

An Analysis Of The Gospel Read On The Sunday Called Sexagesima

Luke 8:4–15

Originally written in German by Prof. G. Stoeckhardt, and published in the February number of the 13th volume of Magazine for Ev.-luth. Homiletics (1889) under the title "Predigtstudie über das Evangelium des Sonntags Sexagesimä." ...Translated by J. F. Boerger, Sr.

The parable of the sower is well known to all who are but somewhat familiar with God's Word. The Evangelists Matthew and Mark place it at the head of the Lord's allegorical discourses. Mt. 13. Mk. 4. St. Luke omits all other parables already mentioned by the first two Evangelists, but reports the parable of the sower as an especially important example of this way of teaching used by the Lord. This parable of the sower is one of the most powerful texts amid the pericopes of the church year. It calls to mind the truth, that it is not enough to hear the Word of God preached Sunday after Sunday, one must also hear it right; and shows how much depends on this one thing, the right use of the Word. It solemnly reminds the preachers rightly to perform their office, to sow the seed of the Word with all faithfulness and patience, and likewise admonishes the hearers willingly to receive the preached word as preached by God, as God's Word.

If we are correctly to grasp and teach the important and grave doctrine of this parable, the first and most necessary requirement here too is, that we carefully consider the text itself, study its individual words, and heed well their connection. Our text is made up of three parts. The first part, verses 4–8, contains the parable itself; the third part, verses 11–15, brings the interpretation of the parable; and what the Lord tells His disciples in the middle part concerning the Word is also closely connected with the theme of the Gospel, the hearing of the Word. The first part, vv. 4–8, reads: "*And when much people were ... hear.*"

Often before, the Lord had preached God's Word to those people who were then gathering around Him from the cities of Galilee, also confirmed His preaching by many and great miracles. But the mind of the people, of the great majority, remained unchanged. They were willing for a while to rejoice in the light risen over Galilee, but would not obey this greatest prophet ever risen in Israel. Only a few repented and believed the Gospel. It was a small, despised little crowd that openly confessed Jesus as Israel's Messiah and followed Him. To all these people the Lord now preached in parables, and first of all by the one of the sower.

We first consider the parable itself. The Lord relates a happening, tells a story of the life and labor of a tiller of the soil. The story according to our text, supplemented by what Matthew 13:4–8, and Mark 4:3–8 relate, is the following: A sower sowed his seed. And while he was sowing, some fell by the wayside, and remained there, lying upon the hard ground, unmixed with the earth. Even the possibility that this seed might at some later day enter the earth and still bring forth fruit was cut off; for it was soon crushed by those who walked on the way, and eaten up by the birds of the air. —Some fell upon a rock covered with a thin sheet of earth. That sprang up, sprang up soon. Because it had so little top- and no root-soil, it sprang upward instead of rooting downward (Mt., Mk.). But as soon as it came up, it also withered down again under the hot rays of the sun, (Mt., Mk.), because it did not have much earth and therefore not sufficient moisture, and because in the thin layer of earth on the rock it had not sunk sufficient roots (Mt., Mk.).—Some fell among thorn-infested soil, and the thorns sprang up together with the good seed, and overgrew (ueberwuchert) and choked the latter. —But some fell on good ground, and sprang up, and grew and increased (Mk.), and bare abundant fruit, thirtyfold, sixtyfold, hundredfold (Mt., Mk.). Luke only mentions the highest production to visualize the great fruitfulness of this seed.

The parable pictures an occurrence in nature, in country life, which one can annually observe from seedtime to harvest. But what does the Lord want to teach by this story, this parable? What does he mean by the painful complaint over the great amount of seed that perishes without bringing fruit, which plaint finally turned into joy, joy over the hundredfold fruit? He surely must have in mind other seed than that sown by the tiller of the natural soil. This narrative manifestly is only a picture and likeness that points to higher things, to things pertaining to the highest weal and woe of the children of men. That was, as we know, the custom of the Lord to

preach of the kingdom of God. Such questions and thoughts must then have come and must still come to all who then heard and who now hear and read this parable. And by the call: “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear!” the Lord with great earnestness bids all who hear such words to pay close attention, to search for the sense of this figurative speech, and take to heart the doctrine contained therein.

On the disciples of the Lord this grave admonition made an impression, as the following shows. “*And his disciples asked him ... might not understand.*” Verses 9. 10. The disciples desired an interpretation of this parable from the Lord. And the Lord first tells them why He is willing to grant them their petition. Because it was given to them in general to know the mystery of the kingdom of God, therefore the meaning of this parable shall also be made clear to them. A significant word: “*Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God!*” The mysteries of the kingdom of God embrace all things of which Christ preached. Christ preached the kingdom of God that He Himself would and should establish, which in and with Him was at hand. He testified of Himself, His Father, and the purpose for which He was sent. These very things that concern man’s salvation and life, the eternal thoughts and decrees of God regarding the redemption and happiness of man, were and are hidden, are a mystery to man. No one would know thereof, had God not revealed them to mankind. So Christ has now through His preaching made known to men the mysteries of the kingdom of God. But even this preaching of the Gospel still is and remains covered and sealed to man, if God does not inwardly through His Spirit reveal to him that which the Gospel says. Natural man receiveth nothing of these things, they are foolishness unto him; neither *can* he know them. God must open man’s heart, mind and understanding so that he can really grasp, know, understand and perceive the mystery of the kingdom of God, the Gospel of Christ. And this grace was imparted to the disciples of Jesus. “Unto you it is given, that is, the Spirit gives it to you, so that you not only hear and see but also perceive and believe it with the heart; therefore it is now no more a mystery to you.” Luther.* And as many as believe this day, believe the Word, as many as have come to know the truth, to know Christ: they have this from God, it has been given to them by God.

“*But to others in parables ... understand*” (v. 10b). Over against the believing disciples the Lord places the others that do not believe. The others are they “*that are without*” (Mk. 4:11). Meant are the multitude of the Galilean people, who in their hearts were far removed from and strangers to the Lord and the little band of His disciples, although they, too, often came near unto Jesus to see and hear something new from Him. They are not disciples and do not act like the disciples. To them is “*not given,*” Mt. 13:11, that which is given to the disciples, namely “*to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven.*” The opposite is the case with them. They may indeed see and hear outwardly, but inwardly they should not see and hear, not understand and perceive, “*That seeing they might not see and hearing they might not understand.*” And that’s why the Lord speaks to them in parables “*that seeing they might not see,*” etc. The parables of the Lord had one effect on the simple and another on the perverted. Before the eyes of the simple the parables pictured the invisible, heavenly things in a way that for them was both within reach and attractive. They were thereby attracted and tenderly invited to search for the real sense hidden under the picture, and what they thus learned, attached itself to their heart and memory. “For parables naturally please the simple, and they remember them well, because they are taken from the common everyday events of their life.” Luther. To this purpose of the parables the Lord points Mt. 13:35. But for the disobedient and unbelieving the mysteries of the kingdom of God were then and are still veiled and hidden by the parables, that they do not see and do not understand them.

The people of Galilee had hardened themselves against the bright and clear testimony of the truth, so it was a just judgment of God that dark pictures and riddles, which they could not solve, were now preached to them. The words “*that seeing they might not see,*” etc., the Lord took out of the prophet Isaiah. There the complete sentence as quoted in full by Matthew and Mark reads: “*Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert, and be healed.*” Is. 6:10. The prophet had the commission from God to harden “this people,” this unbelieving, stiff-necked people, with his preaching. And thus also Christ’s preaching, especially

* All quotations from Luther, unless otherwise noted, are taken from his sermons on the Gospel (Lk. 8:4–15). St. Louis Edition of Luther’s Works, Vol. XI, 514–525, and Vol. XIII, 202–210.

that of His parables, finally served to harden the unbelieving generation of His time. Wherein the judgment of hardening consists, one sees from that very same passage. Luther here remarks: “We need not go to the extreme, so as to say, God blinds effectively, in an active manner. When God withdraws His Spirit and leaves the wicked to Satan, that is enough to harden them.” “God permits that those are blinded who will not believe the Gospel.” Luther. Lat. Exg. Works., Erl Ed., Vol. 22, p. 74. God does not blind and harden in such a manner that He exerts a positive and direct blinding and hardening influence on the heart and mind of the wicked. No, when God hardens a man, He withdraws His Spirit from him, while still permitting him to hear His Word outwardly. Thus a man can, of course, not understand what he hears, but must the longer the more stumble and take offense at the Word. God gives man over to the power of his perverted hardened mind. Thus God deals with those who harden their hearts against His Word. The Galilean people had long heard the preaching of Christ in vain, abused the grace of God to perform their sinful lusts, resisted the Holy Spirit. So it was a just punishment that God withdrew His Spirit, so that with seeing eyes they did not see, and with hearing ears they did not hear, and with their hearts did not understand. Those who by no means *will* hear and understand, they then also *shall* not hear and understand.

The double fact expressed here in plain and clear words, “*to you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God,*” and “*to the others in parables; that seeing they may not see,*” this we should acknowledge and take to heart well, but also let the matter rest there and search no further, search not for the last reasons. Here, of course, a mystery remains, that we Christians cannot fathom, and which God has not revealed to us. When we permit our thoughts to go beyond what the Lord here says, we arrive at the question: Why did God deal this way with the ones and the opposite way with the others? Why does He give *to these* “to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God” who by nature are just as blind and corrupt as the others? Why does He permit *the others* to remain in blindness and unbelief, and finally give them into the power of their perverted mind, which surely all had earned alike? Why does He not reveal or hide it to all in like manner?

God in His Word does not give us an answer to such questions and thereby forbids us to brood over them. Our Lutheran Confessions, the 11th Article of the Formula of Concord, on the basis of such passages as Luke 8:9, 10, confesses this fact: “*One is hardened, blinded, given into the power of his corrupted mind, another, though being in like guilt, is again converted,*” etc. But the reason and cause for this fact, the last reasons behind God’s wise counsel, the Formula of Concord puts on the docket of those things which God has buried in silence and which He forbids us to pry into. Luther, in one of the two sermons mentioned above, adds this remark to these two weighty verses of our text, Luke 8:9–10: “*Therein the deep knowledge of divine providence is touched upon, that He hides and reveals to whom He will.*” And he, too, manifestly here means, we should under no circumstances undertake to explore the lofty wisdom of divine providence or the mysteries of divine majesty. No, we should with our thoughts remain with what God’s Word, also our text, plainly and unmistakably testifies: To them that know and understand the mysteries of the kingdom of God it is given by God, in them God’s free grace glorifies itself. In the others, whom God gives over to their perverted mind, that they do not see and understand it, we should behold the severity and righteousness of God’s judgment, who will not let it go unpunished if men hear His Word and yet not heed it nor take it to heart.

After the Lord has in verses 9 and 10 declared why He explains the parables to His disciples, while to the others He preaches mere parables without interpretation, and has thereby already given His disciples an important instruction about the hearing and understanding of the Word, He now in verses 11–15 interprets the parable of the sower to the latter: “*This is the parable. The seed is the word of God... Keep it, and bring forth fruit with patience.*”

The seed that the Lord has in mind is, according to His interpretation, the Word of God. That He Himself, who revealed to men the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, is the sower, then was and still is self-evident. But the Lord speaks in general of the sowing of the divine Word, and therefore wants what He says understood not only of the preaching which He Himself then performed in Galilee, but of all preaching of the Word at all times. That indeed all preachers of all time, who sow the seed of the Word, are servants of Christ, the heavenly sower, is made clear and certain by Scripture elsewhere.

But the instruction the Lord here gives refers to persons, to the people that hear the Word, to whom it is preached. They are in this interpretation of the parable in very general sentences described as “*they that hear the word,*”—“*they that hear and keep the word*”—, which at once makes clear that what the Lord here teaches has reference to all men who at any place and any time hear God’s Word. Yes, in this parable Christ has in mind the various kinds of people that hear the Word. After placing the sentence, “*The seed is the word of God*” at the head of His interpretation of the parable, in which this and that is said of the *seed*, one could expect the Lord now correspondingly to show how the *seed or word* with different people produces a different effect and outcome, and to proceed something like this: The seed that fell by the wayside means that the Word finds no acceptance with many; the seed on the rock, also that among thorns, means that the Word with others indeed has some success, but only a passing effect; the seed, finally, that fell on the good ground, shows that, thank God, His Word nevertheless always and everywhere with some produces and achieves that whereunto it is sent, works faith, obedience, good works, and finally eternal salvation. But the subject in the interpretation of the parable is not “*the word,*” but the *hearers* of the word. These people, these persons are the subject the Lord wants to place before our eyes in this parable.

This also explains the peculiar form of His first two sentences in the interpretation of the parable. One should expect this interpretation to read throughout like its third and fourth sections: “*That which fell among thorns,*” “*That which fell on good ground,*” namely that seed, etc. But the Lord starts out this way: “*Those by the wayside are they,*” “*They on the rock are they.*” The picture and the pictured here like two streams flow together in one. “*Those by the wayside*” and “*They on the rock,*” etc., is an abbreviated expression for: “*Those persons with whom the seed fell by the wayside.*” This peculiar construction of the first two sections of the interpretation of the parable, that the subject which is designated by the personal pronouns “*those*” and “*they,*” is placed at the head of the first two sections, proves that He wants to leave no doubt in the minds of His hearers and readers, that persons, such and such persons here described, are the subject of the parable. However, the purpose of this parable now is not to picture the nature of these persons, their moral and spiritual make-up, their manners and natural traits, but their action or what they *do* in a certain situation. The Lord, therefore, does not carry out that the hearts of the first are as the hard-trodden wayside; those of the second like the rock; those of the third like the thorn-infested field; and finally, the hearts of the last like the good ground—no, He tells us what these persons *do*. Our text says: that they “hear” the word, “accept” it, “believe for a time,” then “fall away,” “bring no fruit to perfection,” that “they keep the word and bring forth fruit with patience.”

By these expressions the Lord does not describe men’s nature, quality, heart condition, but their behavior and conduct over against the Word preached to them. The different positions men take over against the Word of God, or as Luther puts it, that there are four different disciples of the Word, that is the theme and content of the instruction given by the parable of the sower.

The varied reception the earthly seed receives in the natural soil is a picture and parable of the varied reception the Word of God is given by men. That’s the point of comparison, nothing else.

The reception natural seed receives in natural soil is a process, a process of nature to which the seed is subjected. Something happens to the seed in the soil.

However, the reception of the spiritual seed of the divine Word on the part of men is not only a process and an event, something that happens in men, but men not being earth and stone, rather rational persons, it is an action, a work and behavior of men, an inward and outward action. Man takes a position over against the Word one way or another; so naturally the speech must take a somewhat different turn in the interpretation than in the parable.

We shall now consider the four kinds of hearers, as the Lord introduces them to us in Luke, comparing the parallel passages in Mt. 13:18–23 and Mark 4:13–20.

The first kinds of hearers of the Word are those by the wayside. They are they that hear the Word, hear it with the ears only, and let the matter rest there. “The word goes in one ear and out the other.” Luke and Mark indeed speak of “The word that is sown into their heart.” Whosoever hears God’s Word, even any intelligent speech, does not inwardly remain altogether untouched. It is something different to hear the Word preached than to hear the bells tolled. He who hears the Word grasps at least something of the literal sense of the Word.

Even a natural pleasure in the Word is not excluded. For pastime a man may willingly listen to a sermon. But the Word thereby nevertheless remains outside of his heart like the seed on the hard-trodden wayside. It does not mix with the heart. Not the least spark of spiritual life, of repentance and faith, is ignited in the heart by such hearing. People of this kind hear the Word “and understand it not,” as Matthew points out by saying: “When anyone heareth the word of the kingdom *and understandeth it not*, then cometh the wicked,” etc. The real understanding, all spiritual understanding, is lacking. And the Lord is here faulting and reproofing them for this type of hearing of the Word, that they hear without understanding. They do not pay attention, do not catch the Word with their thoughts, do not pull it down into their hearts, do not consider that it is God’s Word they are hearing. They treat God’s Word like mere talk, like a worthless ware, and then forget all about it. But such forgetful, careless hearing is no joke, no slight oversight, but right here the devil has his hand in the game, as Christ says. “To us there seems to be no danger in hearing and not keeping God’s Word. They that do this are, as we think, simply inattentive people with whom it is natural to forget a sermon they have heard. But Christ judges differently here and says, the devil cometh, ‘and taketh away the word out of their hearts.’ Therefore, when you see a man who permits you to speak and preach to him like a log does, as our avaricious burghers and boors do.... then be sure that the devil is sitting in his heart, and takes the seed, the Word of God away, that he may not believe and be saved.” Luther. Self-evidently, the Lord does thereby not want to remove the fault from the hearer and load it onto the devil alone. No, man should consider how great his sin and guilt is. When he pays no attention to the Word that is preached to him, he thereby gives room to the devil, and trifles away faith and salvation.

But they on the rock are they which, when they hear, receive the Word with joy, believe for a while, and in the time of temptation fall away. That they first believe, and then fall away, is something similar to this, that the seed on the rock “springs up and turns green, lovely to behold, and giving good hope, but withers down when the heat of the sun strikes it.” Luther. The rapid growth of the seed and its rapid withering here is the *punctum saliens*. Like unto this is the willing reception of the Word, and the sudden falling away from the Word. The hearers of the Word here described receive the Word with joy, are delighted by God’s Word, by the Gospel of Christ, the Savior of sinners. They really believe. Also temporary faith is faith. “Of these there also is a great multitude that rightly hear and purely receive the Word, and rejoice that they can see, and know, how they are to be saved without works by faith.” Luther. But “they endure but for a time,” (Mark) “when it comes to this, that because of the Word they should suffer damage, shame, loss of body and goods, they fall away and deny it.” Luther. “When persecution ariseth because of the word,” (Mt., Mk.) when they are persecuted or ridiculed or despised because of the Word, “immediately they are offended,” (Mt., Mk.) take offence, are hurt by the Word which at first was so dear to them.

Or when “temptation” or “tribulation” of any other kind strikes them (Mt., Mk.), when their faith is to be tried and approved, then they deny the Word and former better knowledge. “These have no root,” nothing in themselves to cling to. That’s their fault. They took it easy after receiving the Word, did not then make faithful use of the Word. Thus their faith did not go deep. And thus the falling away of these people is not only a sad lot and fate, but a sin in itself, a consequence of preceding sins against the Word, a result of their unfaithfulness; they cast away the Word.

The circumstances surrounding the third class of hearers are similar to those of the second. They hear the Word and also receive it into their heart, they, too, believe the Word. What is lacking here is not a good beginning, but a good end, as in the former case. They bring no fruit to perfection. But danger and destruction comes to these people from a different side than to the former. They may stand up in many a trial and temptation, but are then entangled in the cares, riches, and lusts of this life. Thus they liken the seed that grows up amid the thorns. And as the thorns finally choke the growth of the good seed before it can bring forth fruit, thus faith is, step by step, choked by those earthly cares and lusts. But the fault lies not within these things, but in the hearers themselves. “The cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things enter in,” says Mark. They “enter in,” go into the inside, the heart of these people, who have taken the Word into their heart. This expression “enter in” is striking and proves how little the Lord is out to describe the natural condition of the hearts of men, and to show by this parable that the natural heart is poor soil for God’s Word.

Had the Lord intended to carry out this thought, He would, after describing the plight of the earthly seed in the thorn-infested land, have very fittingly said: Now, as the thorns grew up together with the good seed, out of this bad ground, so also the cares and evil lusts came up out of the evil, unclean soil of the heart. But no, He does not use the parable or picture thus. On the contrary, He thinks of and describes the cares, riches, and lusts as being outside of man, in the world, and says, that from thence, from without, they enter into man, into the *heart* of man, which has received God's Word. The hearers of the Word described here, have first given room to the Word of God in their hearts and renounced those earthly things, but then these earthly things and goods, these worldly cares and lusts again gain entrance to their hearts, they themselves grant them entrance and room, and not a poor but the best room of their heart, protect, foster, and feed the cares, riches, and lusts there, give them the governing place, the place of the Word in their hearts. That's their fault. "They don't give the Word serious consideration and use, become lazy and plunge themselves into the cares, riches, and lusts of this life." Luther. And the evil lusts and desires of the heart, when man suffers, protects, and fosters them, then soon turn into deeds. These people "go forth amid the cares, riches and lusts of this life." Thus writes Luke: "They go forth." They now also permit their life to be governed by these things, pay no attention to the Word and do what their hearts desire, care for earthly things, seek earthly goods, serve mammon and carnal lust, perhaps at first in a finer form. And thus it happens, that cares and riches crowd God's Word out of their hearts. First they would not oppose and resist the evil, finally they cannot resist anymore, they are too weak to resist. They finally choke, they stop breathing, their faith has come to an end. All spiritual life is choked. And they bring forth no fruit. That does not mean that they were altogether without fruit and good works as long as they believed the Word. For faith is never without good works. But the fruit desired, and the success sought by God, that their whole life up to the end might be filled with holy, God-pleasing works, is wanting. They have deprived themselves of this glorious success by not being serious in the use of the Word, by more and more falling behind with their hearing, learning, and believing, with prayer, and giving earthly worldly matters, cares and lusts the ruling position in their hearts. Faith and falling from faith are here again placed before our eyes. The only difference is that the faith of this third class lasts longer and that they fall away gradually. Surely, the multitude of those is great, who first believe and take to the Word, and then sooner or later deny both Word and faith. "The greatest part is and remains evil and without fruit; the least and poorest part improves and believes." Luther.

However, wherever the seed of the Word is sown, there also believing and obedient disciples (hearers) are found. These hear the Word and give heed thereto and "understand it" (Matthew), take it to heart and "keep" it there; they also hold fast to the Word in times of temptation and amid the various trials of this life. By this right learning and use of the Word their heart is turned into "an honest and good heart." This name or expression does not describe the heart condition, least of all the natural kind and quality of these people. No, "the honest and good heart" is here considered in motion and action, as it willingly receives and firmly keeps God's Word. Thus Luther describes the honest and good heart: "A fine, clean heart is necessary (namely to bring forth fruit). That is a heart that first of all is not inattentive, but gives God's Word real serious attention... Secondly, the heart should be certain and steadfast, not soft and cowardly, easily misled or frightened, and not permit itself to be troubled by men's favor or disfavor... Thirdly, it must also be cleansed and swept that no thorns remain therein; that is, we must not permit ourselves to love goods, money, honor, and pleasure more than God's Word and future life, neither dare we busy ourselves with other worldly affairs *more devotedly* than with God's Word."

A heart thus laboring and caring for God's Word is honest and good. It is like unto the good ground. Good ground is fit to produce fruit. And he who learns and uses God's Word right is able and fit for good works, he brings forth fruit in his calling and position, manifold fruit, is diligent in all good works, brings forth fruit with patience, does good without tiring, and though he grow old, he will nevertheless remain faithful and fresh, his leaves will not wither, and whatsoever he does, prospers. These are the true disciples of the Word, that hear, learn, and believe it, prove their faith by obedience, endure in faith to the end, and finally obtain the end of faith, the soul's salvation. That these people who use God's Word right, do not by their own reason and strength understand, believe, endure, do good, all know who know Scriptures. Also in connection with our text the Lord

gives testimony to that truth by saying in verse 10: “Unto you it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God.” But the purpose of the *parable itself* is not to inculcate this truth. The Lord here simply speaks of this, how differently men conduct themselves toward the Word of God, how some shamefully neglect it, while others learn and use it well, and leaves out of consideration the causes of the different conduct, namely, that with the first the ill use of the Word in the last analysis grows out of their own evil nature, corrupted by inherited sin, while the others, who use God’s Word well, have been taught so by God.

* * * *

This is Christ’s own interpretation of the parable. And when using this text for a sermon, we must be very careful to stick to Christ’s explanation, and not to supplement, much less supplant it by our own arbitrary exposition. The parable of the sower, the fourfold ground, has become a playground in modern sermon literature, where pulpit orators practice and apply their art of interpretation. They here picture before the eyes of their hearers the most colorful pictures of nature, of farm life, and exercise their keen senses in finding and pointing out everywhere the spiritual things to which these pictures refer. Renowned preachers here tell us all kinds of neat little tales of lively little birds, these innocent little creatures, of the many little, innocent things by which many are kept from hearing the Sunday sermon, and teach us that the birds pick up the good seed from the hard, unproductive ground, and instead of eating it, carry it through the air and drop it on good fertile soil, as though the devil found joy in spreading God’s Word on earth; they give us an exact report on the origin of the thin layer of earth on the rock, that it consists of broken-up particles of stone, describe the thorns, how they often blossom beautifully, nevertheless pierce and wound, etc. It’s clear that you only destroy impressions created by God’s Word, if you thus let your imagination run riot. But even if you do not go to such extremes, but remain sober, yet every interpretation and application that goes beyond the clearly drawn boundary lines of the Lord, every human addition here is evil, detracts from the supreme simplicity and profound seriousness of the parable.

Especially do modern preachers find satisfaction here in picturing the hearts of men in all possible shades. Good style in this day and age requires to use wayside, rock, thorny land, and good ground as pictures of the different natures and conditions of the human hearts; of the differences in their mental attitude and disposition; of the different characters and temperaments. We have seen that such an interpretation is not gathered from the text and is foreign to the sense of the Lord. We must forget about the different hearts, the thoughtless hearts, the hard hearts, the impure hearts, the good hearts, and not touch them with one syllable. By such heart picturing (*Herzensmalerei*) we only lose ourselves in error. A real conversion, they say, never takes place in hard and unclean hearts; they may at best be moved to pious feelings. Thus these interpreters run into direct contradiction with the Lord. For He clearly teaches that those on the rock, as also they among thorns, believe for a time. And with the honest and good hearts these interpreters go altogether wrong, because in opposition to Scriptures they are compelled to assume and teach that certain hearts have a natural ability to receive God’s Word.

Other preachers do better and at least remain inside the bounds of truth, by turning the minds and thoughts of their hearers not to the kinds and conditions of the human hearts, but to the nature, power, and effect of the divine Word, and on the basis of this parable, speak of the Word of God as the seed of regeneration, as a seed that brings much fruit. It is of course most certainly true according to Scripture, that the true knowledge, true faith, true works, all these things are fruits of the Word. According to Scripture it is certainly true that it’s the Holy Ghost alone who teaches us to know and understand the Word and believe in Christ, who keeps us in the faith, and works the willing and doing of all good in us. But there are enough other texts in which this truth is expressly treated, among these also some pericopes of the church year. The intention of our text is not, as we have seen, to describe the regenerating, renewing power of the divine Word or the work of the Holy Ghost. So let us save such instructions for another occasion! One thing only we would not like to forbid, namely this, that when in the sermon you specifically speak of the parable and its interpretation, leaving aside the middle parts contained in verses 9 and 10, that then, after having spoken of the ill use of the divine Word, you also point to

verse 10, and remind your hearers, that the ill use or abuse of the Word is finally punished by obduracy (*Verstockung*, hardening), and, after you have shown the right use of the Word according to verse 15, lastly also point to verse 9, and briefly remind the Christians, that to him who hears and uses the Word right, it has been given by God, that he must therefore also, while hearing and learning the Word, call on God and ask Him for His Spirit.

If the preacher wants to bring home to his hearers what the Lord meant, wanted, purposed with this parable, then all depends on this, that he give heed to the text, and remain with the text. If the preacher has really grasped what the Lord means and what He does not mean, then the disposition of the matter will cause him no further difficulty. The theme nearest at hand, one the text itself offers the preacher, is: The fourfold reception of the Word of God, or as Luther so strikingly formulates it: The fourfold pupils of the Word. The parts are also given by the text.

The first hear the Word but do not heed it;

The second hear the Word and receive it, believe for a time, but in the time of temptation fall away;

The third hear and believe, also endure many a temptation, but permit themselves to be deluded and deceived by the worldly cares and lusts;

The fourth hear, believe, and endure in faith and bring forth fruit with patience.

How verses 9 and 10 can here be made use of has already been said.

The parable of the sower contains an earnest warning and admonition for all that have ears to hear, especially also for the disciples of Jesus to whom the Lord especially interpreted it for *all* disciples, the Christians of all times. The example of those who hear the Word in vain, heed it not, warns all believers, because they too are still flesh and blood, against similar disregard of the Word, and urges them on to follow the example of the real pupils of the Word, to be really serious in their handling of the Word. Thus one can very well put that word at the head of his sermons, which Christ in connection with His discourse also said to His disciples: "Take heed therefore how ye hear!" and clothe the chief thoughts of the text in the form of a warning and admonition, thus for instance: Take heed that you are not forgetful hearers! Take heed that you do not depart from the Word in temptation! Take heed that you do not permit your self to be turned from the Word by earthly things, cares, and lusts! Take heed that you hear, learn, keep the Word correctly, and also become doers of the same!

However, in developing this theme, you will here then too fare best, if you simply follow the text and describe the people that use the Word so and so, and then end the description of every kind of hearers by applying what you have said to your Christian hearers for their warning and admonition with a simple statement of facts, a description of the various behavior of those who hear the Word. This mode of teaching here chosen by the Lord is most effective, more effective than all your talking, urging, assuring, and adjuring.

In our parable the Lord describes the people that hear the Word, and these are not only imagined persons, not only examples taken out of life; no, the Lord here describes all who come under the influence of the Word, as they live, and are. (*Wie sie leibt und lebt.*) He here describes and relates a story which always did happen, always does happen, and always will happen, wherever the seed of the Word was and will be sown. It really is a fact: "Most people remain evil and without fruit, the least and minor part improve and believe." Luther. It's worthwhile also to bring this point to the front in a special sermon, for the purpose of giving the Christians strength to keep from being offended at the Word, from losing their faith in the Word, when they see how most people despise it and few people believe it. You can then take as topic of your discourse, *the lot and fate of God's Word on this earth*, and following the text prove that double truth, that according to the testimony of the Lord Himself the Word, where it is preached, *is despised* by most people, but also, thanks be to God, always and everywhere *received with joy by some*. Of course, you must then in the first part make it very clear that the blame for the general contempt of the Word does not lie in the Word but with those who hear the Word. But beware of applying the truth itself, that most men reject and few believe the Word, to your congregation. The great majority of those who despise the Word live in the world outside of Christian congregations. Among the so-called Christian nations there are few (if any) who have not at least heard something of the Word. But by far the greater part of these despise the Word.

Because of the rich content of our text, it certainly also is altogether fitting if a preacher, after having expounded the whole text repeatedly in its connection to bring out its sum, takes out a certain section and uses it as text for a special sermon. Thus the portion verses 13, 14 is one of those Scripture passages that speak of apostasy, warn against apostasy, and give occasion to consider the fact that so many who once believed fall away again, and to show how apostasy starts, how it is accomplished, and how it can and should be opposed and prevented.

And the middle part of the text, verses 9, 10, easy to separate from the parable and its interpretation, really needs a special clarification and consideration. Its content may be packed into the word of St. Paul, that the Gospel is to the one “the savour of death unto death, to the other the savour of life unto life.” II Cor. 2:16. Even for Christians, who so often pay so little respect to God’s Word, it is good and necessary to have this trenchant truth impressed upon them, that God will finally give those who cast His Word to the winds and will neither believe nor follow it over to their reprobate mind, so that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not hear. And it only serves to further the faith of the believers when they become keenly conscious of this fact, that all they have in preference to others, their knowledge and insight, their faith and endurance, is given by God. And since Christians are still prone to mix their reason into matters of faith, it also is necessary and beneficial seriously to warn them, not to brood and speculate over such things as why some believe and are converted, while others continue in unbelief and are hardened, —something which God has hidden from men— and to admonish them simply to believe the Word.