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Don't Choke the Word

990-B

Series: Let God Be God

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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Don't Choke the Word

I- A LITTLE SLEEP; A LITTLE SLUMBER

I went by the field of the slothful, and by the vineyard of the man void of understanding;

And, lo, it was all grown over with thorns, and nettles had covered the face thereof, and the stone wall thereof was broken down.

Then I saw, and considered it well: I looked upon it, and received instruction.

Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep:

So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth; and thy want as an armed man. (Proverbs 24:30-34)

That's the writer of Proverbs 24:30-34 describing a sad situation. He was walking down the road one day surveying the surrounding farms. (Taking, an afternoon stroll, I suppose.) Suddenly, he came upon a piece of land that evoked a response of horror. It looked like a disaster area just after an enemy attack. It was all grown over with weeds, and what little grass there was, was brown and diseased. The wall had hunks of stone missing. There was no semblance of order, no evidence of care. The writer's heart sank.

So he went home and began to think about it. He asked himself; "What went wrong? Did someone with a vendetta sneak in at night and destroy this man's property?" He answers, "no". "Did a horrible storm descend and leave this remnant of horror?" He answers, "no". No, this sad sight is the result of a more subtle enemy, the enemy of neglect. It is the home of a slothful man, *one who means well*; he just never quite got around to taking care of the little things, because the little things seemed so harmless. But little by little, decay set in. Little by little, the weeds began to overtake the healthy plants. Little by little, the stones began to fall from the wall. Little by little, the thorns grew up and choked the vines. Little by little, it all happened. In fact, from one day to

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the next, you could hardly tell anything was happening. Decay is that way. It is insidious. It is subtle. Then one day you awaken out of a slothful slumber only to find that, *in the process of time*, neglect has robbed you of what was once yours. It's a sad story.

And the writer draws this conclusion:

Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep:

So shall thy poverty come... (Proverbs 24:33,34a)

No, it didn't happen overnight. It took months, even years of neglect. "Look, there's a new weed growing in the garden...have to tend to that some time. Oh, well, think I'll grab a little extra shuteye. Look, I believe that fence is sagging...have to deal with that one day. Oh, well, think I'll take another forty winks. Look, that tree is infested with worms...have to treat that one of these days. Oh, well, think I'll take a nap instead." A little sleep; a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest.

Perhaps there are more than a few wives who are hoping that this is a lesson on fixing up the things that have been on the "got to do that someday" list at home...and it might have that side-effect. But that's not what this study is all about. It's about neglect, all right. It's about an unkept garden, all right. But not the one outside your window...it's about the one *inside* your heart.

I think the Lord Jesus may well have had this proverb in mind as He described the third and final thing that goes wrong when you plant seed on untended soil. And that, you may recall, is where we have been going these past few lessons. We have been studying the parable of the seed, or the parable of the soil, as some call it. And it is, you remember, more than a parable; it is a pattern, a pattern of *how* and *why* Jesus spoke in parables.

And tucked within its context rests a sea of spiritual truths, all waiting to be applied to our lives. First, the Master told the story, a simple kind of story it was, about a farmer and what happened when he sowed seed. Then Jesus turned to his bewildered followers, who, by their own admission, didn't understand what he was saying, and explained the rich spiritual truths that lay buried beneath the surface of that childlike tale. It was a story about four things that happen when you sow seed...in this case, the seed representing the Word of God.

Three of those four things did not culminate in a healthy

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crop. One did. For instance, some of the seed fell by the side of the road, where it had no way to be absorbed into the ground, and immediately, the birds of the air, (representing Satan), came and snatched it away, so nothing happened. Jesus added, "That's what happens when you hear the Word, but never take it into your heart; never gaining 'understanding'." And some of the seed fell into shallow soil, soil not deep enough for roots to form. Though there was immediate growth, when the sun came out and the heat began to penetrate that outwardly healthy plant, it withered because it had no roots. Then the Master reminded us that that's what happens when adversity or persecution raises its ugly head and tests the Christian, if that Christian has never taken the time to develop "roots".

Now Jesus paints a third scenario, and like the first two, it involves the story of seed that falls into the soil *but for still another reason*, fails to produce a healthy harvest. Unlike the first two, however, this seed does grow, and it does grow well. Here, the issue is not so much a matter of *condition*, as it is a matter of care, for as a result of neglect, subtle neglect, these seeds never fulfilled their potential. The story and the Master's explanation of the story go like this:

³And some (seed) fell into the midst of the thorns; and the thorns sprang up with it and choked it; and ²it produced no returns. (¹Matthew 13:22; ²Mark 4:19; ³Luke 8: TLOCIS)¹

Jesus explains that part of the parable this way:

¹He also who received seed among the thorns is he who, ³on hearing ²the Word, ³goes his way; ²and the cares of this world ³and the pleasures of life, ²the seductiveness of riches, and passionate desires for other things, enter in and choke the Word and it is made unfruitful—³it brings no fruit to completion. (¹Matthew 13:22; ²Mark 4:19; ³Luke 8: TLOCIS)

Here the Master is describing a man's heart, and it looks like that piece of land in Proverbs 24. It had great potential. Good seed. Good soil. Some growth. But no edible, usable fruit ever came forth. Why? Once again, the sin of neglect. That is the portion of the parable we will be looking at today.

The outline:

I- A Little Sleep, A Little Slumber

II-The Peril of Spiritual Neglect

¹ The Life of Christ in Stereo: The Four Gospels Speak in Harmony; by Johnston M. Cheney; © 1969 Western Conservative Baptist Seminary, Portland, Oregon

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III-Three Things that Choke the Word

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II- THE PERIL OF SPIRITUAL NEGLECT

I trust that by now the parallel between the slothful farmer in Proverbs 24, and the thorny soil in this parable is evident. Same problem, different realm. All one has to do is make the spiritual switch to see that the peril of neglect is as valid in the spiritual realm as it is in the agricultural world, more valid, in fact, because it takes longer for it to show in the spiritual realm; so we justify our neglect and think *no one will ever know*.

Now I want you to understand that this guy heard the Word. And he heard it *gladly*. He didn't quibble. He sat on the "amen" row. He took notes, put them in a three-ring binder, and kept them on a shelf in his study with all his research material for his growth group. He bought all the latest Christian books and kept his car radio set on station W-O-R-D, "Jerusalem Radio for Sanctimonious Saints". He had a bumper sticker that said "In case of rapture this chariot will self-destruct". I mean, he was *with it*. He was chairman of the social committee, ushered two Sundays a month, and sent his kids to the Christian school just outside the city gate.

But he *never produced any spiritual fruit*. You say, "How can that be?" I'll tell you how. He kept on taking in the Word, thinking that if he kept taking it in, *he had to be fruitful*. He just made one mistake. *He didn't tend the garden*. He didn't realize that unless you deal with the weeds that work their way into where the precious seed is beginning to grow, *the weeds will grow up with the seed, and eventually, the weeds will choke the seed, and the seed will become useless*.

You try it. Plant something of value in your backyard. Water it. Fertilize it. See that it has plenty of room for its roots to grow. But overlook the weeds and the thorns and the thistles and the bugs and the diseases that attack it; just assume that as long as you water it, it doesn't matter what attacks it. Try it. But don't plan on eating what you planted. It'll never be edible. Unless you watch that garden like a hawk and pull up every weed the moment it begins to push its way against the tender crop; unless you treat that soil and stop the root rot and the destructive critters that plan on having your bunch for lunch, you'll never see a healthy tomato or squash or whatever it was you planted. Never. Your

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precious expectations will be crushed by the agonizing enemy of neglect.

And spiritually, the same thing is true. You can attend six Bible studies a week, sit on the front row of every class, have a tape recorder playing sanctimonious sermons hanging in your ear till you look like a transistorized robot...and never bear fruit, never see the fruit of the Spirit become alive and evident in your life. Not because you didn't plant the seed. Not because you didn't water the seed. Because you didn't tend to the garden. So the enemies of the Word, the weeds in God's garden, crept in and choked the Word...and it became unfruitful.

III- THREE THINGS THAT CHOKE THE WORD

It is important that we understand what it means to "choke the Word". There is more than one word used in the New Testament that is translated "choke" in our vocabulary. One word means "to be seized by the throat or suddenly strangled; or to be drowned". It is the word used in Mark 5:13, where the swine, inhabited by the unclean spirits, were "choked in the sea". They were suddenly strangled by drowning;"choked to death". The same thought is transmitted in Matthew 18:28, where the ungrateful servant who had been forgiven much, refused to forgive another, and "took him by the throat". He "choked" him, suddenly seized him and strangled him.

But the word used in the passage before us is not quite such an aggressive word. It means, rather, "to suffocate gradually; to strangle by crowding out". One is sudden and vicious; it happens and it's over. The other is gradual, quiet, unnoticed, but deadly.

Jesus is not talking here about the seed snatched up by the enemy, or about the seed that never took root because the soil was too shallow. Jesus is talking here about seed that *did take root*, seed that grew, seed that sprouted up and began to blossom. But alongside, *apparently unnoticed by the gardener*, grew subtly dangerous thorns. They were not an immediate threat, so the gardener just let them be...and took an extra nap instead. But little by little they grew. Little by little they placed subtle pressure on the root system of the seed. Little by little they *crowded* out the life-bearing plant, until one day, with no fanfare at all, the precious seed was crushed to death by that seemingly harmless weed. It seems they couldn't coexist after all; but it was only after all the damage was done that the gardener realized what had

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happened.

Jesus, the perfect gardener, knows better. So He is warning us about the things that crowd out the seed and choke the Word. And to be sure we understand, He groups those things into three basic categories. The King James Bible says this:

And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches,
and the lusts of other things entering in, choked the word,
(Mark 4:19)

If they were important enough for Jesus to single them out, then they must be important enough for us to examine, if we are going to be God's gardeners, God's seed protectors.

The first thorn that chokes the Word is labeled "the cares of this world". Now the word "cares" is an interesting word. It literally means "that which divides or distracts the mind; that which troubles by diversion." Have you ever seen a teenager, sitting at his desk after school, studying for that geometry test that loomed on the horizon of his life at 8:30 a.m. the next day? He had no intention of slacking up. His heart was set on studying. But as he was studying, he couldn't help but hear a noise in the background. It was a thump...thump...thumping noise. It was Billy, the boy next door, playing basketball just outside his window. For a moment, his mind began to wander. Then quickly, he pulled the reins of his will and began to study again. But a few minutes later, he heard laughter. Jenny, the girl up the street he had eyes for, was out there watching Billy play basketball. Now *that was a distraction*. Still, he had to study. So he scrunched up all his will power, held his hand over his ears, and tried to think geometry. But his thinker was out to lunch. His thinker was next door with Billy and Jenny. It was no use, now. He had been *distracted*. Something unexpected had crept in and choked his concentration on his objective. Little by little, like a magnet, it drew him...until he was gone.

Distractions are funny things. What distracts one doesn't bother another. His mother wasn't distracted by the basketball, or by Jenny's laughter. Yet things would distract her that he would never hear. So distractions, to be distractions, must be things that *appeal to the natural senses of the one being distracted*.

Food is a distraction for me. You can probably tell. It is for some of you, as well. I can have my mind focused on the things of God and my heart set on the Word of God, but if I smell fresh baked cookies, or my stomach begins to churn, or I begin to think

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about how long it's been since I ate, I'm done. Food is a distraction for me. My mind can be set to go minister to someone's needs, but my stomach always wants to be fed first. I may miss ministering, but I seldom miss a meal. So in my case, *food chokes the Word*. And there's nothing wrong with food. It needn't be something evil...just something distracting.

Television is a distraction for many. I was about to say, "But it's not a distraction for me..." when I looked at my watch and realized it was time for the Chicago Bears/Miami Dolphins game to start, and without even realizing it, I reached up and turned on the TV to see if I had missed anything. The lesson could wait. Distraction. Not necessarily evil, but subtly crowding out the best.

The second thing Jesus cites as a seed-choker is the deceitfulness of riches. He didn't say the deceitfulness of "being rich". He said the deceitfulness of riches. And some of the people whose lives are most choked by the deceitfulness of riches are people who don't have anything. So getting things is all they think about. The word translated "deceit" here means "to be led away ; to wander; to follow a delusion." Once again, the connotation is one of a gradual falling away, a wandering from the objective without really realizing you've wandered. Only here the issue is not one of distraction, but of a progressive change of values.

It's a portrait of the one who, upon becoming a Christian, developed a conviction about financial freedom, or borrowing, or giving, only to find, as time went on, that his or her *convictions were so foreign to the world's that almost no one, not even their Christian friends, went that far*. So, *for the sake of money or financial security*, he or she rationalizes that in an emotional moment, they over-reacted. "The Gospel isn't really that clear," they decide.

Or it's a portrait of one who gradually tastes more and more of the "good life" (and of course, the good life is relative; prosperity for one may be poverty for another); but this one experiences a higher standard of living, and that now becomes his or her new "norm". Now God is *expected* to always give them at least that much, or they aren't being "blessed". That's the deceitfulness of riches. And it chokes the seed. It strangles the fruitfulness of discipleship, because it changes the value system of a life from that which is totally spiritual to that which tries to gain the best of both worlds. It's almost silent as it creeps into your life. Only when the damage is done, do you see the consequences. The

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spiritual rocks in the wall of your life have worked loose and come tumbling down.

Sure, you're accepted by the rest of the Christian community. Their standards are the same as yours. You're *more accepted*. You've let the world squeeze you into its mold; but you've choked the Word, and it has become unprofitable.

The final thing Jesus mentions is the "lust of other things entering in". The word translated "lust" here means "any desire which attaches itself to something contrary to God's best." It is the draw of the lower nature to participate in, either by thought or deed, those things which are clearly defined as evil in the Word of God. It represents life's besetting sins. Those lustful thoughts that rest in the canyons of the mind unchecked; those habits which the world condones, but the Word condemns; those outright violations of moral principles that, when allowed to continue as normal, choke the Word until it becomes unprofitable. Guilt develops. A crust of resistance to spiritual sensitivity forms. The Scriptures are not fresh any more. You avoid meditation; you feel less comfortable around those who are more spiritual. You find excuses to miss worshipping or to find fault with those in spiritual authority. The Word preached no longer profits you, not being mixed with faith. You cannot find a way to place those thoughts or actions alongside the Living God and make them fit. So you become busy, overactive, easily offended. What has happened? The lust of (or for) other things entering in have choked the Word, until it has become unprofitable for you.

The result? The worst possible kind of existence. Outwardly spiritual, inwardly rotten. Outwardly religious, inwardly rebellious. Trying to be in the Christian community what you think you are supposed to be, all the while being in the confines of your heart, a man or woman whose life is being choked to death by thorns. So a once joy-filled life now plays the charade; as little by little, weeds are growing inside, alongside, choking the Word.

IV- DON'T CHOKE THE WORD

The cares of this world (the distractions that lure you away from being God's best); the deceitfulness of riches (the gradual drawing of the flesh to a temporal value system); and the lust of other things entering in (the willful acceptance in the garden of your heart of the thorns of impurity or immorality or other

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besetting sins), these things choke the Word.

And when they do, no matter how much you study; no matter how much you hear; no matter how faithful you seem to be to the outward evidences of religiosity...little by little, the cancerous disease of compromise eats away at the fiber of your being, and the Word becomes unprofitable.

So don't choke the Word, Beloved. Don't delude yourself into thinking that you can continue to take in the Word and that you will automatically grow, just because you are "in the Book". If the distractions of this world, or the luring of a temporal value system, or the lust of besetting sins are eating away at your life, you have built a wall around your Spirit, so that Truth cannot settle there and do its work. You have continued to water the plant, but have failed to deal with the thorns that have been subtly, ever so subtly, growing up alongside. Little by little, ever so slowly, those thorns choke the Word...until one day you wake up to the realization that you have lost the peace you once had. You have lost the power you once had. You have lost the witness you once had. You're still going through the motions, still active in the church, still looked on as a spiritual giant...but empty. You never stopped planting the Word in your life, but you *didn't tend the garden*. You didn't root out the weeds as they began to grow; and because in the spiritual realm they didn't show, you assumed they were not doing any damage.

Then one day, you're walking along the roadside, just looking at the farm houses along the way. "There's a nice looking one over there," you think, "rich fields, well-tended house, nice looking yard. There's another...not quite as neat, but acceptable. But, oh, my, look at that one. Weeds are everywhere. Fence is crumbling. Thorns have eaten away the vines. Roof is falling down. Grass is dead. What a pity. Who would ever let that happen?", you ask yourself. "What a pity, indeed."

Then you look at the mailbox in front of the house. Why, it has *your* name on it. That's *your* house! How could your house get so run down; your yard so covered with weeds and thorns? You stop to "consider it" and "receive instruction".

Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep:

So shall thy poverty come as one that travelleth; and thy want as an armed man.
(Proverbs 24:33,23)

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That's how it happened. Neglect. The seed was sown on decent soil, and it began to grow. But unseen by the eyes of those who passed by, weeds began to sprout up alongside. Day after day, those weeds grew untended and unnoticed. It took a long time, but one day, you looked around and saw spiritual poverty in a life that had once been a testimony of the riches of the Kingdom.

But praise God! It's not too late. It's not too late to get out God's rake, and God's hoe, and God's other garden tools. It's not too late to get out the cement that holds the rocks in the wall. It's not too late to mend the fence, and replant the yard, and kill the weeds. It's not too late. It's not too late to change the sign on the mailbox from "Home of slothful servant" to "Residence of a wise man". It's not too late.

One thing, however, *must take place*. You and I must take a walk around the garden of our lives this afternoon, and see it as God sees it. And if the cares of this world, or the deceitfulness of riches, or the lust of other things entering in, have choked the Word...we'd better put on our work clothes and get alone with the Master Gardener, and make plans for a clean-up day.

And we'd better pay attention in the future to the problem of weeds and thorns. They don't look very dangerous at the outset; but oh, the damage they do, when they are allowed to grow. You know what they do...they choke the Word.

TEND YOUR GARDEN

So, tend to your garden, Beloved
For each plant you must tenderly care
Gently, lovingly, guard it...
Against thorns that would enter there.

Root out those weeds at the outset
Ere all of the hurt is incurred
For those weeds will continue to grow and grow
Till they literally choke the Word.

But, no, that need not happen
To let it happen is sin.
We can tend to the garden, Beloved,
And begin to grow again!

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Application Assignment

1- Paraphrase (write in your own words) Proverbs 24:30-34. Can you find other passages of Scripture that echo the same warning? Can you make any practical application about your own household? Make a list of the things you need to do this week that you have postponed doing. Now make the "Spiritual Switch". Pretend that your heart is a field, and God is passing by, examining its condition. Make a list of what He would see.

2- Compare this element of the parable of the seed with the first two illustrations Jesus gave. What do you see as the primary difference?

3- Can you list, without referring to your notes or the Scriptures, the three things that "choke" the Word? Look up the root words, if you can. What can you add to the definitions in the lesson? Form your own definitions.

4- Make a list of things that are distractions for you. What can you do specifically to keep them from 'choking' the Word in your life?

5- Has a gradual desire for "things" begun to develop a temporal value system in your life? Has your "level of acceptable lifestyle" changed? How does this kind of attitude "choke" the Word?

6- Make a date with Jesus to go gardening in your heart this week. Declare war on the weeds that the Word may grow.

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