

The Parable of the Soils **Part 3**

Matthew 13:1-9, 18-23

Worldly Worry

- *Psalm 34:19, 37:8; Matthew 6:25-34*

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The Parable of the Soils¹

Part Three

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Today we are on the third of four Sundays in our series on the parable of the soils. The story is found in Mark's, Luke's, and Matthew's Gospels, and June read it to us from Matthew 13. I'd encourage you to open your Bibles to that passage as we continue to explore it in more depth today.

First, let's review: remember, we aren't really told who the farmer is; it could be God, or Jesus, or anyone who is sharing the Good News of Jesus or God's Word with others. What is the seed? The Word of God, which is the Logos, which is *all* the purposes of God, all of which come to fulfillment in and through Jesus Christ, who is called the Logos himself. If you don't understand the Logos, I encourage you to go to our website or our YouTube channel to download the manuscript or watch the message from part one so you will have a better understanding, because it's very important to know.

What is the soil? It is our hearts. That's the point of this parable that Jesus taught: that we always want to be ready to receive more and more of Jesus in the soil of our souls, but we must examine our hearts. Jesus is teaching that the soil of our hearts can be able to receive more and more of Him into our lives all the time, so we will enjoy abundant and fruitful life as God intended and so our lives will produce more fruit for God, just like a crop. Remember, the seed is not planted just to produce a single plant, is it? A seed is planted to produce a crop and to reproduce multiple times. The seed is given to us not just for our own benefit, but with the intention it would also produce an entire crop of Christians as it grows in us and through us to the lives of unbelievers as we introduce them to Jesus. Right? Good.

So far, we've looked at the first type of soil which Jesus described as the path. We talked about how we don't want to be pathway people, having hard hearts. Remember we said that the things that can pound a path through the soil of our souls are the wrong people, ponderings, and priorities.

Then we looked at the rocky soil, which has the bedrock of wrong belief, the boulders of disobedience, and the gravel of ingratitude.

Today, we are going to look at the third type of soil. Jesus talked about how the worries and anxieties of this life can affect the soil, or the conditions, of our hearts. He was talking about

¹ Resources:

Phillip Keller, *A Gardener Looks at the Fruit of the Spirit*, Inspirational Press, 1993

Robert S. Snow, Arseny Ermakov, *Matthew: A Commentary in the Wesleyan Tradition*, Beacon Hill Press, KC, 2019

Ralph Earle, "The Gospel according to St. Matthew," in *Matthew-Acts*, vol. 4, *The Wesleyan Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966)

John D. Barry et al., *Faithlife Study Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2012, 2016)

William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, Third Ed., *The New Daily Study Bible* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2001)

protecting the ability of our hearts to receive God's Word, God's purposes, our ability to receive Jesus himself more and more into our lives so that we can be fruitful and share the Good News of God's love with others. So let's examine the ground full of thorns and weeds. Let me just re-read that particular passage to us from verses 7 and 22:

"Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants...the seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful." (Matthew 13:7, 22, niv)

The question we want to ask ourselves today is a crucial one: "What is growing in the ground of my life? What takes up the most space? What occupies most of my time, attention, and thoughts? What do I do with money and resources? What has gained prime place in my priorities? What has become the main growth and production in the overall performance of my life? What is the net result of my living? Is it worthless weeds or the fine fruit of a life with Christ in the center?"

Christ made it clear there are three types of weeds, and we are going to look at those today. You can keep track by writing notes in your WVC journals or in the church app, or however you want to make sure you remember what God tells you today.

The first weed we want to look at today is the weed of...

Worldly Worry.

This is what Jesus called the worries of life. We used to call this "the rat race." Are you familiar with that term? It was used to describe the stress and work and worry involved with trying to compete and keep up with the demands for money, power, status, and material possessions. That's the rat race. But like one comedienne once said, "The problem with the rat race is that, even if you win, you're still a rat."²

But even if we don't want to get caught up in the rat race, the cares of living are still an embedded part of our lives. So we delude ourselves if we believe that somehow as Christians, we are exempt from the stresses and strains of life, because it is a part of everyday life in this world. The Bible is clear that God understands this, and we are not exempt from it; but the difference is in our attitude about it and what our focus should be on. Psalm 34:19 says:

"The good man does not escape all troubles—he has them too. But the Lord helps him in each and every one." (Psalm 34:19, tlb)

Jesus was very clear about this – that we would have stress in this life; he understood that. But he reminded us:

"I have told you all this so that you will have peace of heart and mind. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows; but cheer up, for I have overcome the world."
(John 16:33, tlb)

The daily demands of meeting expectations, earning a living, paying bills, taking care of loved ones – this is all a daily part of being responsible. The problem comes when we become consumed with these things, when we become discontent and ungrateful, and so we begin to "fret." Fretting is to

² Lily Tomlin

worry to the point of being troubled and irritated and obsessed. This is why God tells us in his Word:

“Do not fret – it only leads to evil.” (Psalm 37:8, niv)

Why is fretting a problem? Why does fretting lead to evil? Because *the minute we begin to worry, we stop believing that God is in control and that He is bigger than our problems, or we think he can't take care of us. (repeat)*

The difference is where our focus and trust are placed. At my parents' home (which was the house I grew up in), they had a couple of large maple trees at their home – one in the back and one in the front. After my mom passed, we moved my dad up here to assisted living and we sold their house last year, but when our boys were growing up, we would take them there about once a year. Now, I didn't get to climb those trees when I was a kid. We moved into that house when I was about 3, and then my dad planted the trees, so they were too small for me growing up. But by the time our boys were little, those two trees were at least 50 feet tall with branches going in many directions – perfect for climbing. So when we'd go visit, the boys wanted to climb them. They'd have a little competition to see if they could get higher than the last time.

One time, when they first got the bug to start climbing the trees, I lifted one of our boys up to the tree's lowest branch. He was about 5 at the time (I won't say which one it was). But he was scared, and he wouldn't let go of me. I tried to coach him along, telling him to first kneel on the branch, then slowly stand up and climb to the center of the tree. But the only thing he was concerned about was falling. He kept saying, “I'm going to fall! I'm going to fall!” I couldn't seem to get him to relax, so I said, “Don't think about falling. Think about climbing. Think about what's right in front of you and where you want to go.” He thought about that for a moment, and then he cautiously stood and climbed the branch toward the center of the tree. His fear was gone, and he was able to do what he wanted. I remember the very next day he wanted to climb the tree again. This time when I lifted him onto the lowest branch, he said, “Daddy, this time I will think about climbing.” He climbed confidently right up into the middle of the tree, and began to climb higher. He wasn't as concerned about falling anymore. *His mom* was concerned, but he wasn't so much.

The phrase, “think about climbing” sticks with me. When I think about my own life – about tasks or projects I need to complete that seem impossible, schedules that overwhelm, I sometimes feel paralyzed with stress and worry. If I allow that to overcome me, I will be crippled and stunted. But if I think about climbing with Christ – not fretting or worrying – then I will be able to see the problem or challenge from a new height, with new perspective. Does that make sense?

Jesus went to great lengths to teach about this. He said at one point in his Sermon on the Mount:

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry

(repeat 2x), saying, 'What shall we eat? 'or 'What shall we drink? 'or 'What shall we wear? '
For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own." (Matthew 6:25-34, niv)

Jesus makes it abundantly clear: we cannot borrow sorrow from tomorrow. Today's got enough of its own, and the answer to that is to keep our focus on God's Kingdom and his purposes – the Logos – all wrapped up in our relationship to Jesus Christ and our submission to him – not to focus on the things of this world.

Let me ask you this: would you say that you are good at worrying? (raise your hand) Sure! Well, if you are good at worrying, then you are already good at meditation. It's just that you are meditating on the wrong things. Meditate on anything other than Jesus and you'll be good at worrying, which will lead to fretting, which leads to evil. Instead, use that ability to meditate on Jesus, who he is and what he can do and what he wants to do in your life and in this world through you. The more you do that, the less you worry. Turn worry into worship!

So first is the weed of worldly worry. The second weed that Jesus mentions is...

The Attraction of Affluence.

This is similar to worldly worry, but it's focused more specifically on money. This is difficult for us for all kinds of reasons – greed comes naturally to us because it's in our sin nature. But we also live in a commercialized society that thrives on creating a scarcity mentality; it works best if we are not content and always think we need more, because then we buy more stuff. And then we make more money, which can be taxed at greater rates so the government can get more of your money. Money is a real problem for us.

There is a Jewish parable about an old rich man with a cranky, miserable attitude. He visited a rabbi one day to see if the rabbi might be able to help him discover what was wrong with his life.

After the two men talked together for a while, the rabbi thought of a good way to illustrate to the rich man the problem with his life. Taking the man by the hand, he led him over to the window. He asked him to look out the window and tell him what he saw. The man stood there a moment before saying, "I see some men and women and a few children."

The rabbi said, "Fine." Once more he led the rich man by the hand across the room to the mirror. The rabbi said, "Now look and tell me what you see."

The rich man frowned and said, "Well, I obviously see myself." The rabbi said, "Interesting. The window is made of glass, and mirror is also made of glass. But the glass of the mirror has been covered with silver. As soon as you add the silver, you cease to see others and instead see only yourself."

A very good point!

What does the Bible say about this? Doesn't the Bible say, "Money is the root of all evil"? No – it does *not* say that. The Bible says in 1 Timothy 6:10,

“For *the love* of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.” (1 Timothy 6:10, niv, italics added)

What is the root of evil? It’s not money itself that is the source of evil – it’s *our love* of money that is. Money is simply a resource – a tool to be used, and it can be used for great good in this world. But love it and it’s the source of evil for you. Again – it’s your attitude.

One author has rightly said, “Some Christians have a distinct misunderstanding about wealth. Wealth in itself is not wrong. Riches are not necessarily evil. Affluence is not always sin. Immense finances are not invariably wicked. If that were so, then God would never have given so much wealth to men like Abraham, Joseph, Solomon, Job, or Hezekiah...not to mention some modern-day heroes of the faith. The difficulty lies in our attitude toward wealth. How is it dispensed? For what purposes is it accumulated? To what ends is it dedicated? For most people the dilemma is the deceitfulness of riches. Riches have the capacity to distort our thinking; riches may blind us to eternal values; riches also have the insidious ability to dominate our desires.”³

It’s like that old story of when someone asked the famous millionaire Rockefeller, “How much money is enough?” His response was, “One dollar more.” That becomes the attitude that many of us have. By the way, the *lack* of money can be just as much a choking weed to us, if we think that money is the answer for our lives, or we get caught up in the desire for more of it. But Jesus was clear about what, or better *who* ought to control our lives:

“No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money.”
(Matthew 6:24, niv)

The word that Jesus used for “money” is the word “mammon.” Mammon is more in the form of a name than a noun. In other words, Jesus was calling money a false God, or an idol, or even a demon. Money is *that* dangerous to believers. That’s because to follow one is to become entangled in the weedy undergrowth of selfish, self-centered living. To follow Christ, on the other hand, is to have the ground of our lives cleared of constricting weeds that would wrap themselves around us in our pursuit of wealth for its own sake.

Obviously, we can’t devote our days to just making money and at the same time devote them to serving God. The question comes down to this: “Is wealth my master or is Christ? Who controls my life and money?” Because if Christ controls you, he will be in charge of what you do with money. If Christ is not, then money is. The answer then is to desire Christ more than anything else, and always be ready to respond instantly to the same call that Christ gave the rich young ruler when he told him this:

Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”
(Mark 10:21, niv)

If that seems extreme or scary to you, if you hesitate when you consider that command, then watch out – there may be a weed growing! Naturally, Jesus isn’t telling you to be irresponsible; he’s making sure you’ve surrendered everything to him – especially money.

³ Randy Alcorn

John Wesley, the great Christian leader from the past had this rule of thumb: “Get all you can without hurting your soul, your body, or your neighbor. Save all you can, cutting off every needless expense. Give all you can. Be glad to give, and ready to distribute; laying up in store for yourselves a good foundation against the time to come, that you may attain eternal life.”⁴

If you want the antidote to the attraction of affluence, be a giving person. Give of yourself, including being generous with money. Give as God gives: fully, freely, and sacrificially. What are we told about God? For God so loved the world that he...*gave* his one and only son. He gave all he could give because he loves you, and he wants you to be like him. That’s Christlikeness. Do you know why, every Sunday, we receive tithes and offerings? Is it because God needs our money? No. *It is a weekly practice of priority for us*. It reminds us that God gives, that we can trust him, and that we want to be giving people. God has set the tithe in his word – giving ten percent – in order to remind *ourselves* that God is first in our lives. That’s obedience. Then, we give beyond the tithe in order to practice generosity. Tithe is obedience and trust, offerings are generosity. That’s why we always say it’s “God’s tithes and our offerings.” Listen, you don’t get stronger in anything without exercise and practice. The same is true in giving. We give weekly to avoid this weed in our lives.

Worldly worry, the attraction of affluence, and the third weed is...

The Magnetism of Materials.

Jesus put this bluntly as Mark records this parable in his gospel. Jesus said:

“The lusts or desires for other things come in and choke the word, making it unfruitful.”
(Mark 4:19, niv)

As with wealth, so with material things; many of them in and of themselves are not wrong. It is the *desire* for them that grows and diverts us from the more important, eternal, divine values in life, and we end up settling for second best. One author says it really well: “We are occupied with tinsel when we could be reaching for the stars.” (*repeat*)

One of my hobbies is to read, and I like reading about history. I once read that in 1923 there was a meeting held at the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago. Attending the meeting were nine of the world’s most successful financiers: Charles Schwab, steel magnate; Howard Hobson, president of the largest gas company at the time; Arthur Cotton, the greatest wheat speculator; Richard Whitney, president of the New York Stock Exchange; Albert Fall, a member of the US President’s cabinet; Leon Fraser, president of the Bank of International Settlements; Jesse Livermore, the great “bear” of Wall Street; and Ivar Krueger, head of the most powerful monopoly in the world.

Twenty five years later, Charles Schwab had died in bankruptcy, and had lived his last five years on borrowed money; Samuel Insull had died a fugitive from justice and penniless in a foreign land; Howard Hobson was insane; Arthur Cotton had died abroad, insolvent; Richard Whitney had spent time in the famous Sing Sing prison; Albert Fall had been pardoned so he could die at home and not in prison; Jesse Livermore, Ivar Krueger and Leon Fraser had all died by suicide. Tragic ends to lives of material luxury.

Reminds us of what Jesus said:

⁴ <https://www.forbes.com/quotes/5543/>

“What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?”
(Mark 8:36, niv)

In light of these men’s stories from history, Jesus’ words make serious sense, don’t they?

Still, we live in a consumer society, where the expectation is that we consume things, and if we can’t afford them then we consume them on credit. Day and night the media by every means and in every way crams our TV’s and bulging mailboxes and emails and phones and devices, screams at us to buy this, strive for that, acquire something here, possess something there. As a result we become mesmerized with and magnetized to material things.

But God’s Word is very, very clear – while the world urges us to get, get, get, Jesus tells us to give, give, give.

The world says that happiness lies in everything from sex to spaghetti. Christ says our peace is in knowing him. Period. The world says make a big splash and show your success by your possessions – impress people on your Instagram posts of all the places you’ve been. Christ says that the greatest among us is the one who is willing and ready to be the least.

What is it you desire? Is it materials? Or is it Christ? Because you can’t have both. Jesus warned us by saying:

“Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions.” (Luke 12:15, niv)

What does your life consist of? Again, we go back to the original question: what is growing in the ground of your life? Is it the worthless weeds of worldly worry? The attraction of affluence? The magnetism of materials?

I’d like for us to move to a time of prayer.

You know, in New Testament times, scientific research says that there were over 200 species of common weeds that would grow in gardens. It was a gardener’s constant work to cleanly cultivate the ground. The only available means was to constantly pull at the weeds. It must’ve been backbreaking!

Today, we’ve got some advantages. If I see some unwanted weeds in my flowerbeds, all I have to do is go to my garage, open a bottle of weed killer, walk out, spray the weed, and then wait for it to die. The real hard work of coming up with the chemicals strong enough to kill the weeds has already been done for me. All I have to do is apply it.

Here’s the point: as we’ve been talking, have you realized that there are weeds of sin choking out God’s Word and purposes in your life? There’s good news – the hard work of developing a weed killer has already been done for you. You can stop breaking your back trying to constantly pull them up – you’ll never be able to eradicate weeds on your own. There is a substance that you can apply to those weeds of worry, affluence, and materialism. That substance is called the blood of Jesus Christ. Jesus shed his blood for you; it is his shed blood that brings about the forgiveness of sins for you and me. All you need to do is identify the weeds – confess them to Jesus, then apply His blood over them by asking him to forgive you. He will kill those weeds – that sin – all the way down to the roots. But if you try to pull them up yourself, do you know what will happen? You won’t get it all; there will be some remnant of weed root left in the soil that will spring up again in

some other place. Let Jesus forgive you, and then invite the Holy Spirit himself to till the soil of your soul and keep your heart pure – to keep you from going back to those things again.

Prayer

(Ephesians 3:17-19, tlb)

I pray that Christ will be more and more at home in your hearts, living within you as you trust in him. May your roots go down deep into the soil of God's marvelous love; and may you be able to feel and understand, as all God's children should, how long, how wide, how deep, and how high his love really is; and to experience this love for yourselves, though it is so great that you will never see the end of it or fully know or understand it. And so at last you will be filled up with God himself.