

## The Infested Heart

I watched something recently about a very unusual garden in England, called the Poison Garden. This is a garden created in 2005 in Northumberland that contains nothing but deadly plants. Over 100 infamous killer-plants are carefully cultivated, mostly just for educational and tourist purposes. As visitors are taken through the garden, they are forbidden to taste, touch, or even smell the plants. What surprises people who walk through those gardens, is how beautiful the poisonous plants are, and even how common they are in regular gardens. Some of the plants are found in the average garden, but they produce cyanide, which can kill you. Plants that can kill other plants, or animals, or people don't always look nasty and threatening. Often, they are harmless looking, or even inviting.

Just like those pretty but poisonous flowers, there are some things in our lives that are equally inviting but equally invasive. But these things do not kill flowers – they kill spiritual life. They are inviting and enjoyable, but their end result is that they kill the effectiveness of the Word in our lives. They choke out the Word of God so that it never takes root and spreads. The heart that is full of these things is the third heart in this parable.

Christ's main lesson in this parable is that the power of the Word works together with the condition of the heart that hears it. He has been explaining why the Word brings differing results in different people. There's only one sower – Christ, or whoever preaches Christ. There's only one kind of seed – the Word of God rightly taught. But there are four types of ground – four kinds of reception that the Word gets. Hard hearts reject it altogether. Shallow hearts seem to receive it, but actually don't, and it simply takes some tribulation to reveal that. The fourth and final soil receives the Word.

But it's the third soil we want to consider today, to see if we have not an indifferent heart, not an impulsive heart, but an infested heart.

### I. The Image of the Third Heart

*"And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it. (Lk. 8:7)*

This is the image: this seed falls on ground with enough softness to receive the seed. This soil is not like the wayside. It is not merely a few centimetres of soil hiding a bedrock of limestone underneath it either. No, this kind of soil has enough softness and enough depth for a plant to take root.

In fact, the problem is not that nothing grows in this kind of soil, but that too *many* things grow in it. The problem here is not *depth*, the problem here is *space*. This kind of soil hosts not only the seed of the sower, but the seed of thorns. You'll notice that Jesus does not describe the thorns as fully grown when the seed lands on the soil. Those thorns are also in seed form. But according to Jesus, the thorns sprang up with it.

Thorns or weeds thrive in most soils. You pull them out and leave just a fragment and they're back. You don't have to cultivate thorns and weeds. Whoever planted weeds in their garden deliberately? But they come. They never stop coming. They are so natural to the ground, it is as if the ground itself stores them and releases them!

But when introducing the seed of a crop you want to grow, you have to till the soil, turn it over, water, protect, cultivate. The things we want to grow for food seldom grow the way weeds do. You have to do all kinds of work on the soil to get it to grow and grow successfully.

But these thorns or weeds choke out the plants that need cultivation, using up water, space, sometimes growing over them, on top of them, even twining around them.

Now Jesus explains the meaning of this kind of soil.

*Now the ones that fell among 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. (Lk. 8:14)*

Jesus says this kind of heart is not resisting the Word outright. They are not being shallow or impulsive with it either. They hear the Word, they consider it, they take it in. The problem is that other things are never removed, Word is taken in alongside three competitors. There is no space for the Word to ever turn into something which changes them, because of all the other things in the heart.

What are these things?

## **II. The Infections of the Third Heart**

Jesus describes three things: the cares of this world, riches and the pleasures of life. We can summarise these three weeds this way: worldliness, wealth-seeking and wandering desire.

### ***i) Worldliness***

In Luke, they are simply called cares, in Matthew and Mark 'cares of this world'. Cares, in English seems like a harmless word. But it actually translates a Greek word meaning anxieties, worries, burdens. This word is used both positively and negatively in the New Testament, but what makes this kind of concern deadly to the Word is what it is concerned about. The phrase is 'cares of this world'. The word for world is actually the word that is often translated 'age' – this era, this time; It might better be translated, “anxieties of this age”.

There is one other place outside of this parable that Jesus used the term.

**Luke 21:34** *But take heed to yourselves, lest your hearts be weighed down with carousing, drunkenness, and cares of this life, and that Day come on you unexpectedly.*

Jesus is linking this kind of mind with things like carousing, and drunkenness, which lets you know that this is something much more sinister than merely the pressures of life that everyone faces.

In other words, this is the anxiety of those chasing worldliness. They are chasing the things the world values. By the world, we mean the spirit of the age, the system of thought and loves which is in rebellion to God. Worldliness is that way of life which makes living for yourself without thought of God seem normal, and living for eternity seem strange. So worldliness specialises in three things: pleasing the body, keeping up appearances, and living for your own glory.

When you are a disciple of the world, it is an anxious life. You need money to get those pleasures for your body, to keep those friends, to look impressive, and to gain more and more control over life, and then too often have to play the world's games to get the money, and that puts you under pressure with time, and you don't have as much time to enjoy the experiences. And once you're in, you need more money to look more impressive, you need more power because the power you've had up to now doesn't cut it anymore, but there are others trying to get the money you want, and get the power you want. Once you're on that treadmill, you can't ask it to slow down, and it looks like getting off just isn't an option. And it's hard to sleep at night, because more than ever, there is fear in your heart. Fear of losing your image, or your control, or your money.

Why is this a weed? Because worldliness competes with your love for God.

**1 John 2:15-17** *Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world -- the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life -- is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever.*

**James 4:4** *Adulterers and adulteresses! Do you not know that friendship with the world is enmity with God? Whoever therefore wants to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God.*

Worldliness is a pseudo-heaven. Worldliness is a substitute Heaven. It tries to make what is temporary seem permanent, what is passing seem eternal. It turns what is meant to be a training ground into a final home, what is meant to be a testing station into a dwelling place. This is one of the thorns, and it chokes the Word.

## **ii) Wealth-Seeking**

What Jesus is calling our attention to is not money or wealth itself, but the deceitfulness of it. That's the phrase in Matthew and Mark: Deceitfulness is the subject, riches is possessive. The deceitfulness of riches. This is a strong word which means trickery, fraud, deception. Money is an inanimate object. How can money be deceitful? It is not money that is deceitful, it is the promise human hearts make themselves about money in abundance – or riches - that is deceitful. Whether that promise comes from our own minds or the minds of others, it is a promise which lies. We can summarise it this way: worldliness seeks to be a substitute Heaven, and money seeks to be a substitute Saviour.

Riches promise what a saviour promises. Riches promise freedom. Riches promise power. Riches promise security. Riches promise to solve your problems. Riches promise pleasure. Riches promise love. Riches promise permanence.

The money doesn't make these promises. We make these promises to ourselves. The problem is not the money, it is the trust and love we place in it. This is why Paul said: **1 Timothy 6:9-10** *But those who desire to be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and harmful lusts which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows.*

This is why the promises is deceitful. Instead of freedom, the love of money produces bondage. Instead of pure pleasure, the love of money brings more pain. Instead of peace, the love of money produces nothing but anxiety.

**Ecclesiastes 5:12** *The sleep of a laboring man is sweet, Whether he eats little or much; But the abundance of the rich will not permit him to sleep.*

Instead of solving problems, the love of money brings two more for every one it solves. Instead of bringing love, loving money ends up attracting selfish people who love your money and not you. Instead of bringing ultimate permanence, loving money finds it flies away.

**Proverbs 23:5** *Will you set your eyes on that which is not? For riches certainly make themselves wings; They fly away like an eagle toward heaven.*

Instead of status, those who love money find it leaves you just as it found you.

**Ecclesiastes 5:16** *And this also is a severe evil -- Just exactly as he came, so shall he go. And what profit*

*has he who has labored for the wind?*

How prone we are to love wealth, to believe its promises, to seek it as a saviour. It is that very desire, which will destroy the Word's effectiveness in your life.

Why is wealth-seeking a weed? Because loving money as your saviour, trusting in money, serving money is hostile to loving God.

**Matthew 6:24** *No one 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.*

**Luke 18:24-25** *And when Jesus saw that he became very sorrowful, He said, "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! "For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."*

This is another of the thorns, and it chokes the Word.

### **iii) Wandering Desire**

In Mark, the description is "the desires for other things". In Luke it is "pleasure of life". Simply, this is the heart looking outside of God for ultimate satisfaction. This is the catch-all for what is left over after worldliness and wealth-seeking. It can be anything which may be lawful in itself, it may be one of the gifts of God in creation. But when you turn it into an end, by seeking it as your ultimate pleasure, it becomes a god. Whether it is material possessions, status, power, prestige, sexual lust, knowledge – if you cannot enjoy it for God's sake, you should not enjoy it at all. If you cannot love it for God's sake, don't love it at all. And if you can love it for God's sake, then don't love it in isolation from God.

There is a simple word for that: idolatry.

Because anything you love in your life as an ultimate end is a god.

Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. (Col. 3:5)

Worldliness is a substitute heaven, wealth-seeking is a substitute saviour, and wandering desire is a substitute god.

Now in comparing these things to thorns or weeds, there are two important lessons to learn:

*1) Worldliness, wealth-seeking and wandering desire are natural to our sinful natures*

**Mark 7:21-23** *for from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders, thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. "All these evil things come from within and defile a man."*

I don't need to go looking for worldliness to introduce it into my heart. Jesus says my heart already has the pride of life, and an evil eye and fornications – i.e. Lust of the flesh, lust of the eye and pride of life. If I expose it to worldliness, it's just like a magnet finding the opposite pole of another magnet.

I don't need to learn how to desire riches. Jesus says that covetousness exists in my heart. It just needs enough temptations to blow those embers into a flame. It just needs a little stimulus to get those thorns growing.

I don't catch idolatry from someone else, like mumps or measles. Jesus says, my heart is filled with blasphemy and covetousness which is idolatry, and foolishness. It's there already, and, like we've said before, the right circumstances will just bring out what is still in the heart – the hot water will

bring out what is in the tea-bag. One trip to the mall will bring out whether or not worldliness, lust for wealth and wandering desire is strong in your heart. It's not the mall that is doing that to you, it is not the fault of the window displays. It's just watering something that's already in the heart.

In the fifth century, a man named Arenius determined to live a holy life. So he abandoned the Egyptian society to follow an austere lifestyle in the desert. Yet whenever he visited the great city of Alexandria, he spent time wandering through its bazaars. Asked why, he explained that his heart rejoiced at the sight of all the things he didn't need.

This is why Jesus used the illustration of thorns or weeds. Thorns and weeds just grow naturally. They don't need special care. They don't need cultivation. All they need is soil and some space. Worldliness, the love of money and idolatry grow naturally in the sinful nature of the human heart.

You don't need to do anything to have them there. You have to do something special to *not* have them there.

*2) Worldliness, wealth-seeking and wandering desire are hostile to the Word.*

Jesus' point is that these three things cannot co-exist with the Word for any real length of time. In time, like thorns do to useful plants, they choke them.

It is interesting that Jesus does not describe the plant choking out the thorns. How often does a plant you are cultivating just destroy the weeds around it? No, it is weeds that conquer regular plants, not the other way around. And so, Jesus is teaching, you cannot just let all of these grow together in your life at the same time, and hope in the end that the Word will get so big that it will nudge the others out. It just never happens that way. Allow these things in, let them grow, it is only a matter of time before they completely choke the Word in your life.

What does that mean exactly? What does it mean for these things to choke the Word? Wealth-seeking, worldliness and idolatry are different loves, priorities, hopes. And to pursue those opposing values, you have to use up time, attention and energy which should be used on the Word.

It is possible to use time, attention and energy to work, earn your money, take of needs without it choking out the Word. If your heart is set on seeking first the kingdom of God, busyness and industry need not destroy the Word in your life. The Word can co-exist in a busy life. For centuries, busy, industrious Christians have been in the Word and the Word has been in them. And even though in history, Christians worked longer work hours than is average today, they lived devoted, contented, Christ-centred lives. The problem is not a busy life. It is priorities that make us overbusy, stretched too far, while we chase the end of the worldly rainbow.

You can be a Christian businessman committed to making as much profit as possible, without lusting after money. It may be a fine line, but it is real one and a necessary one. You should want to make as much money as possible, but then don't lust for the money or treat it as a saviour.

You can be someone who has to understand the culture of the world in order to work with it and trade with it. But you don't have to embrace it as home. You don't have to turn your tent into a cottage.

You can love the gifts of God without turning the gifts into God. How do we do that?

### III. The Improvement of the Third Heart

What is the spiritual equivalent of pulling out weeds and cultivating the soil? Repentance. If and when you find worldliness, a lust for riches or idolatry in your heart, you must root it out. Call it what it is – a sinful desire. Don't call it by pet names, don't try to airbrush or sweeten it. Gardeners don't try to justify the presence of weeds around the flowers they want, they pull them out. Farmers don't call weeds by flattering titles, like 'my other crop' or my 'secondary produce'. So don't call these things personality, temperament, habit, harmless. If you want the Word to thrive in your life, agree with God that these things are deadly to spiritual life and turn your back on them. Ask God for forgiveness and then leave it behind you.

Paul used the word mortify. That means killing the sin by not repeating it, and by not feeding it. Think about what you watch on TV, what you look at on the web. Think about the music you listen to in your leisure hours, or in the car. Think about the magazines you read, the places you frequent. Think about the friends you have, and their Facebook pages. What do these things feed? Love of Heaven? Or a pseudo-heaven? Trust Christ? Or love of money as a Saviour? Love of God? Or love of things as God? Don't feed what you don't want to grow.

One of the best ways to make sure you are uprooting these weeds is to replace them with their opposites. Grow eternal priorities in your heart by living that way.

**1 Thessalonians 4:11** *that you also aspire to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business, and to work with your own hands, as we commanded you,*

A life of quiet industry, loving your neighbour – this is the opposite of worldliness with its emphasis on glitz and glam, celebrity and power.

**1 Timothy 6:17-19** *Command those who are rich in this present age not to be haughty, nor to trust in uncertain riches but in the living God, who gives us richly all things to enjoy. Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.*

Instead of the pride and self-dependence that goes with wealth-seeking, be rich in good works. Build eternity into your budget. Build Christ and His church into your spending. Sow to eternity.

<sup>7</sup> *But what things were gain to me, these I have counted loss for Christ.* <sup>8</sup> *Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ* <sup>9</sup> *and be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith;* <sup>10</sup> *that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, (Phil. 3:7-10)*

<sup>13</sup> *Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, (Phil. 3:13)*

Instead of wandering desire, focus your life on knowing and loving Christ, make it about Him. Have a unifying passion in your life, a big-picture theme, which is knowing and loving God.

Repent and replace.

One of the saddest scenes in the Bible is when Jesus dealt with a rich young man, who wanted the Word, but he wanted it to grow alongside the worldliness and love of wealth in His life. Jesus knew this weed was choking out the Word. We read this: <sup>21</sup> *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." (Mk. 10:21)*

Jesus loved that unbeliever, and loved him enough to tell him that love of money was choking out the Word and he needed to do some radical amputation to give it space. In your life, Christ behold you, and loves you. His call to uproot these weeds is a loving call. He desire fullness of joy for you. But you must accept that pretty plants can be poisonous. You must agree with Him, and choose the real Heaven, the real Saviour, and the real God.