

**Russell Kelfer**

# **Our Not So Magnificent Obsessions**

**#1357-A**

**Series: The Parables of Scripture**



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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.

# Our Not So Magnificent Obsessions

We are, these days, pretty heavily involved in the gardening business. We are seriously looking at pruning the greenery of our hearts.

It all began when we walked by a seashore one day and came upon an unschooled carpenter who was seated in a borrowed fishing boat, teaching a wide-eyed bunch on the beach about how to become good farmers. What He was really doing was painting word pictures about how to produce fruit in the spirit realm. So He spoke of soil, of seeds and of weeds, then drew the net around the human heart.

When last we stood on that crowded shoreline, we heard Him speak of soil that was good and seed that was perfect. The results should have been a bumper crop. But instead, the grain was diseased, unfit for human consumption.

What had happened? How could such a promising scenario turn into such an unproductive life? Weeds. Thorny weeds, said the Master, had entered in and *choked the word*. Then, to be sure we understood, He defined and described these silent, aggressive destroyers. They were three-fold:

- 1- The cares of this world (life's everyday responsibilities)
- 2- The deceitfulness of riches (life's temporal pursuits)
- 3- The lust of other things entering in

It was those other things entering in that attracted our attention in our last study. The first major choking weed we discussed was the distraction of an electronic garbage dispenser that occupies a prominent place in most of our homes. We looked at the devastation caused by peacocks, windows, and eyes, and I asked us for seven days to turn it off and see what a difference it made in giving us time we thought we had lost.

Time to behold God.

Time to listen quietly as He speaks through His Word.

## Our Not So Magnificent Obsessions

Time to look at and listen to the cries of hurting people all around us.

Time to memorize and meditate day and night on the Living Word of God.

Time to...just be still.

Once the persistent peacock and the bloodshot eye were put in their place, I asked you to consider taking one week to slow down the speed with which you have been racing through life. I asked you to take a week and smell the roses of life, to walk into some of life's still photographs where everything is quiet, including your heart, and sit by one of those gentle streams of God as it flows into the river of His grace.

I pray that you took the time this week to do those two things. Experientially understanding what time and stillness are meant to be is crucial to dealing with the issues we still have facing us as we continue to look at other things entering in which choke the Word.

We looked at the mystery of stillness in our last study, and determined that God had a plan and a reason for our learning to be still. One reason He led us beside still waters was to restore our soul. Yet we get so busy running, and so agitated at the pace of life, that so often we are never still long enough to be refreshed and renewed. More than that, by getting us to accelerate our pace beyond the norm, Satan keeps us running fast enough that we do not deal with the sin in our lives.

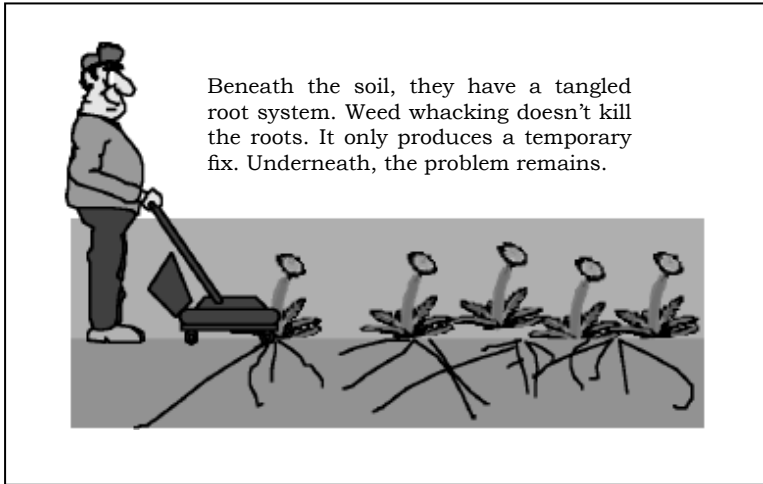
Finally, Satan convinces us that the *religious activities we do are so intense and so important*, that God is bound to overlook the transgressions in our lives. The enemy simply causes other things to enter in, and as they do, we respond with more action, more activity, more intensity, thinking we are becoming more godly through the very weight of our commitments. The truth is: we are substituting *activity* for *true spirituality*. It is time some of us slowed down, got off the race track, and learned to be still once more.

### WEED WHACKERS OR WEED PULLERS

What we so often do with the weeds that Jesus is referring to in Mark, chapter four, is to buy a spiritual weed whacker and mow them like grass. We find temporary fixes that satisfy

## Our Not So Magnificent Obsessions

the emotions or ease the conviction. We go forward and make a decision or raise our hands or tell a friend that we're going to get rid of the weeds that are infesting our spiritual garden. But a little way down the road, *other things enter in*, and the good intentions give way to disillusionment and despair. What went wrong? We tried to cut them down without pulling them up.



Weed whackers make for nice looking lawns, short term. But the long-term prognosis is that the roots, which have been left submerged beneath the soil for no one to see, will only grow stronger and come back with a greater intensity than before. You can't whack weeds. You have to get down on your knees, and you have to pull them up one at a time. Weed pulling takes time, lots of it, and determination, lots of it. It isn't a quick fix; it's a decision followed by obedience and faithfulness. Some of us have been mowing down the weeds in our garden, and we look nice and green on Sunday morning; but the infestation will go on until we stop everything, get down on our knees, and do something about the roots.

That involves slowing down. It involves focusing the lens of our spirits on God's Holy Word day after day, hour after hour, until the awesomeness of His holiness permeates our souls and we determine to deal with *whatever is entering in and choking the Word*, and thus clear out the weeds, from the root system up. For many, it will mean creating some margin in your life. It will mean giving up some activities, maybe even limiting some of the

## Our Not So Magnificent Obsessions

good things in your life to make room for the one thing in your life that is primary.

### WHEN MARGIN BECOMES A MIRAGE

Margin is a relatively new term, but not a new concept. It is the process of slowing down and making room in your life by taking away some of the unnecessary things that force you to live under pressure. It relieves the crush by anticipating it, and preparing for it. Good idea.

There is, however, a word of warning that is appropriate. Satan has an alternate plan when you begin making more room in your life for expansion and freedom. He subtly convinces you that *the reason for the margin is to make you happier*. He sort of takes that hair product commercial that says, I'm worth it! and applies it in the spirit realm. People then believe that the extra time you free up by giving yourself margin is designed for you to have more fun. There may be a need for that in your life, *but be careful*. Remember your reason for living: It is to so appropriately the nature of God by spending time with God that your life overflows into the world around you and others come to Christ and grow as well.

That is not necessarily accomplished with more leisure time, but with more prayer time, with more time in God's word, more time in God's presence, more time sharing God's love with others who are hurting. Don't get blind-sided by the *mirage of margin*.

Jesus scheduled time for margin. He stopped, went to the other side of the sea, went up into a mountain and got away. But not to play. To pray. We see Him at the wedding feast in Cana. He made time to go. His Father sent Him. But always, whenever and wherever He was sent, there was a divine purpose. He went to glorify the Father, not to serve Himself. Remember II Corinthians 5. It says

...He died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto Him which died for them, and rose again.  
(II Corinthians 5:15)

That's your reason for living. The margin you create in your life is a new horizon for God to use to change you and use you. Don't let Satan dictate what you do with it. Ask God for wisdom to give you more margin in your life, but also ask Him for Scriptural wisdom as to how to use it.

## Our Not So Magnificent Obsessions

A brief word to retirees. If you were to be interviewed, many of you would say, "I worked hard. I worked long. I deserve to end my life without the pressure of working and without the stress of authority. I deserve to retire."

That's a dangerous premise. God in His grace allowed you to work hard and has allowed you to retire. Not everyone can. Take it as a gift, not a reward. Secondly, your retirement is from your career, *not from the ministry*. Now you have more time to be available to hurting people, more time to serve with the gifts and talents you have used in the commercial world so long. Now you have more time to spend with God, more time to pray, more time to be still and know that He is God; maybe more time to devote to sharing your faith or involvement in missions. You have been granted the ultimate in margin. Don't abuse it. It isn't for you to simply use to enjoy yourself. It is a gift from God to allow you to complete your days with the crowning glory of servitude and spirituality written over your life. Let Him close the circle with years of praying, mentoring and serving.

One of the reasons I believe that God allows some to retire is to give them an opportunity to be the prayer warriors they always wanted to be. Time robbed them of more than perfunctory intercession. Now the constraints of time have given way to the freedom of unbroken hours with God. Seize on it. It, too, is a gift supreme.

As you retire, or if you have, why not claim this passage for your later years:

The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree: he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon.

Those that be planted in the house of the LORD shall flourish in the courts of our God.

They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; (Psalm 92:12-14)

Be serious with God. Pray this prayer:

Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength faileth.

Now also when I am old and grayheaded, O God, forsake me not; until I have shewed thy strength unto *this* generation, and thy power to every one *that* is to come.

(Psalm 71:9,18)

There is another generation coming along that needs your

## Our Not So Magnificent Obsessions

wisdom. Satan will try to tell you that you can't relate. Then let God do it. And always there are those just a few years younger needing a guiding hand to hold on to, a wiser voice to heed. Don't buy the lie. You are not retired to retreat, but to rediscover. Otherwise, all that margin will become a mirage.

### OUR NOT SO MAGNIFICENT OBSESSIONS

God wants to slow us down and redirect our lives. He wants us to reexamine the things that have entered into our lives that are crowding out the word. That much we know. We have looked at the electronic marvels that are stealing our time, and at the lies Satan tells us about how to use the time we have. There is another major issue in Scripture that has, since the beginning of time, stolen the good seed from God's people by subtly causing other things to enter in and choke the word. The Scripture calls it idolatry. We might call it *our not so magnificent obsessions*, for in actuality, the things that dominate our thinking, drawing away our time compulsively, are in effect, the idols of our day. Television is one of those. It is a nearly universal idol. That is why we dealt with it so universally in the last lesson. But it is symptomatic of dozens of other idols which are less likely to be recognized, simply because they vary so from person to person.

Interestingly enough, the dictionary defines obsess as to harass or beset like an evil spirit or to haunt as a fixed idea. Even the world knows where obsessive spirits come from. Now look at the dictionary definition of obsession is the state of being beset or actuated by the devil or an evil spirit, or a compulsive preoccupation with a fixed idea, or unwanted feeling or emotion. It is being consciously or unconsciously driven to do or become something that you, in your better moments, might reject. It is a compulsion to do what you might not otherwise do, *but it is also a compulsion to overdo anything you might otherwise do in moderation.*

Please keep that thought in mind. Back in the '50's there was a movie and a song that captivated the world. It was called *Magnificent Obsession*. It was a love story and a love song that drew the conclusion that this love was one thing that was a healthy obsession. Our dictionary definition doesn't indicate a place for such a controlling person or thing in our lives to be healthy. Neither does Scripture, with one exception. You and I were meant to be obsessed with God. We learn in Genesis that we



## Our Not So Magnificent Obsessions

were created in His image. We were created to be totally enthralled, totally enraptured, totally controlled by the very mention of His name. We were to image Him, responding to His every move with obedience. We were to worship Him, falling down in absolute awe in His very presence. We were to be obsessed with God.

What happened? *Other things entered in.* Satan called Eve on the phone and asked her why she would become so obsessed with anything or anyone when she could, in essence, exist on her own, making her own choices, and obeying no one. She listened, Adam responded, and we were plummeted into the abyss of sin, separated from the One with whom we were to be obsessed or controlled.

He paid the price to bring us back to Himself, but the process of returning to His image would be one of choices and continual surrender. We were to see that *nothing else entered in to choke out His word or overcome the priorities that made Him everything.* Alas, however, this world and its powerful magnetic pull have caused most of us to become enamored and obsessed with things other than God, and have allowed us to join the world in calling those so possessed and obsessed fanatics or religious fools. We seem to long to be controlled, but we are afraid to be controlled by the Only One capable of bringing us joy and peace.

The Bible calls it idolatry. It is the setting up of anything in the place of God. While many idols in Scripture were pagan statues or temples where worship took place, some idols exist in the human heart. Ezekiel 14 gives us an example:

Therefore speak unto them, and say unto them, Thus saith the Lord GOD; Every man of the house of Israel that setteth up his idols in his heart, and putteth the stumblingblock of his iniquity before his face, and cometh to the prophet; I the LORD will answer him that cometh according to the multitude of his idols; (Ezekiel 14:4)

Paul warned the Corinthians in I Corinthians 10:

Wherefore, my dearly beloved, flee from idolatry. (I Corinthians 10:14)

The reason idolatry was so hated by God was that it removed Him from the throne of the life or the nation and put something else there. In Mark, chapter four, Jesus is warning against the very same thing. *Other things enter in...* And when they do, they choke the word and they deny that driving obsession to be controlled

## Our Not So Magnificent Obsessions

by the Spirit of God. There is, remember, one obsession that is desirable. It isn't natural; it's supernatural. You don't believe me? Listen to God Himself describe His desired relationship with us:

Then said Jesus unto his disciples, If any *man* will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. (Matthew 16:24)

Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me. (Mark 10:21)

And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. (Luke 14:27)

Then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?

And Jesus said unto them, Verily I say unto you, That ye which have followed me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of his glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:27,28)

Then Peter began to say unto him, Lo, we have left all, and have followed thee.

And Jesus answered and said, Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's,

But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life.

But many *that are* first shall be last; and the last first. (Mark 10:28-31)

God isn't looking for casual followers. He is looking for men and women who are willing to forsake *all that they have to be His disciples*. He is looking for men and women to take up their own personal cross every single day and follow Him. He is looking for men and women like Paul who are willing to die daily, to bear persecution, pain and pressure with joy and gladness for the crown they will one day be able to lay at His feet. God is looking

## Our Not So Magnificent Obsessions

for men and women obsessed with Jesus Christ. And because He is, *anything that crowds into that obsession and begins to occupy that throne becomes an idol; and though it may not be evil in and of itself, God hates it for what it is costing you in your relationship to Him.*

Your hobby can be an idol. If every time you have a free moment, you gravitate to it, rather than to Him, you are in danger of being obsessed by something, which in and of itself is good; but when moderation gives way to control, it is an idol. Is it something you occasionally are drawn to for pleasure or relaxation, or is it something you are driven to do?

Exercise can be an idol. Bodily exercise profiteth some. It is good; and it puts God's temple in order. But does it occupy such a place of importance in your life that you would miss time with Him, but never miss your time running or walking or bicycling? Has something that simple become a god to you?

Losing weight can be an idol. You can become so focused on something good that when you meet people, instead of sharing what God has done in your world, the first thing you talk about is how many pounds you've lost. You are becoming obsessed with something good that is not God.

Golf can be an idol. It is a healthy way to fellowship and a wonderful way to exercise, but does it occupy a place of importance in your life equal to time with God, time ministering, time praying? It happens without your realizing it. Other things just enter in. But if you would miss a quiet time for an intrusion, but die before you'd miss your golf game, you might begin to wonder if that little ball you swing at so ferociously is becoming an idol. When you get to heaven, God won't ask you what your handicap is. He'll be more interested in why you handicapped yourself by putting so many things before Him.

Ladies, your house can become an idol. You can become so obsessed with your dwelling place on earth that it begins to overshadow your dwelling place in glory. You can begin to spend all your time cleaning it, rearranging it, protecting it from getting soiled or cluttered, until you forget why you have it. Jesus didn't even have one. The reason for houses in Scripture is to give a place for your children to be raised, a place for believers to gather around the Word, and a place to offer hospitality to others, particularly those who are less fortunate and less blessed. If

## Our Not So Magnificent Obsessions

you are more interested in how you can make it more attractive so your friends will be impressed than you are on how often you can open it to those who walk the byways of life, you've become obsessed with something that's going to one day burn to the ground and turn to ashes, while turning your back on the rewards God has in mind for those who share what they have without limit or fear.

Your job can become an idol. The Christian is to be the best employee in the marketplace. He or she is to have the best attitude, be the best example, be faithful and considerate and loyal and committed. But the job is a means to an end. That end is to feed your family and be on life's mission field where God placed you. When you begin to be obsessed and overcome with the pressures of it because you are trying to perform for your own glory, you no longer are glorifying God, but yourself. If you have a choice, and you constantly choose to work more and minister less, or labor more and see your family less, consider carefully what might have happened. You may have become unconsciously obsessed with succeeding or you may have allowed your job to become a cloak in which to hide from the realities and responsibilities of your walk with God.

When you get to heaven, your job will be gone. The time you spent with God, however, will be transformed into a relationship that will draw you into His arms of comfort and joy as though you had been there all along, because you have. Be careful. Don't let something as good as your job become an idol.

Education becomes an idol for some. We become impressed with titles and degrees and certificates until we forget that they don't transfer into the gates of heaven, and in glory the only letters anyone will have after their name will be JC for Jesus Christ. If you are giving up things eternal for more degrees and those degrees will do more for your ego than for your ministry, beware. You may be constructing an idol.

The big question is: are we going to keep mowing the weeds in our garden, or are we going to start pulling them up, one at a time until there is room at last for the good seed to blossom into its fullness.

### AN ASSIGNMENT TO TEND TO THE GARDEN

Once again, I want us to end this lesson with a practical

## Our Not So Magnificent Obsessions

challenge to application, so the assignment will be in the body of the study rather than at the end. I think, by now, we have an idea of what kinds of things enter in and choke the word out of our lives. The question always comes down to: what can I do about it? For some of us, at least, we may be at a crossroads. Perhaps we have come back to some of the issues we have struggled with all our lives, and experience is causing us to doubt that we can remove the barriers and begin to experience life in Christ to its fullest. Let's look at doing three things:

1- Sit down this week and make a list of the weeds in your life that you know are entering in and stealing time from God. Take your time. Take three or four quiet times and meditate on Scripture, particularly Joshua 1:8,9 and Deuteronomy 11:18-21. Let your days pass in review in your mind. Ask yourself: Where do I spend my time? What consumes my thoughts when my thoughts are in neutral? Ask yourself if the hours you spend with the television set each week are productive spiritually.

Did having the TV turned off increase your time with God? Did it increase your margin of time to think? To listen? To pray? Then, what are you going to do about it? If there were a robber in your house, and he was stealing the most precious things you had, one day at a time, and you knew what he was doing, would you just turn your back and pretend he wasn't there? I believe there is a robber in most of our homes, and that dreaded peacock and his friends will not go away by themselves. He is a thief. He is stealing time from you and from God. Decision time. You make it.

Then make a list of the idols in your life that have slowly and unconsciously become obsessions. I confess that computers and all that's connected to them draw me to spend time with catalogs and software and the like, and I will gravitate towards that and spend hours focusing on the latest in technology, knowing full well I don't need it, can't afford it, and won't buy it. But I will sit like a zombie and stare at those books for hours and then wish I had more time to be with God or with hurting people. Simple decision. I simply have to make it. It's an idol. What does God do with idols in Scripture? He tears them down. He never leaves them around to stare at. He tells us to destroy them before they destroy us. If you mean business about pulling weeds instead of mowing them, you'd better make the list, and then get alone with God and tear down some altars.

## Our Not So Magnificent Obsessions

2- Make a list of the priorities in your life today as you see them. Some of you might list them like this:

- 1- Time with God and His Word
- 2- Time with your mate
- 3- Children or grandchildren
- 4- Job/ministry
- 5- Recreation/health

Others might have a totally different order or totally different objectives. One of your priorities might be schooling or training or parents you have to care for. You might vary the order or turn it upside down. But make it. Unless you do, you cannot reorder what you are doing on the basis of what is most important. If you are going to make more room in your life, some things will have to go. Unless you know what order of importance to place them in, you might do away with the wrong things.

3- Make an agreement with yourself and with God that you are going to slow down and give yourself the margin you need to get rid of the thorns that infest the garden of your life. Get off the fast track. It will take a wrong turn and if you're going at breakneck speed, you'll not even realize it until you've traveled miles in the wrong direction. Turn down the rpm's while you still can. Take that priority list you made and start rearranging your time based on what is eternally important. Once you have done that, start weeding out the things that have simply entered in and give the earth room to breathe. You'll begin to enjoy living again.

This last week I took time to watch it rain, to sit and meditate, to listen to birds sing, to listen when people talked. It was only a weak beginning. But I began to realize that life out of control is just what Satan wants. I said no to things I might have said yes to before, only this time I used the time I saved to fall more in love with my Jesus. As I said, it will be hard. I have lived by the clock. Like some of you, however, I think enough is enough. I want margin, and I want to use it for the right things.

Jesus summed up the whole counsel of God in one verse in Mark, chapter 12:

And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked

## Our Not So Magnificent Obsessions

him, Which is the first commandment of all?

And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord:

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.

And the second is like, *namely* this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these. (Mark 12:29-31)

Beloved, it really isn't complicated at all. God simply wants us to become obsessed with loving Him. He wants us to love Him with all our heart, with all our soul, with all our mind, and with all our strength. That just about covers it all. And He wants us to make all of our decisions, set all of our priorities, and focus all of our energy on being His. If we will do that, we are promised that our lives will bear much fruit.

The problem is simple, as well. Other things keep entering in. The solution, then, is for us to become Godly gardeners and tend to the soil assigned to us. We make it complicated. Jesus made it simple. He called it a parable.

As that crowd stood on that seashore that day, many didn't grasp it, even in its simplicity. But those who had ears to hear, had a choice to make.

And so do we.

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