

In the name of ✝ Jesus.

I read an interesting essay this past week from Public Discourse. The author, a humanities professor at Villanova University — that’s a Catholic university in Pennsylvania, was pondering “Why Religion and the Humanities Are in Decline” (Terence Sweeney, Public Discourse, www.thepublicdiscourse.com, July 11, 2023). He reports, “The downward trend in religion, particularly Christianity, accelerated in 2008”; and he observes that “This decline is particularly acute among Millennials, of whom only 46 percent identify as religious.” FYI, millennials are those born 1981 to 1997, currently age 27 to 42.

This is an important question for us. I hear often how we need to be growing as a church — no one would disagree with that. In fact, Christianity, the only way of salvation, needs to be growing as a whole. But it is not. Why not? The author suggests the trend comes from a “social ethos,” the spirit of our times, if you will. That ethos, he says, is “our obsession with means and neglect of ends.” He referenced a recent *Wall Street Journal* poll that indicated “a growing prioritization of money (always a means) and a downplaying of nation, community, and God (ends). We live an infinite [focus on] usefulness with little sense of the point of our labors.”

Indeed, we might ask: “what is the point?” “What is the point of our labors?” “What is the point of our being?” These questions are taken up in some catechisms; Luther’s does not, nor does the Synodical Explanation. The essay’s author points to “The *Baltimore Catechism*—a standard American Catholic teaching text from the 1880s to the late 1960s.” It “begins with a section ‘On the End of Man,’ which famously asks, ‘Why did God make you?’” It considers our purpose as God’s creatures. “It asks the human question in light of God’s purposes.” And our essayist summarizes: “To participate in Christianity is to live for—as one is called—one’s end in light of the Creator’s purposes. Religion does not just offer answers, it moves the questions and answers into the intersecting horizon of God and humanity.”

How about us? How might we answer the question: “Why did God make you?” We might answer very nearly like the *Baltimore Catechism* did. We might answer, God created (and recreated) us to have eternal communion with Him, to live a life of faith in Him, looking to His Son Jesus, praising and glorifying Him, and to live a life of love of Him and of our neighbors, serving others as we have been served. You might quibble with that a bit, but it’s a good start.

In the spirit of our times, people reject such ends, such a purpose. They want to focus only on the means — like money, as our essayist mentioned. Of course, we don’t ignore means; we talk about the “means of grace.” You remember that term from your catechism. What are the instruments that bestow God’s grace? You know them: the Gospel word and the Sacraments!

Jesus doesn't ignore means either. Indeed, that's much of what this first of his parables deals with, as Jesus explains in it "*why*, despite his ongoing ministry of words and deeds, so many people in Israel [did not respond] in faith and discipleship" (Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary: Matthew 11:2–20:34*, p. 680).

The parable itself is simple, and we understand its meaning because Jesus explained it. "*A sower went out to sow*," Jesus begins His parable. In His explanation, Jesus tells us that it's "*the word of the kingdom*" that's being sown. The seed is the word. On the other hand, Jesus doesn't identify the sower, but it must surely be Jesus in the first instance, and then later it's we, who go forth and scatter God's word.

In the sowing, Jesus continues, some of the seed falls on the hard path; some falls on rocky soil; some falls among the thorns, and some falls on the good soil. I don't think the text supports the idea that the sower sows with reckless abandon; I don't think one can say "one-fourth" of the seed is scattered in each of these places as Dr. Franzmann intimates in the hymn we'll be singing shortly.

No, rather the sower sows seed, and, as expected in the sowing, some of the seed falls on the hard path. It doesn't sprout and grow. It can't penetrate the hard path. Birds come along and snatch it away. Jesus explains, this is a picture of the devil snatching away the word from hearers' hearts. The word doesn't germinate into faith.

Some of the seed falls on rocky soil with no depth of soil. This seed does sprout and take root and grow, but the hot sun comes out and scorches the plants, and they wither and die ... no depth of root. Jesus explains this, too. This is a picture of faith, evident only for a time — the person "*hears the word and immediately receives it with joy*" —, but "*when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away.*" The tender plant of faith withers and dies.

It's sad when this happens, for it's especially at those times of trial and tribulation when people need the comfort of the Word, as we heard Jesus invite us to last Sunday: "*Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light*" (Matt. 11:28-30). It's especially at such times — to use Isaiah's picture — that we need to be watered by God's Word, built up by the Lord's Supper, supported by the mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren. Sadly, too often that's when folks stop coming to church. It's not God's fault; nevertheless, like the parched plant, their faith withers and dies.

Some of the seed falls on soil with thorns. The thorns grow up and choke the tender plant; they steal away sun and water and nutrients. The plant is without fruit, good for nothing.

Truly, Jesus teaches, it's not just trial and tribulation that take us away from God's Word and from His church. Other activities can distract us from the Word, activities that we think are more important than the Word. Means, like money, deceive us and take us away from our Christian purpose and end. Remember: fruit bearing demonstrates that we are disciples (John 15:8); true faith always produces good fruit (Luke 6:43); faith without works is dead (James 2:17). Fruitless branches are cut off, thrown into the fire, and burned (John 15:6).

Finally, some of the seed falls on good soil. And with water and sun, this seed sprouts and grows and bears abundant fruit. The faithful Christian endures to the end (Matt. 10:22), doing the good works God prepared for them (Eph. 2:10).

Clearly, in this parable there is a dual focus on both means and ends. The means of grace Jesus highlights is His word. The seed is the word, and there is no distinction. The same seed is sown regardless where it falls. It's a good seed, an efficacious word in the hearts that it penetrates. As the Lord says through the prophet Isaiah, "*my word ... accomplish[es] that which I purpose.*" The Lord's word does "*not return ... empty*"; it "*succeed[s] in the thing for which [He] sent it.*"

But clearly also, the Lord has an end in mind; He has a purpose for His word, namely, faith. He wants us to believe, for He wants us to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4), and that comes only by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8-9). Thus, besides the word in Jesus' parable, faith is also a major focus. The devil snatches away the word ... no faith. When trial comes upon a shallow faith, it withers and dies. When the world's deceitfulness chokes faith, it becomes fruitless. A strong, vibrant faith endures to the harvest.

But this faith also bears witness to another end: the fruit of faith in good works. God desires our good works; He demands them; they please Him (Heb. 13:16), and Christians do them, naturally, willingly, joyously, though because we still have flesh, we need to be reminded of this purpose of God. We do them because our neighbor needs them, and seeing them, they may give glory to the Father (Matt. 5:16).

The Spirit might even draw them here, though the cultural winds are blowing against us. Our essayist says his "college students have worked hard getting impressive credentials since at least middle school and will continue to do so long after college. When I ask them where this is all going, they are befuddled. 'This is just what you do,' they often answer. Anything else is impractical, unrealistic, and useless," for remember, they're all about means and, for them, their means are their

ends. He says, “They have been going their whole lives without asking or being asked ‘where to?’ Asking such a question means stopping, thinking, and perhaps changing direction, all things that religion and humanities have us do.”

The essay is a bit of a dual lament ... the decline of religion and the humanities. But the essayist ends on a hopeful note. “[I]n Christianity,” he says, “we find the union of ends and means.” Quoting another author, he writes, “‘Jesus Christ, in his Incarnation, appears as God’s means for the salvation of human beings and for the establishing of God’s kingdom. But where Jesus Christ is, there also is this salvation and kingdom.’ Christ is the means and the end, the way and the destination, the unity of this life and the next. What God commands us—to love Him, to serve Him in this life, and to be happy with Him in the next—He gives to us” — yes, as we heard today: He gives us His Word, and as we believe it, we receive Him and live our life for Him. This, our essays concludes, is dwelling “in the graced union of ends and means ...,” which leads us to pray:

Lord Jesus Christ, with us abide, For round us falls the eventide.
O let Your Word, that saving light, Shine forth undimmed into the night.

Stay with us, Lord, and keep us true; Preserve our faith our whole life through—
Your Word alone our heart’s defense, The Church’s glorious confidence.

(LSB585:1, 6)

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