

September 25, 2011

Genesis 3:17-19 / Proverbs 24:30-34 / Isaiah 5:1-7

Life-Lesson Series #1 - The Flowers and the Weeds

It is said of Charles Spurgeon -- one of the greatest preachers that ever lived -- that he would find the illustrations he used in his sermons by going out and spending time in the very places people lived their everyday lives.

He even encouraged the students at the preachers college he started to do the same. "***Take a walk,***" He told them, "***and say to yourself, 'I will wander over the fields, or I will get into the garden, or I will stroll through the woods, and see if I cannot find some illustration there.'***"

"Look!" he would say, as you walk down the street / peer into a shop window / sit in a kitchen / pass by a factory / or watch men at work on a farm / or at a construction site. / Read the newspaper / visit a sporting event / watch children play and interact / stand close to a crowd of people and hear what they speak about / or visit the sick.

He even suggested watching a spider weave its web and trap its prey. "***If you keep your eyes open,***" he said, "***you will not even see a dog following his master, nor a mouse peering up from his hole, nor will you hear even a gentle scratching behind the wall, without getting something to weave into your sermons if your faculties are on the alert.***"

For example, says Spurgeon:

"One Saturday afternoon I was walking in my garden. A dog had the habit of coming through the fence, scratching in my flower beds, and spoiling all my toil and temper. That day as I walked I saw the four-legged creature -- a rather scurvy specimen -- and having a walking stick in my hand, I threw it at him with all my might, at the same time giving him some good advice about going home.

Yet what should my canine friend do but turn around, pick up the stick in his mouth, and bring it and lay it at my feet, wagging his tail and looking up at me" [as if expecting my thanks and kind words for a job well done]!

"Of course, you do not suppose that I kicked him, or threw the stick at him again. [No] I felt quite ashamed of myself and told him that he was welcome to stay as long as he liked, and to come as often as he pleased. I used that illustration the next day in my sermon, as an instance of the power of non-resistance, submission, patience, and trust in overcoming even righteous anger."

So why do I tell you all that? Because today I'm going to start a series of sermons I will call "The Life-Lesson Series."

Five or six messages that I've come up with over the past year simply by doing what Spurgeon suggested -- training my mind to be attentive as I go about my everyday duties / and trying to find some spiritual lessons / or an illustration from things people do and places they go all the time.

And TODAY I'd like to begin with spiritual lessons I've learned from my attempts at gardening and taking care of my lawn! / NEXT WEEK will be lessons I learned about the Body of Christ from riding my bike to church!

And in the WEEKS TO FOLLOW THAT it will be, "Swimming to Shore -- How to Escape the Cultural Current of Busyness" / and then a message on, "Doing it Right the First Time" -- a life-lesson my dad taught me, but I just had reinforced big time as I added a porch onto the back of my house!

And though it's TRUE, that many of you have not done that last one, the lessons I hope to share from it will be ones that everyone should be able to relate to!

So let's get started TODAY with our lesson on "The Flowers and the Weeds." Or as it was posted on the sign out front, "You Don't Need to Garden to Grow Weeds."

Most of you (I assume) have tried your hand at gardening at some point in your life, or tried to keep your lawn from being overrun by dandelions, weeds, crabgrass or grubs. You've tried to create something of beauty. Which is biblical. In creation God made things, says Gen. 2:9, the were "***pleasant to the***

eye." And being created "***in his image,***" we desire to do that too. Create something we can stand back and admire or appreciate.

Although, in my attempts to have a flower garden that is "***pleasant to the eye,***" and a lawn that's not brown or filled with more weeds than grass, I have learned something about the spiritual life.

Solomon said, "***Look at the ANTS, you sluggard***" (that is, you lazy, unmotivated person) "***consider its ways and be wise. It has no commander, overseer or ruler, yet it stores up its provisions in summer and gathers its food at harvest. Yet you, how long will you lie there you sluggard? When will you rise from your sleep?***" He wants the "sluggard" to learn a life-lesson (a spiritual lesson) from the ants.

Jesus also taught spiritual truths by pointing to "***a sparrow***" / "***seeds planted in the ground***" / and "***the grass of the fields.***"

And today I'd like to do the same using flowers, weeds, lawns and gardening. I never have been much of a gardener. But I have to say that trying my hand at gardening has given me a better understanding the world we live in. / It's helped me see the uncanny parallels between the physical and spiritual realms.

It's given me a far greater understanding of the nature of sin and virtue / what is necessary to cultivate the one and kill the other / and how the "Fall" (as recorded in Gen. 3) has affected our world and our own personal struggle with sin and temptation.

But most of all it has helped me see ***WHAT I MUST DO*** in terms of spiritual disciplines, if I ever hope to see the fruit of the Spirit ripen in my life. If I ever hope to cultivate the fruits of virtue, godliness, and holiness in my life / and deaden the weeds of sin.

So let me share with you the lessons that gardening has taught me, starting with the primary lesson I learned. And so as to be clear, I will be using weeds as a metaphor for sin / flowers as a metaphor for virtue or godly fruit / and the garden as a metaphor for the soul or life of the believer.

So, what's that primary lesson? That in our world -- fallen as it is (and we must never forget that) -- "weeds" are what will grow the most naturally and take over the garden if we don't make an effort to keep them out!

We don't have to garden to grow weeds. In this world weeds take over naturally. But we do have to garden (and garden regularly) if what we want is beautiful flowers.

Why is that? The Bible tells us. In Gen. 3 God says (because of Adam's sin): **"Cursed is the ground because of you. Through pain and toil you will eat of it all the days of your life. It will produce thorns and thistles for you** (that is, useless, irritating, labor-wasting weeds that even cause physical pain) **and you will eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground."**

That was God's curse on the earth. And there is a spiritual analogy there. Before the Fall, useful trees and useful plants flourished. "**The Lord God,**" we are told in Gen. 2:9, **"made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground -- trees that were pleasant to the eye (beautiful) and good for food."**

Likewise in Gen. 1:29 God says: **"Every seed bearing plant on the face of the whole earth, and every tree that has fruit with seed in it, will be yours for food."**

It was a lush and pristine environment. It was green. It was beautiful. It was, as God said, **"pleasant to the eye."** And everything was useful as food. But NOT after the Fall.

Before the fall trees and plants and flowers and grain and fruit abounded -- it grew most naturally and without labor. But after the fall it was the thorns and thistles and weeds that grew naturally.

After the fall God cursed the ground and from then on we would live in a fallen world where weeds grew more naturally and we would have to **"labor and toil by the sweat of our brow"** for our food.

We would NOW have to be vigilant and wise and work hard to keep all the other things of the now fallen creation from killing what he would have to labor so intensely to produce -- bugs and mites and ants and root-eating grubs and blight and weeds and other crop killing rodents!

And in that cursing of the physical world, there is also a clear parallel to sin, and the cultivation of virtue or godliness. What's that parallel?

LISTEN: When we leave things to take their natural course in a fallen world, sin and not virtue, comes to take over. Weeds grow more naturally in a fallen world than flowers. A lawn that is not cared for, or fertilized, or treated with weed-killer will eventually be overrun with dandelions and crabgrass -- NOT lush, green, healthy, Kentucky Blue Grass!

If you leave a garden untended for years... / If you do nothing to kill the weeds / or till the soil / or plant / and fertilize / and tend the vegetables or care for the flowers / you will not have a beautiful garden, you will have a garden overrun with WEEDS.

We don't drive by vacant lots or houses and see meticulously cared for gardens with gorgeous flowers sprouting up everywhere! We see weeds taking over!

Last summer I was home at my mother's house in Massachusetts, and I looked out at the spot where my father's vegetable garden used to be. And you know what? There's not one vegetable growing in the entire spot! Why? Because my mother has no interest in vegetable gardening, and simply "let the garden go."

And the RESULT of simply "letting it go" (or doing nothing to care for it) was NOT a bumper crop of tomatoes and green beans and cucumbers and corn and peppers, as WAS the case when my dad rotor-tilled it every year / and put down the cow manure / and weeded between the plants / and would even have us kids go down the rows with a can of gas finding all the tomato worm caterpillars (which my mother hated and we used to jokingly toss at her on occasion) before we putting them in the can of gas!

My dad even had a .22 gauge rifle (with a hair trigger and perfectly sighted) sitting inside the back door of our kitchen. And when a rabbit / or a wood chuck / or a squirrel / or a crow / would bother his garden, he would quietly push the door open the door just a crack / pick up the rifle / take careful aim / and rid the garden of those unwanted pests.

And my mom, who would often be cooking breakfast or dinner, would jump with a start! Pow! And we'd all get to try -- grandchildren included!

And what does all that tell us? It tells us that the world we live in, and even our own soul, is NOT a neutral place! It is fallen. Its natural bent is toward sin.

If you leave things to themselves... / If you let them follow their natural course... / if you simply stand back and DO NOTHING but watch a garden over time -- it will come to be overrun with weeds! And the same is true of the garden we call our soul!

When things are left to follow their "natural course" in a FALLEN WORLD, they head in the direction of DECAY! Scientists and engineers call it "the law of entropy" or "the 2nd Law of Thermodynamics."

Speaking of this law of entropy one scientist says: ***"Everything heads toward decay. Chaos increases. Nothing stays as fresh as the day one buys it. Clothing becomes faded, threadbare and ultimately returns to dust. Everything ages and wears out over time. Even death is a manifestation of this law. It touches everything in the universe."***

It's a scientific law that merely affirms what God states way back in Genesis 3!
It's part of the curse!

If you don't believe it, buy a BRAND NEW CAR and park it in your front yard, and leave it there for years. Don't start it, touch it, move it, wash it, wax it or do anything to it.

And you know what? It will NOT stay new! It will NOT become more shiny and brilliant and beautiful or run better as time goes by! It will get dings and dents and fade and rust and corrode. The gas will go bad and the engine will probably seize from lack of use!

And how does KNOWING THAT help me in my struggle to rid my life of sin and "grow in godliness?" It helps me see I must do something, and do it regularly, if I hope to keep the weeds of sin from growing and nurture the flowers of virtue.

It helps me to see that if I do nothing I cannot expect to reap a harvest of righteousness! Flowers don't simply grow and flourish by themselves in a fallen world!

The same is true for your own soul or spirit. If you do nothing to nurture your soul in the ways of God / or leave your spirit untended / or simply "do what you feel like doing" (as our culture so often encourages people)...

If you refuse to be alert to the schemes of the enemy / or the craftiness of sin / or fail to guard against the initial workings of temptation in the soul / or fail to uproot the weeds of sin when you see them choking out the flowers or fruit we call virtue / the result will NOT be a harvest of godliness!

In a PERFECT WORLD where the creation / and the human soul / were not "in bondage to sin and decay" -- that would not be the case! But this is not a perfect world! It's a fallen world where the creation is still in bondage to sin (Rom. 8:21) / and so are people by nature (Gal. 3:22) / and therefore there are things we must do to cultivate, protect and nurture the fruit of godliness in our souls. If we don't, weeds and decay will win out.

We must avail ourselves of the means of grace that God directs us to in His Word. Like the practicing the spiritual discipline of prayer / and singing spiritual songs in our heart to God / and studying or memorizing the Scripture -- **"hiding His Word in our hearts that we might not sin against Him."**

Fellowshipping together regularly. / Doing ministry together. / Worship-ping together / Confessing to one another / Praying for one another / Sitting under the preaching of the word / or being silent before God in adoration -- even when we don't feel like it!

You see, I don't always FEEL like mowing and fertilizing the lawn. / I don't always FEEL like weeding my garden / or pulling up the dumb dandelions from the yard / or spraying the crabgrass.

But you know what? If I desire a nice looking lawn / or a garden that is "pleasant to the eye" instead of "ugly and irritating to the eye," I need to do it anyway. / And the same is true with our soul.

And please don't hear me wrong! I'm NOT advocating a legalistic works mentality, that suggests we can "earn salvific merit" or "brownie points with God" by engaging in rigorous spiritual disciplines.

That's NOT what I'm saying. There is absolutely no place whatsoever for the concept of merit in the Christian gospel -- as I've said hundreds of times.

But that doesn't negate the fact that in a fallen world, godliness is something we must nurture and cultivate and tend in the soul. We must actively join with God as He carries on His work of sanctification within us.

In regeneration we are passive. The new birth happens to us when we are "dead in trespasses and sins." / It is something God does to us without any help from us. It's a gift of sheer divine grace.

But in the work of sanctification we must actively join with God and avail ourselves of the means of grace He has made available to us.

The apostolic admonition is: "Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you both to will and to act according to His good purpose."

And, of course, the aspect of salvation Paul is speaking of is our sanctification. We must continually work, says Paul, in conjunction with God, as He carries out his ongoing work of sanctifying our souls. (All the while remembering that as believers we work FROM His acceptance, not FOR His acceptance.)

So in **CONCLUSION**, let me share **7 lessons I have learned from gardening** that help me in relation to cultivating virtue and killing sin.

- 1.) With poison ivy or dandelions, I must dig deep to get the last vestiges of the root of their roots. I cannot leave even the slightest part, because leaving even the smallest tip in the ground means it will grow back!

One friend even pointed out that Poison Ivy, when left to grow long enough (for many years) can even strangle and kill an oak tree!

2.) I even learned that even if I pull up every dandelion in my yard (and I do, ask Nancy!) but my neighbors don't kill or pull up theirs / I'll be out there next spring pulling up the ones that grew from the seeds that blew into my yard from their weeds!

Sin is like that. When everyone around us doesn't bother to resist sin (and I'm not implying my neighbors don't!), it can weaken our resolve to do so.

The seeds of the weeds they allow to grow / will fly into our yard (our souls) and take root -- even when we've tried to keep our yard free of them!

It's true. When everyone else is doing something, it begins to seem normal (even acceptable) when it's not! And that can wear down our resolve to fight it.

"What's the use?" I'll often say when I'm pulling up dandelions. Because my neighbor's yard is full of them (I sometimes think they must like them)! And I know when they go to seed they'll all going to blow over into my yard!

3.) We must get away from the thinking that says, "I'll only do what I feel like doing," or "I'll only do it when I feel like doing it." Because the person who does that will see their garden overrun with weeds.

They will see sin growing, and taking greater root in their soul. Sin that God calls us to, "put to death."

4.) We must use the "sword of the Spirit." We must take that sword and use it to cut down the thorn bushes / or dig it deep into the soil of my soul until it severs the roots of those weeds!

We must even use that sword to kill the rodents that eat at the roots of the flowers we're trying to cultivate and grow in our garden.

5.) We must remember that flowers need care. Weeds grow without any (and even when you're trying to kill them)! / You need to plant flower seeds. / Weeds seed themselves.

6.) I have found that flowers and fruit (I have found) are often tender, fragile, and easily damaged or killed, while weeds are just the opposite. Weeds seem to flower all the time, are sturdy and drought resistant, and are almost impossible to kill -- even when you're going out of your way to try and kill them!

Which means that without a regular and intentional effort to kill the weeds, and nurture the flowers, the weeds will eventually nudge out the flowers and take over.

7.) We must avail ourselves of the means of grace God has provided. If we want a harvest of godliness, we must work along with God and discipline ourselves in the habits of prayer, repentance, silence, praise, worship, ministry to others, theological reflection, fasting, meditation, evangelistic outreach, fellowship, and the study of His Word, faith in His Gospel and resting upon His promises.

If we hope to see a harvest of godliness, we must do the things that must be done in terms of killing weeds and cultivating flowers.