

Mark 4: 18 and 19; "The Seed among the Thorns", Sermon # 20 in the series - "Astonished at His Teaching", Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on September 21st, 2008, in the Morning Worship Service.

Last week we began the study of this parable by seeing that the seed which the sower is sowing is the Word of God. The sower sows the Word of God. The sower is Jesus Christ Himself in the initial sense. He who existed from all eternity as the 2nd person of the Divine Trinity, came to this fallen world full of sinners through the womb of the Virgin Mary. He came in His incarnation, being the "brightness of His Father's glory and the express image of His person." "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us." His life was sown as a seed of righteousness in His perfect obedience to the holy Law of God. And this perfect obedience continued on to the point of death, even His death on the cross for our sins. He said before He went to the cross, "Most assuredly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it produces much fruit." He sowed His words of truth in such a way that fallen sinful people everywhere might understand and be saved from their sins. He gave the seed of the Word to His apostles to sow and they became sowers in His place. He said to them, as He left this earth, having been raised from the dead, and ascending to the right hand of the majesty on high, "Preach the gospel to every creature." "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations; baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit." "And lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age." The apostles preached the gospel near and far in their generation and then handed it over to the next generation of those who would preach it, and so it has continued since that time. The sower is anyone who will preach the gospel of Jesus Christ in truth; that is in accordance with the truth of the Bible, which we insist is the very Word of God.

We have seen that in this parable there are four types of ground upon which the word falls when it is sown. There is the wayside ground, the stony ground, the thorn infested ground, and the good ground. Those by the wayside, when they hear the word of God they do not understand it. Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to God except through Him, but people who hear the gospel preached, some of them do not understand why they must have the grace of Christ to be saved. They do not understand why they must be so utterly and entirely dependent upon Christ to do anything in the Christian life. They believe that they can grow their own fruit for God and present it to Him on the last Day, the Day of Judgment, as good fruit. Salvation is by their own religious works. They can live by their own conception of life and have their own self-made religion. But it will be rotten fruit by the time that they present it to God, for they will have lived to themselves and to their own glory. They will have believed that by their own strength and wisdom that they will receive a reward from God. It shall not be so. In their case, we can say from this parable, that Satan comes, after the Word is preached, and steals the truth that would save their eternal souls. He steals it away from them. He then persuades

them that the Bible is not God's book of authority for all of what we should believe and what we should do with our life. He whispers into their ear that there are as many ways of wisdom as man's mind can conceive. They are then led, by questioning the truth of the Bible, into thinking that the way to eternal life is not narrow. They actually come to believe that it is quite broad. Certainly it ought to cause the Christian much sorrow to think of the many people that he knows who have the word sown in their hearts, and yet they still do not understand. The Devil blinds the minds of the unbelieving that they might not see the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Then secondly, we looked at the stony ground hearers of the word. These are those, it says in verse 5 and also in verse 16, "who spring up immediately because they have no depth of earth." They "immediately receive the word with gladness." They appear to have been genuinely converted to Christ. They believe that God has done great things for them in the gospel of Jesus Christ. And it has all been done to make them everlastingly happy. Jesus has died and so they will never have to worry about things ever again. Jesus has suffered and so they will never have suffer. God is sovereign and so they will never have to face persecution, ridicule, or afflictions for the sake of the truth. And then a short time later, they experience some great difficulty; usually some opposition from friends or family to their being a Biblical Christian, and they stumble because of it. Their parents will not come to their baptism. Their children think that they are a fanatic. Their friends will not come around any more. They begin to think, "How can God be good; how can His word be true if I have to face such oppositions and afflictions as these?" "Surely, I should not have to endure these things." "God would not have me to be unhappy." He would never have me suffer persecution." "Something must be terribly wrong if I have to face dark providences in my life." "This God who is being preached to me from the Bible must not be true if my earthly life and journey is an unhappy one." In verse 16 it says, "These likewise", referring back to the fact that Satan will help on this kind of reasoning so that this stumbling over the Word will continue, so that this person will not endure and so their continuing to maintain a Christian profession withers away as it says in verse 6. Why does this happen? It happens because, as it says in verse 16, "they have no root in themselves". This happens because they have never truly been converted. This leads me to ask this question this morning, a question which each of us ought to ask ourselves. Do you have the root of the matter in you? Has Christ's seed of righteousness and truth been sown in your heart so that you are growing up as the planting of the Lord? If it has, you will put down roots into the good soil of God's word, and you will be bearing fruit that will be pleasing to God. He will be gathering good fruit from your words, from your deeds, and from the way that you live that will show Him and all the watching world that you are His true child.

Now this morning we want to look at the seed that is sown among the thorns. We must remember, that in each of these first 3 types of ground, that they are hearing the Word. But something happens to the Word after they hear it. In the first, it is stolen by Satan. In the second, it withers because there is a bed rock

slightly underneath the surface; a hard heart and no depth of soil. There is no willingness to deny oneself or to give up everything in order to be the disciple of Christ. So any word from God's Word which would bring unhappiness cannot be true. Now in this 3rd type of ground the Word is being heard, but there are thorns there in the person's heart that are doing something dreadful to it. They are choking the Word and it becomes unfruitful in them. So this is what we want to explore with the remainder of our time. There are 2 things which are mentioned in these verses which choke the Word of God so that it becomes unfruitful in the life of a Christian. In Matthew's gospel they are said to be, "the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches." In Mark's gospel they said to be "the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in." In Luke's gospel Chapter 8, verse 14 we find that it says, "Now the ones that fell among the thorns are those who, when they have heard, go out and are choked with cares, riches, and pleasures of life, and bring no fruit to maturity. So this is what we want to spend the rest of our time looking at this morning. The question is, "What are those things in our lives that will choke the Word of God's power and influence in our lives so that we will not bring forth fruit unto God? They are the cares of the world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things.

1st of all - The Cares of the World are thorns to Word of God.

They will choke the Word of God in the heart of the person hearing it on a regular basis and keep them from bearing fruit unto God. This person looks like he is doing fine in terms of his profession of faith, but really there is something quite insidious going on inside his heart. There are cares there; worldly cares which have come to supersede, they grow up beyond, the Word of God's influence upon their heart. They actually come to choke it and to take its place, so that he bears no lasting fruit. If there is fruit, it is not brought to maturity, and thus it is no good for eating by God or by men. This kind of hearer attends the preaching of the Word of God on a fairly regular basis. He listens to the Word of God. He is a hearer of the Word of God but there are cares growing up in his heart which are thorns and briars to his faith. Turn with me to John Chapter 15. The problem with the cares of the world choking the word of God is seen right here. Verse 5 says, "I am the vine, you are the branches He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without me you can do nothing." "If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned." The problem of the ground with the thorns in it is that this person, who happens to be listening to God's Word on a regular basis, is not abiding in Christ as a branch. He allows the cares of life to burden him down. He looks to his success in earthly and worldly things to make him happy. He doesn't see that His greatest happiness and joy are to be found in Christ and the spiritual relationship that he claims to have with him. You can see from these verses that if this person does not exercise faith in Christ and develop his relationship with Christ that he will bear no fruit because of these worldly cares. His relationship to Christ becomes one of doubt and fear rather than comfort and peace. He becomes fretful and complaining to people around him

because things just never are going well. But he will not pray and trust in the Lord to ask him for the good spiritual things which would satisfy his soul. He does not pray and seek to be holy and useful in service to God and to Christ. Here in these verses it says that if he does not abide in Christ by learning to become a doer of the word rather than merely a hearer, that he will be cast out as a branch and he will wither and eventually be "thrown into the fire," a picture of being cast into hell. It seems all so unnecessary and sad.

What will lead people to this sad condition and this awful place? Well turn with me to Hebrews chapter 6. I want you to look at verse 7 with me. For the earth which drinks in the rain that often come upon it, and bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated, receives blessing from God; but if it bears thorns and briers, it is rejected and near to being cursed, whose end is to be burned." This is the same description that Jesus gave to us in John chapter 15, and it adds a bit more information to us. You would think that when it talks about the earth which drinks in the rain that the writer is speaking of the influences of the Holy Spirit. Although I would not exclude His blessed influences, it appears that it is actually referring to the preaching of the Word. Listen to John Owen on this. "This rain is said to fall often on the earth (yea, upon that earth which continues utterly barren), in one shower after another. And this can be no way accommodated unto the dispensation of the gifts of the Spirit; for they being once communicated, if they be not exercised and improved, God gives no more showers of them." "It is therefore the administration of the word that is intended." "And in other places the doctrine of the Scripture is frequently compared unto rain and watering: Deuteronomy 32:2, "My doctrine shall drop as the rain, my speech shall distil as the dew; as the small rain upon the tender herb, and as the showers upon the grass." This is very helpful. The earth is the picture of the human heart. And if it drinks in the teaching of the Word of God and if it doesn't bear herbs useful for those whom it is cultivated, but rather bears thorns and briers, it is rejected. What we need to see that it is absolutely essential to the reality of our having been given grace by Christ, to see that we do end up bearing fruit to him and not receive all the teaching of the Word in vain. It is not simply an issue of rewards related to our works after we are saved. It is an issue whether we really know the Lord at all.

What can we do, whether we are a Christian or not, to counteract this terrible tendency; to drink in the teaching and not to bear fruit? Well turn to Psalm 37. Here we find the answer. What do the cares of the world tend to do to a person? They cause him to fret and be worried. And usually this fretting comes because of other unbelieving people around him who are prospering in an earthly sense, and the professed Christian believes that he should prosper in that same way. But look at what it says here. "Do not fret because of evildoers, nor be envious of the workers of iniquity." "For they shall soon be cut down like grass, and wither as the green herb." "Trust in the Lord, and do good; dwell in the land, and feed on His faithfulness." "Delight yourself also in the Lord, and He shall give you the desires of your heart." "Commit your way to the Lord, trust also in Him, and He shall bring it to pass." "He

shall bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday." "Rest in the Lord, and wait patiently for Him; do not fret because of him who prospers in his way, because of the man who brings wicked schemes to pass." "Cease from anger, and forsake wrath; do not fret--it only causes harm." This is the answer. When we receive God's word and trust in Him, when we do not fret and let the cares of the world grow up around our heart, then we will bear fruit for God. Our fruit comes from trusting in Him at all times, and seeing that our fruit comes from Him. Let me ask if you are doing this? Do not let the cares of this world rob you of the fruit which you can bear unto God by trusting in Christ and abiding in Him.

Now the 2nd thing that will choke the power and the influence of the Word of God in our hearts is the deceitfulness of riches.

What is it about riches that deceives a person with regard to their eternal soul? What is it about having them that chokes the Word of God? Well, if we look at some of the teachings of the Lord Jesus concerning money and riches we shall find the answer. Turn with me to Mark chapter 10 and verse 17. Now you probably remember this story. It is full of pathos. It is the story of a young man who came to the Lord Jesus with the best of questions and yet left in a self-deceived state. "Now as He was going out on the road, one came running, knelt before Him, and asked Him, "Good teacher, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" "So Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call Me good?' "No one is good but One, that is, God." "You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, do not murder, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, do not defraud, honor your father and your mother.'" "And he answered and said to Him, "Teacher, all these things I have kept from my youth." "Then Jesus, looking at him, loved him, and said to him, 'One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come take up the cross, and follow Me.'" "But he was sad at this word and went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions." "Then Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, 'how hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!" "And His disciples were astonished at His words." "But Jesus answered again and said to them, 'Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God!"

There are a number of things which are worth observing upon this passage. You notice what a wonderful human being this is who comes to the Lord Jesus with the finest and best of questions. He comes running to Jesus. He very much wants to know the truth. He kneels before Jesus. He knows that Jesus is good and that He is a teacher sent from God. Jesus sows the seed of the Word of God to his heart. He lists the commandments of the Second table of the Law, all but one; commandments 5-9. And this young man says that he has kept them from his youth. Jesus doesn't contradict him in his statement. It says that he looked at him and loved him. How many a minister would be tempted to bring him into the membership of the church with so many good qualities in his life. He had heard the word before, He was hearing the word now with Jesus right in front of him, and yet Jesus knew that this young man was being deceived by his riches. The Word was being choked by them.

His obedience stopped at this very point and his covetousness reigned! Only 1 thing that he lacked, and yet it was something that he could not give up, even to have eternal life! Even to be one of the closest of Jesus' disciples! Even to take up the cross. No, he was sad at this word, and went away sorrowful, for it says, "he had great possessions." He could not trust in Christ that Christ would make up his lack if he sold his possessions and gave everything away to the poor to follow Jesus. His problem? He was trusting in His riches and not in God.

And I must pause at this point and ask if I have any of my listeners who are doing the same thing? Riches are deceitful because if we love them more than Christ, we will find it extremely hard to enter the kingdom of God. Turn over with me to Luke chapter 16. Here Jesus has just finished telling the parable of the unjust steward to his disciples. He told them this parable in order that they might use all of their resources in God's service, to make friends for their Master. The unjust steward did this by going to his Master's debtors and telling them that their bill would be lowered. The Master had not said any such thing, but you can see how it would win friends for him anyway. This shrewd, but unrighteous strategy did much good for the Master's reputation, and so it was commended by the Master. The point is not that any of Christ's servants should act in an unrighteous way to misuse money which does not belong to them. The point is that the steward did understand the generous nature of His Master and used it for his own advantage. We do the same thing when we make friends for our Master, the Lord Jesus Christ, by using our money which He has given to us, and entrusted to us, in a way that commends to them God's generous character of grace. Is this what you do, my friend or do you hold your money tight to yourself? Jesus goes on in verse 11 to say, "Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?" It is unrighteous to use someone else's money in the way that this steward did, but still he was commended. But Jesus says in verse 11, "Therefore if you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?" "And if you have not been faithful in what is another man's, who will give you what is your own?" This steward was faithful in the mind of the Master even in this presumptuous action of his. He could be entrusted with the true riches of God's grace, that he would use them wisely and improve upon them.

But then Jesus says something that really struck home with the Pharisees. He said, "No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other." "You cannot serve God and mammon." Look at their reaction to this strong statement. "Now the Pharisees, who were lovers of money, also heard all these things, and they derided Him." They made fun of Jesus for saying this. "And He said to them, 'You are those who justify yourselves before men, but God knows your hearts.'" "For what is highly esteemed among men is an abomination in the sight of God." The thorns had grown up in their hearts and choked the word. All they could do was make fun of it. This is the deceitfulness of riches. You cannot serve God when you are serving them. Do not fool yourself in this important matter. You may be withholding and holding on

to that which God would have you to give away. God knows your heart and He knows what He would have you to do. In applying this I want you to turn with me to Proverbs chapter 11. I want you to see the principle of how to make the wisest use of the money that God has given you, and how to also then, make the wisest use of the riches of grace that have been given to you. Verse 24 says, "There is one who scatters, yet increases more; and there is one who withholds more than is right, but it leads to poverty." "The generous soul will be made rich, and he who waters will also be watered himself." Here are the principles of good stewardship of what God has given to you, both in terms of money and of His grace. You scatter what He has given to you as seed which is sown. You would think that this would result in poverty, but it does not. It increases the more. Why? Because God Himself is generous and He blesses the generous. You water the lives of people around you that are dry and parched, and you find that you yourself are watered. The generous soul will be made rich. The tight-fisted hoarder of money will come to poverty. He withholds more than is right. In another place Jesus said, "Give and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom." "For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you." (Luke 6: 38) Ask yourself whether the deceitfulness of riches has choked out the Word of God from doing its good work in your soul to transform you in this way? If not, why not repent before it is too late. If God is generous, you too must become generous to the work of His kingdom and in helping the poor.

Now the 3rd thing that will choke the power and influence of the Word of God in our hearts is the desires for other things.

This desires for other things; what would it include? In Luke it is called, "the pleasures of life". All three of these things that we have been speaking of from our text are easily able to take a person, who says that they are a Christian, off from following closely their Lord and bearing fruit unto Him. They may in the final analysis prove that he is not a true Christian at all. The real test of your Christianity is whether you are going to cultivate a field of thorns or a field of corn. That is what you must decide. You can't have thorns growing unchecked in the same field and bear fruit. You must tear the thorns out. Each of these 3 things choke the Word of God and it becomes unfruitful. Can the pleasures of life bring thorns with them? Most certainly they can. Can the desires for other things, things of earthly interest which are not evil in themselves, become something which is evil because we have had too great a desire for them and no real deepening desire for God and a closer walk with Him because of them? Most definitely! What is the principle here; for we are talking about many possible different subjects under the subject of pleasure and the desire for other things. The principle is simply a matter of what you as a professed believer give your time and attention to; it is a matter of where your heart is. In 2nd Timothy chapter 3, verse 1, it says, "But know this, that in the days perilous times will come; for men will be lovers of themselves, lovers of money," and then a little farther down the list he says, "lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God." Can't you love God and pleasure too? The answer is that our sinful hearts

would rather love pleasure than God. We tend to make a God of our pleasures. Sometimes it is one pleasure in particular, sometimes it is many pleasures of different kinds together. The Christian, you should know, is one who takes pleasure in God Himself first and foremost. He is a person who prays over his priorities and one who will not let his pleasures compete with His love for God Himself; the One who is the giver of every good and perfect gift. The Christian knows that it is very easy to pervert God's good gifts by loving the gift more than the Giver. And so he reasons; that since God is a jealous God, who will have no other gods before Him, he will jealously guard himself from having the pleasures of this world and the desires for other things take the pre-eminence over what God would say to Him in His Word. He jealously guards the way that he lives, so that the things that are pursued, the things that are cultivated in His life have God's approval, and He can find God's pleasure and blessing in them.

For after all, the Christian is one who takes pleasure in doing God's will; in doing His good pleasure. The pleasures that God gives are holy pleasures and they are given to His children to strengthen them to do what is good and right and true; not to forget what is good and right and true. The earthly pleasures that God gives; these are holy pleasures and they are all meant to be enjoyed in moderation, not in such abundance and continuance that we hurt ourselves body and soul, and set a bad example to others. They are not given to be the end in themselves. We may enjoy watching sports on Television, but do we have to be consumed with sports so that it becomes our greatest pursuit in life? We may enjoy eating, but do we have to become gluttons in our pursuit of fine foods? We may enjoy playing music, but do we have to spend more of our time in listening to our music that we forget about singing and praising God? We may enjoy reading books, but do we love the Bible more than all the books of men? Do we read it? We may enjoy our work and accomplishing things in a timely fashion. But does that mean that we will not attend the meetings of the church to accomplish what we want done? God does look at whether we give Him the time of the services of the church, so that He can accomplish what He wants in terms of the instruction and building up of each Christian into a mature Christian. There is, as you are probably well aware, the possibility of a thousand pursuits in life and any one of them or all of them together may crowd out the Word of God and choke it dearly beloved. If you do not weed out the thorns you will not bring any fruit to maturity. You will have begun well but you will end badly. If you allow these thorns to grow, and not include God and His principles of truth on how to enjoy the earthly things that he gives to you without sinning, then you will sin in your use of them. They will become thorns and snares in your relationship with God and with your Savior, Master, and Friend; the Lord Jesus Christ. But if abide in Christ and abide in His Word, you will bear fruit unto God. We will speak more of this fruit bearing in the next sermon.