

Equipping the Church

Part 3: 'The Weed of Unbelief'

As we continue opening ourselves to the equipping of God in this new teaching series I want to talk about the greatest threat to that equipping – in fact I believe it is the greatest threat to everything in our journey as a disciple of Jesus Christ.

We are going to look at a story in chapter 9 of Mark's gospel, but first I'm going to read one verse from Matthew 13, from the parable of the sower, just to put this story in Mark in its wider context. So because we are reading only one verse from the parable of the sower, let me just remind you that the seed in this parable is the word of God and the soils represent the condition of our hearts. Before we go any further I want to make an important point.

The productiveness or the fruitfulness of a word that God spoke does not validate whether it was from God or not.

That's why this parable is here and why we are presented with four different kinds of soil. Three of these soils were no good but the seed was still authentic - it just didn't bear fruit. The seed is never the problem. The fault is never in what God says – the fruitfulness is determined by the soil.

Many people make the mistake here of thinking that we judge a tree by its fruit and that's absolutely right. But they will wrongly assume that we know whether this was a word from God or not by the fruit. That is not always the case. You will remember that Jesus once spoke into the lives of ten lepers and healed them all. But only one leper had a character change enough to return and give thanks. Does that mean the other nine were falsely healed? No, God's word is not validated by what we do with it. God is not on trial by what I do - I am. Ok, so here's Matthew 13, verse 22.

Matthew 13:22 *"The seed falling among the thorns refers to someone who hears the word, but the worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, making it unfruitful."*

If you are a gardener you will know that if you stop caring for your garden – then it will not be long before the weeds are up to your waste and the good plants are not even be visible. We will always have weeds because the seeds are deposited by birds and sometimes the soil we bring in to top up our garden already has seeds in it. We plant good seeds and seedlings but other seeds compete and very often the weeds will grow in times of neglect more than the good plants because many of them require less moisture and will always overtake a neglected garden.

So here's the challenge we face every day. God's word comes to me – this good seed which I receive into the soil of my heart. But I have this other word; and this other idea; and over here I have this disappointment; or this criticism; or this complaint; or this doubt or fear ... I've got all these other seeds that are vying for the same nutrients. They all want to germinate and take root in my heart - the cares of this world, the worries of this life, various other burdens or concerns and especially the busyness of life - all compete with the good seed. Let me just give you a quote here for your fridge door: **Busyness is artificial significance.** The enemy works to expand our busyness to increase our cares and worries so he can then plant seeds that compete with the Word of God. OK let's go to Mark chapter 9, reading from verse 17.

Mark 9:17-19 *“A man in the crowd answered, “Teacher, I brought you my son, who is possessed by a spirit that has robbed him of speech. Whenever it seizes him, it throws him to the ground. He foams at the mouth, gnashes his teeth and becomes rigid. I asked your disciples to drive out the spirit, but they could not.”*

“You unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.”

Now in the NKJV and the RSV Bibles, Jesus replies, *“You faithless generation.”* In the NIV which I am using here and the NASB it is translated *“You unbelieving generation.”* This is one of those times when the translation makes all the difference and I'm a little annoyed that two of the most read Bible translations in the world today use this word *faithless* because that is not what it says. The literal word in the Greek is translated *unbelief* and those two are definitely not the same. Let me explain.

Simply put, unbelief is not the absence of faith, it is merely the presence of unbelief. There is a difference. Later in verse 24 this man says, *“I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief.”* The problem here is you can have more than one seed growing in your garden but to say it's a faithless garden is not accurate. There is faith in the garden. There is good seed in the garden. So to call it faithless is simply not true. There's just unbelief there. The weeds of unbelief grow right alongside the good seed of God's word.

Over the years I have heard people who struggle to embrace the gospel say things like, *“Well, I have more of an intellectual bent.”* What they are really saying is they have an unbelieving bent – that's nothing to be proud of. I have it on good authority that God is quite smart; He is very intelligent; I think they call it *omniscient* – which means He is the only genuine 'know-it-all' - and yet God's intellect and knowledge doesn't interfere with His faith. So if my intellect and knowledge is affecting my faith, obviously what I know is wrong and I allow my garden to be filled with seeds that compete with what God is saying. They compete with the Truth and therefore they compete with my destiny.

True faith gives you access to your greatest source of intelligence. I believe in the days ahead we are going to see the greatest intellectualism mankind has ever seen and it will come out of faith. Here's another one for your fridge door! **We don't believe because we understand - we understand because we believe.** Faith gives us access to a level of understanding which you will never get through human reasoning. Ok, back to Mark 9.

Mark 9:19-20 *“You unbelieving generation,” Jesus replied, “how long shall I stay with you? How long shall I put up with you? Bring the boy to me.” So they brought him. When the spirit saw Jesus, it immediately threw the boy into a convulsion. He fell to the ground and rolled around, foaming at the mouth.”*

The evil spirit obviously did this in front of the disciples and it worked. If you can create enough disturbance with what you see in the natural, it can interfere with what you see in the Spirit. You see faith doesn't deny a problems existence - it just denies the problem a place of influence.

Mark 9:21-28 *Jesus asked the boy's father, “How long has he been like this?” “From childhood,” he answered. “It has often thrown him into fire or water to kill him. But if you can do anything, take pity on us and help us.” “If you can?” said Jesus. “Everything is possible for one who believes.” Immediately the boy's father exclaimed, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” When Jesus saw that a crowd was running to the scene, he rebuked the impure spirit. “You deaf and mute spirit,” he said, “I command you, come out of him and never enter him again.” The spirit shrieked, convulsed him violently and came out. The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, “He's dead.” But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up.”*

There are several things we could note in this story but I want to focus on just one today. Just picture your garden again. You have these good plants you have nurtured from a seed but in between those plants are others you didn't plant. They just appeared and all of the plants are now competing for air, water, sunlight and nutrients. There's this battle going on because when you water the garden you water the weeds too. Nobody has invented a watering system that only waters the good plants!

The point I'm trying to make is the water of God's presence waters all seeds. Whatever seed is in the soil will become visible in the presence of the Lord. The good seed and the weeds will both emerge in the presence of God and that is actually a good thing. You don't want hidden weeds doing damage under the ground or hiding somewhere in your garden. You need everything to be revealed and God is always revealing what's in our hearts – whether we like what we see or not.

Let me illustrate this concept that the presence of the Lord causes all seeds to grow by pointing you to the Last Supper. This is the most intense and intimate moment ever between Jesus and His twelve closest colleagues. They would have been able to feel it in the air. The presence of God would have been intense. Something's about to happen, Jesus knows He's about to go to the cross but His disciples just feel the anticipation – they are in this intense moment of Divine Presence, this intimate moment. We see John with his head on Jesus' chest; we have Peter announcing he will never deny Jesus and we have Judas walking out of the room to betray the Lord. All seeds are watered in the presence of God – the good ones and the bad ones. They all become manifest in these moments. You just need wisdom to recognize when the Lord is bringing something to the surface and in that moment, He has given you the grace to deal with it quickly and thoroughly.

Throughout our lives we will discover all kinds of things planted in the soil of our heart. We've got the word of the Lord over our life, but like this guy in Mark 9, we believe but we also struggle with unbelief. We've wrongly thought that the answer to this challenge is to have bigger faith. Jesus rejected that notion when He said faith just the size of a mustard seed could move mountains! That's not just a nice, warm, fuzzy illustration. It's not a motivational line. It's a clear statement of fact: something this small can move something that big. So you see the problem is not the size of our faith – the problem is we have other plants in our garden and those thorns and weeds can overpower the good seed if we don't tend to our garden regularly.

Now there are lots of different weeds in our gardens at home which compete with the good plants we want to nurture and grow. In the same way there can be lots of different weeds in our heart which compete with God's word every day. However, I want to suggest to you that most weeds we contend with in our hearts come from the same single species – the same source - unbelief. In fact, I would say that unbelief is the cause of most of our struggles. The Bible and our own experiences confirm that the primary sin that robs us of the fullness of God's promises, power and manifest presence is the sin of unbelief.

If you remain diligent in the garden of your heart and continually identify and remove those weeds of unbelief then all those great promises of God will in time become your experience: *"I will keep you in perfect peace ... You will be able to do all things through Christ who strengthens you ... Ask anything in my name and I will do it for you."* etc. The Word of God will produce fruit, because it has within it the power to fulfil His promises. All it needs is fertile, deep, rich, open, co-operative soil – all of which equates to a believing, teachable, receptive heart. In faith we may embrace all the wonderful promises of God, but deep down we struggle to really believe they are for us, right here and now. Let's look at some of the opening words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Ephesians:

Ephesians 1:3 *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in the heavenly realms with every spiritual blessing in Christ."*

If you are a disciple of Christ, you now have *everything* in Christ, but if you don't really believe that is true and don't act on that belief every day - then you will never experience it. Paul goes on ...

Ephesians 1:4 *"For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight."*

He has already done that. Any attempt on our part to 'become' holy in His sight is futile and we need to repent of that sin of unbelief. Unbelief gives rise to every other sin in life, from the Garden of Eden till now. Why do believers still covet, steal, commit adultery or lie? It is because they don't believe they already have everything in Christ. You don't need to strive for acceptance in Christ, or try to attain God's holiness by your religious performance. You don't need drugs to find peace with God. You don't need to manipulate people into liking you, because you are loved by God Himself.

Unbelief is really the mother and father of all sins. Every other sin that we feel bad about is our futile attempt to earn the things that God has already freely given us. God said to Adam and Eve: *"I give you everything in abundance. It is all good."* Then the serpent said, *"God is withholding something from you. If you really want to live, then in addition to all that God has given you, you need to take this forbidden fruit."* **Taking the fruit was not Adam and Eve's first sin. Not believing what God had told them was their first sin.** Unbelief was the first sin and the cause of almost every other sin!

Ephesians 1:5-6 *"In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons and daughters through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will - to the praise of his glorious grace, which he has freely given us in the One he loves."*

There is no more that we need. We just need to believe what we are told and step out and act as if it were true. We have ALL we need for life in Jesus Christ; ALL we need for godliness; ALL we need for happiness; ALL we need for an authentic life; ALL we need for our Church to become the Church Christ promised to build. If we have prepared good, rich, open, receptive soil; if we meditate on the fact that we already have everything in Christ and act as if that fact were true, then we will begin to experience what the Word promises to us. If we don't, we won't - it's that simple.

Our lives are full of all kinds of sins and we tend to put them in different categories, and we repent of them as we feel convicted, but until we repent of the primary sin of unbelief, our lives will never work, and we will go on committing many other sins which flow from unbelief. God told Abraham that he and Sarah would have a son. Abraham's unbelief caused him to try to help out by having a son with Hagar. He then had to repent of his second sin as well as the sin of unbelief.

Throughout my ministry I have endeavoured to demonstrate our complete freedom in Christ; that we are ok with God; and that His life is given to us freely, and we never have to earn it. Why have I done that? Why has this seemed like a cracked record? There are a number of reasons. Firstly, it's New Testament truth, and we all need to hear it often. Secondly, I love you as brothers and sisters and I want you to become increasingly more free, full of joy and confidence, experiencing more and more of the abundant life which is yours in Christ. The third reason is that we you really believe and act on these truths, sin won't be an issue. Romans 6 says we are no longer slaves to sin. Hebrews 10 tells us that we have been made holy and presented to God, perfect in Christ. Paul sums it up well in his letter to the Romans.

Romans 4:13-16 *"It was not through law that Abraham and his offspring received the promise that he would be heir of the world, but through the righteousness that comes by faith. For if those who live by law are heirs, faith has no value and the promise is worthless, because law brings wrath. And where there is no law there is no transgression. Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace."*

The promise comes by faith so that it may be in accordance with grace. Grace says, 'You don't have to work for it – you get it free.' If it's by faith, then anyone can do it. Religion says: 'You reach God's highest purposes if you are a good pray-er. You need to live a life of holiness and purity to reach spiritual maturity. You will only stand in the end-times army of God if you clean up your act.'

No, no, no!! You get it by believing what you've been told and acting on that, according to grace. Anybody can believe, you don't need super intelligence, you don't need the right connections, you don't need to be wealthy or good-looking. Anybody can believe God's Word. Jesus had a way of making it so simple it hits us in the face. For example:

John 6:28-29 *"The disciples asked Him: "What must we do to do the works of God?" Jesus told them: "This is the work of God – to **believe** in the One He sent."*

This is our primary work – to believe in Jesus.

If you want to work hard for God, let that belief be translated into action: become the person you already are in Christ. Belief without action is not belief at all. Part of that work of faith is repenting of those actions by which we are trying to achieve for ourselves that God has already given us. That is why it is so crucial that we understand the full implications of God's grace and all that we have been given freely in Christ.

We need to know deep in our hearts that we are OK not because of our own behaviour or our performance against a set of laws or requirements. We are OK because Jesus made us OK. So 'Jesus plus nothing' is our salvation *and* our life. That is the only solid foundation for building the Church. God will remove any other, because anything built on a wrong foundation cannot last.

In the final analysis, if our life is not working, if we are struggling, hurting, suffering physically, emotionally or spiritually, it's not because of our mother or father or employer or the Government or anyone else's sin against us – past, present or future – it's not even ultimately because of the secondary sins in our own life. Our problems arise from one primary sin: the sin of unbelief.

When we finally believe that we are totally, unconditionally loved, accepted and made holy before God and empowered by His free grace as given to us in Christ, then we will no longer be intimidated by anything, either from without or within – even our own sins and shortcomings. We can hand them all over to God, once and for all.

The Bible is the account of men and women's experiences with God. It is His story, rather than ours. God is the central character – Creator, Author, Hero and Finisher of this long narrative, and as the story unfolds, so does the revelation about Him. From the beginning, He is a God of grace, choosing people and making promises to them, blessing them, and keeping His promises despite their failure.

Such is His love that He always treats His people with dignity and respect, allowing them to respond to Him by their own choice. Those commended by God in Hebrews 11 are the ones who chose to believe His word, take part in His plans, and see the fruit emerge in their lives.

Hebrews 12:1-3 *"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."*

If we are to be fully equipped as the Church; if we are to fulfill the mission of Christ on earth today, then we need to tend the garden of our hearts every day and deal with those weeds of unbelief which the enemy of God places there every day.

May we hear the words of Jesus afresh today: *“This is the work of God – to believe in the One He sent.”* In the Greek this actually reads that we are to *“believe **into** the One He sent.”* It literally means we step into Christ and take on His mind, His heart, His will, His faith, His mission and His power. We already have everything we need to live an authentic, productive Christian life – it has already been given to us in Christ. Our task, if we want to be fully equipped, is to believe that truth and then start walking in that reality. I look forward to taking that journey with you.