

Corporate America seems greedier than ever, but it took the death of some businesses to wake us up. Over the past few months a disturbing pattern has emerged. A business grows large but lies about its assets. Accountants keep quiet. Insider trading fattens the pockets of executives while the company meets its demise. Workers who had trusted in the business's assets wake up penniless, jobless and without retirement benefits. Now congress wants businesses to act ethically, and the market is collapsing at the very thought of it.

Businesses in the United States have had to wrestle with two different goals: profits and services. If a business wants to earn profits, it has to provide a useful service. But few businesses will increase services unless they increase profits. Here in Cameron, for example, wireless phone companies may or may not improve services, but it will depend on the company's profitability more than the client's need. In the United States if a business chooses between profits and services, it will choose profits. This is one reason so many Catholics grew disgusted with the sex scandals. Cutting a deal was more important than protecting children. Profit was more important than service.

Americans even choose livelihoods based on income rather than on service. Almost all the helping professions need more employees. Nurses, teachers, firefighters, police officers, the armed forces, clergy – all of them say we need more people. You rarely hear it said that we need more CEOs, more lawyers or more professional athletes. In general, if a job pays well, plenty of people apply. If the job performs a public service, though, salaries are not high and applicants are few.

If corporate America is to lead the way on ethical behavior, it has a long way to go. The problem is not just with businesses; it's in how Americans think about business.

In the parable of the sower, the problem is with the soil. The sower scatters seed. The seed is good, but the soil may not be. If the seed falls on the path, birds eat it. If it falls on rocky ground, it withers. If it falls in the edging, thorns choke it.

To interpret this parable, Jesus names three things that keep the seed from taking root: the evil one, shallowness and greed. The birds that eat the seed are like the devil who obscures the word. The shallow soil is like shallow people who hear the word but never reflect on it, never pray over it and never act on it. The seed that falls among thorns is like the word that gets choked by greed. The good soil is like those who hear the word and understand it. They bear fruit.

If any of us wishes to give an example of fiscal ethics, whether we are businesses, churches or individuals, we will fail as long as we try to grow in the soil of greed. God's word calls us to charity and service.