

Sunday, October 27, 1968

Sermon Subject: "Thistles, Thorns and a Thousand Things"

Three summers ago, my family and I came to Gatlinburg. Shortly after we had moved into the parsonage it fell my luck to get out and mow the grass. And while I was mowing the grass in the back yard, there was a plant that was growing just off the patio. I paused when I got to it. I learned a long time ago as many of you husbands did that when you mow the grass and there's some question in your mind, you'd better be careful, lest you mow down the flowers. When I saw this plant growing there, I stopped and studied it for a moment and then I reasoned this way: it must be a flower or it wouldnt have been left to grow this long, for it was a healthy plant. So, I let it grow and I watched it over the course of the summer as it grew stronger and taller and then in late summer suddenly there was a beautiful purple blossom at the top of the plant. It was a thistle. But it was a beautiful blossom. And I was glad that I let it grow, and I knew that it had been left there because of the knowledge that when it did mature that there would be this beautiful purple blossom at the top even if it were only a weed. And so the second summer, when the grass began to grow, I discovered that there were dozens of little plants of the thistle growing in my back yard. And so I was very selective, I chose two or three to let grow. And I mowed the others down and each time I mowed the grass, I kept mowing them back and I left these few to grow. This past summer when I started to mow the grass, I had to look for the blades of grass, thistles were everywhere. So finally I had to get down on my hands and knees and cut each of these plants with a long blade and be done with them all before they took over the whole yard. Now it was after an experience similar to this that Jesus paused to tell a parable. He said that a sower went out to sow and when he scattered the wheat upon the ground, some of it fell upon a rocky path where the soil was thin and it did take hold and grow up into tiny shoots but because there was little nourishment there, that when the sun came out and burned against it and when there was a short draught, then the plants burned up and were destroyed and there was nothing there. Some of the wheat fell upon a hard path where it had been packed down so hard that the roots couldn't take hold and so the seeds simply lay there until the birds came out of the sky and devoured them. He said some fell upon fertile soil but, thorns had been left to grow there so that when the plants took hold and tried to grow up into healthy plants they couldn't. The thorns crowded them out until finally, choaked of all nourishment they shrivilled up and died and finally there were no plants there. Then he said there was that great part of the land which was free and clean and free from all weeds and thorns and here the wheat took hold and it grew up into a great harvest. Now he said what I have illustrated to you is the various ways in which the gospel of God takes holdin people's lives. Now for you and me we don't have to be concerned about those persons who are likened to the hard soil upon which the seeds cannot take hold. The very fact that you are here the very fact that you have chosen to pause these moments to worship God. This is proof within itself that his presence ~~that~~ had taken hold upon your life. You have not rejected him because of the hardness of your life. Neither do we need to be concerned about those represented by the seed falling upon shallow soil which flashes for a moment and then is gone. Once again the evidence of your presence speakes of your still concern and your reaching out after God. And for some of us we are the fertile soil upon which the seed had fallen and our lives have produced much, we are real gems in God's kingdom. Possible there are some of us here that have no weeds in our lives or thorns, but I dare say that most of us come into the category whose lives are filled with thorns in which the presence of God must struggle for survival. Here we are most vulnerable, because

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we being human and having taken on the attributes of humanity, naturally have these leanings in other directions so that there is a constant struggle for the gospel of Christ to manifest ourselves in our lives. We turn to other things and move in other directions, and be totally unaware of the presence of God.

what they might be and

Let's look at these thorns and see if there is an identification that we make with our lives to what Christ has warned us against. It was he who identified them. He said there are those clumps of thorns which are cares of this world. What he was simply saying was that we are so caught up with worry and anxiety that our lives are not sensitive to the better things, the nobler things, and they are soon choked by the presence and the worries and the anxieties. You know as well as I that it's entirely impossible for us to be free of worry and care. None of us are strong enough to be a barrier to any presence of anxiety or concern. And yet there's a great danger of letting it override the calmness and the courage and the faith in God that erases all worry and cares. Jesus warned us over and over again about letting anxiety take hold. For he saw that it kills the spirit of the man. I don't know of anything that so drains a person of vitality and energy then to be obsessed with some worry or some fear whether it's imagined or it's real. To worry is to race the engine of one's car while it's sitting still, using up all of the force and the energy and yet achieving nothing for here is a ravenous beast that is constantly eating and draining away and giving nothing in return. One has gone far ~~away~~ along to complete trust in God when he can lay his cares upon God and wipe away his fears his worries and his anxieties. Worry puts life out of perspective. It's difficult to see where the values really lie and the measure of value from one to another. George Bernard Shaw said that the luxury of worry is best achieved by those who have enough time to wonder whether he's happy or not. And all of us know people like that and perhaps we too are like that. Looking within ourselves and searching within ourselves for the inadequacies and the lack of real purposes that we determine that we are going to be unhappy and we are really far short of what we are really capable of becoming because we are obsessed with the fact that perhaps there are inequities in life and at times we get more than our share of the lower range of life's gifts. I think a lot of the problem that exists today, concerning human rights can be pointed into this direction. If there were more energy and time given to doing something creative and building upon the positive aspects that are there without constantly looking upon the absence of the things that are not there, keeping them in the forefront many times avoids our moving along without ~~our~~ <sup>root</sup> of purpose ~~and~~ <sup>in</sup> direction in achieving what we all want in the end. Anyone of us looking upon the things that we do not have being unaware of the things that we do have, are going to be unhappy and feel that we are cheated in life. Obsession with worry many times will drive us to the point of physical illness. There is a term for it in the medical profession, simply one being brought down by a ~~physiso~~ psychosomatic illness, which is not to say that the illness is not there, it is but the root of the illness is in the mind, and not from any physical cause. Those who are ill from psychosomatic causes are just as ill as any other. And then worry denies us of so many opportunities that we ought to take advantage of. Remember that occasion when Jesus stopped off at Bethany to visit in the house of Lazarus, Mary and Martha lived there and they were dear companions of Jesus although Jesus had a family, I think Mary and Martha and Lazarus were as dear to him as any other family he might have because there are so many times that Jesus stopped off at Bethany when he needed to find some companionship and some real strength that comes from others. On this particular occasion, he came and they weren't expecting him, I think perhaps it had been a hard day for Martha, she wasn't ready for guests. Mary impulsively rushed out and threw her arms about him and said, "Come on in."

And then she sat down at his feet and she listened to every word with rapt attention that he had to say. But Mary didn't come out of the house. She was pacing the floor on the inside and she was asking the question, "It's almost dinnertime, and I'm not prepared for guests, what will I do, I have nothing to serve him, I don't have enough?" "I didn't prepare the house for company and I'm embarrassed for him to even come in and sit at the table and see what a poor housekeeper that he might think that I am." And so pacing the floor with this kind of worry she denied herself the rich experience of simply sitting down in the company of Christ, letting his words bring strength and meaning into her life. Worry, anxiety. Jesus says these are clumps of thorns that choke out the presence of God. And then he said there are those thorns of love of riches. Now Jesus never spoke out against ones possessing wealth. In fact the Old Testament equates great wealth with the blessing of God. And if one has attained much wealth then this is evidence that he has pleased God and God has blessed his life. And that can be said in many instances today where people have attained wealth. Many times it is because it is because of such a life they have lived that this is a natural end to what they have sought for. One isn't necessarily going down the wrong road if in the course of his movement, he is amassing riches. Jesus was very careful here to define the difference between possession of riches and an overwhelming desire for riches. I think perhaps most of us are vulnerable here. Because we are conscious of what money will buy, positions that wealth brings, and we all want these things so therefore in achieving wealth we can achieve many side things that we want as well. But life is far more than that. And the element of the blessings of riches is limited as to what it can do for a person, it's like eating all of your dessert at once. Because when this life is complete if it is one's possessions that he has amassed, the limit of his achievement is in riches then he is of all men, most poor. What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world, and yet lose his own soul, there's really no story in the bible that is quite as pathetic as the story of Diabes and Lazarus. How Lazarus was a poor man lying at the gate of Diabes, begging only for the food that has dropped from the table and then the events are projected out into the future to where you can see what has come of these two to see that Lazarus reclines in the bosom of Abraham. And now it is Diabes that is begging, not for a morsel of food but for a drop of water to cool the tip of his tongue. Yet we don't seem to learn that lesson. We go driving after possessions, trying to expend the balance sheet to show more credits and fewer debits. I read of an encounter between two men who were very close friends over the years. They hadn't seen one another for many years, after one had moved away to another city and now they were in reunion together and one said to the other, "Well, how's everything going now with you, I remember so well the good times that we shared when we lived next door." and he answered, "Oh, let me tell you about it." "After you left, you see, I made an investment in oil and I really made a killing, Oh you can't imagine what great fortune that was for me." He began to tell of all the things that he now had and the investments that had come from it. And then there was a pause in the conversation the first person said, "Tell me, do you still enjoy going to your church as much as you used to? I remember that that was really the highlight of your life" and the man paused for a minute and he said, "Well, no. Really, I'm too busy now I don't get to go to church like I used to, Oh! I love it, I would like to but business is just too demanding and I don't get to go there as often as I did." "Well, tell me about that Sunday School Class that you taught, you were always telling me about the things that went on there and how you felt that this was the one thing that was uniquely your way of serving God." OH!, he said, "I had to let that go long before I left the church, I just didn't have time for that. But let me tell you more about my oil empire."

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A desire for riches. is the thing that crowds out the presence of God. And then Jesus says that there is that clump of thorns that is simply other things. He didn't choose to identify these, let me say that instead of these they may be simply thistles, not quite as overwhelming as the one that Jesus identifies but the little things that keep God out. Perhaps it's greed. It may be selfishness. It may be simply a bad feeling that exists between you and another person. It could be any number of things but these are the little things that take precedence over the teachings of Christ as to what one ~~w~~ should do when he is confronted with these things. So many things that use up all of our energy and time so that when we get to the end we discover that we have no cargo after all. It's like the two steamboats that were racing on the Mississippi River. They had both left from the port of New Orleans and they were on their way to Memphis and this was back in the days when everyone wanted to race upon the river. This one steamboat was proceeding up the river ~~and as he~~ he discovered that a steamboat of a rival was gaining on him and so he sent word down to keep adding fuel to the furnace until we pull out ahead of them but instead of pulling out ahead of him, he discovered that he was losing ground and so he sent word again throw in all the wood that we can get hold up to make a hotter fire to build up more steam. And so they began to rip away the wood in the ship using the furniture everything that they could get their hands on and they threw it into the furnace to build up a head of steam. And so he pulled out ahead of them finally he had used all the fuel and he began to slow down and the rival ship began to gain once again. So he turned to one of the men on the ship and he said, "What's our cargo?" He said, "It's a cargo of meat." And he said, "Oh, that ought to stoke the fire good, start ~~throwing~~ throwing in the meat." And so they did and so the burning meat built up a head of steam and he pulled out ahead of his rival and got into Memphis long ahead of his rival ship. But when he pulled up to the dock, he looked out ~~onto the dock~~ waiting to see the wagons waiting for the cargo of meat and he looked down into the hole and it was empty. He got there ahead, but he had no cargo. when he arrived. This tragedy can be illustrated many times over in the lives of us who let other things take precedence over the one real importance of our lives. But I don't think Jesus would want us to stop here although this is as far as he carried us along, because now we have been talking about negative aspects of our faith. We have been talking about defensive ~~measures~~ measures and the other teachings of Christ say so much about the offensive measures of our faith. The greatest defense there is is a good offense. I remember sometime ago watching a football game and it was a hard fought game, it was a bruising game. One team had the ball and they couldn't move it and then they got the ball and they couldn't move it. And so they kicked it off to the former and so it was for the full measure of the game it was simply beating themselves against one another and kicking the ball to the other team and the game ended with a score of 0 to 0. Something is to be said about a good defense, but the best defense is a good offense. Not one of us wants to face Christ and say, "Look at the absence of faults and sins in my life. This is not what he is asking of us. Rather he says let me see the badges of achievement. Let me see the trophies that you've won. Not what you've been able to keep out of your lives. If we are to establish a fertile ground upon which the seed can fall and grow, it is to be a land that is absent of thistles, or thorns, or a thousand things that keep God out. It would be wonderful if someone were to invent a fertilizer that you could work into the soil and the plants could be strengthened by it and the weeds could be poisoned by it. Perhaps there will be a break through like that

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sometime, it hasn't come yet, but there has been a breakthrough like that in our spiritual lives, for God has given us the means by where we can strengthen the wheat only to let the thorns and the thistles die away. The first of this is to have a bolstering of our confidence in God, God is not experiencing the best press these days. He's not the most acceptable force that is loose in society. One philosopher said that perhaps the greatest mistake of God is that he is so constantly misunderstood in every age of man. And as we project our mind back to the time of the early Hebrews, their concept of God was such a gross miscalculation, we wonder how they could have worshipped a God like that. But then let us move into modern times and let us see that there is an equally gross misinterpretation of what God is really like. For one thing he is of an intellectual nature. And his power is beyond any achievement that we have made in science. Our tendency is to put other things above ~~xx~~ him and say, my mind is too well trained to accept such a primitive idea as this, and yet the very nature of God astounds the ~~xxxx~~ greatest minds, we can only attain toward it, we can't attain it. We need to put a confidence in this kind of a God, the real ever-present power, God. We pride ourselves in relating ~~xxxxx~~ <sup>our</sup> lives to something that is important something that is real, yet this is the most real and most important of all things. And having bolstered our confidence in God, we need to bolster our confidence in ourselves. It's awfully difficult to think that we could be important, that our lives can count for much because we are constantly being reminded tht we're not important. Halford Luddock ~~said that he was on a train riding into New York City and then as he was sitting there~~ <sup>came by</sup> and then motioning to the seat in which he was sitting said, "This space is reserved for New York." And as he walked on by the thought went through my mind, "Why couldn't he have said this man is going to New York, this person is going to New York, but all he saw me as was a space and nothing more than that." Many times we're looked upon as one segment of a greater portion with little importance within our selves. As the presidential candidates are vying for our attention and our support they want each one of our votes individually, but they are looking at states. We've got to get this state and we've got to get that state and in order to get that state we must attain individual support. But the individual support is not the important thing. Sometimes we wonder if we matter for much at all. There's a great debate going on right now in the Roman Catholic Church as to whether birth preventive measures can be used. And I'm glad that this is raging now ~~and it~~ because it serves to point out one thing to us and that is the fact that the individual is a Child of God, <sup>not</sup> something to be looked at very casually and accepted or rejected at will. Now don't get me wrong, I believe in birth control and if we don't control the population of the world, we are in for some perilous times. I think it's only a matter of time until our brother church, the Catholic Church comes into thinking in the very same way because it is something that we have to control and face up to but at the same time it tells us that every individual born is precious in the sight of God and is not to be taken lightly. If Jesus taught us one thing that surmounts time, it is this, God loves you, not because you're an American, not because you are white, not because you're Protestant, not because you're Catholic, not because you're beautiful, he loves you because you are his child. Harry Lotter was a Scottish comedian and in World War I he lost two sons in battle, it was almost more than he could bear and after the war was over and he had spent himself entertaining and working for causes that would help the war effort, his doctor said to him, "You're going to have to get away for a while." And with that he sent him off to Australia to recuperate. While he was living there in Australia, away from all the pressures of his former life each evening at dusk he would take a walk down a dusty lane and after a while there

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was a little lad who fell in beside him and they would walk down the lane together, many times the little boy talking at a fast pace. Harry Lotter never replying, and then at other times their sharing a conversation together. On this particular evening, the little boy fell in beside him and they were both silent for a little while and then the little boy looked over into the window of a cottage they were passing and there was a service banner hanging there in the window and he looked at it and he pointed and he said, "What is that?" Harry Lotter said, "Well, son, that star in the window said that there was a boy who came out of this home to go into battle and fight for you and me." This satisfied the little boy until they had gone a little further and he spotted a gold star, and he said, "There's a gold star, what does it stand for?" Remembering his own two sons who had been lost in battle, his eyes moistened as he answered, "Son, that means that there was a lad in that house who laid down his life for you and me, that we might be free." This sobered them both for a moment and after they'd gone a little further, the little boy looked up into the sky and he said excitedly, "Look up there, God hung out his banner." Looking at the evening star, there was a bright gold star hanging in the sky. Harry Lotter's spirit quickened. He remembered. He said, "Yes, son, God did send his son into battle and he died for you and me." Harry Lotter telling that experience said that in that moment I realized the worth of my two sons that died in battle and I felt that I was a Man once again. Whenever we are prone to feel that we are not important, pause to take a look at the cross, that is God's way of saying, "You, too, are important."

And now, this: Sometime you will be asked in judgement, "Show me your wheat." Pity the man who has only thistles and thorn and a thousand things that have choked God out.