

Sunday, May 13th, 2012, 10:00 a.m.

Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

CHOKED LISTENING - Be Careful Where You Set Your Attention

Matthew 13:7, 22 - "Other seeds fell among thorns, and the thorns grew up and choked them....13:22....As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful."

In our study last week we saw how outside persecution and the peer pressure of the ungodly can cause lightly committed Christians to wilt and die like young plants in the hot sun (13:6, 21). Converts can't grow in discipleship and faithfulness to the Lord while cherishing closeness with those who don't honor Him.

Jesus predicted this kind of tension and prescribed a realistic anticipation of rejection by the world so growing Christians wouldn't be shocked or discouraged by it. In doing so He was reinforcing an idea that North American Christians find almost unimaginable - that following Jesus might actually put us in **tension** with the world around us. The contemporary church finds this concept unacceptable. Amazingly, contrary to everything Jesus said, success in church practice has come to be measured by the extent to which the world **likes** what we seem to be doing.

Expect **cultural resistance** as you embrace the way of Christ. **Expect** it. That's Jesus' reminder. By anticipating persecution for Christ enthusiastic followers would discover a deeper joy than even the first stirrings of saving grace produced. That's Jesus' radical teaching in the shallow soil. Joy in the Lord actually deepens as loyalty to Christ is demonstrated against the peer pressure or persecution of the ungodly. This is a **hard won** blessing that many Christians never discover. Spiritual doom comes to those with shallow, unrealistic expectations of cultural acceptance after coming to Christ. That's the lesson of the shallow soil plant.

But not all the dangers to faith arise from pressure and persecution from the **outside** world. Deep dangers threaten the life of faith from the **inside**. This is the issue Jesus addressed in the next situation in His famous parable - the seed choked out by the thorns. And the thorns He identifies, not as the ungodly enemies **outside** the Christian, but the **cares of this world** and the **deceitfulness of riches**. These are the **interior enemies** warring to keep us from listening to the Lord with faith and fruitfulness. The cares of the world **drain** faith. The deceitfulness of riches **seduce** faith.

1) **THE UNIQUE DANGER OF THE THORNY SOIL**

Matthew 13:20-22 - "As for what was sown on rocky ground, this is the one who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy, [21] yet he has no root in himself, but endures for a while, and when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away. [22] As for what was sown among thorns, this is the one who hears the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it proves unfruitful."

Of course, we studied the rocky soul in our last teaching. But I'm listing these two soils together to emphasize the different **kind** of danger in the thorny ground. The **reception** of the Word isn't the object of Jesus' attention as it was in the rocky ground. In the rocky ground account Jesus highlights the reception of the word with "joy" - "**....immediately receives it with joy....**"(13:20).

There was an immediate, bright response to the Word. Genuine spiritual life brightened the heart with the presence of amazing grace. True, what was ignited so quickly in the heart wasn't continued in, but that doesn't change the fact that Jesus highlights the joyous initial discovery of conversion.

But there is no thought of the **conversion** experience in the thorny soil. There is no mention of the **joy** of that grace-filled moment. That's **not** because it didn't happen. Jesus doesn't single it out in the thorny soil because that's not what He wants to emphasize. The emphasis is all on the **post-conversion continuance** in listening to the Word.

And I think there's a **reason** for this change in emphasis. Jesus cautions there's a particular danger that comes **after** the initial excitement of conversion. Satan can't always snatch the seed from the heart **before** saving faith is exercised, like he does in the hard, wayside soil - **Matthew 13:19** - "**When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what has been sown in his heart. This is what was sown along the path.**"

In spite of Satan's best efforts, many people **do** respond to the Word in faith. In those cases Satan has another plan. Thorns grow silently. Weeds creep in along with the plants in your garden. In the rocky soul the situation is totally different. The persecution Jesus described is quick and drastic. Like the obvious heat of the blazing sun, usually we **feel the heat** of those who persecute us for our faith - "**....when tribulation or persecution arises on account of the word, immediately he falls away**"(13:21).

Outside persecution is an **obvious** danger that we easily see coming. No one has to **tell** us tribulation and persecution against the people of Christ is bad. We can **feel** the wickedness of it. It's precisely the **weight** and **injustice** of persecution that made that once joyous, fast-sprouting convert in the shallow, rocky soil give up and quit the faith.

But the thorns and weeds in the next soil in Jesus' parable are identified as **cares** and **riches** (22). **Cares** are problems that have to be

solved. And **riches** seem **helpful** to the cause of life, not hurtful. I mean, money is how we **solve** most of those cares of this worldly life.

So take note of what Jesus is saying here. It's deep and profound. He's saying that **after the conversion experience** there is a particular problem that gradually creeps into Christian hearts. And it's a **listening problem**. Something frequently happens to once genuine disciples of Christ that shrivels up the Word and renders it lifeless.

Here's the particular danger. Christians don't see this weed **problem** in the making until it's too late. Thorns and weeds overtake the plants **gradually**. Thorns and weeds don't **look** that much bigger the next morning than they did the previous evening. They look about the same.

This is how the Word gets "**choked**" out. Jesus says many of His followers don't deal with **competitors** for their attention **first**, because the competitors don't appear to be dominating, and **second**, because these competitors don't **look** wicked. They look **normal**.

God's Word becomes one word among many. **The** Word becomes **a** word - one of several heard at the same time. This is what makes listening a **battle**. This is what **listening** to God's Word is up against. Cares and riches are both powerful voices demanding **not** to be ignored. You have to **deal** with cares. We admire **problem solvers**. And money is powerful. Usually it **looks** more powerful in terms of satisfying desires and providing security than does God's Word.

Jesus tells us how God's Word, while all-powerful, can have the life **choked out of it**. When God's Word becomes merely one of **several voices** directing your life, it's on its way out in terms of fruitfulness and blessing. That's the danger Jesus addresses in the thorny soil.

2) THE WORD OF GOD IS ONLY LISTENED TO WHEN IT TOWERS OVER EVERY OTHER VOICE INFLUENCING YOUR LIFE

There's a reason Jesus demands undistracted listening to His Word. Generally, weeds grow faster than plants. They push their roots down at a very rapid pace. They suck the nutrients out of the soil that would have nourished the cultivated plants. Jesus' teaching point here is the soil can't nourish **everything** drawing life from it.

Jesus displays His divine wisdom when He tells us the Word gets choked out gradually by thorns and weeds. This is the danger He said arises **after** conversion. The Word's competitors enter through **phases**. We get **interested**. Then **distracted**. Then **pre-occupied**. Then **consumed**. And then finally **choked**.

But rare indeed is the disciple who sees all of this coming in the **interest** phase. Nothing wicked seems to be happening. There just isn't quite as much time for church anymore. Certainly no time to teach a class or come to a prayer group. Most churches can't find enough interested worshippers to even sustain an evening service anymore. There's a lot of other stuff going on. The Word is never, ever denied. It's just choked out.

Let me wrap up this point with one more observation. There is always a **reason** for the images chosen by the Spirit in Scripture. Here, in this thorny soil image the Word is likened to a little plant. And the reason for that image is Jesus is showing the dangers of competing interests. A small plant is genuinely **threatened** by thorns and weeds. They suck away nutrients that little plant needs for growth.

But there are other images in Scripture describing the Word when it's genuinely loved and heeded. Consider this one:

Psalm 1:1-3 - "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; [2] but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. [3] He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither...."

Picture this gigantic, fruit-bearing tree. There's a reason it's planted by the water. Its massive roots suck up everything around it. This tree **dominates** its surroundings. This tree stands through storm and drought and winter because it's big enough to starve out anything else trying to suck up its nourishment.

This tree is the **opposite** of the little plant competing with the thorns and weeds in Jesus' parable. The counsel of the ungodly and the peer pressure of sinners and the mocking of the scoffers are simply overwhelmed by the consuming mass of that great tree.

Let's pretend. Just imagine a church full of gigantic California redwood listeners to God's Word. Imagine the conversations: "**No, I heard about that movie, but never did get a chance to see it. I've just been so absorbed in my study of Romans lately. I don't know. Time just got away on me. I meant to see that movie. I just never got around to it.**"

Or, "**No, I know all those great shoes were on sale 80% off. And I meant to get over there but they asked me to help work with the kids program at the church and it's been so exciting I just haven't had much time for shopping. Don't even miss it!**"

Or, "**No, I didn't take that promotion at work. I know it was double the money, but I would have been away so many Sundays. And I get such a buzz worshipping with God's people I knew I just had to turn the job down.**"

No, I'm not describing fantasy or some science-fiction account of life on another planet. I chose all those examples because none of them is in any way sinful or wicked in itself. I'm not promoting some legalistic list of holy vs. worldly activities. Quite the opposite, I'm talking about what **might** actually be heard when people's love for the Word simply **chokes out** the competing voices of the weeds and the thorns. I'm describing what people **might** actually say when they allow the Word of Christ to feed and fuel their energy and joy the way that great big tree almost drains that pond it sits beside.

3) **WORSHIP MATTERS WHEN YOU'RE TRYING TO ROOT YOUR LIFE IN GOD'S WORD**

In a nutshell, we fight back against the choking power of the thorns - the **cares of this life** and the **deceitfulness of riches** - by worship that makes the Word and rule of Christ **gigantic** and **weighty**. In contrast, we make the thorns big and consuming when we give them more attention than the Word and rule of Christ. This is a spiritual law.

Here's where I'm going with this as I close. How we worship when we gather together, in spite of what you may hear or read, isn't just up for grabs as a matter of **style** - contemporary/traditional, seeker sensitive, emergent, liturgical, etc. The central issue of worship is much bigger than that. **Worship must make the Word of Christ huge**. For corporate worship to be effective we should all leave this sanctuary knowing to the depths of our heart that everything else is **small and worthless** when set against the backdrop of our gigantic Christ and His Word.

So be very careful **what you praise** with your thoughts, words, and time. Only the seed of the Word merits first place. This is what Paul meant in his famous words in **Colossians 3:16** - "**Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.**"

Something is going to dwell in your heart richly. Everyone praises something. Everyone has something - some **word** - that rules his life. Remember, weeding takes constant effort. Weeds grow faster than plants. Think about the little, gradual choices of your life. They all take your heart somewhere. Get rich in the Word of Christ.