

## GOOD SEED AMONG THORNS

### Matthew 13:7, 22

In this parable of the sower, the seed, and the soils, Jesus describes a farmer who scattered his seed on four different types of soil. But only one of the soils bore any fruit. Jesus called it “good ground.” However, the wayside soil did not bear any fruit, because it did not allow the seed to get in. And the stony places didn’t bear any fruit; because, though it allowed the seed to get in, it didn’t allow it to get down deep enough to take root. But the seed that fell among thorny weeds also did not bear any fruit; because, though it allowed the seed to get in and down, it did not allow it to grow up. The thorns choked the seed before it had a chance to grow to the stage of fruit bearing. Now, according to 13:18-23, these various soil types represent the different ways the human heart responds to the word of God. That is, some people are like wayside soil. They are hardhearted people who are unresponsive to God’s word. Others are like stony places; they are superficial believers whose profession of faith will not last when the heat is on. Still, others are like seed scattered among thorny weeds. And the seed among thorns teaches us that some people do not respond to God’s word because their hearts are divided by the cares of the world, the deceit of riches, and the desire for other things.

---

In the aftermath of Adam and Eve’s fall into sin, **Genesis 3:17-18** records: “Then to Adam He said, ‘Because you have heeded the voice of your wife, and have eaten from the tree of which I commanded you saying, ‘You shall not eat of it’: Cursed is the ground for your sake, in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life. Both thorns and thistles it shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the herb of the field.’” Because of Adam’s sinful disobedience, the cursed ground of the earth brings forth thorns to this day. And you don’t have to plant, grow, or cultivate thorns. They are natural to the soil. However, seeds are exotic to the soil. Therefore, if fruit is to grow, the soil must be properly prepared to receive the seed. If not, thorny weeds will cut off the growth of the seed before it is able to bear fruit. And that’s what happens to worldly people who hear the word of God. In 13:22 Jesus explains: “Now he who received seed among the thorns is he who hears the word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and he becomes unfruitful.”

Now when Jesus says, “he becomes unfruitful,” he means that this person is not saved. **Luke 8:12** makes clear what’s at stake in this parable by saying: “Those by the wayside are the ones who hear; then the devil comes and takes away the word out of their hearts, lest they should believe and be saved.” As the seed is planted in the soil in order to produce fruit, so it is that the word of God is proclaimed that men and women might repent, believe, and be saved. The point of the parable is clear: no fruit, no salvation. Therefore, because the seed

planted among thorns did not bear fruit, it teaches us that a heart that is torn between the word and the world cannot be saved. **Matthew 6:24** says, "No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." **James 4:4** says, "Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God." And **1 John 2:15-16** says, "Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the father is not in him. For all that is in the world – the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life – is not of the Father but is from the world."

---

And Jesus teaches in this parable of the sower that worldly people are not saved, be they religious or irreligious. Notice how the word "choke" is used in the text. In 13:7, the word "choke" translates the Greek term *apopnigo*. The verb *pnigo* means to choke or strangle. And the preposition *apo*, which speaks of separation, is added to it for intensity and emphasis. Literally, *apopnigo* means, "to choke off." And that's exactly what worldliness does to some people. It chokes off the word. That is, it totally separates them from saving faith in the word. But worldliness doesn't always operate like that. In 13:22, the word "choke" translates the verb term *sympnigo*. Again, *pnigo* means to choke or strangle. But the preposition *sym* means "with." It's the direct opposite of *apo*, which means "away" or "off." Literally, *sympnigo* means, "to choke with or together." That is, it is to choke through suffocation, rather than separation. In fact, **Luke 8:42** speaks of Jesus being "pressed" (*sympnigo*) by the multitudes, meaning they virtually suffocated him. And that's exactly what worldliness does to some people. Worldliness does not have to totally separate a person from God's word, God's Son, or God's church, to do its work. A person can profess faith in Christ, join the church, and regularly sit under the teaching of God's word, yet never bear the fruit of saving faith. And they bear no fruit because, although the word is planted in their hearts and even begins to grow, worldliness suffocates the growing seed before it matures to fruitfulness. Mark it down:

- Worldliness and saving faith cannot coexist.
- Faith is snuffed out by worldliness.
- The seed of God's word is choked in our souls whenever Christ is not our all in all.

So let me show you three thorny weeds of worldliness that must be ploughed from the heart so that the implanted word can mature to saving faith.

---

## I. THE CARES OF THIS WORLD

The word “cares” translates the noun *merimna* that means to care for something or to be concerned about someone. And this concern can be positive or negative, depending on the context. On one hand, it can refer to proper, legitimate, or even spiritual concerns. It’s used that way in **2 Corinthians 11:28**, where Paul speaks of his “deep concern for all the churches.” But it can also refer to undue, worldly, or sinful concerns. That’s what Jesus means here when he speaks of the cares of this world that choke the word. It’s worry, anxiety, and distress about worldly matters that can choke the word you hear on Sunday from every bearing fruit on Monday. Jesus himself gives us a powerful illustration of this in **Luke 14**, which records the events that took place during a dinner party Jesus attended at a Pharisee’s house. During the conversation, **Luke 14:15** records that one of the persons at the table exclaimed, “Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!” And that statement led Jesus to tell a parable about who will and who will not eat bread in the kingdom of God.

The parable is recorded in **Luke 14:16-24**. It says: “A certain man gave a great supper and invited many, and sent his servant at supper time to say to those who were invited, ‘Come, for all things are now ready.’ But they all with one accord began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it. I ask you to have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them. I ask you to have me excused.’ Still another said, ‘I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.’ So that servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house, being angry, said to his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in here the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind.’ And the servant said, ‘Master, it is done as you commanded, and still there is room.’ Then the master said to the servant, ‘Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say to you that none of those men who were invited shall taste my supper.”

Notice that in this parable of the great supper, the guests did not have to do anything but come. The master of the house had made all of the preparations for the banquet. The guests just had to show up. The point is that God himself has done all that is needed for us to enjoy salvation’s supper. All we have to do is respond to his gracious invitation. Yet, Jesus teaches that there are some people who have received and accepted the invitation, but they won’t be allowed into the supper. And they will not be a part of salvation’s supper because the cares of this world. And in the parable of the great supper, the cares of this world are property, possessions, and people. These invited guests allowed their personal concerns to take precedence over the master’s call. So they missed the supper, while unlikely guests filled the master’s table.

What excuse are you giving the master for why you have not made salvation’s supper your first, top, and highest priority? Are you allowing the

cares of this world to choke the word in your life? Is worry or anxiety about the things of this life getting more of your attention than God? And note that the cares of this world have nothing to do with a person's financial situation.

**WILLIAM HENDRIKSEN** spoke well of the thorn-infested heart when he said:

"When this person is poor he deceives himself into thinking that if he were only rich he would be happy. When he is rich he deludes himself into imagining that if he were only still richer he would be satisfied, as if material riches could guarantee contentment." Worry chokes both the rich and the poor. In fact, our word "worry" is derived from an Old English word that means, "to strangle." That's what worry is. It's mental, emotional, and spiritual strangulation. So what is it that you're so worried about that it is choking the life out of your faith? Well, whatever it is, you need to confess it, repent, and ask God to plough it out of your heart, so that it does not choke the word from your life.

---

In **Matthew 6:31-33**, Jesus says, "Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you." And in **Luke 21:34**, Jesus says, "But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighted down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly." And **Philippians 4:6-7** says, "Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God, and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." And **1 Peter 5:7** says you should be "Casting all your care upon Him, for He cares for you."

Isn't that great news? Your faith doesn't have to be choked by thorns. Your life doesn't have to be consumed with worry. Your mind and heart don't have to be consumed with the things of this world. You can give it to God. You can cast it upon him. You can trust God to take care of you. **STEVE BROWN** calls this "positive relinquishment." That is, we should leave life in the hands of God. That doesn't mean that you should become a fatalist. And it doesn't mean that you should not do what you can and should do for yourself. It means that you leave that which is beyond you in the hands of the One who is beyond you. It's like the young wife who only had \$1.87 to buy her husband a gift, and Christmas was the next day. Impulsively, she decided to sell her long, thick, beautiful hair to buy him a chain for his treasured gold watch. Little does she know that at the same time her husband was selling that watch to buy his present for her - special combs for her beautiful hair! Here's the point, just in case you missed it: **IF YOU TAKE CARE OF GOD'S BUSINESS, GOD WILL TAKE CARE OF YOUR BUSINESS!**

---

## II. THE DECEITFULNESS OF RICHES

**Matthew 19:16-22** records Jesus' encounter with a man that time has come to call "THE RICH YOUNG RULER." He wanted to know from Jesus what to do to inherit eternal life. But Jesus knew what was really in the man's heart. So he commanded the rich young ruler to liquidate his assets, donate the proceeds to charity, and become a disciple. But the rich young ruler deemed this price to be too high. So he walked away from Jesus with sorrow in his heart. Or, to put it another way, the deceitfulness of riches choked the word and he became unfruitful. **Matthew 19:23-26** says: "Then Jesus said to His disciples, 'Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom. And again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. When His disciples hear it, they were greatly astonished, saying, 'Who then can be saved?' But Jesus looked at them and said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

Now, be clear that Jesus is not saying that you have to be broke, poor, and destitute in order to be saved. No, having financial wealth, material possessions, and worldly affluence do not automatically disqualify you from the kingdom of heaven. The stuff that you have or do not have is not the issue. The issue is your attitude toward that stuff. **Proverbs 11:28a** says, "He who trusts in his riches will fall." **Matthew 6:21** says, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." **1 Timothy 6:10** says: "The love of money is a root of all kinds of evil..." Don't miss that. Money itself is not the root of evil. Money is morally neutral. Money itself is neither good nor evil. However, the love of money, deceitfulness of riches, and the cares of this world are evil. **CHARLES SPURGEON** said it well: "A person cannot be eager to get, and eager to keep, and eager to increase, and eager to become a millionaire, and at the same time be a true servant of the Lord Jesus. As the body grows rich, the soul grows poor." How we need this word, in a day where there is no shortage of high-profile religious personalities who are insistent in their claims that God want you to be rich, prosperous, and successful. But what they don't tell us is that there are spiritual implications attached to material prosperity. And so you must guard your heart, so that riches, money, and prosperity will not deceive your heart. Well, how do you know when riches have deceived a person? I'm glad you asked.

- You are deceived if you define yourself by what you have or don't have.
- You are deceived if you are basing your security of bank account, savings, and stock options.
- You are deceived if you think that money can buy happiness.
- You are deceived if you think that material possessions can bring true satisfaction.
- You are deceived if you think that the joy money brings will last.

- You are deceived if you believe that having more stuff will solve your problems.
  - You are deceived if you put material things ahead of God.
- 

There's an old Aesop fable about a certain dog that got a big, meaty, and juicy bone while roaming around. And that dog trotted home with great joy. But as that dog crossed over a bridge, it looked over the edge and saw what looked to be a dog with an ever bigger, meatier, and juicier bone. And, forgetting the bone he had in his mouth, the dog snapped at the dog, to get its bigger bone. Of course, he didn't get it. And in the process, he lost the bone he already had in his mouth. Mark it down: Riches are deceitful. And the deceitfulness of riches will choke the word in the divided heart. That's why **Proverbs 23:4-5** says, "Do not overwork to be rich; because of your own understanding, cease! Will you set your eyes on that which is not? For riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away like an eagle toward heaven." And **Ecclesiastes 5:10** says, "He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver; nor he who loves abundance, with increase. This also is vanity." And **1 Timothy 6:17** says, "Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy."

---

### III. THE DESIRES FOR OTHER THINGS

This parable is told in **Matthew 13**, **Mark 4**, and **Luke 8**. The three passages parallel one another. But **Mark 4:18-19** adds a profound phrase to this explanation of the seed among thorns. It says: "Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful." Notice how Mark's version intensifies this issue of the divided heart. It says that not only are worry and materialism thorns that choke the word, but so is any other desire that we allow to compete with our affection, devotion, and commitment to Jesus Christ. The answer to the first question of the **Westminster Shorter Catechism** says, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy him forever." And that's the right answer. But **John Piper**, in his book *Desiring God*, tweaks that answer a bit and makes it a little more precise. He says, "The chief end of man is to glorify God by enjoying him forever." This subtle but powerful revision of that statement is based on Piper's biblical conviction that God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him.

True Christianity does not use God as a means to an end. Rather, it proclaims God himself to be the ultimate end of our one's desires. So we must always be on guard against the desires for other things that constantly grow in our hearts like thorny weeds. And let me warn you that a choking thorn of

worldliness does not have to be something overtly sinful, carnal, or materialistic. It can be any good, noble, or honorable thing that you allow to come before the Lord. **Hebrews 12:1** says, "Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us." Or course, we must strip away the sins that trip us up on faith's journey. But we must also strip away the "weights" that trip us up. "Weights" are things that, although not sinful in and of themselves, will nonetheless hinder you from enduring in faith.

Let me bottom-line this for you:

- The Lord demands first place in your heart.
- God won't take next.
- The Lord is too great and glorious to share his throne with anything else in your life.
- God deserves and demands your unconditional surrender, your total devotion, and your highest priority.
- If Christ is not Lord over all, he will not be Lord at all.

I have a book of devotionals by Joni Eareckson Tada, in which she tells of an instructive incident that took place one evening after she and her husband had gotten into bed. She was eager to share with him the insights she had gleaned from a book on prayer she had been reading that day. He tried to listen. But it was clear that he really wasn't interested. This angered Joni. And she clammed up. Ultimately, they talked about it. They challenged one another, cried together, and finally resolved the issue. In the process, they determined that they both have a problem with expectations. And that misplaced expectations had caused the tension that night. But in that conversation, her husband Ken made a heavy statement that I has stuck with me every since if first read it. "Joni," he said, "If I met all of your expectations, you wouldn't need God."

I often think about it when I get angry, disappointed, frustrated, or impatient. It reminds me that my wife, my family, my friends, my wisdom, and my resources are never sufficient to meet all of my needs. That's why I need God. And to depend on any other source for that which only God can provide will choke spiritual life. Let me close by giving you some bad news and some good news. The bad news is that thorns are painful. They sting. They hurt. They injure. In **2 Corinthians 12**, Paul spoke of a painful situation that he went through. But he never identified what exactly the painful situation was. Instead, he described it in graphic terms. **2 Corinthians 12:7** says, "There was given to me a thorn in the flesh." And with those words, we readily identify with Paul's painful situation, even though we don't know what it was. Thorns are painful. That's why, in **Matthew 6:34**, Jesus says, "Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble." In other words, each day has enough trouble of its own. So to worry is

to do nothing more than borrow sorrow from tomorrow. It doesn't pay. And in **1 Timothy 6:9-10**, Paul says, "But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows."

I repeat: The bad news is that thorns are painful. But the good news is that thorns can be useful, purposeful, and beneficial. Picture a little boy playing in the yard. His ball rolls into the bushes and he goes to retrieve it, without hesitation. He reaches for his ball, but he gets an unexpected sting instead. And forgetting his ball, he runs into the house. When his mother sees him coming in the kitchen door, she immediately reprimands him. "I thought I told you to play outside until dinner was ready," she says. He replies by simply saying, "But mom!" Then he shows her the splinter in his finger. Immediately, his mother's tone, attitude, and expression change. Forgetting her previous reprimand, she now gives all of her attention to caring for her son's minor wound. She gets the splinter out. She kisses the wound. And she even gives him a cookie for his trouble. And, in the same manner, no matter how painful the thorns of worldliness may be, they are all useful if they lead to the Father's heavenly home, the Lord's gracious embrace, and the Spirit's divine comfort.

---

SOME FOLK WOULD RATHER HAVE HOUSES AND LAND  
SOME FOLK CHOOSE SILVER AND GOLD  
THESE THINGS THEY TREASURE AND FORGET ABOUT THEIR SOULS  
I'VE DECIDED TO MAKE JESUS MY CHOICE

THE ROAD GETS ROUGH, THE GOING GETS TOUGH  
THE HILLS ARE HARD TO CLIMB  
I STARTED OUT A LONG TIME AGO AND THERE IS NO DOUBT IN MY MIND  
I'VE DECIDED TO MAKE JESUS MY CHOICE