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Sexagesima

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Text: Luke 8:4–15

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Last Sunday's sermon was about one Biblical truth: sinners are saved by God's grace alone in Christ. The salvation of sinners – your salvation! – rests solely upon the goodness and merits of the Lord Jesus Christ. Divine grace is God the Father's unmerited favor given freely according to His goodness revealed in the perfect life, redeeming death, and victorious resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ. Our sins are forgiven and we are born again into His eternal kingdom because of Christ Jesus alone. Last week's sermon was all about God's grace in Christ. Human works are absolutely and completely excluded when it comes to the salvation of sinners.

Last Sunday, I purposely avoided any discussion of good works for two reasons. First, good works are excluded in the doctrine of man's salvation. Second, I planned to preach about good works today and next Sunday too. I wanted to demonstrate in the very order and pattern of these sermons, that good works can only follow after the sinner has been redeemed unto eternal life by the grace of Christ Jesus. And I will hasten to add, that good works and our growth in Christian sanctification can only happen by the grace of God in Christ. God's grace alone brings about our salvation; and God's grace preserves, sustains and brings growth in our life of good works and sanctification through His holy Word by the Spirit.

The gospel reading from Luke 8 will guide us as we consider good works in the life of the Christian. In this text, the Lord Jesus teaches about the hearing of His Word and the fruit it produces. The Holy Spirit produces good works in our lives as we believe His Word and live according to it.

Jesus told a parable about a sower (or a farmer) sowing (or planting) seed in a field. The seed falls onto four kinds of soil, each representing a differing kind of hearing God's Word. Each of the soils produce fruit, except the first.

The first type of soil represents those who hear God's Word. But it doesn't take root and the devil snatches it away from their hearts so that they may not believe and be saved (vs. 12). This first group represents unbelieving sinners never converted to Christ through the Gospel. The warning we Christians must heed from this is that the devil seeks to steal God's Word from us. Both individually and corporately as a congregation. That original deception from the Garden of Eden is still spoken in various ways, "Did God really say...?" We Christians are not ignorant of the devil's schemes. By the grace of the Spirit, we do not despise preaching and His Word. But hold it sacred and gladly hear and learn it. God's Word is our greatest treasure.

Now we get into the types of hearing that represent faith and trust in Christ. The second type of hearing is represented by the hard, rocky ground. The Word finds enough ground to grow. Fruit is produced. But when times of testing come, however, there isn't sufficient depth and the plant withers and dies. The third type of hearing God's Word is represented by thorn-infested ground. The plant grows but it gets choked by the cares of life in this world. Its fruit can't mature; it remains malnourished.

The second and third types of soil represent Christians hearing God's Word. But the ground, that is, the heart and soul, are neglected. The rocks were not dug up and removed so that seed could find sufficient ground to grow even during times of heat and adversity. When the weeds started appearing, they were left alone to grow and multiply. The vitality of the soul was sapped; in both cases the plant produced. But the good works never matured, or they shriveled up altogether.

Jesus instructs us that our heart and soul must be cultivated in order for His Word to bring forth much fruit. Such cultivation must include self-examination guided by God's Word. Where are the stones in my heart and

life that prevent the Word growing? Might they include past and present sins we refuse to acknowledge, turn away from in repentance, and seek Christ's forgiveness? You cannot expect God to bless your life with growth and maturity if your heart, mind, body, and soul continue to be filled with actions, decisions, and attitudes which God Himself declares are wrong, sinful, and harmful to your spiritual life. Sin hardens your heart and makes your soul stiff-necked, resistant to the fruitful work of the Holy Spirit. As Christians, we daily seek to live a life of repentance – turning away from sins of thought, word, and deed – so that the new man may daily emerge and produce good works of faith, love, and hope.

Jesus instructs us that the cares, riches, and pleasures of life can choke our spiritual lives to such an extent that good works never reach maturity; they never fully ripen. Vitality is constantly being sucked away through fear, anxiety, care, and worry. The Bible from cover to cover warns us against greed, covetousness, and the deceptive promises of worldly wealth. In another place, Jesus asked what profit is it if a man gains the whole world (i.e., wealth, security, prestige, etc.) but loses his soul? As Christians, we daily seek to keep worldly demands and priorities in their proper place so that our spiritual lives of worship, faith, prayer, love, and devotion to God and man can flourish.

Finally, we come to the fourth type of soil. And maybe with a sense of eager expectation. This is where we want to be. In vs. 15, Jesus says, these are those who, "hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience." Hearing God's Word with an honest and good heart includes confessing that as Christians, we remain sinners who struggle. There are weeds that need to be pulled. Stones need to be dug up and thrown away. Getting rid of them may be painful. Keep the imagery in mind: weeds must be ripped out. Rocks must be removed by a shovel. For the soil to remain good, rich, and productive, daily repentance and nurturing must happen. Not only must the bad things (weeds, rocks, hardened soil, etc.) be removed, but the soil and the plants growing in the soil must also be nurtured with water, sun, and nutrients. Plants must be pruned, tied, and tended so they can grow

properly. Much patience is required. The fruit of good works may come slowly. This is the place of God's Word, prayer, and the support we give one another in Christ's name.

But according to the promise of Christ, the fruit will come. The Lord Jesus is the sower who sows the seed in our lives. Good works will come by His Spirit working graciously in our lives. We will consider the nature of good works more next Sunday. For now, I want to say simply that the Ten Commandments guide us in how we are to love God above all things and love our neighbors as ourselves. The Catechism instructs us to "consider your place in life according to the Ten Commandments: Are you a father, mother, son, daughter, husband, wife, or worker? ... Have you stolen, been negligent, wasted anything, or done any harm?" The good works we seek God to produce in our lives are never self-chosen! God defines them, gives them to us, and work them in us. God's grace directs our Christian lives of good works too! God be praised. We close with these beautiful words from Ephesians 2:8–10 that teach us this very thing:

⁸For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, ⁹not a result of works, so that no one may boast. ¹⁰For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.