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WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE PREACH GOD'S WORD?

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Gifts are funny things. It is amazing how the very same gift will produce different responses in different people. Some people will break down in tears of joy because you were so thoughtful. Other people might receive the very same gift and walk away hurt or offended because they thought that they deserved much more and much better. One might think that Americans might not appreciate gifts as much as people from third world countries, but that is not necessarily the case.

Over thirty years ago, my wife and I took in two Ukrainian orphans. They needed a home, at least temporarily. They had spent their lives in an orphanage in the Ukraine. They didn't have anything other than the clothes on their backs. The people who placed them with us hoped that we might consider adopting them. We weren't the wealthiest people in the world as far as material goods, but we had more than enough. We fed them, clothed them, took them to the doctor and the dentist, and tried very hard to make our home appealing. We had a lot of love to give. I certainly thought that they would think that our home was a wonderful place to live, certainly better than what they had. They didn't feel that way at all. They hated our home. They would have preferred going back to the orphanage in the Ukraine rather than living with us.

What happens when we preach God's Word? We are going to see different reactions to the very same message. Why do some continually rejoice while others yawn with boredom? Why do some people come to church all the time and then just mysteriously disappear? Why do some leave the church after many years? Why do some, in spite of all kinds of trials and difficulties, continue to remain strong in the faith? All these questions will be answered this morning as we look at the question: WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE PREACH GOD'S WORD?

Jesus was and is the eternal God who came down from heaven to be our Savior. He loved the world so much that he was willing to lay down his own perfect, sinless life for the sin of the world. His message of salvation would change the lives of many for all eternity. Remember how the sinful woman washed Jesus' feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. She couldn't believe that Jesus would show her that kind of love and forgiveness. Yet others hated Jesus so much that they demanded, planned, and carried out his death. It was the very same message, but very different reactions.

Jesus would speak of the Kingdom of heaven through a parable: "A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up." Jesus is going to talk about the four different kinds of soil. We have a picture of a farmer sowing seed. You didn't take one seed at a time and plant it in the ground. Rather, you walked along with the seed in your bag. You threw seed all over the place very liberally. You were not going to be stingy. Rather you wanted to plant as much seed as you possibly could.

Let us remember that it is the very same seed that is sown in every place. The difference comes in with the soil. The first soil is along the path. Jesus explains in with the words: "When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart."

There are those people who hear the Word of God and immediately walk away. They don't even consider the message. Why not? They don't understand the message. Now when we say that they don't understand the message, that doesn't mean that they can't grasp certain facts. In fact, they may grasp facts very well. There are many people who can tell you all the facts about Christmas. They know about the angel Gabriel and Mary and Joseph, the town of Bethlehem and the shepherds. They know that the child born to the Virgin Mary was the Son of God. They know that Jesus performed many miracles such as changing water into wine, walking on water and raising the dead. They know that Jesus died on a cross outside the city walls of Jerusalem. They even know that Easter is the festival of our Lord's resurrection. They know many Old Testament Bible stories. They know the names of some of the apostles. But they do not apply it to their own lives. They may say that Jesus died. They will never say, "Jesus died for me!"

Satan is the one who snatches the precious Word from their hearts. He may convince them that Christianity is just outdated superstition. He convinces them that there is no such thing as sin or that we can find our own salvation somewhere else. He makes people prideful, convinces them that all religions are basically the same, including those that we make up in our own minds. He tells them not to believe in heaven or hell. And they listen to the Prince of lies!

"Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root." This soil has a layer of rock underneath. The seed will not grow quickly and then die for lack of root.

There are always people searching out there, looking for something and not knowing where to find it. There are people who will hear the message of Christianity and they cannot get enough of it. They want to come to church all the time. They want to have Bible classes twice a day. They want to invite everyone they meet to church because they are so happy. Six months later they aren't even coming to church anymore. They've moved on to something else.

The question has always been asked, "Is Christianity emotional or is it intellectual?" The correct answer is that it is both. Christianity has to touch our emotions. How can we not be moved by God's love for the human race as we celebrate the miracle of Christmas or the solemn season of Lent? How can the resurrection not move us as we attend Easter services or a Christian funeral? I'm sure that all of us have certain hymns that affect us emotionally because of what they say.

Christianity is also intellectual. The Christian faith is based on objective fact. God loved us. He sent his Son into the world. Christ lived for us, died for us, and rose for us. He has given us the forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and salvation as his free gift. This we cannot deny. Our emotions may lie to us at times. There are times when we may not feel forgiven or loved. God speaks to us and says, "Put your feelings away. This is what I say to you, and I cannot lie."

"When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away." It is a wonderful thing to be a Christian, yet Jesus tells us that we will have our problems as long as we live in this world. He did not come to bring heaven on earth, but rather to bring people on earth to heaven. As long as we live in this world we will have to deal with unpleasant things. We deal with illnesses and the deaths of those close to us. We deal with natural tragedies and accidents. We deal with the loss of jobs and money. We deal with ridicule and persecution that comes from those who hate Christ. Some will fall away at these times because their faith has no root.

"Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants." We all know what weeds can do to a garden. They drain strength from the good plants and can actually choke them out. Jesus tells us that the weeds here are the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth.

As long as we are in this world, we can be tempted to worry. We want certainty and we don't always get it. We want to pray, "Give us this day our yearly bread or enough bread to last for our entire lifetimes." We want to be absolutely secure in knowing what tomorrow will bring. When we don't have the assurance – we worry. Will I have enough money to send the children to college? Will I have enough money to secure my retirement? Will I have enough money to pay my bills next month? When we give in to worry, we become more and more tempted to play God and take matters into our own hands. Then the idea of a heavenly father who loves us for the sake of his Son Jesus Christ becomes more and more foolish to us.

Earthly wealth is deceitful. The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Money in and of itself is neutral. We use it to buy food and clothing and shelter and everything else. It can serve for good or for evil. We think of the sad case of Judas who loved money so much that he was willing to betray his Savior and teacher for thirty pieces of silver. How much money is enough? Half a million dollars? Two million? Five million? Remember the words of our Lord, "What good is it for a man to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"

We don't always know what will happen, but we do know that God is with us. Jesus gave us his promise, "I am with you always, to the very end of the age." We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God, who have been called according to his purpose. We also know that God will not allow us to be tempted beyond what we can bear. He will provide a way out so that we can stand up under it. We don't always know what God has in mind when he allows certain things to come upon us, but we do know that he will sustain us with the promises given to us in the Word and strengthened by the Sacrament.

Still other seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop – a hundred, sixty, or thirty times what was sown." This is the kind of hearer that Jesus wants to make of every person. God wants all to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. We do not take credit for making our hearts receptive to the message of God's Word. By nature, we are spiritually blind, dead, and enemies of God. No one can say Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit.

Only a miracle of God can make our heart good soil for the gospel seed. The Holy Spirit creates faith in our hearts through the Means of Grace and he causes that faith to grow. He enables us to do works of love for God and for our fellow man. He enables our love to touch the hearts of many people that we come into contact with so that there is an even greater harvest.

The Word always works when it is preached. Some will reject it in their unbelief or let other things take a greater priority. God has given us ears to hear and understand his glorious message of salvation. We thank God for the gift of faith and pray for daily strengthening! AMEN