

## What's Choking You?

(Mark 4:18-19) 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.

In this portion of the parable, Jesus identifies three types of thorns that threaten to choke us spiritually, preventing us from bearing fruit for God.

### **Cares of this world**

This can apply to being occupied with daily cares of this earthly life. We are legitimately busy – with long “to-do” lists. It’s like a farmer who is hired to look after a farm. He is very diligent, making sure the buildings are immaculate; the flowers are growing beautifully and the beds are well-weeded; the lawn is lush and even; the machinery is well maintained. However, this farmer has lost focus on the very purpose of the farm: he became too busy to plant the fields! Would the owner of the farm say, “Well done, thou good and faithful servant”? Hardly! Sometimes, our lives are a little bit like that farmer. We have become busy with all sorts of things, but have lost our focus: furthering the Kingdom of God. Now, just like on the farm, supporting roles are important: buildings require maintenance, and machinery must be serviced. The farmer wasn't entirely wrong, but his emphasis and priorities were misplaced. The same can be true of our lives. Busy-ness comes in the form of career advancement, cars, home maintenance, redecorating, new furniture, and the endless preoccupation with conveniences and gadgets. What about cares of the body, chasing after beauty products, and frequently replacing/upgrading clothing and fashion ware? If we really believe Jesus is only interested in the condition of our heart, why spend so much effort on the external? How often have you said “no” to service opportunities in God’s Kingdom because you are occupied with the cares of this world?

For example, there is a man that I have known for years, who is especially ripe for the presentation of the Gospel. I have done a little bit of sharing and praying with him, but he would benefit from much more. What is holding me back? It is the busy-ness of this life. I have difficulty planning a visit because it requires me to break my daily cycle of activities to attend to another demand on “my” time. How ridiculous! I don’t have time to visit a man that needs the Gospel?! Have I have lost the priority and urgency for his soul!?

### **Deceitfulness of Riches**

What is deceitful about riches? “More will make me happier and more secure.” These are lies! Have you chosen a lifestyle that requires working overtime and/or full time income from both spouses? Have you minimized your giving into the Kingdom of God in order to maximize your personal financial goals? Do you work full time and have a business on the side? Have you seriously considered working less, thereby freeing up more time and energy for the Kingdom? Or how about a leave of absence to do a special project for the Lord? Are you willing to make the sacrifice of less income? How seriously do we take Jesus’ statement “Ye cannot serve God and mammon”?

1 Timothy 6:9-11: But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness.

1 Timothy 6:17-19: Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not high minded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy; That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; Laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.

An accumulation of wealth may be a result of being a faithful servant of God. When that is the case, and we place our trust in God, we are not deceived by our riches. But Paul has specific instructions for the rich: be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate (the Greek word translated as “communicate” means to form/maintain fellowship, and share one’s possessions, be free in giving).

But who is “rich”? Another characteristic of the deceitfulness of riches is that we never consider ourselves as rich - there’s always someone else who has much more. According to a study of the distribution of wealth of the world, published in Dec. 2006 (<http://www.wider.unu.edu/>), those whose net worth was \$61,000+ were in the top 10%! “Charge them that are rich in this world”– this is for us! Let us be rich in good works, ready to distribute and share what God has given us, and so escape the deceitfulness of riches that can cause us to be unfruitful.

### **Lusts of other things**

The word lust is used to describe a desire that is unlawful. This can be true in the absolute sense: desiring that which is against the moral law of God. But it can also apply in a personal sense, regarding our calling and the path God has set before us. Desires outside of those boundaries could be lusts that choke the Word, even though they may not be specifically against moral law. How? Because the very pursuit of these desires compete with the fruitfulness God is working to produce in our life. We are finite creatures, and we make choices every day: where will we allocate “our” time, energy, creativity, resources, and abilities? In the pursuit of “harmless” (though selfish) pleasures? Anything that competes with service for the Lord saps our resources and hinders our fruitfulness. When you consider your life, what would it take to increase your involvement in Kingdom work? What activities and pursuits compete with your heavenly calling? It’s like trying to drive with the parking brake engaged – you have energy and a desire to move forward, but these other pursuits act as a “brake”, hindering your effectiveness for the Kingdom. Some leisure activities or hobbies can become ministry opportunities by providing a way to connect with another person for the purpose of ministering in some way, rather than merely for personal gratification. I’m talking about *being* more, not just *doing* more. By allowing the fruit of the Spirit to grow in our lives,

we allow the Grace of God to mold our heart's desires. But there's also work to be done. What does a farmer do when he sees thorns growing among the good fruit? He must get rid of the thorns. And so we also have to do the unpleasant work of rooting out thorns, things like: TV/movies, video games, internet surfing, magazines, newspapers, excessive leisure, selfish hobbies, and various other things that are choking our spiritual vitality. We may ask God to help us bear fruit, but if we don't make the decision to cut out that which He has identified as a thorn, we're not going to be fruitful.

On the one hand, we live in a physical, temporary world which requires certain temporary pursuits and responsibilities. There are many opportunities to serve the Lord while doing these temporary tasks. On the other hand, our heavenly calling also requires us to minimize temporary pursuits in order to make more room for other areas of service, such as: serving a meal; hospitality to brethren and strangers; clothing the naked; visiting the sick, lonely, elderly and those in prison; sharing the gospel; encouraging; becoming a foster parent; helping a mission; disaster relief; visiting a small church; giving; befriending the friendless; helping a single parent family; .....the list is endless. If we pursue these things together, it will greatly enhance our unity, sense of purpose, and direction as a fellowship.

By the Grace of God, cut out the thorns and grow more fruit!