

Russell Kelfer

Seed Among Thorns

#1355-A

Series: The Parables of Scripture

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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Note: Russell wrote each of these lessons in a manner that would enable him to clearly communicate them to his weekly class. The grammar or punctuation you encounter may not be technically perfect, but you will certainly “hear” his unique gift for making the message applicable to the common man in everyday situations.

It’s been said of him that he was really a writer who read his stuff. And that’s a very accurate statement!

May you be richly blessed as you “hear” as you read.

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There is no more beautiful time of year than springtime. Flowers begin to lift their heads through soil frozen in winter's harshness. Trees begin to bud. That which was barren begins to sprout with the green essence of new birth. That which appeared to be dead begins to be resurrected at the hand of a God who desires that we learn spiritual truth from nature's windows of illustrations.

Birds begin to return; the frigid iciness that held much of the world in its grasp gives way to a kind of warmth; the ground begins its pilgrimage back to the land of the living. Grass that has seemingly laid dormant, apparently dead, begins to give way to the formation of a velvet carpet of green once again.

Except...that one word except. Except for those pesty weeds. Where did they come from? For every inch of luscious lawn that starts to rise to greet its maker, longing to be fertilized and mown, there seems to be an equal inch of unwanted, unexpected, undesirable sprouts whose sole desire it seems is to choke out and take over the turf of the good, green plants we so long to have grace the area around where we live.

Weeds. What undesirables they are. They are good for nothing but to be pulled up, burned, or thrown into the trash heaps of life. Not only are they not attractive in themselves, they crush the life out of the plants that are. What are they? Why did God allow them? Where did they come from physically? And what do they say to us, spiritually?

That is the topic of this, our third look at the parable of the soils. Our study is entitled, "Seed among thorns." It is a beginning look at the third of the four types mentioned in Jesus' amazing illustration of the processes and the purposes of soil conservation. He concluded with, and we begin with, that one statement: "He that ears to hear, let him hear."

Not everyone who crowded along that sandy seashore that day understood why this amazing carpenter who spoke with

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such authority bathed in love, would see His congregations grow into the First Church by the Sea International, and then, when the crowds seemed to reach their peak, He spoke to them, not of eschatology or of even current theology, but rather He spoke of rocks and weeds and packed-down soil. He told them about birds that swoop down and eat seed, and of why the same seed would have dramatically different lifetimes, depending on *what kind of soil they fell into*.

“Why are you speaking to them in parables?” asked the disgruntled, somewhat confused associates of the Master. “Why tell them simple stories at a time like this?” they asked. Jesus answered:

Therefore speak I to them in parables: because they seeing see not; and hearing they hear not, neither do they understand.

But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear.

(Matthew 13:13,16)

Jesus was not addressing His amazingly simple remarks to this basically unregenerate, though curious crowd. He was speaking to *those who had ears to hear*. The message was one of simplicity submerged in an ocean of depth. The crowd understood the simple physical illustrations. Those who had come to believe in Him had antennas sufficiently tuned to eternity to understand the message in the message. Without the indwelling Spirit yet within them, however, they were confused. So they asked Jesus to explain to them what these simple stories meant. As always, He obliged. And aren't we glad He did? For He was speaking to us, as He was to them. *Therefore, He that hath ears to hear... listen.*

The first two types of soil were the soil packed down by the edge of the road, hardened and unresponsive to new seed, and the rocky soil—soil that looked good on the surface, but lacked the depth beneath the shallow ledge of dirt to allow roots to plummet the deeper ground, the kind of ground needed to become a tree that will grow until birds nest in its branches and both animals and people find shade beneath its limbs.

Now Jesus turns to the third kind of soil, and it is, indeed, a troubling analogy. Tucked within its context lies the root, or lack of it, that plagues the church in this generation, perhaps more than any other. It's all about soil that appears to hold the key

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to growing good plants, but the keeper of the soil ignores those tiny, seemingly harmless weeds, planted there carefully by the enemy so that they look as though they belong there, only to find later that by leaving them in place, you have written a legacy of unfruitfulness and despair.

In this passage, Jesus talks about a certain kind of weed, one that is not only an intruder, but has a rough edge to it—a kind of unheavenly sandpaper that not only crowds out the good seed but is difficult to reach down and pull up, almost impossible to deal with without some special help. We'll read today from the Mark passage. The parable and the explanation go like this:

And some fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up, and choked it, and it yielded no fruit.

And these are they which are sown among thorns; such as 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 becometh unfruitful. (Mark 4:7,18,19)

Some of the seed that was intended to grow into fruitful harvest fell down into *what appeared to be perfect ground*. But the soil, either before or after the planting, was not kept free from thorny weeds, and those weeds quietly went about choking the life out of the grain or the grass that would have been such a blessing. As the seed grew, so did the weeds. And the weeds seemed to be the stronger of the two, not because they were made of better stuff, but because *their motive was to destroy, rather than to produce*.

The spiritual analogy was then painted in bold strokes by Jesus. He said: "This is the person who genuinely hears the Word of God and takes it into His heart where it could grow and bear precious fruit for the glory of the King and the good of the Kingdom. But three categories of weeds infest the soil, and though they seem on the surface harmless, they will, if left untended, see to it that no useful fruit comes forth from that soil. *Hear, therefore, the parable of the sower.*

This is one of the most graphic warnings of all in the New Testament that take real world situations and apply them to the element of spiritual growth. Unfortunately, most Christians spend more time planting seed than tending soil. Most of us are *grain squashers*. We run to the grain storehouse on a regular

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basis, and think that *because we are getting new seed, we must be bearing more fruit*. Rather than tending the soil, we just pour on more seed. The new seed lays on top of the old seed, which incidentally wasn't growing anyway. The problem is that oftentimes the seed is falling on hardened soil, or on soil without sufficient depth to provide for roots that will stand when the storms of life assail.

Just as often, Jesus seemed to be saying, the seed will fall on decent ground, not too hard, not too shallow, and still produce absolutely nothing. There will be little or no growth seemingly for year after year after year. Christians active in the fellowship, even active in Bible Study, seemingly excited with each new subject, each new theological gem to fall from someone's lips, seem to take it all in, go home and listen to Christian radio, shout "amen" and ten years later be dealing with the same besetting sins, the same lack of evangelistic fervor, the same lack of love that characterized them shortly after conversion.

We sometimes blame it on our personalities, our parents, our temperaments, *even on our spiritual gifts*. No, the problem has nothing to do with how you were made, physically or spiritually. The problem has to do with not tending the soil. More seed won't solve the problem by itself. If the seed isn't bearing fruit, twice the seed will only net twice the frustration. The problem lies in the weeds. And Jesus tells us clearly that we are responsible to tend the garden.

What kinds of *thorns* is Jesus talking about? What could possibly bloom in the garden of our lives that would be so devastating that they would destroy the work of God without our even realizing it? The most fearful part of this story is that the soil seems unaware that it is being attacked. It thinks the green stuff that is gnawing away at the productive fruit is either a different kind of fruit, or at worst, a harmless enemy, meant to grow alongside without conflict. The *weed* theory is Satan's cunning at its best.

THE CARES OF THIS WORLD

The first thorn or twisted weed Satan uses to keep the seed from bearing fruit, and the only one we will address in this lesson, is called by Jesus the cares of this world. Simply put, it is the ordinary, run-of-the-mill, daily schedule of events that control

our time, our hearts, our allegiance, and our focus. They are not normally construed to be bad things. In fact, often after making a sincere decision to follow Christ to new heights, the believer will awaken days or weeks later only to find that it hasn't been some grievous sin or even the slipping back into some besetting compromise that first denies their new spiritual objectives. It is just getting back to business as usual that does it.

Business as usual doesn't leave much time for intense spiritual commitment, particularly in today's society. Your commitment to spend more time with God may move from 15 minutes to 20 minutes, at least until one of the kids gets sick or the car needs attention, or the boss calls with a change of schedule, but the thought of spending hours with God? That's not practical you surmise, in today's world.

Oh, really? Whoever said walking with God would be practical? Whoever said denying yourself and forsaking all that you have to be His disciple would be practical? Whoever said taking up a cross is practical? Whoever said becoming conformed to the image of Christ, or entering into the fellowship of His sufferings would be practical?

Beloved, Lordship is invasive. If you think you're going to work God into your lifestyle, forget it. You have to work your lifestyle around His plan for your life. *Real discipleship involves prioritizing life around Him, not around you.* That doesn't mean you stop working, stop keeping house, stop caring for the kids; quite the opposite. But it does mean re-assessing every single priority you now have and reevaluating them in the light of eternity.

The "cares" of this world. What does that word "cares" mean? There are three or four Hebrew words and at least two Greek words translated in Scripture into that word or thought. Together, they give us a good overview of the kinds of things Jesus was talking about. We'll look at some of them:

The first Hebrew word is: **אָשַׁם** {soom} or siym {seem}

It is translated put, make, set, lay, care. It basically means to deliberately set in place. It is translated care in 2 Samuel 18:3:

But the people answered, Thou shalt not go forth: for if we flee away, they will not care for us; neither if half of us die, will they care for us:

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Another translation says it this way:

But the people answered, You shall not go forth. For if we run away, they will not set *their* heart on us, even if half of us die.

They will not set their heart on us (or care for us) the passage says. To care, or to have cares, is to set your heart on something. It is a deliberate decision to refocus your attention on a person or thing, *usually with good motives and good intentions*.

Let's say that you have refocused your antenna on spiritual things and made a new commitment to spend time with God, memorize His word, and apply it to your life. You have made such a commitment known to God, to man, or to both. For a few days, the intensity of that moment when the commitment was made is motivation enough for you to carve out the time, be creative in your priorities, and the results are already beginning to show. You're not going to eat breakfast, you say, until you have fed on God's word. You are not going to watch television, you say, until you have memorized and meditated on Scripture that day. You are not going to bed, you say, until you have spent a time of praise for who God is and what God has done that day. And oh, what good intentions you have.

About the fourth day, however, the alarm doesn't go off, so you have to skip your quiet time. God will understand, you say. Suppose you needed God's incredible indwelling power to share your faith tomorrow, and He used that kind of excuse for not being available? The fifth day, a television show comes on you have been dying to see, so you determine to memorize two verses the next day, only to find that the show is in two parts, and the next part comes on tomorrow. Oh, well, God will understand. The seventh day, you have an early appointment so you go to bed without your praise time. I need my sleep, you rationalize, and you do. But do you need it more than you need the word of God in your heart? God will understand? Indeed He will. He will understand what's most important to you. So subtle the compromises. So seemingly justified the alterations of your priorities.

The cares of this world. The second word is:

בִּתְּחִלָּה betach {beh'takh} It literally means: to provide security or safety. It is found in Jeremiah 49:31:

Arise, get you up unto the wealthy nation, that dwelleth

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without care, saith the LORD, which have neither gates nor bars, *which* dwell alone.

Another translation renders it:

Arise, go up to the nation that is at ease, who dwells securely, says the LORD, which has neither gates nor bars, *which* dwells alone.

The nation that is without a care is the one who dwells securely, or safely.

A second way the cares of this world enter into our lives are the subtle choices we make in the name of security, either financial, emotional, or vocational. The big question is: Will we sacrifice our spiritual priorities for security, or *is our security in Christ?* I don't mean failing to do your job well. That would violate a basic Christian principle. People who are slothful on the job in the name of discipleship dishonor God and create disdain for the gospel. But there are certain decisions we make in the name of security, particularly where giving and serving are concerned, that in reality are compromises. If God lays it on your heart to give to a certain missionary, but after a few months, you decide your savings account needs a shot in the arm, so you violate your commitment to that one on the field and say, next month I'll make it up. But next month, an unexpected financial intrusion has made its way into your checkbook, and rather than sending two gifts, you cut back on the one. What happened? The cares of this world moved in on your commitment and choked out your decision to honor the word.

A third Hebrew word is: דָּרַשׁ darash {daw-rash}

It literally means to seek or enquire. It is used in Deuteronomy 11:11,12, a good New Year's verse. It says:

But the land, whither ye go to possess it, is a land of hills and valleys, *and* drinketh water of the rain of heaven:

A land which the LORD thy God careth for: the eyes of the LORD thy God *are* always upon it, from the beginning of the year even unto the end of the year.

The actual meaning is: The land you are going in to possess is a land of both hills and valleys, and it is blessed by heaven's rains. God *cares* for it. He is always looking into and enquiring about its needs. He is the caretaker of it, would be another way of putting it.

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You and I have people and areas of life we are caretakers of. Normal care and keeping of those things are Biblical responsibilities. Abnormal or over-attention to those people or things as justification for weak discipleship is a travesty. It may be a committee you serve on. It may be a board you are privileged to be a part of. It may be a project or a hobby or even a ministry that involves your time and talent and intensity, *and you are charged with its cares.*

Question: Have you weighed the eternal benefits of each of those cares? Could someone else who is not a believer or doesn't share your other responsibilities fulfill that role and free you to pour your life into people for God's glory? If so, the cares of this world are choking out the potential you have to bear fruit.

Two Greek words are defined care in the New Testament. One in particular demands a look. It is: μεριμνάω merimnao {mer-im-nah'-o}

It means to be anxious, to be troubled with cares, to have care of, to look out for the interests of someone or something. It is found in Philippians 4:6, as well as I Peter 5:6 and 7. The I Peter passage says it well:

Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, that he may exalt you in due time:

Casting all your care upon him; for he careth for you.

Another way of putting is casting all your anxieties, your unnecessary worries, on Him, for His watchcare over you makes that anxiety unnecessary. In other words, the cares of this world includes those things that clutter your heart with worry that God intended to take care of for you. While you are worrying, *the cares of this world are choking out the word of God in your life.* "Which of you by worrying can add one inch to his height or one day to his life?" the Scripture reminds us. What it can do is shorten that life or bend us down with weariness and woe. It chokes the word until it becomes unfruitful.

The Philippians passage gives us the positive side: It says:

Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.

And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

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(Phillipians 4:6,7)

Stop worrying. Start praying. That's what it means when it says be careful for nothing. Worry is taking cares you were never intended to carry. Caring for your children is noble and Scriptural. Worrying over them is not Scriptural and is counter-productive. You are to cast those cares on Him. He cares for you and He cares for them. When you occupy your spirit with anxiety, you are taking responsibility for things God is responsible for, and you are choking the word.

So there are at least four ways the cares of this world choke out the word.

1- We make deliberate choices, often unintentionally, that compromise our priorities;

2- We compromise our convictions in the name of security,

3- We get overcommitted to those in our care at the expense of God's word; and

4- We allow anxiety or worry to rob us of our peace and instead of casting our care on Him, we become anxious instead of prayerful.

Let us now take those four arenas of care and make some very practical applications and some very serious challenges to our own hearts and to one another. This is tough stuff. It is basic business. It is where the rubber meets the road. The Son of God is on planet earth trying to teach His somewhat thick-skulled disciples about the reasons many would respond to the gospel, but only a few would move on to heights of glory in their daily walk with God. He was trying to clearly separate the hand-raisers from the heart-changers. He was trying to delineate between those who take up their causes and those who take up their crosses. It would seem like a fine line, but to cross it was to begin to possess the land we have been given. The bulk of the church would be poised at the edge of the perimeter, listening intently to the words of the ten who said it couldn't be done. This land is full of giants and wild beasts, they would say. Nonsense, would cry Joshua and Caleb, It all depends on what you see when you see what you see.

What we must see is a land of milk and honey, a land filled with the soil that multiplies itself, the soil that produces 30, 60, even 100 times the weight of the seed. But...we must tend the

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soil, or the enemy will trample it underfoot, see that the rocks remain, or worse still, sow little seeds of thorny weeds among the good seed, so that, as the crop begins to grow, *unnoticed at first, the thorns will begin to infest the good seed and choke the word, so that it becomes unprofitable.*

It sounds so easy, but if it were, the world would be filled with men and women turning it upside down. Instead, it is filled with a church that is vacillating daily between indifference and discipleship. It wants the best of both worlds: deep commitment to Christ without loosening its ties with the world system; a precious fellowship with the Son without paying the price of spending the time to have that fellowship. So we play-act.

The Greek word is: υποκριτες hupokrites {hoop-ok-ree-tace'} I'm sure you know what it means. Jesus used it over and over to describe those who made an outward show of surrender, which only masked an inner hypocrisy. It literally means to play-act. He particularly thought the Scribes and the Pharisees, the ones who made the church scene and had the church leadership roles but didn't have the mind of God, deserved this moniker. He said, for instance:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye devour widows' houses, and for a pretence make long prayer: therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he is made, ye make him twofold more the child of hell than yourselves. (Matthew 23:14,15)

He used it to describe spiritual leaders who wear masks of spirituality and use those masks to either disciple others or use others for their own gain, *but their hearts were filled with compromise and evil intent.*

It was also used of regular believers who just do what they do for show while refusing to build their relationship with God and let Him do a work in their lives. He said:

Therefore when thou doest *thine* alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. (Matthew 6:2)

And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and

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in the corners of the streets, that they may be seen of men.
Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

(Matthew 6:5)

Moreover when ye fast, be not, as the hypocrites, of a sad countenance: for they disfigure their faces, that they may appear unto men to fast. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward.

(Matthew 6:16)

No, we have two choices, and today is a good day to make sure we understand those choices. We can honor our commitments of surrender *at whatever the cost*, or we can gradually drift in and out of a world of faithfulness, while refusing to count the cost as we drift. The choice is ours. The consequences are brutal.

Jesus was talking to us! He spoke of men and women who are plugged into situations where we are hearing, reading, and learning about what the Word of God says for our life, and what true cross-bearing is all about. As He spoke, He likened us to men and women with different kinds of soil in our hearts. When He came to most of us, He talked about pretty good soil that just isn't tended. Great potential. Low yield. Special, fertile, ground. Mediocre crops. Not a good scenario, at all.

The cares of this world. The deliberate choices we make to put aside the important things in order to do the things which either make us look better, make us more acceptable, or make us more overtly spiritual, while masking a heart and a life that still is unwilling to pay whatever price is necessary to really walk with God in total abandonment. That choice is to deliberately, often without even realizing it, set aside the commitments we have made to God as less important than the commitments we make to society, all the while continuing to justify it in our own hearts as balanced living. Hogwash. The balanced Christian life is one that is balanced by Jesus Christ as everything on one side, and us as nothing but clay in His hands on the other. The balanced Christian life is total surrender. Anything less is compromise, and thus anything less is extreme. The *cares of this world* will keep us from God's best.

The cares of this world. The little compromises we make based on what we call security. God calls it foolishness. He says we cannot serve God and mammon. He says we are placed here for spiritual ministries and spiritual transformation, and our needs consist of having food to eat and clothes to wear. Anything more than that is extra grace, and God has guaranteed us that.

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He has told us to work, then promised to meet our needs if we do. The problem revolves around that word need. Our need is to care for the basic needs of our families and give all we can to changing lives for the glory of God. Time. Money. Influence. They don't bend both directions. There has to be a prioritization, or we will blow with the wind. The *cares of this world* will keep us from God's best.

The cares of this world. Over-commitment to people and places by refusing to sit down and honestly reflect on the eternal value of every second we spend and every relationship we have. So we become overcome by the tyranny of the urgent. And *the cares of this world* keep us from God's best.

The cares of this world. The acidity of anxiety. The weariness of worry. The carrying on our shoulders the weight of a world that is already in the most capable hands of all time and eternity. The process of letting those we care about become cares until in the soil of our hearts they became tares. And the *cares of this world* keep us from God's best.

Stop fooling around, beloved. Go back to God and say, I will honor those commitments. I want to become godly at any cost. I want to have the kind of walk with God I pretend to have, and I will become accountable to someone so I will not drift once again until the weeds grow up and choke the seed, for:

Two *are* better than one; because they have a good reward for their labour.

For if they fall, the one will lift up his fellow: but woe to him *that is* alone when he falleth; for *he hath* not another to help him up.

(Ecclesiastes 4:9,10)

Better, indeed. Study that verse if you think accountability is a man-made concept that is not verified or commanded in Scripture. You say, But my motives may be wrong. Good point. Then don't go to work tomorrow unless you feel motivated. See how long you have a job. No, we become accountable as a tool, not as a source of satisfaction. Our task as believers is to become faithful. Do what it takes.

Don't listen to the enemy. The soil in your heart may be infested with weeds, but God is the original weed-eater. And today is not too late to begin or even to begin again. Let the Master Gardener do what He came to do. Let Him tend the garden and pull up the weeds, so you can get on with the process of bearing

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fruit. Hear ye the parable of the sower. Some seed fell among the thorns, because the *cares of this world* choked the Word.

But it doesn't have to. It's a choice.

A Challenge to Further Study

1- Try to do what you sometimes ask children in school to do. Draw a picture of Mark 4:7. Don't worry about your lack of art training. Show the soil, the seed, the fruit, and the weeds. Try to picture in your own mind how that is a portrait of your heart.

2- Look at the Hebrew and Greek words that are used in this lesson to describe the cares of this world. Cross-reference them using a concordance. Ask God to expand your understanding of care and cares.

3- Pay special attention to Philippians 4:6 and I Peter 5:6,7. What does God ask us to do in I Peter 5? What does He promise in Philippians 4? What keeps us from releasing those cares? What things worry you constantly? Do you consider that worry sin? How do you turn worry into prayer?

A Challenge to Further Application

1- Make a list of the deliberate choices you make, seemingly unknowingly, that gradually remove your heart from the intensity of commitments you have made or want to make to God. Now ask God for creative ways in the Spirit to rediscover how to make different choices.

2- How committed are you to security? What place does this seemingly elusive thing play in your decision-making? How often does your security become a care?

3- Make a list of your regular commitments as well as those of your children. Prioritize them in the light of the call to discipleship. What can you leave off? What seemed so important before that is becoming less so in the light of God's calling? Become accountable to someone to do something about it.

A Challenge to Scripture Memory

Memorize I Peter 5:6,7 and Philippians 4:6,7

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