

Little Green Apples

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[0 : 00] Well, I was told once, I guess I read it in a book, that before Vancouver was ever inhabited, and it was still virgin forest, that one of the biggest trees ever seen in British Columbia stood at the corner of Granville and Georgia Street.

A tree so big that you could hardly believe the dimensions of it, a great Douglas fir, the seed of which would fit under any of your fingernails. Now, I'm talking about seeds today, and I thought that would be a good way to give you a kind of reason why Jesus talks about the seed and the soils. And what we've been doing is breaking down this parable, which was the primary parable that Christ gave.

In a sense, it's the model parable, and it's the beginning of a whole lot of teaching, which was done by parable.

I was having a discussion with a friend of mine yesterday about this, you see. And the amazing fact that when Christ taught in parables, he pointed here, you see, at the field and the sower and the birds and all that was going on over there, in order to express to you a quite different reality.

[1 : 28] And I still have great trouble with television, because I haven't figured out what it's trying to do. But I suspect that the problem of television is that it makes you think that you're looking at the real thing.

And what you're really doing is seeing a tiny microcosm, which is, in effect, just a parable of what's going on in Saudi Arabia or in Oka or wherever it is.

And that what's required is that you take and you interpret that, because that's a little picture that represents a great reality of which we know very little.

And the danger for us is taking it to be the whole thing, going away with the assumption that we know what's happening in these parts of the world. And so a parable is sort of like that, in that Jesus teaches it, and he tells them that they're to understand that what's happening in nature is actually a little picture of what's happening in terms of the same God, who is the God of nature and the God of our redemption.

That you can take the two and see the reality there to understand the reality in which you are involved in your relationship to God, whether negative or positive.

[2 : 58] Now, the passage we're looking at today talks about Jesus began to teach. Now, Jesus has a lot of names, like he was a redeemer, and he was a healer, and he was a miracle worker, and he promised his presence with people.

And most people are glad to be the recipients of whatever he can do for them, especially if we're in extremity of some kind. We would like Jesus to do his thing, whether it's healing or miracle working or what.

But one of the primary functions that Jesus came to do was to teach. And if you want to be the recipient of what Christ came to do, then you will be the recipient as you are taught.

So that a fundamental relationship to Jesus Christ consists in allowing him to be the teacher, and you being the disciple or the student who is learning what he has to teach.

And lots of people want a relationship to Jesus, which does not include being taught by him, does not include the necessity of learning from him what he has to teach.

[4 : 14] So that you find lots of people who want to believe in Jesus, but they don't want in particular to be taught by him. And one of the things that is involved in looking at the parables is that Jesus would be our teacher in explaining to us what it's all about.

Now, last week I suffered greatly coming here and talking to you, and I developed an acute depression as a result of it.

And it was very helpful to me, but I hope it doesn't happen again. But part of the depression was that one of the senior members of the group last week came up and told me, Harry, you're all gloom and no glory.

And I was very convicted by that because I've known that for a long time. I just didn't want anybody else to find out about it. And he just nailed me to the mast and said, that's what the problem is. If you get on to the glory, things will go better. So this is glory week. The difficulty I have with that is, well, I mean, I want to justify myself for being all gloom and no glory.

[5 : 44] And that is that if you want to look at the New Testament, look at the darkest possible place, because that's where you will discover the glory.

And that's one of the sort of paradoxes I think of of our faith. The glory is there, but it has to do with God revealing himself in a way that is quite unmistakable.

So that if you want to understand the glory of God in the resurrection, the only way is to understand the crucifixion. And then you see how it ties together.

So I'll take you through the gloom and hope that God will lead you to the glory. There is about the best I can do under the circumstances.

So that's how it works. We had a singing group from Ghana last Sunday night, and they were great.

[6 : 50] I mean, I love their singing compared to ours. And they started off by singing, everything's going to be all right.

And lots of all together, you know, and we were all going, and everything was going to be all right. And that can be the stupidest statement of unwarranted optimism that anybody ever breathed, you know.

But on the other hand, by reason of a faith in the God who has revealed himself to Jesus Christ, it is in fact true.

And a glorious statement of faith, you know, that everything is going to be all right. So I want you to know that that's a deep conviction of mine, even in the midst of the gloom, that everything is going to be all right.

And that when you get to this parable, then, this is how it works out. You remember that what we're talking about is that the presence of the kingdom is the seed, and the seed is tiny, almost, I mean, you just simply wouldn't notice it.

[8 : 10] It's so small and insignificant. And yet, Jesus says, that's where the kingdom is. And that's why I told you the story of the tree at Granville and Georgia Street.

Huge. But it begins with a tiny seed. And so the presence of the kingdom among us is as the seed. The seed is the word of God. The word of God is Jesus Christ.

Jesus Christ is present among us by his word and through his word and in his word, so that that seed is there, and that seed gets into our hearts, and that seed is meant to grow and produce.

But the parable, which is the parable of the seed and the soil and the sowers, the man who went out to sow, and he sowed seed. Some fell on hard ground.

Some fell on rocky ground. Some fell on rocky ground, grew up quickly. And the part we're dealing with today is the part that fell on the good ground, but it was choked out by seeds.

[9 : 10] With respect to the hard soil, I told you that you have to plow the concrete. That in terms of the spiritual reality of God's purpose, our lives are paved over.

And in order for the seed of the word of God to break in, something's got to smash that concrete. You've got to plow it open so the seed can get in. Otherwise, the word of God sits there and is taken away by the birds of the air.

The second thing I told you was about the night sky. That for a lot of us, the spiritual experience of our life is like sea festival fireworks that illumine the whole of the sky and then leave you with a darkness which was darker than before it went off.

And I decided I'd like to change the title of that second one to the radical Christian. That it means the Christian with a root.

A Christian who's living from the roots, not one who is all this demonstration but has no continuing source of life. And so when you talk about the problem of the seed that fell on the rocky ground and sprang up quickly and it had no root.

[10 : 28] And a radical Christian, because the word radical means rooted. A radical Christian is one who was living from the root.

And today we're talking about thorns, the seed that was sown among thorns. Thorns are notoriously unproductive. They consume the soil. They're hostile.

They have no future except the fire. They're extremely difficult to handle. The only great moment for thorns in the New Testament was when some soldier went and took them in his hands and twisted them into a crown and pressed them down on the brow of Christ as part of the mockery.

Of Christ before his crucifixion. The crown of thorns. And that was the high point for thorns, I think, in the whole of the New Testament.

What happens then is that Jesus explains what it means that this seed, which falls into the ground like that and is trying to grow up like that, but the thorns come out like this and they choke it out.

[11 : 48] And there's actually three thorn trees or thorn bushes that come out from it and that the seed can't get going. The three thorns that are spoken of are these.

And you can see this in verse 19. The kinds of thorns that grow are the cares of the world. That's one kind.

The second is delight in riches. That's another kind. And desire for other things. So that you know that when you wake up in the morning and are lying there in a semi-somnolent state, the only thing that gets you going are one of these three, you know.

You've got the delight of riches to attract you. You have the cares of the world to drive you out of bed in a resentful stupor toward what you have to do because you're so worried about it.

And the third thing is desire. You know, it happens when you're young, you get over it, but it's there it is.

[13 : 12] So I want just to look at these three things. The cares of the world. Now, you know, you hear it all the time. People have got to take care.

One of the ways of explaining what cares are is what is the thing that you are occupied with? What is it that occupies your mind?

Which you know has been taken to mean what is your occupation? What is the thing you are paid to worry about? And so all of us are in the position where there are legitimate cares that are necessary to our life.

But when Luke talks about it, he ranks the kind of cares that are thorns that choke the word of God in our life.

Luke says in 21-34, he says, Dissipation, drunkenness, and the cares of this life. That that was the kind of crippling care that destroys a man.

[14 : 22] Martha knew all about it, and Jesus pointed it out to her when he went to visit their house, and Martha was busy in the kitchen, careful about many things, so that she was growing a thorn tree while the seed of the word of God was being planted in the heart of Mary.

And Jesus said to her, that's not going to work. And you get another example of it. What care is, and this is the theological word book of the New Testament says, it's resting not on the strength of your own calculations, but wholly on the spirit given to you from the world to come.

That, you see, that what happens when he says, the cares of this world, cares are very legitimate, but they're very often badly focused.

They're cares about the wrong thing. They're cares about the future, over which you have no control. There are cares about yourself.

There are cares about what other people think of you. There are all sorts of areas of care, which destroys and consumes all the energy that you have, so that you end in a life of, what St. Luke says, dissipation, drunkenness, and the cares of this life.

[15 : 59] They just hammer you down, so that there is no room for anything else. They fill your life. You are a careful and anxious person in whom the seed of the word of God cannot take root and cannot bring forth anything.

Paul says that it's one of the things that happens to married people. He said a single person can be occupied with, occupied, occupied with care for the things of God.

Married people are less useful because they become occupied with caring for one another. Is that inappropriate? I won't stop to debate it.

I, uh, but, uh, I think where it is inappropriate is, uh, is where, you know, I mean, you see it when, when the husband is very anxious that his wife should be full of care for him, should be burdened with an anxiety to please him, or a wife, uh, doing, doing the opposite to her husband.

And you see that kind of 20 or 30 years of simmering resentment because you don't think you're cared for very well. And, uh, you have to hold that over the other person in order that they will not neglect what you consider their proper care for you, and you don't want them to be carefree.

[17 : 36] Well, you could get into quite a discussion of marriage on, uh, to what extent your marriage is dependent upon your partner being carefree.

And to what extent you impose it. So it's that same kind of thing that happens in our spiritual life is that we become filled with care. I picked up the province this morning, and I have news for you on oil prices, GST, aboriginal rights, breakdown of federalism in Canada, free trade, aid.

It's all there. So that if you can't generate enough things to care about, to keep you occupied, and to consume all your energy, and send you to work in a state of deep depression, then read the province, you know.

And, uh, and then you will know that that's what happens. And so our lives become totally occupied with that. And Jesus says, as far as the word of God taking root in your life and bearing fruit, there isn't a chance.

Because you will be nurturing these anxieties all the time. Anxieties over which you have no control and about which you can do nothing.

[18 : 58] And that's why Peter says, cast your cares on him because he cares for you. That's why Paul says, be careful for nothing.

Because the job you have is to identify your cares and give them to the only one who can deal with them. And you cannot be, and the Bible is very, very particular about this, you can't be careful for tomorrow because you don't know what's going to happen tomorrow.

And besides, you will have other cares when tomorrow comes. So that you are addicted to this process of anxiety and caring and that chokes out the possibility of Jesus teaching you and imparting to you the word of God which would take root in your life.

So that's the first thorn tree that's going. The second one that comes up to choke the soil, to choke the seed so that it can't grow. The second one is delight in riches.

And what he's saying here, and again, the Bible is very positive about riches and all you very wealthy people, I want you to be very happy that you have such a fine balance in the bank and have done so well.

[20 : 21] The only problem that I can foresee is that you will use that riches in the wrong way. And when Jesus is talking about it, here he says, the wrong use of it is the creation of a pleasant illusion.

That's what this is about. That you use it to escape from reality. And that's what advertising and magazines do for us.

They say, for this much money we can create a very pleasant illusion for you. in the midst of which you can live. And then you don't have to come to terms with the realities of life at all.

Because you have been able to create for yourself and for your life a pleasant illusion within which you can live. And when you've got that pleasant illusion all carefully adjusted, fine-tuned, and balanced, and color-coordinated, then you can live happily with it.

And the seed, which is the word of God, could be a matter of less indifference to you. I mean, it just doesn't matter at all. Because you have become occupied with what Jesus calls the creation of a pleasant illusion.

[21 : 46] And, I mean, if you read the story of the prostitute in Proverbs chapter 7 approaching the young man, and when she describes her bed and the perfume and the time they have and the prospects they have, and she right there propositions him with a very pleasant illusion.

And the writer of the Proverbs goes on to say, you know, what he's doing in buying into this pleasant illusion is he's going to be, he's going to end up like a deer with a spear thrown through its heart.

You know, that pleasant illusion is going to have disastrous consequences. And so, that's another thing that happens. The third thing that happens by way of growing thorns is called a desire for other things.

And this word desire is one of the big words in the New Testament. And it means an intense emotional assertion of the self.

So that, you know, the delight in riches is a kind of aesthetic experience. The anxiety is a kind of cerebral anxiety. the desire for riches is your emotions are out of control.

[23 : 13] They are out of focus. Now, there is nothing wrong with desire as such, except if you focus it on an unworthy object, like money or gold or sex or power.

if you are like one of the women in 2 Timothy who is swayed by impulse, that this intense emotional experience becomes the thing that drives your life and you become enslaved to it.

And that's, and that can so easily happen to us. There is, there is, we read the Ten Commandments in church.

We read them, you know, that thou shalt not or thou shalt or you shall love the Lord your God. and the response that we make is, incline our hearts to keep this law.

Now, the lovely thing I think about that statement is that our desires are not wrong, the object of them is wrong.

[24 : 31] And that the incline of our hearts, which is toward the wrong thing, it needs to be re-inclined in the other direction towards the right thing.

The right thing is that our hearts should be inclined to keep the law, not to get away with breaking it. That this intense emotional experience is to be one of the great realities of our life, which is to find appropriate fulfillment in the right thing.

And that's what, that's what Christ says, happens, is that, that the desire is inclined toward the wrong thing, which has promise, but not fulfillment.

And that our hearts need to be re-inclined in the other direction toward the thing in which there is fulfillment. So you see the, what Christ is saying here in these three things that choke out the word of God.

He said, they're right, I mean, you are right to be anxious for the appropriate thing, but your energies are not to be consumed by anxiety for things over which you have no control.

[25 : 50] You're right to enjoy the riches of all that God provides for us, but you're not to use those riches to create for yourself a delightful illusion to escape from reality.

It's appropriate that you should live at, at a level of intensity from an emotional point of view, but that, that emotional intensity should not be addicted to the wrong thing.

And that's how the, that's how the, how, how Christ completes the, the, the story of the three things. Now, you will notice then that 75% of the seed that is sown is wasted.

You know, that some falls on, on, on the hard pathway, some falls on shallow soil, some falls and is choked out by thorns. But, what remains and what I want to talk about next week is, is the, the, the seed that produces and produces in a very big way.

So, Christ has, has portrayed for us that thing by which, which the whole of our relationship to him is built.

[27 : 13] Can we hear and can we respond? You know, I, I told you before that the seed was sown everywhere. Hard ground, rocky ground, thorn infested ground.

It was sown everywhere and then the plow came along and broke up the soil in order that the seed could take root. So, there is the coming of Christ, there is the plowing of the ground, the seed is to take root, but it only produces 25% of the places it's sown.

There is building up even here in the Gospel of Mark a pattern of rejection of Christ, rejection of the Word of God.

That that happens most of the time and, and it happens for the reasons that Christ says. The, the, the, the, the, Satan is against it and plucks the seed away and that, and that we make a response to it which is inappropriate and shallow and has no root and finally that other things crowd in on our lives and our whole life becomes a long series of unbroken worries and anxieties of the creation of pleasant and unreal illusions and desires that are focused in the wrong direction.

well, there is a fourth option we'll call for, for the present purposes the glory option and come back to it next week.

[29 : 00] Let me pray. Lord Jesus Christ, as you are our teacher and our hearts need very much to receive the, the seed, the, the, the seed which you plant in our hearts that it may begin to germinate, begin to grow, begin to take root and begin to develop to the point where it might even bear fruit in our lives.

We ask that you will give us great delight not in our pleasant illusions but great delight in the fact that you have spoken to us through your word and your purpose for us is that we might share your glory.

We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.