

Sermon for Sexagesima Sunday

**Sermon for Sexagesima Sunday – Luke 8:4:15**

*Hauspostille*

Martin Luther, "Sexagesima," Matthias Loy, ed., *Dr. Martin Luther's House-Postil, or, Sermons on the Gospels for the Sundays and Principal Festivals of the Church Year. Volume 1. Two Volumes. Second Edition.* (Columbus, Ohio; J. A. Schulze, 1884), pp. 293-304.

**Luke 8, 4-15.** And when much people were gathered together, and were come to Him out of every city, He spake by a parable: A sower went out to sow his seed: and as he sowed, some fell by the way-side: and it was trodden down, and the fowls of the air devoured it. And some fell upon a rock; and as soon as it was sprung up, it withered away, because it lacked moisture. And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it, and choked it. And other fell on good ground, and sprang up, and bare fruit a hundred-fold. And when He had said these things, He cried, He that hath ears to hear, let him hear. And His disciples asked Him, saying, What might this parable be? And He said, Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God: but to others in parables; that seeing, they might not see, and hearing they might not understand. Now the parable is this: The seed is the Word of God. Those by the way-side are they that hear; then cometh the devil, and taketh away the Word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved. They on the rock are they, which, when they hear, receive the Word with joy; and these have no root, which for a while believe, and in time of temptation fall away. And that which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection. But that on the good ground are they, which in an honest and good heart, having heard the Word, keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.

Beloved: You learn from this Gospel that there are many kinds of hearers of the pure Word of God, but only a few who retain it and bring forth good fruit. This must be diligently presented to the people, so that all may examine themselves and discover to what class of hearers they belong, and make haste to be numbered among those who are called the good ground, in whom the Word brings forth fruit.

**T**he first class of hearers are those with whom the Word fares as "the seed by the way-side." It does not yield fruit because it is either trodden down or devoured by the fowls of the air. The second class are they "who hear and receive the Word with joy." They not only speak of it but believe in it, and it grows finely, as the seed upon a rocky soil, but when the first hot day of summer comes it begins to wither, because it has neither root nor moisture. When persecution and tribula-

tion come, such people fall away before the good fruit of faith with patience follows. The third class are easily discernible. They are Christians who are as seed among thorns; it grows, but brings no fruit and is choked; the thorns grow too densely around it. The fourth class of hearers, finally, are they who faithfully receive and retain the Word in an honest and good heart until it brings forth fruit with patience. They do not endeavor to avoid persecution for the sake of the Word, are ready in

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faith and love towards God to endure all that may happen, and bring forth fruit, some an hundred-fold, some sixty-fold, and some thirty-fold.

These are the four classes of hearers. Now let each one examine his own heart, and see to which class he belongs. The first three are of no account; the worst of all are the first, who hear the Word, but are immediately robbed of it by the devil, so that they do not believe unto salvation. Mark this well.

I would not have ventured to presume the hearts which hear the Word, but heed it not and forget it, to be possessed of the devil. We regard the heedless hearing of the Word of God as of no especial danger. Those who act thus we suppose to be simple, inattentive persons, with whom it is natural to hear and then forget the Gospel. But Christ judges differently in our text. He says: "The devil taketh away the Word out of their hearts."

This tells us plainly what we must think of persons, of children and domestics, who hear the preaching of the Word with inattention, and then go on their way as though they had never heard it, with no inclination to think of it. All such can not say that the Holy Ghost is their guide; for the devil is so near them that he reaches into their hearts and plucks out the Word. From this other evil habits must result; they become disobedient, dishonest, stubborn, selfish, proud and vindictive; whereas if they would retain the Word in their hearts and ponder it with care, they would become well-behaved, obedient, diligent, honest, humble and tractable people.

These are the first and most reckless class, and the Lord is very wroth at their depravity, so that He pronounces a severer judgment upon them than upon others. He says: The devils, who dwell in the air, take the Word from their hearts, so that they disregard it and think themselves beyond all danger, even if they let the preaching of the Word enter into one ear and escape by the other. But listen to what imminent danger you expose

yourselves by such conduct. Christ, whose judgment is reliable, says: "The devil doeth this."

Wherever you meet any one who permits himself to be talked to and preached to as though he were a log, as our stingy city-folks and farmers do, and as is the case especially with our opponents ... you may at once conclude that the devil has his nest there, and tears out from the hearts the Word of God, the good seed, so that all preaching and singing and admonition has as little effect upon them as a stroke with a rod has upon the water; they believe not, nor will they be saved. This is the devil's work; for if this forgetfulness were merely natural and innate, as some persons are more docile than others, there would at least be a desire to learn, which would cause one to exclaim:

O God, why am I so stupid! Give me grace, and enable my heart to be attentive and to retain what I hear in church!

The devil finds no room nor abode with those persons who have an earnest longing for the Word and who exert themselves to keep it, else they would not have such a desire. But the former care not for the Word, and deem it a great loss if they must miss the earning of a dime, or of a penny, on account of attending church and hearing a sermon. You may depend upon it, such persons are under the devil's thumb.

This class of hearers, who have the Word but heed it not, since the devil plucks it from their hearts, is by far the most numerous.

The following two classes are not quite so bad. They are weak and faltering; they do not object to the Word and begin to believe; therefore the Lord does not give them over to the devil, as He did the first, although they are also deficient in bringing forth fruit. They are those who in time of temptation do not resist nor persevere, but fall away as the wormy fruit falls in heaps from the tree in stormy weather. "For a while they believe," says the Lord, but when troubles come they are frightened, and not resolved nor ready to endure

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suffering. The fruit of life everlasting will not be theirs, nor any other good fruits which come from the Word and from faith.

The third class consists of those who neglect the Word on account of avarice, cares and pleasures of this life. Whoever indulges in the cares of this world, and thinks of nothing else but how, by toiling and moiling, to become rich, burdens his heart, as Christ says, Luke 21, so that the good fruit is choked, as is the seed among the thorns. To labor is right, and every one ought to be busy and industrious in his calling. This is not forbidden, but rather commended when God tells us, Gen. 3: "In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread," etc. But the sordid and niggardly drudgery, in which the world now engages for the purpose of augmenting the heap of dollars and cents, so as to become rich and honored, chokes the Word of God in many a heart, so that it cannot grow nor bring forth fruit. These temporal concerns fill the heart, and to them it cleaves to the exclusion of everything else.

With these three classes the Word is of no effect. This, however, is a great and terrible privation and injury which we cannot adequately comprehend. Hence the Lord admonishes us all with great ardor in the words: "Take heed therefore how ye hear: for whosoever hath, to him shall be given; and whosoever hath not, from him shall be taken even that which he seemeth to have." Evidently these words do not refer to common matters, nor ought they to be treated lightly. It will not do for one to think: Well, if I have time hereafter, when I have gathered together what I need, I will go and hear the Word of God and believe in it, but just now I have other business on hand which profits me more, and to this I must first attend.

Take care, my friend, that you do not deceive yourself. Who knows how long you may yet live, or how long you can hear God's Word, or what trials God may send you? You may succeed in deceiving yourself, but Christ you cannot delude; He exhorts you earnestly when He exclaims:

"He that hath ears to hear, let him hear." It is His desire that you should not procrastinate in these matters as men commonly do. He says, now, when you hear, is the time to heed, else it may be too late.

It behooves us therefore to make sure of our belonging to the small fourth class. To this end we ought to implore earnestly our Father in heaven that we may have good hearts, that they may accept and retain His Word, and bring forth good fruit.

This little company consists of saints. ... "They who hear the Word and keep it bring forth fruit an hundred-fold;" that is, in such abundance that it is beyond all estimation. Or as St. Matthew classifies: "Some an hundred-fold, some sixty-fold, some thirty-fold;" for just as the external offices and duties differ, thus will there also be a variety in the fruit. A minister of the Gospel serves the Church more than a mechanic does, who attends only to his own domestic affairs; yet both are Christians, redeemed by Christ from sin and death; both are heirs of eternal life. Let us strive to be counted among this company, though it is the smallest of them all.

The first requisite to accomplish this is to have "an honest and good heart." Such a heart is attentive to the Word of God and cherishes it with fidelity, otherwise the devil will surely come and pluck the Word away. Again, the heart must be sure and firm, regardless of the favor or hatred of men, not wavering nor yielding to the allurements of evil; for if we do not fear and love God above all things we cannot keep the Word, which the world and the devil ever attempt to steal away, since they are not able to endure it. Satan is a restless task-master, who does not suffer his servants to be at ease, but urges them on continually, ... and we shall experience still more in the future.

The heart must also be cleansed and freed from thorns: we dare not love money, fame among men, and worldly pleasures, more than the Word of God and the life to come. We must fur-

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thermore regard all other temporal concerns as of inferior importance compared with God's Word, as Christ says: "Seek ye first the kingdom of God," &c. Where the heart is thus attentive, faithful and untrammelled by thorns, there we find "an honest and good heart" which will bring forth fruit. It will do this in patience, for it cannot escape sorrows and temptations. Afflictions and oppositions will come, as St. Paul writes: "Yea, and all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." We must be prepared to meet these trials and, as Christ says, "possess our souls in patience," always resorting to prayer; for we all must confess that we fall far short of our calling in our relation to the affairs of this life. The devil is ever watchful of our weaknesses and tempts us in various ways, so that he may take from the heart the Word and burden it instead with cares, avarice, pride, anger and other evil affections. We all know sufficiently well that sordidness, ambition, lasciviousness and the like, draw people away from the Word and make them corrupt.

It becomes therefore an urgent necessity to keep a steady eye upon our defects, and to guard against the infirmities of our nature, that we may not continue in a false security. We have the comfortable assurance, Luke 11: "The Father will give the Holy Spirit to them that ask Him," hence we should earnestly supplicate God for the Holy Ghost, that He may remove from our hearts all obstructions to the Word, freeing them from thorns and thistles, so that we can hear and retain it and bring forth good fruit, true faith in Christ; through which faith we will become not only obedient unto God, but also His children and heirs. Then will the seed accomplish the purpose for which it was sown; the holy Gospel which is preached in all the world will thus bring forth fruit in us which remaineth to eternity.

The parable also teaches us not to be amazed when we observe that the Word does not everywhere bring forth fruit; for the Lord Himself divides the hearers into four distinct classes, of which only one, and that the smallest, is "honest

and good." The remaining three classes are of no account; they must be left to themselves, nor ought they to cause us offense. Wherever the Gospel is preached there will also be these three kinds of unworthy hearers. Yet the Word is not at fault, nor does the blame attach to him who preaches it, as [some] charge against us. They point with malicious satisfaction to all the offenses which the devil has stirred up since the Gospel has again been preached, and thus endeavor, in their folly, to bring discredit upon us and our preaching.

But pray, tell me, how was it when Christ Himself preached, and John, and His apostles? Were there not great offenses then, and did not great sins become manifest? When John the Baptist began to preach, all people went out to hear him, and were convinced that he was a holy man, yet he was charged with being possessed of the devil; and finally king Herod, who often and willingly listened to him, as the evangelist tells us, had him beheaded. Yea, though they heard Christ, the Son of God, and saw Him raise the dead and perform other great miracles, they nevertheless nailed Him to the cross. Does it follow from this that John, that Christ, and that the Apostles were not true preachers, because the people remained wicked and would not be converted, as the pure doctrine required of them? To this question they must remain silent, lest they might be exposed as enemies and blasphemers of Christ: but us and our doctrine they revile, because they think it can be done with impunity.

We do not propose to enter at this time into a defense of our doctrine, and to show why we are ready to adhere to it unto death, but will merely call attention to the words of Jesus when He says: "The seed is the Word." We presume that there is no [one] insane enough to assert that the Word, of which Christ speaks in this connection, is an evil word or false doctrine; and yet, what does Christ say of this good seed? Does it grow? Ah, merely a fourth part of it remains in the ground and brings fruit! Who then can deny that the world remains wicked, though the Word and

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its preaching is good and pure, and in itself productive of good fruit?

As stated above, we will not at this time dwell upon our doctrine nor explain it, but this [some] must confess, whether they will or not, that the world is wicked and will not receive the Word, no matter how pure is the preaching or how pious the preacher. For Christ tells us plainly that only the fourth part of the seed brings fruit; and His own experience, as also that of John and the apostles, exhibits the fact that but few heed the preaching of the Word. The great majority of mankind is and remains wicked and fruitless; but the smallest portion believe and are converted.

If this was the experience of Christ, the Son of God, the preacher without a blemish, what else could John the Baptist, or the apostles, or we expect? Shall therefore the doctrine be blamed as wrong? If so, we must also denounce the seed which fell by the way, upon a rock, or amid thorns. But no, this would be blasphemy. The Word of God is the seed which is sown; this Word is good and salutary: it must, according to its nature, bring forth good fruit. That it does not everywhere produce fruit is the fault of the barren land upon which it falls, and in which the seed is destroyed; God and His Word must not be held accountable for this.

Hence [our opponents] have no reason to condemn our doctrine, and to pronounce it wrong because it creates offense here and there; they ought rather to reproach themselves and others, for their hearts are neither honest nor good. The Word which we preach is faultless, but their hearts are impure and wicked. To such the devil comes, and incites them to oppose the Word, as Christ says in that other parable, Matt. 13, where

the field was fertile and the seed good, but intermixed with tares. Whence came the tares? Christ answers: "The devil came and sowed them among the wheat;" he hates to see a clean and fruitful field, and is ever busy to make it unproductive. And since he cannot root up the good seed entirely he sows the tares among it. Who then would dare to say that the Word of God is at fault and causes the growth of the tares?

Let every one learn from this parable that the Gospel will always meet with opposition; that some will be converted by it, while the greater portion of its hearers, yea even three-fourths of them, will take offense and disregard it. The result is that many are called, as Christ says in another Gospel, but only few are chosen. The many are of an impure and dishonest heart; they heed the devil more than the Gospel. Hence not only great and glaring sins ensue, but, as the Lord says in our text, such misconduct will be punished with blindness, "that seeing they might not see, and hearing they might not understand."

Let no one therefore be offended at the Gospel, though it encounters much opposition: the cause of this are the wicked and malicious hearts, in which the devil rules. It is not the fault of the seed if it does not grow by the way-side, or upon the rock, or among the thorns. Be not troubled at such failures, but let each one diligently see to it that he possesses this seed; yea, let us all implore God's mercy that the heart may be prepared to receive and to retain the Word in patience, so that we may be saved through faith in Christ, which the Holy Spirit implants in us by means of the Word and the Holy Sacraments. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ grant this unto all of us! Amen.