

# Weekly Encouragement

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## Unstuck from Number 3

By Rev. Peter Eng

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*"And as for what fell among the thorns, they are those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature. As for that in the good soil, they are those who, hearing the word, hold it fast in an honest and good heart, and bear fruit with patience." (Lk 8:14-15)*

I see it – now. But why not earlier? Maybe it is spiritual pride. Maybe I think I know the passage so well that it has become boring. Maybe it is because my attention is misdirected. But at this stage in my life, that is poor excuse. Maybe it is laziness.

The well known and well loved parable of the seed and the soil is taught from as early as I can recall. Yet, it is only now

that I see where I need to focus my attention.

Jesus tells the story of how seed that is sown falls on the pathway, rocky ground, thorns, and good soil. It represents the Word of God on different kinds of hearers or hearts. When the Word of God falls on good soil, that is, truly receptive hearts, the word grows and yields a crop a hundred times itself. There are many lessons here, but there's one I just noticed.

Jesus retells and explains the parable to his disciples in a small group setting. He explains to them what to expect when they deliver God's word to the people. Not all will receive it: expect rejection from some. Not all who receive will last: expect easy faith and easy fallout. Not all who last are productive: expect ineffectiveness in some. But some are productive and yield a hundred fold: expect those as well. There are four categories, and Number 4 is the obvious goal.

I suddenly see the message, not in the climax of the one who brings forth a hundred fold, but what leads to it. In Number 3. The one whose spiritual life is choked and unproductive. This is where I need to focus my attention. This is where many Christians live. We are spiritually alive but unproductive. If I will confess it, the plant in the thorny ground describes

me better than the plant growing in good soil. While the fruitful soil is the climax of the story, I am stuck at Number 3.

"As they go on their way they are choked," Jesus says. That's me. I am not the person he wants me to be. I am so far from my true spiritual potential; I really need to know what Jesus is saying about this category of people. Sometimes, I feel like that wrestler quite immobilized by a chokehold, and all he can do is to wait for the bell to end the round. I am choked alright. Jesus, I want to get out of this chokehold!

*"As they go on their way, they are choked by the cares and riches and pleasures of life, and their fruit does not mature."*

Here is a three-point spiritual chokehold: the cares of life, the riches of life and the pleasures of life. These keep us from becoming all we should be in Christ.

Cares of life. In the name of the god of thoroughness, the god of covering all the bases, and the god of problem solving, we have been commissioned to tackle all the cares of life.

We justify our worries and anxieties because we have undischarged responsibilities. One way we respond to things we need to do is to fill our heart with feelings of anxiety, irrationally supposing that our anxiety will be rewarded with a solution, but rationally knowing that our anxiety does nothing to affect the outcome.

When we are anxious, we become emotionally debilitated. We lose our spiritual effectiveness when we choose not to rest in God's promises but allow our anxieties to sap our energy.

There is no doubt that some things have to be taken care of, but there are also

things that resolve themselves over time. If we leave some issues alone, they work themselves out and there is really no problem left to solve. Yet, it is often the issues over which we have little or no control that we worry the most. It is the control freak in us who insists that every detail can and must be planned, even though life would show time and again that plans are rarely executed in exactly the way they are planned.

Riches of Life. We consume all our time and energy acquiring riches. Riches that will be tried by fire and burned, riches that give momentary delight, riches that make us compromise our spiritual character, riches that become gods. Do riches not take us from spiritual fruitfulness? Do we not spend disproportionate time and energy on earthly riches and opulence?

I am drawn to one aspect of Shaker theology: simple living. They have a song that has survived the group. It gives us an enduring Christian message:

Tis a gift to be simple, tis a gift to be free  
Tis a gift to come down where you ought to be  
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,  
Twill be in the valley of love and delight.

Simplicity does not come naturally. It is not easy to turn our backs to wealth in favor of a simple life. Wealth gives us security, the nice things in life, and a host of other things. So to acquire wealth, we expend time and energy. Sometimes to the point that when we get them, we have no time or energy left to enjoy them. Perhaps you too have seen many empty big houses whose owners are too busy to enjoy.

When getting riches dictates how we

spend our time and energy, we will never be spiritually fruitful. Instead, we need to control our life agenda. On that agenda, wealth is one item that contributes to our spiritual goal of spiritual fruitfulness.

Pleasures of life. "What will be your pleasure, ma'am / sir?" we hear the waiter say. Dining out is delightful because the food tends to taste better than what we cook at home. But it is also about individual choice, and about being served. We take the pleasure of food and enhanced it so there is greater pleasure. This is true for most of life's ordinary experiences, be it hair styling, or watching a movie, or drinking coffee.

One pleasure rarely addressed in Christian circles is the pleasure of useless knowledge. Atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell right observes, "There is great pleasure to be gained from useless knowledge." Look at the amount of time we spend with the TV! When browsing the internet first became possible, and we were charged by the data we downloaded. A dear pastor friend whispered to me that he spent \$800 that month surfing the web. I asked him what he was looking for. He said, he just went from one site to another just to know things. I am sure today, he has no idea what knowledge he learnt that is worth \$800. Our free surfing is costing us more than \$800. It is costing us our life. Ahh! The pleasure of useless knowledge.

King Solomon predates Russell to point out that beyond the pleasure of useless knowledge is the curse of useless knowledge: "All things are full of weariness; a man cannot utter it; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, nor the ear with hearing" (Eccl. 1:8). Solomon warns us that the final product of the pleasure of useless knowledge is an unspeakable weariness. It is a life whittled away, not

by some great sin, but by small indulgences in the name of noble knowledge.

When we spend our time and energy in the pursuit of pleasure, be it of the body or of the mind, without regard to our spiritual development, we lose our ability to bear fruit.

The call to be fruitful is a call to "lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely" to us.

Are you tired of being stuck at Number 3? I am. I want to move on to Number 4, to fruitfulness. To do so, I need to prune my life from these time consuming and energy sucking pursuits. I need to cast off the cares that debilitate; I need to subsume my quest for wealth under spiritual goals; I need to decouple my life from the burden of pursuing pleasure.

Note: The ESV is used unless indicated otherwise.

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**Rev. Peter Eng** is an ordained minister from the Reformed Tradition, but he is truly global in perspective. He served the Lord in various capacities starting from his teenage years in the 70s. His undergrad studies were done in Singapore, his grad studies in the USA, and post-grad studies in the United Kingdom, with additional post-grad research in Germany.