

## The Infested Heart

Mark 4:1-20

There is a plant known as the Belladonna, a beautiful plant with long leaves, bell-shaped purple and green flowers, and delicious sweet berries. In fact, the name 'Belladonna' is Italian for beautiful woman. It is found in many parts of the world, and is an attractive plant to have in your garden. Another name for the Belladonna is 'Deadly Nightshade'. That's because eating a few berries will kill a human. In fact, ingesting just one leaf will usually be fatal. The belladonna is an attractive, but destructive weed that will kill.

The things that kill the Word in our lives are not ugly looking. They are attractive and tasty on the surface; they bring happiness and short-term satisfaction. But the end result is that they kill the Word.

As we've studied this parable, we've seen Christ's main lesson that the power of the Word works together with the condition of the heart that hears it. Hard hearts reject it altogether. Shallow hearts seem to receive it, but actually don't, and it simply takes some persecution to reveal that. We come now to the third kind of heart.

**Mark 4:7** *And some seed fell among thorns; and the thorns grew up and choked it, and it yielded no crop.*

This is the image: this seed falls on ground with enough softness to receive the seed, it is not like the wayside. This soil 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 (Luke 8:7).

Here's the thing: thorns or weeds thrive in most soils. You pull them out and leave just a fragment and they're back. They spread, they flourish, and they grow quickly, so much so that we use them as analogies for speedy growth. That's because weeds and thorns do well in their native soil. 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. You don't have to do that with 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!

Now Jesus explains the meaning of this kind of soil.

**Mark 4:18-19** *Now these are the ones sown among thorns; they are the ones who hear the word, <sup>19</sup> "and the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the desires for other things entering in choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful.*

Jesus says this kind of heart, this kind of hearer is not resisting the Word outright. They are not being shallow or impulsive with it either. They hear the Word, they consider it, and they take it in. The problem is that 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?

Jesus describes three things: the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches and the desires for other things.

Let's examine those for a moment to see what Jesus means by them.

### ***i) The Cares of this World***

The way that comes out in English makes it sound harmless. The word for world is actually the word that is often translated 'age' – this era, this time; while the word cares' is a negative word meaning anxieties, worries, and burdens. It might better be translated, "anxieties of this age". This is not merely the pressures of living. It is something connected with worldliness. 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. In other words, this is the heart and mind of the one chasing worldliness. They are chasing the things the world values. They are seeking the world's approval. They want the world's entertainment. They want the world's experiences - lust of the flesh: what I can experience, lust of the eyes: how I can appear, pride of life: what I can control

But it is not at all an easy thing to please all the competing gods of worldliness. You need money to get those experiences, to keep those friends, to look impressive, and to gain more and more control over life. Then you 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 to enjoy the experiences. 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. 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. This is one of the thorns, and it chokes the Word.

### ***ii) The Deceitfulness of Riches***

What Jesus is calling our attention to is not money or wealth itself, but the deceitfulness of it. 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 of riches that is deceitful. Whether that promise comes from our own minds or the minds of others, it is a promise which lies. Money promises freedom, but loving money produces bondage. Money promises power but loving money produces slavery. Money promises pleasure, but loving it brings more pain. Money promises security but loving it 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.

***Proverbs 11:4*** Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, But righteousness delivers from death. Money promises status, but in the end 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?*

Money promises to solve your problems but loving it brings two more for every one it solves.  
Money promises love, loving it ends up attracting selfish people who love your money and not you.  
Money promises permanence, but loving it ends up flying 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.*

Money promises to satisfy your every desire, and then, for loving it, God withholds you from enjoying it

**Ecclesiastes 6:1-2** *There is an evil which I have seen under the sun, and it is common among men: <sup>2</sup> A man to whom God has given riches and wealth and honor, so that he lacks nothing for himself of all he desires; yet God does not give him power to eat of it, but a foreigner consumes it. This is vanity, and it is an evil affliction.*

In 1928 a group of the world's most successful financiers met at the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago. The following were present: The president of the largest utility company, the greatest wheat speculator, the president of the New York Stock Exchange, a member of the President's Cabinet, the greatest "bear" in Wall Street, the president of the Bank of International Settlements, the head of the world's greatest monopoly. Collectively, these tycoons controlled more wealth than there was in the U.S. Treasury, and for years newspapers and magazines had been printing their success stories and urging the youth of the nation to follow their examples. Twenty-five years later, this is what had happened to these men:

The president of the largest independent steel company, Charles Schwab, lived on borrowed money the last five years of his life and died broke.

The greatest wheat speculator, Arthur Cutten, died abroad, insolvent.

The president of the New York Stock Exchange, Richard Whitney, served a term in Sing Sing Prison.

The member of the President's Cabinet, Albert Fall, was pardoned from prison so he could die at home.

The greatest "bear" in Wall Street, Jesse Livermore, committed suicide.

The president of the Bank of International Settlements, Leon Fraser, committed suicide.

The head of the world's greatest monopoly, Ivar Drueger, committed suicide.

All of these men had learned how to make money, but not one of them had learned how to live.

And yet, with these examples, how prone we are to seek after wealth. It is that very desire, which will destroy the Word's effectiveness in your life.

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

### ***iii) The Desires for Other Things***

This is simply the desire for pleasure apart from God. Whether it is material possessions, status, power, prestige, sexual lust, knowledge – it is simply seeking joy and pleasure outside of God.

There is a simple word for that: idolatry.

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

#### **1) Notice, these things 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, <sup>22</sup> "thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lewdness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride, foolishness. <sup>23</sup> "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 general covetousness 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 comforts of 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) These things do not peacefully co-exist with 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?

*Firstly, because they are hostile to the things of God.* Thorns actually grow over and pierce and destroy another plant. So these things are hostile to the mind which wants to serve 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. <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> 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.

**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! <sup>25</sup> "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."

**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. <sup>10</sup> 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.

**Colossians 3:5-6** Therefore put to death .... covetousness, which is idolatry. <sup>6</sup> Because of these things the wrath of God is coming upon the sons of disobedience,

**Luke 12:15** And He said to them, "Take heed and beware of covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses."

**Mark 8:36** For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?

Secondly, because they use up what the Word needs, weeds choke plants when they use up the things they need to survive like water or soil space, or block out the sun.

What are the things that the Word requires for it to grow and thrive in your life?

**It needs time.** You need time to read the Word, hear the Word, and above all – think on the Word. And what these things do is not simply use up time, but they take up all your time. They run you off your feet from when you wake up to when you go to sleep. Pretty soon your weekends are filled too, until even the Lord's Day starts to be used for profane purposes.

**It needs attention.** When you do need to study the Word, you need to give it your thoughtful, careful attention. But what these things do is begin to send our minds to an endless list of responsibilities and tasks and to-do lists, so that we are almost continually thinking about a list of things, scattered thoughts, flitting from task to task, thought to thought, and less and less able to focus, to concentrate, to listen. What worldliness and wealth-seeking and idolatry do is to send our attention in a hundred different directions, so that calling it home seems like trying to retrieve a hundred birds we let out their cages.

**It needs desire.** There is no doubt that the one who wants to understand the Word must come with desire. You must come with a desire to search, to seek, to hear and to remain seeking and waiting until you do. It requires persistence and patience, which can only be motivated by desire. The problem with these things is - by the time they have finished with us, we have little desire left except to sleep or watch TV. It requires a high level of desire to keep pursuing wealth or a great image or power or things. You have to be, in the world's parlance, 'driven'. But a better word for how most people feel when trying to please all these gods is 'drained'. False gods use up desires like a desert drinks up water, and like the desert floor, false gods do not replenish the water. They use up time, they use up attention, they use up desire. At first they use up time that the Word should have received. After a while, they have grown to where they are forcing the Word, if not any relationship

with God, out entirely.

### **How should we deal with thorns and weeds?**

1) Pull them out where you find them. What is the spiritual equivalent of pulling out the weeds? 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. Turn your back on it. Ask God for forgiveness and then leave it behind you.

Repentance. Continual confession and repentance from these things when we find them growing.

2) Consider, thorns and weeds wouldn't grow if those seeds never found place in the heart. What would be the seed of worldliness, lust for money or idolatry? Thoughts - if you give space to thoughts which approve of these things, you are letting seeds take root.

Where do your thoughts go when they are free?

Sometimes you will hear a Christian say that they fantasise about being wealthy, or having all kinds of things and they then smile and say, “Well, it's OK to dream, isn't it?” It is OK to imagine things which are God's will. To fantasise about something which is clearly not God's will, or may not be God's will, only plants those seeds in your heart.

You cannot buy a pet alligator when he is a few centimetres long, and hope he will never bring you any trouble in the future.

Track your thoughts. Direct your thoughts, don't watch them. Hold your thoughts to the standard of *Phil 4:8. Whatever is true, noble, just, pure, of good report, virtuous, praiseworthy -- meditate on these things.*

**2 Corinthians 10:5** *casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ,*

3) Thorns and weeds wouldn't grow if we did not give them space. How do we give them space? By the way we live our lives, by our priorities. The hard part is not letting the natural and good become the evil. It is good and well to work hard and support yourself or your family. It is another thing to allow the chase for luxuries and a materially luxurious life begin. It is good and well to take care of your appearance. It is another thing to become addicted to it and bound to this world's fashions. It is fine to enjoy the pleasurable gifts God gives you. It is another thing when we chase them or want them out of God's will.

The only way you can keep track of whether or not the natural and good has become thorny and evil is periodically do an “evaluate and amputate”. Evaluate your life, the priorities you keep, the budget you use, the lifestyle you have with the Scriptures. Is it in line with the following Scriptures?

**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,*

**Titus 3:14** *And let our people also learn to maintain good works, to meet urgent needs, that they may not be unfruitful.*

**2 Corinthians 9:6-7** *But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. <sup>7</sup> So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver.*

**1 Timothy 6:8** *And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.*

**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. <sup>18</sup> Let them do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to give, willing to share, <sup>19</sup> storing up for themselves a good foundation for the time to come, that they may lay hold on eternal life.*

That kind of life does not require the kind of upkeep that the world insists upon. Is it the streamlined, efficient, wartime lifestyle of God's people, or is it just a PG version of the world's lifestyle? Is it essentially the same lifestyle, minus the evil entertainment?

If it is the same, then consider what you might amputate to avoid those thorns from growing. It's interesting how Jesus dealt with this in the rich, young ruler. He called him to go and sell all his goods, give to the poor and follow Him. Jesus was dealing with the weed by giving it no space, and calling the man to use the ground for other things. Very often, self-denial and sacrifice are exactly the things which challenge these thorns and give them no space. It is amputation - service where it is uncomfortable, budgeting more for mercy or missions or ministry. Perhaps some needed confrontations in refusing to allow the world to encroach further on your time and desires and attention.

If God has blessed you financially, praise Him for it – no sin in that. But do a radical inventory. A good thing becomes a bad thing if it chokes out the best thing.

These three thorns unfortunately grow naturally in our hearts. Left to themselves, they will choke out what the Word needs, and left to grow, they are hostile to it. Pull them out with repentance, don't give the seeds, by thinking about them, space to grow and make sure your priorities are not secretly giving them room to breathe and branch out.