

It's remarkable how many of our Lord's parables deal with growing things. Perhaps part of it is that that's what man was made for, to tend the Garden of Eden. And to be sure, it's something that bears incredible fruit, from the beauty of a well-tended flowerbed to the taste of cherry tomatoes right from the garden, to providing food for many, many people as farmers and ranchers do. But as everyone who has tended a flowerbed or a vegetable garden can tell you, or especially a farmer or rancher, it's hard work.

This is something we see in today's Gospel reading. Our faith is a wonderful gift, given to us by the grace of God, bearing fruits that last for eternity. But it's also hard work, requiring patience, before we'll get to see the fullness of its fruits.

We see the grace of God right away in this parable. Jesus says, "A sower went out to sow his seed." Why is the sower sowing? Because that's who he is, that's what a sower does. The ground doesn't somehow "earn" his casting of his seed upon it. The sower just does it.

Likewise, our Lord has sent and continues to send His word into all the world. Why? Because that's just the kind of God He is. He desires people to know of Him, and His love for them, and how He died to save them from their sins and grant them eternal life in His glorious Kingdom.

No one deserves the word or has earned the right to it; rather, God sends it out purely by grace – giving a gift purely out of His love.

Grace is seen still further in how the sower sows His seed. He sends it everywhere, even onto places that wouldn't seem like good ones for seed to grow. Hardened, compacted soil of paths; shallow, rocky soil; soil with patches of weeds; all these receive the seed just like the good soil.

Likewise, our Lord sends His word into all the world. As He scattered the Jews in exile, He granted that they would bring the Old Testament with them, taking the news of the coming Messiah all throughout the ancient Near East. And then at Pentecost, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit, causing His disciples to proclaim His mighty works to save in the languages of those then visiting Jerusalem. He then sent His disciples, like the Apostle Paul, on far-ranging journeys to spread His word.

Still today, God works through missionaries and evangelists and ordinary Christians to proclaim the Good News of Jesus throughout the world. Nobody "deserves" to hear this word, but in grace God sends it anyway!

A third sign of God's grace seen in this parable is that it is the same seed that is scattered everywhere. The sower doesn't figure that the rocky or compacted soil are unlikely to produce and so he'll just use up old or decaying seed on them, and save the good seed for the good soil. No, every place gets the same seed, because the sower only has his good seed.

Likewise, God sends His one, true word throughout the world. Wherever it is heard in its truth and purity, the word always contains the power of God unto salvation, the conviction of sin by the Law and the promise of grace through the blood of Jesus in the Gospel.

And even where the devil and evil men try to twist it or hide it, the Lord still causes His truth to shine through, even if it's only a dim glow. For example, despite all the corruptions present at the time of the Reformation, God still brought forth faith in Luther and others, causing those good seeds to remain and grow even as all sorts of weeds were scattered at the same time.

Out of grace, God sends out His word, despite the fact that no one deserves it. Out of grace, God sends His word to all, regardless of how likely it might seem that the recipient is to believe it. And out of grace, God sends His same word to all, conveying His almighty power to save to any who hear it. It is the sower and his seed that allows the ground to bear any fruit. It is God and His word, His power, His grace, that is the only reason why salvation is brought forth in men.

So then, if God sends out His saving Gospel, which contains His divine power, why aren't all people saved? Why do many not believe? And why do many who were once Christians end up falling away from the faith? This is the problem pointed out by Jesus in the parable.

The seeds falling on the hardened path are never allowed to sprout and are eaten by the birds. Jesus says these "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." Just rejecting the word out of hand, not going to even consider what it might say.

The seeds on rocky soil do sprout, but then wither and die when the sun's heat overwhelms them. Jesus says these "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." When things are going great, they're glad to be a Christian. But when difficulty or persecution makes them choose between the faith and the idols buried in their heart, faith dies while those rocks remain.

The seeds among thorns sprout and even begin to grow, but then the thorns overtake them, choking and killing them. Jesus says these "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." Christians who believe, but over time find their love of God supplanted and strangled by a love of worldly concerns and activities. In each case, salvation is lost.

Why does this happen? Again, the problem isn't with the word or the One who sowed it. As St. Paul writes, working through this very issue, "But it is not as though the word of God has failed." And we heard the Lord declare through the prophet Isaiah concerning His word, "it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it." The problem isn't the word.

No, the problem lies in what happens after the word arrives, how one tends the faith which it produces. Like raising any sort of plant or crop, persevering in and growing in the faith is hard work. Being a Christian is a struggle in this life. And our Lord is completely straightforward about this all throughout the Bible.

Clear back in the Old Testament, God promised Abraham the land of Canaan. But He also told Abraham that his descendants would first be slaves in a strange land, afflicted for four hundred years, before they could take the land. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells those who would be His

disciples, “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.” On his first missionary journey, the Apostle Paul, having barely survived a stoning, tells the Christians “that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.”

Being a Christian, following in the footsteps of Jesus, is not an easy path. Faith is a living thing that must be nourished if it is to stay alive. When the word falls on our hearts in hard places, saying things that we’d rather not hear, we can’t just ignore it. We have to let it cut deep, like a plow, breaking up that hardened ground. And we have to chase the birds – the devil – away when he would try to come along and seize the word from us.

When our faith is growing, but encounters idols in our lives that would stop the growth, we have to let God’s word be the hammer to break those rocks apart. We can’t just figure that the roots are “good enough” and that the heat of persecution will never actually test them.

When we notice weeds springing up in our lives, things that are taking our time, our trust, our love away from God, we can’t just go on our way, figuring that those weeds aren’t too tall and that we’ll be fine. It’s the nature of weeds to be surprisingly fast-growing, and tenacious. Christians must constantly be cutting down and uprooting the worldly thorns and thistles that would invade our hearts and strangle our faith in and love for Christ. It’s all hard work, as our Lord makes plain. But the alternative is the death of faith, and with that, the loss of salvation.

Yet in all this, our Lord shows us still more grace. He knows the struggle, the work, that lays before us, and so He freely gives us the means to tend our faith and cultivate our hearts into good, receptive soil. Our chief and great instrument here is the word itself.

Not only is the word the seed, but as we heard from Hebrews, the sharp, two-edged sword, which can cut through hardness of heart. The word is also, as the Lord declares through Jeremiah, “like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces,” even those rocks that would keep the roots of faith from sinking in. The word is that sharp sickle which our Lord uses to separate the wheat from the weeds, gathering the former into His heavenly barns while burning the latter with fire.

Our Lord has given us the perfect instrument to turn our hearts into good soil where faith may grow, and He also supplies us with the strength to do so. In grace He even gives us the will, the desire to do so, to persevere when the work is long and difficult.

As the Holy Spirit inspired St. Paul to write, “And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” The Apostle doesn’t say that God will make it easy – he’s writing those words from a first-century prison, after all – but by His grace God will grant to us whatever we need to keep faith alive and make it grow.

He has graciously given us the word. He has graciously filled that word with His power. And He has graciously promised to sustain us while we travel through this life. Brothers and sisters in Christ, cling to that word and the Lord whose grace has saved us. He will supply the patience, that you might see the hundredfold fruits in heaven.

In the name of Jesus, amen.