart of the Christian’s life, at the heart of your life. For in this Gospel is both the content of our faith and the power of it. And by it, for Christ’s sake, you have salvation. And hope in the midst of struggle, strength in weakness, power for patient perseverance. There is much more to say about this parable, especially about how it applies to the Church as a whole and to how she goes about the work of sowing the seed, but I think that is enough for today. Now to Christ Jesus our Lord, be all glory and honor for sending us His holy Word and His Spirit, and may He keep us faithful and patient in perseverance to the end. Amen.

✠ Soli Deo gloria ✠