

# **Beware the Cares of the World!**

Psalm 65:1-4, 9-13, Matthew 13:1-23

What really matters in your life? What is of central importance? At the end of the day, when all is said and done, where do you stand? In what do you believe? Whom do you obey? Today's reading raises these questions. Today's reading focuses these questions very sharply. Do you believe in God or not? Do you believe in Jesus Christ or not? Do you believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ? Do you believe in the forgiveness of sin? Do you believe in the gift of eternal life? Do you believe in the kingdom of God or not?

It all comes down to this. Do you believe in the power of the preaching of the word of God or not? That is what today's reading is about. Jesus Christ tells us here the parable of the sower. And this is a parable that tells us of the remarkable power of God and of the victory of God working through the word of God. As the parable is first told, the sower encounters a number of ordinary difficulties but still has an extraordinary harvest.

The ordinary difficulties included the hard path upon which the seed fell so that the birds found it and ate it before it could get underneath the soil. The ordinary difficulties included the shallow and rocky soil quickly warmed by the sun but running the risk of not allowing for depth of roots so that the heat of the sun also destroyed these plants. The ordinary difficulties included the thorns which infested the ground and choked out the good plants. All of Christ's hearers would have been very well aware of these ordinary difficulties.

But then Jesus tells of an extraordinary harvest. The sower who sowed the seed received from that which fell in the good soil a harvest of a hundredfold and sixtyfold and thirtyfold and all of a sudden we are not talking about agriculture anymore. We have slipped away from the ordinary to the extraordinary, and here we are telling about the power of God and the goodness of God. In many ways this parable could be understood to tell about the crowds that were following Jesus Christ at this point in his ministry. He had to get into a boat and move out from the shore while the people stood on the shore to hear what he had to say. The point here is that God will gather an extraordinary harvest planted in the world and this is an occasion of great joy and great gratitude.

Why did Jesus teach in these parables? Why is there a division between those who hear and understand and those who do not hear or understand? Jesus quotes from the prophecy of Isaiah to talk to the disciples about this and then he retells the

parable in a way to explain the lack of understanding. For when the story is retold, when the parable is explained, there is a shift away from ordinary difficulties to extraordinary difficulties. The difficulties are no longer agricultural but they become spiritual. And if the first telling of a parable points to the crowds that surrounded Jesus, perhaps the retelling of it points to the difficulties the disciples would have had to encounter when they went out and begin to preach to try to build up the church of Jesus Christ.

The first difficulty has to do with those who hear the word of the Kingdom—that is those who hear the preaching of Jesus Christ and yet do not understand it. For those Jesus says the evil one snatches away what is sown. This is not an agricultural problem. This is now carried into the realm of spiritual conflict. The evil one, the devil, snatches away what good was placed there.

There is a second difficulty, that those who hear immediately receive the word with great joy and rejoicing. We might understand these to be religious enthusiasts. They are happy. And yet when tribulation comes on account of the word, on account of the gospel, on account of the preaching of Jesus Christ—when those difficulties come, enthusiasms wane, and these people fall away.

There is a third group. Those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the delight in riches choke the word that is growing within them. I think this is of special concern for Presbyterians. These people are so close and yet so far away.

The people in the first category who hear but do not understand presumably are not the ones here. That would be of importance to a more evangelistic outreach beyond the walls of a church. The second difficulty has to do with religious enthusiasm and that has not normally been very much of a temptation for Presbyterians. There are other Christians who are more enthusiastic than we are, but that typically has not been the problem we have. But the third one—the ones who are choked by the cares of the world and the delight in riches—that could be us. Presbyterians typically are very much involved in the cares of the world and the production and amassing of riches. We want to tend to the cares of the world very well, perhaps even as a part of our calling and to do our duty there. We want to be involved in productivity and the sharing of what is produced. But there is a danger here. There is a danger that the cares of the world overwhelm us, that they choke out the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the good news that we are meant to hear. That is the danger of which we need to be aware.

There is a fourth category in the parable—that is the people who both hear and understand the word of God and the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The parable tells us that this is the center of life—the way that God may have made it. We might have chosen to structure life differently. We might have chosen to have structured life around intelligence or position or power or fame or wealth or family.

But no one asked us. Jesus says this is the way life is and has been built and made by God that it has centered upon hearing and understanding of the word, and this leads to the tremendous harvest.

How does this apply to us today? We are invited and encouraged first of all to be appreciative to God and to express our gratitude to God for reaching out to us and the extravagant proclamation of the word that goes throughout the world for all to hear. We might also respond to this with the tremendous focusing of our lives. The single most important thing in our lives is the word of God. We are called to hear and to understand it. And this parable gives us encouragement to recognize and set aside other things in our lives that may be distractions.

The word of God is greater than politics. And I mean politics here at its very best—not at its worst, but at its very best, the gathering of our best thoughts and efforts to set public policy and to govern our lives together. The word of God is more important even than that.

It is more important than economics. It is more important than entertainment. That should probably go without saying, but in our age entertainment captures a tremendous amount of attention and energy. The word of God is more important even than family. This is shocking and striking to us but we know there are places where Jesus says that we are to love him even more than we love mother and father. This parable can lead us to a tremendous focusing of our lives.

What it is calling upon us to do is to hear the word of God especially in sermons, preaching the word of God. This was the job of the disciples as they went out to preach the gospel. This is the primary job of the church—to preach the gospel. Sermons vary, and there we tell of the glory and majesty of God, the person and work of Christ, the forgiveness of sin, reconciliation to God, the gathering of the church, and all of these many parts of the gospel.

Dr. Ben Lacy Rose preached to us three weeks ago about what is vital in life. And he told us how foolish it is for parents not to provide for their children to know Jesus Christ and to know the things of Jesus Christ. We could expand upon that and say how foolish it would be of us all not to hear the word of God and not to put ourselves in the place to hear the word of God.

One image I like to use to try to think about this has to do about a person who is thirsty, and where would you go to get a drink of water. You could go and stand in the desert and wait, or you could go stand under a waterfall and throw your head back with your mouth open. You might find a drink of water in the desert, but odds are you are more likely to get the drink of water standing under the waterfall. It is more likely that you would hear the word of God where the word of God is read and preached.

This parable also urges us not only to hear but also to understand. If you go home and read through these twenty three verses again, note how many times the word “understand” is used. Understand what? What this gospel wants us to understand is that the gospel of Jesus Christ comes to us by the preaching of the word of God and not in some other way. What this parable wants us to understand is that the grace of God comes to us by the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The forgiveness of our sin comes to us by the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Our being drawn into the kingdom of God comes to us by the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the very gift of eternal life comes to us by the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. So it is that the preaching and hearing and understanding of the word of God is the single most important thing we do.

This understanding is believing, and it overflows into obeying. Some of the commentators have switched the word “understanding” to “stand under”—that we are to stand under the word. We are to acknowledge that the word has authority over us and not the other way around. The church does not live by its wits. The church does not live by its strength. The church does not live by its beauty or its fame. The church lives by the preaching of the word or it dies by the lack thereof. Individually we do not come to God by our wits, strength, good works, or deserving. We come to God by hearing and understanding the word or we die by the lack thereof.

In conclusion we affirm that it is to Christ that the victory belongs. We rejoice that the word is being broadcast upon the fields of the world, and we receive again the promise that a remarkable harvest will be gathered. What is that to us? As Jesus ended his parable so I end this sermon: “He who has ears, let him hear.”

*To God be the glory, forever and ever! Amen.*

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