

“The Sower and the Seed: Choking Thorns”

Mark 4:1-20

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Scripture: Mark 4:1-20

Sermon:

Introduction...

Let me ask you a couple of questions. Is family good? Is family important? Does the Bible teach that we should make our family a priority? Is it important to spend time with and invest in your family?

What about work? Is work good? Is work important? Does the Bible teach that we should be diligent workers, good workers? What does the Bible teach about people who are lazy workers?

What about being good stewards? Does God provide all that we have? Is what we own a gift from God? Are we to be wise and diligent with what God has given us? Our house, our land, our possessions?

Let me read to you a parable Jesus told. It is found in Luke 14:16-24. You don't need to read along, just listen.

Jesus replied: “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’

“But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, ‘I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.’

“Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’

“Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can't come.’

“The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, ‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.’

“‘Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’

“Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’”

In this parable, the guests who had initially been invited to the banquet all made excuses when the time finally came. Each of them decided something else was more important than going to the banquet. These things were not bad or sinful in and of themselves. The first two are about work- having purchased some land and some oxen. The third is also good- getting married, devoting time to family. But although all three of these things are good, they still got in the way of the guests going to the banquet. This meant that they took the most important place in the guests lives in that moment. That is actually very bad.

Let me be clear. The banquet is the kingdom of God. Jesus is warning his listeners, and by extension Luke's readers, that there will be those who think they are going to enter the kingdom of God but, because they chose other things to be a priority, they will miss out! **Good things are no longer good when they take priority over God.**

Do you allow good things to take priority over God? Do you allow good things to take priority over your relationship with God or with people? Are you making excuses in your mind even now as we talk about this?

Context

Today we are continuing our look at the parable of the Sower and the Seed. So far we have looked at the seed that falls on the hard path, which represents those with a hard heart. We have looked at the seed that falls on the shallow, rocky soil, which represents those who make a shallow commitment. Today we are going to look at the third soil, the weed infested ground.

Remember, a parable is a story taken from everyday life used to illustrate a spiritual principle. The everyday story Jesus used is of a farmer spreading seed. The seed falls on different kinds of soil and so produces different results. In ancient Palestine, and still today, there are areas in which the soil is quite shallow on top of the bedrock. In Jesus' day, most farmers just cut weeds down, or burned them off the land, they didn't pull them up to remove the roots. The weeds would then grow up alongside the good plants. There was one weed in

particular that looked just like wheat through most of the growth process. It wasn't until the wheat formed the head on the top of the stalk that you could tell it apart from the weeds.

Text

Bearing this in mind, let's read together from Mark 4:1-20. Remember, this is a parable found in all 3 of Matthew, Mark and Luke. We've looked at Luke and Matthew's versions of the parable. Today we are looking at Mark.

What It Says

First, let's take a look at what this text says. I will assume that you've been here at least one of the past 2 weeks or that you are somewhat familiar with this parable. If not, I hope I don't leave you too far behind. Matthew and Mark's accounts are very similar to one another. In both, Jesus is followed by such a crowd that he gets into a boat in order to teach them and they all line the shore. Interestingly, the word Mark uses for "shore" is literally "soil"! [David E. Garland, *Mark*, p. 152]

Jesus begins the lesson by telling the people, "Listen!" Jesus is emphasizing the need to pay attention, but he is also doing more than that. The Jews in that era (and maybe today, I'm not sure) would begin each day with a prayer and confession of faith called the "Shema." This was taken from Deuteronomy 6:4-9 which begins, "Hear [or listen], O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength." (Deut 6:4-5) The word "hear" is the same as the word "listen." So Jesus was invoking their cultural connection with the OT and their daily confession.

Jesus goes on to tell the parable of the different kinds of soil. Then, in private, he explains the parable to his disciples. He tells them that they have been given the secret of the kingdom of God. Remember, the kingdom of God means God's authority to rule. The disciples have been given the secret or mystery of God's authority, or of how to live under God's rule. The word for "secret" is an important word. The mystery or secret doesn't mean it is incomprehensible. Rather, it means that it is something that must be revealed, something that is not known to everybody. **The secret is something that is only learned through divine revelation.** Remember, Jesus is talking to Jews, the people of God who had received from God the Law. The Law is divine revelation and something that can only be learned through divine revelation. So Jesus is equating the secret of the kingdom of God to the Law in the OT. [Garland, p. 157]

Take a look at Jesus' quotation of Isaiah 9 as presented in Mark. That is, look at verse 12. We've seen this each week so far, but notice in Mark the last part is translated, "Otherwise they might turn and be forgiven!" This, as you recall, is the key to understanding the whole parable. In fact, I think it is key to understanding all of the parables in this chapter!

The seed is the word, or the message about entry into God's kingdom. That is, the seed is the "message about entry into God's plan and rule." [Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, p. 149] What is that message? What is the secret of entry into God's rule? It is to turn and be forgiven. Repentance! To turn back to God means to repent. Repentance is the key to entering God's kingdom. **It is through repentance that we find forgiveness and are reconciled to God.** This is the secret. This is the truth that only comes through divine revelation.

How do people respond to this message that they must repent to find forgiveness and be reconciled to God? How do people respond to the message of repentance? That is what this parable is about! Different people respond to the message differently.

Over the past few weeks we've seen that some people have hard hearts. **The seed that falls on the path stands for people whose hearts are hard.** They do not let this message penetrate. The devil takes the message away before it has a chance to germinate; before it can put down any roots and sprout at all. Others make an initial, joyous commitment. They respond to this message with joy, but it is short lived. The message has difficult consequences, such as actually doing the hard work of cooperating with the Holy Spirit to change. Or letting God into every aspect of our character, our thoughts, desires, preferences and imaginations. Giving our dreams, priorities and goals to God is very difficult. So it living with other Christians. Getting along with fellow believers who are still working on getting right with God themselves can be very difficult. **The rocky soil stands for people whose commitment is shallow**, they have no spiritual root, and so when things get hard, when the initial joy fades, when the feelings change, they fall away. They wither and die.

The third kind of soil is that which is filled with weeds. These things choke out the seed. **The weedy soil**

represents people whose hearts are divided. They love God, they commit to Jesus, they put their faith in him. They begin to grow in the fruit of the Spirit. They put down spiritual roots. But as time goes by, their commitment becomes divided. They allow other things to creep into their lives and choke out their commitment to Jesus. They allow things like worry about this life to crowd out Jesus. They are deceived by the promises of what money can buy. They fall into the trap of believing money can buy the things they need to fill the holes in their soul. Or they allow desires for other things to choke out their commitment to Jesus. These things may not be bad things in and of themselves, but when they push Jesus off the throne of our life they become bad. When they push out life trajectory off course so that we are no longer heading straight for God, they become bad.

The fourth soil, which we will look at next week, is the good soil. This represents people whose hearts are soft, whose commitment is deep and undivided. They produce a wonderful crop. The message of repentance penetrates deeply and produces profound growth.

What It Means

So what does this mean? Why is Jesus telling this parable? The difficult spiritual principle derived from this parable is that not all who hear the message of repentance, not all who hear the message of the good news of the kingdom of God will respond appropriately. Even some who initially respond well will not persevere to the end. Not all who confess Christ at one point in their lives will be saved. Not everybody who calls themselves a Christian is going to make it!

This can be tough for us to hear. We need to realize that all four kinds of soil receive the seed. That is, all four kinds of people Jesus is talking about hear the word, or hear the message of repentance. This means that the different kinds of soil represent people who are in the church, who call themselves Christians or believers or godly people. But not all respond appropriately. In fact, there are numerous ways that people respond inappropriately! This includes many who hear the message, agree with the message, make a commitment to the message, repent at least for a while, but still do not make it all the way.

And this is not the only passage that talks about this difficulty. There are numerous passages throughout the Old and New Testaments that give dire warnings about falling away from God. One particular passage is Matthew 7:21-23, **“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”** This passage in Matthew is particularly insightful. There will be those who call Jesus “Lord” but do not enter the kingdom of Heaven. They may even have a testimony of doing wonderful, even miraculous things in Jesus’ name, but they will not be saved! Why? Because they did not live a life of repentance. They may have repented for a while. They may have turned to God for a time, but it didn’t last.

People who have had years of service to God, may not be living a life of repentance. People who have gifts of the Spirit, including miraculous or spectacular gifts, may not be living a life of repentance. People who have the gift of prophesy, or who speak forth the word of God, including preachers, may not be living a life of repentance! We must all beware! We must all be careful to guard ourselves and make sure weeds are not choking out our spiritual life.

Let’s take a look at some specific things that can interfere with or derail our repentance. Jesus names three specific things, but the list is not exhaustive. Jesus says that the worries of this life can choke out our repentance. He says the deceitfulness of wealth can choke out our repentance. He says that the desire for other things can choke out our repentance.

What are the worries of this life? We all know about this, I think. **Worry can easily consume us.** Worrying about things of this life, of this world can drown out or derail our repentance. We can worry about work, or about our finances, or our families. We can worry about what our friends think of us, or what our neighbours think of us. We can worry about our spouse, or finding a spouse, or our kids, or having kids. There are lots of things we can worry about! And these worries take over our priorities. They consume our mind. They cast a shadow over our feelings. They shift our goals. Our goals become protecting against the bad things we are worried about. As a Christian, as a whole-hearted follower of Christ, our goals should be about glorifying God, about being reconciled to him, about cooperating with the Spirit so we can be transformed to be like Christ. But

when we worry about other things, our goals shift. **Our goals start to be shaped by the things we worry about.**

Jesus also warned about the deceitfulness of wealth. Money is a beast! It will consume you! Just when you think you're in control of it, you will discover it has turned on you and it is in control of you. When we don't have money, we are often consumed with trying to get it. This is one kind of worry about the things of this life. Some of the things of this life can be bought with money, like food, clothing and shelter. When we cannot afford these to the level we desire, we can become consumed with getting enough money for these things. This, too, can derail us from directing our life straight to God.

Similarly, when we have money, we can be consumed with getting more money, or protecting the money we have – not losing it. We can become fixated on our money instead of fixated on God and pursuing him. This is the deceit of wealth- when we don't have it we think we need it. When we do have it, we think we need more and can't afford to lose what we have. We think that wealth can bring the fulfilment we are looking for. We think wealth will satisfy the hunger we feel inside us, will fill the void we have inside us. And while wealth can distract us from that hunger for a time, it cannot satisfy that hunger. It cannot fill that void.

In Luke 12:22-31, Jesus speaks of the pursuit of wealth and material things. "Then Jesus said to his disciples: **Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes.... For the pagan world runs after all such things, and your Father knows that you need them. But seek his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well**" (Luke 12:22-23, 30-31) God knows what we need. If we trust him, follow him and shape our life around pursuing him, obeying him and living a life of repentance, God will provide what we need. It doesn't mean we will be rich! But it does mean we will be provided for. Notice that Jesus says it is the pagans who chase after food, clothes and material possessions.

Maybe you're not consumed with material things. Maybe money isn't what distracts you from God. But that doesn't mean you're in the clear! There are plenty of other desires that can distract us from God. There are plenty of other desires that, when left unchecked, can choke out our spiritual life and growth. Some people are consumed by a desire to be married. Or a desire to have children. Or a desire to be comfortable. Or a desire to avoid difficult confrontations. We all have desires that can take over our lives. We all have desires that, if left unchecked, can push God out of the center of our lives.

Remember, the concept of the heart in the Bible means more than the emotions. It includes the emotions, but also our thoughts, desires, preferences and imaginations. This means **our goals in life are part of our heart**. Our desires are part of our heart. Our life dreams are part of our heart. We need to submit all of our heart to God. We need to let the Spirit shape all aspects of our heart. This means surrendering our desires to God. It means surrendering our life goals to God, our dreams to God. Maybe you have a dream for your life. Does it compete with your obedience to God? Does it compete with God for top priority in your life? Do you make decisions about your dream that distract you from God, or are decisions you've not brought to God or prayed about to God?

What do you imagine your life will be like in 5 years? What do you want your life to be like in 10 years? Are these things from God? Does God factor into these dreams or desires for your life? What about your kids? What are your desires for your kids' lives in 5 years, or 10 years or longer? Do your goals for your children centre on their relationship with God or something else? What would success look like for you or your children? Does this include glorifying God? Is your highest dream for your life or your children's lives that they are walking closely with the Lord? Because anything other than that is a choking thorn, that is a weed.

Remember our parable from the introduction. **Anything, even a good thing, can become a bad thing if it interferes with our relationship with God.** Anything, even a good thing, can become a bad thing if it knocks us off our trajectory, if it bumps us, even a little bit, from heading straight towards God.

What To Do

So what are we to do? If even good things can become a problem, how do we stay on course? How do we keep on target? This is where we need to keep in mind our understanding of what the term "heart" means. We have to submit our thoughts to God. That takes intentionality. We must be intentional about bringing our thoughts under the authority of God. We must bring our desires to God too. We must pray, "God, you know what I desire. You know what I desire even better than I know! Please, purify my desires. Make my desires what you desire for me." We must submit our preferences to God. We must come to God and ask for his help to either change our

preferences or at least give us the strength to follow him even if it means doing things we prefer not to do. We must submit our imaginations to God too. Whether it's what you daydream about, or your fantasy life or your life goals, whatever you imagine, bring it to God. Do you imagine yourself in a big house? Or successful at your job? Or driving a fancy car? Or with a spouse? Or kids? Whatever you imagine, bring it to God and tell him you are willing to give up these dreams if they are getting between you and God.

Do you worry? Do you worry about things other than God? Paul spoke about this in Philippians 4:6-7, **“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”** When we come to God in prayer about everything, it is harder for these things to get in the way of our relationship with God. When we come to God with our worries, and when we include thanksgiving, we are reminded of all that God has done for us and for millions of other people over thousands of years. It gives some perspective. It gives hope and encouragement. It diffuses the worry.

And notice the result. The peace of God will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. When we bring everything to God, not just our problems, his peace will guard our hearts. That is, his peace will guard our desires, thoughts, feelings, preferences and imaginations. These are the aspects of our hearts that can lead us astray, that can allow weeds to grow up and choke our spiritual life. But when we bring everything to God in prayer, these things are guarded in Christ Jesus.

Are you distracted by wealth? Are you deceived by it? If you're not sure, ask God to show you. **Bring your wealth to God.** Tell God that you are willing to give all that you own to him if that is what he asks. Bring it to him and lay it at his feet. Ask God to help you get control over your money, and not let your money have control over you. And don't be fooled into thinking that because you don't have much money it isn't in control of you. How much money you have has no impact on how much control your money (or lack thereof) has over you!

Some practical steps for this include tracking where your money goes. For 2 or 3 months, track everywhere you spend money. There are lots of tools available for this, from carrying a pencil and notebook with you to using your bank's online statements. Make a list of where you spend money and how much you spend.

Make a budget. Given where you spend your money, compare how much you earn. Are things out of balance? Make a budget and stick to it. As part of your budget, include an offering to God as frequently as you get paid. If you get paid monthly, include a monthly offering to God. If you get paid bi-weekly, include a bi-weekly offering to God. Decide how much this amount will be and stick to it! Eventually, work this amount up to 10% of your income. But at least start with a set amount. These are some basic first steps to getting your finances under your control instead of the other way around.

What about your desires? Take time to articulate, even write down some of your desires. Think short term but also long term. Then, prayerfully ask God to show you if these desires are interfering with your repentance. Ask God to show you if they are taking too high a priority in your life. Ask God if they are becoming weeds?

Jesus said, “Listen!” to his audience that day he shared the parable of the sower and the seed. This word is a continual word. He isn't saying “listen for a moment” but “listen continually.” We need to be continually listening to Jesus. We need to be continually checking our life trajectory. Are we heading straight to God? Is Jesus the centre of our life? If not, weeds are threatening to choke out our spiritual life. **We cannot serve God with a divided heart.** We cannot serve two masters. We cannot travel two paths. Jesus said, in the context of wealth, that a man cannot serve two masters. This is true of all that we desire. We cannot serve God and our ungodly desires both. We will come to hate one and love the other. We will be divided. We will not be on a trajectory straight to God.

The sad thing about the people represented by the weed-filled soil is that they love God. They believe in Jesus. They may even serve God regularly or go to church all the time. But their spiritual fruit is choked out by other things. They believe they are Christians, but they are being disloyal to God. They are allowing things other than God to take priority in their life over God. And God will not put up with that!

So be diligent. Do not become complacent. It is when we are complacent about repentance that we drift the furthest off course. One way to check if you're struggling with weeds is if you've been making excuses this

morning about other things in your life. If you're making excuses for how you spend your time, or what you're pursuing or what your life goals are or your dreams, then likely these things are pushing God out of the driver's seat in your life. Your heart is already becoming divided! So stop! Bring these excuses to God. Ask him to show you where you're compromising in your life. Submit these things to God and humbly ask for forgiveness. Ask God to redirect your desires to Him.

He who has ears to hear, let him hear. Amen.