

## THE SEED THAT FELL AMONG THORNS

During his three and a half year ministry Jesus spoke some forty parables that are recorded for us in the gospels. It might be easy for us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century to think that Jesus' teaching method of using parables was unique to just His ministry, however this would not be an accurate view.

Albert Edesheim in his work "The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah" writes: "Perhaps no other mode of teaching was so common among the Jews as that of parables...Every ancient Rabbinic work is literally full of parables."

We also have many examples of parables being used in other places in the Bible. The prophet Nathan tactfully used a parable in his confrontation with King David about what he had done with Bathsheba and Uriah. There are several in the book of Ezekiel. In **Ezekiel 17:2** God says: "Son of man, put forth a riddle and speak a parable to the house of Israel."

The first group of parables recorded for us in the Gospels are the ones that Jesus spoke during His Gallilean ministry that are recorded in **Matthew 13** and **Mark 4**. Let's have a look at the setting where these parables were delivered. In **Matthew 13:1-2** we read:

"The same day went Jesus out of the house [This was a house in the town of Capernaum on the northern coast of the Sea of Gallilee. This may have been Jesus' own house or Peter's house] and [it says He] sat by the sea side. And great multitudes were gathered together unto him, so that he went into a ship and sat and the whole multitude stood on the shore. And he spoke many parables to them."

Here we have the setting: Jesus was sitting in a small boat near the shore of the Sea of Gallilee. A large crowd was standing on the gently sloping hillside. The setting provided a natural amphitheater. The boat functioned as a speaker's platform or stage and His voice was carried across and reflected by the water to the shore where the people were standing. The speaking conditions we have here were as ideal as possible before the days of electronic amplification.

One of the best known parables that He spoke here was the parable of the sower. Jesus describes a scene that is very familiar to His audience: A sower went out to sow grain in his field. The seed falls on four different types of ground: 1) the wayside 2) stony ground 3) among thorns and 4) on good ground. As Jesus privately interpreted later to His disciples each represents a different category of person who hears the Word of God at some point in his life. Each responds differently.

In this article I would like to explore just one of these different categories and look at what we can learn from it. The category that I would like for us to look at today is the seed that fell among thorns.

In **Matthew 13:7** we read: "And some fell among thorns and the thorns grew up and choked it and it yielded no fruit."

Jesus gives us the meaning of this part of the parable down in **verse 22** where He says: "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."

The person in the previous category, the one that fell on stony ground, has a problem with the truth not sinking in deeply and holding the truths of God as a preference that he abandons as soon as it is inconvenient for him.

The thorny ground listener has a problem with priorities. He begins to bear fruit and live a life of obedience but he too has a hang-up. Matthew's account notes two things described as thorns. Mark's account describes three. Let's have a look at that verse over in **Mark 4:18-19**:

"Now these are the ones sown among thorns, they are the ones that hear the word and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches and the lusts of other things entering in choke the word and it becomes unfruitful."

In order to become unfruitful he must have at one time been fruitful. Here is someone who has actually begun to bear substantial fruit as a result of God's word. He has made spiritual progress. He may have been in the church for many, many years and may be looked on as a pillar in the church but sooner or later plain old materialism or sensuality creeps in and smothers his spirituality.

In Mark's account Jesus highlights three things as thorns that choke the word: 1) the cares of this world 2) the deceitfulness of riches and 3) the lusts of other things.

Now the first thorn described here, the cares of this world, is not sinful by and of itself. We all have to invest so much of our time in jobs and businesses in order to put food on the table, clothe ourselves and our families and pay our bills. Add on top of that hobbies and other responsibilities and there can be little time left over to spend with God in prayer and studying the Bible and related material.

The cares of this world are not wrong by and of themselves. It's when we allow those things to crowd out any time for God that we miss the mark. If time for prayer and study and practicing good deeds toward others is being crowded out of our lives we need to do a stocktake of the things that are consuming our time – what things are consuming my time, what is absolutely necessary and what isn't necessary and how do I make time to focus on the things of God?

Jesus also addressed this issue over in **Matthew 6:31-33** where He said:

"Therefore do not be anxious, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, With what shall we be clothed? For the nations seek after all these things. For your heavenly Father knows that you have need of all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness; and all these things shall be added to you."

He wants us to seek His kingdom and His righteousness first. He wants us to always make time for prayer and study and practicing good deeds toward others. There's an old saying "Where there is a will there is a way". Having our will pointed in the right direction makes a big difference in making a way and time for these things, though with some people with the right attitude necessary things may genuinely leave them with very little time left over at times.

When we do our stocktake of our time we should be brutally honest with ourselves and ask do we REALLY put God first in our lives? Does it show in the time that we give to Him? Does it show in our conversations and what we talk about here on the sabbath with others? Or is our mind, our conversations and our time too focused on the cares of this life and worldly things?

The next two things Jesus points out as thorns, unlike the cares of this world, are actually sinful – the deceitfulness of riches (materialism) and the lust for other things (sensualism). There are many pitfalls which can take a person away from the abundant life that God has called us to. It could be money, the desire for financial success or promotion in our careers or addictions to alcohol or sexual lust.

I've heard many a story from friends of people in the church who got caught up in the desire for more and more, be it a bigger house or car or making great wealth to the point that it was choking their spiritual life to being merely a form of religion with no true substance whatsoever.

Rather than placing God first, this type of person focuses on things of this world. Jesus showed how foolish this was over in **Mark 8:36** when He said, "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" and also over in **Luke 12:15** where He said: "Take heed and beware of covetousness for a man's life does not consist in the abundance of things he possesses."

Lusting for things such as alcohol, gambling and particularly pornography and sex can quickly and powerfully into can be deadly addictions that can choke our spiritual lives and we will need to take drastic steps to root them out if they gain a foothold in our lives. We must avoid these pitfalls at all costs.

Two further parables He spoke soon after the parable of the sower focus our minds on what really is important – the parables of the pearl of great price and the hidden treasure. What Jesus promises us is that there is power and riches and adventure and intimacy beyond our wildest dreams in the Kingdom of God that make any riches and glory in this life seem a tame shadow in comparison but for us to be a part of it will take effort on our part to stay close to God and let Him build His character within us. If we are going to be effective in evangelizing to our children and to the world around us we need to plainly and clearly convey just how incredible and wonderful that pearl of great price really is.

The letters to the seven churches in **Revelation 2 and 3** give us insights into how people who were fruitful to begin with can become unfruitful and what it takes to return to bearing fruit again.

The Ephesians after starting off so zealous and so strong lost their first love. Jesus told them: "Remember from where you have fallen, and repent, and do the first works." Jesus is saying: "What did you do back when you were on fire for God? How did you pray and study and do good deeds for others? Go back to doing those things."

Now it is good to have a plan for what things we want to pray about and what subjects we should study and what good deeds we want to do for others. One minister I heard on this point quoted **Isaiah 32:8** which says: "The generous devises generous things and by generosity he shall stand."

He then went on to say, "The generous person devises or plans his giving. That is, he or she, sits down and makes an active plan for giving. Think of opportunities, occasions and situations where you intend to live the way of give."

Now to the church of Thyatira the thorns that made them unfruitful was heresy and the pressure to conform to the world. To protect ourselves from heresy we need to invest time into proving all the key doctrines and also refresh our minds on these things from time to time so our convictions don't become just preferences down the track. Our media is bombarding us and our children with its politically correct views all the time. A lot of these views go against scripture and we need to guard our minds and especially the minds of our

children from this world's viewpoints on many of these subjects as quite often they do influence us and creep into the church.

Jesus told the Laodiceans that they thought that they were rich when in fact they were spiritually poor and naked. In this modern age we have tremendous physical abundance and even our poorest people are quite rich in comparison to times in the past. We also have an incredible abundance of spiritual knowledge with Bibles readily available and booklets, studies and commentaries about Biblical subjects available all over the place online and other places yet how is it that with these advantages we could be spiritually poor and naked?

I was discussing this with friends and one trend that was discussed was that even though we now have more spiritual knowledge available than every before that people seemed to be studying and talking about the Bible less than in the past and there was a special concern for our children in all of this.

If this trend is true what reasons could there be for such a trend? One other related trend is that people seem to be more busy that ever before. Might these two trends be related? I strongly suspect that they are. There are so many more things now for people to do and be busy with that our time with God and studying the Bible and related material can easily become superficial.

Our young people especially have so many more recreational opportunities available to them now with movies, tv, video games, hobbies and so on that it is easy for studying the things of God to be both brief and shallow. Also, with such a plethora of spiritual knowledge available it is easy to suffer from information overload and be superficial with our learning from God. While knowledge can puff people up if we have the wrong attitude when spiritual knowledge is pursued in a deep way with the right attitude it can do wonders to stir up the zeal and enthusiasm both to learn and apply the Word of God in our lives just as Jesus charged the Laodiceans to repent and be zealous.

In conclusion, let's take heed of the thorns of life that can choke the word of God out of our lives – the cares of this life, the deceitfulness of riches and the lust for other things and the way we effectively do that is to apply Jesus' words in **Matthew 6:33** – “seek first the Kingdom and His righteousness.”