The Sower and the Seed (VI)\(^1\)

MATTHEW 13:7.

*And some fell among thorns; and the thorns sprung up, and choked them.*

We have already insisted upon what is said in this parable of the two sorts of ground on which the seed fell, viz. the wayside and the stony ground. We come now to a third sort, and in the text may be observed two things:

1. The quality of the ground. It was thorny ground. Not that the thorns were already grown up, but it was ground that was full of the seeds and roots of thorns. When it is said, "some fell among thorns," it is as much as to say, "they fell upon uncultivated ground," ground that never had been plowed and fitted for the seed. Thorns are the spontaneous growth of the ground, that come up of themselves in land that is not tilled; and it seems to have been especially so in that country, that land that lay fallow and was not plowed, would of itself be quickly overrun with briars and thorns. And therefore it is said in the fourth chapter of Jeremiah, third verse, "Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns"; which seems to imply as much as that ground that lay fallow, was not plowed, was wont to be overgrown with thorns. And therefore when it is said in the text, that "some of the seed fell among thorns," it is as much as to say that "some fell on uncultivated, unplowed land."

2. We may observe by what means the seeds, sown in this ground, come to nothing. The thorns sprang up and choked them.

From this text I would speak to these two propositions:

I. That the hearts of some of the hearers of the Word are so carnal and worldly, that they appear to be as ground that was never plowed, and so is overgrown with thorns.
II. Though such hearers may seem to show considerable regard to the Word of God for a while, yet these thorns do at length prevail and choke the Word, so that it never brings forth any saving fruit.

Prop. I. Some of the hearers of the Word are so under the power of a carnal, worldly spirit, that they are as ground that has never been plowed, and so is overgrown with thorns. Here,

[First.] They are under the power of a carnal, worldly spirit. They are of an earthly mind, and earthly-mindedness has the dominion in their hearts. It has fast rooting in it, and overspreads it as briars and thorns that have always grown upon the land, and never were rooted up or disturbed.

Worldly-mindedness, as the phrase is more commonly used nowadays, is restrained to an inordinate love of the profits of the world. But the Scripture notion of it is of larger extent, and signifies as much as inordinate affection to whatsoever is in the world, and of an earthly nature, whether the profits of the world, or the pleasures of it, or the honors of it. I John 2:15-16, \( \text{"Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him."} \) There we are warned against worldly-mindedness, and in the next verse we are told what is meant by it: \( \text{"For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world."} \) These three things are implied in worldly mindedness: the lusts of the flesh or a love of worldly pleasures; and the lust of the eyes, or a love of worldly profits; and the pride of life, or an affecting worldly honor. So by the thorns in the text is not meant only affections and cares about the profits of the world, but also the pleasures of it; as appears by Christ's interpretation of it in Luke 8:14, \( \text{"And that which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to} \)
perfection." In Mark 4:19, it is expressed thus: "And the cares of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things entering in, [choke the Word, and it becometh unfruitful]."

The hearts of many of the hearers of the Word, are under the dominion of an earthly mind. Worldly lusts reign in their heart, and have the strong possession of them, as much as ever you saw a piece of ground that never was subdued, is possessed and overrun with a wild growth. They are carried away with their lusts, and swallowed up in them—the world is their god; 'tis the idol that they worship, and that rules over them and governs them in all their conduct, and that shuts out everything of a spiritual nature—or if there be anything of a religious nature, it will soon drive it away.

Of those that are under the dominion of a carnal, earthly mind, in some this spirit is more especially exercised in one way, and in some in another. Some are exceeding ambitious and eager for advancement, and have their minds swollen with an affectation of superiority over their neighbors. Some are under the power of a covetous spirit or greediness after gain; are like earthworms, always groveling and buried in the earth, having their backs bowed down always towards the earth, panting after the dust of it, or like the serpent that goes on his belly and eats dust all the days of his life. Others are like dogs and swine, greedy of carnal pleasures, never well but when wallowing in the mire of sin, or greedily drinking at those filthy puddles.

So, some in one way, and some in another, are altogether carnal and earthly. They are earthly in their affections. Those carnal objects are the best things they see. They know of no better happiness than what consists in them, and therefore they place their happiness in them. And their thoughts and cares are earthly: these things are what they employ their thoughts about everywhere; these things take up their thoughts a-weekdays, and these things take up their thoughts on sabbath days. These are the main things about which
they are exercising their contrivance, as though the faculty of understanding was given ‘em for no other end, but only to get much of those things. And those things are the main objects of their pursuit. They seek ‘em much more than they do the salvation of their souls.

Second. These worldly and carnal affections and cares are fitly compared to thorns, and that upon several accounts:

1. As thorns are what the earth brings forth of itself, so those things are the natural produce of the heart. The ground need not be plowed and sowed in order to bring forth briars and thorns; they are the spontaneous growth of the earth; they will come up and grow of themselves without cultivation, as the fruit of the curse that [was] denounced upon the earth after the fall of man. Gen. 3:17-18,⁴ “Cursed be the ground; for thy sake, thorns and thistles shall it bring forth unto thee.”⁵ And since that curse, thorns and thistles are the natural produce of the earth.

And as the fruit of the same fall of man, the same curse is come upon the heart of man in a spiritual sense that is come upon the ground in a literal sense. Ever since the fall, the heart of man naturally brings forth thorns and thistles; worldly affections and cares and pursuits are its natural growth.

2. Thorns are an useless growth of the earth; so are carnal affections and cares the useless produce of the heart. They bring forth no fruit, either to the glory of God or to their own benefit. Those that are under the power of a worldly spirit, are an useless kind of persons; they are barren trees in God’s vineyard, mere cumberers of the ground; they live to no purpose; they don’t answer the end of their creation. God can have his glory of such persons no other way but in their destruction.

And those carnal affections and cares are useless to themselves. They get nothing by them; they are always pursuing after satisfaction, but never obtain. They are forever crying, “Who will show us any good?” [Ps. 4:6], but
they get nothing; they spend their money for that which is not bread, and their labor for that which satisfieth not [Is. 55:2]. The expectation of the wicked perishes; he never obtains those things that he seeks; they are like a partridge that sitteth on eggs, and hatcheth them not [Jer. 17:11]. It may be said to all them that have been violently upon seeking after happiness in the things of the world, "What fruit have you had of all those things?" As the Apostle says to the Christian Romans after their conversion, Rom. 6:21, "What fruit had ye then in those things whereof ye are now ashamed? for the end of those things is death." That which such men swallowed down, they shall vomit up again, and God shall cast it out of their belly (Job 20:15).

3. Thorns are not only an useless, but a pernicious growth. It was a curse upon Adam, when God said that the ground should bring forth thorns and thistles to him. Thorns are what are hurtful to men, and what they had need to beware of, lest they be wounded with them; 'tis very troublesome walking or being amongst them.

So it is with those worldly affections and cares [that] are the natural growth of the hearts of men. They are of an exceeding pernicious nature; they wound the souls of men, and cause to them abundance of trouble and vexation. They afford the mind no true peace, though they promise it; yea, they won’t suffer the mind to rest or have quietness. What is that keeps the world in a continual tumult and uproar, and what makes mankind so restless? What is that makes the souls of the wicked like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest? But worldly lusts are those violent carnal affections and desires that reign in their hearts. The Wise Man says, Eccles. 5:12, "The abundance of the rich won’t suffer him to sleep." And so men’s ambition and their lust after pleasure, they are things that disturb and disquiet the soul. By worldly lust men disquiet themselves, and by these they also disturb the peace of their neighbors. 'Tis from hence that men can’t live quietly one by another, without making each other’s lives miserable. From hence come all those broils
and contentions that the world is full of: contentions between nation and
nation; contentions in counties and provinces; and contentions in towns, and
contention in churches, contention between neighbors, and contention in
private families. Jas. 4:1, “From whence come wars and fightings among you?
come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?” The world
is the great home of contention: sometimes worldly preferment, sometimes
money, sometimes land, sometimes worldly pleasures.

The lusts of those things make men like briars and thorns one to
another. As it was said of old concerning the children of Israel in its
degenerate times, Mic. 7:4, “The best of them is a briar: the most upright is
sharper than a thorn hedge.” So wicked, worldly-minded men are commonly
compared to thorns in Scripture. II Sam. 23:6-7, “but the sons of Belial
shall be all of them as thorns thrust away, because they cannot be taken with
hands: but the man that shall touch them must be fenced with iron and the
staff of a spear; and they shall be utterly burned with fire in the same
place.”

Thus worldly affections and cares in the heart, are fitly compared to
thorns that grow in the ground.

Third. The reason why the heart is overrun with such thorns, or under
the dominion of such worldly lusts, is because the ground has never been
plowed. The ground is fallow, it never has been broken up, and therefore it
has nothing but the natural growth, briars and thorns, that the earth brings
forth of itself; as in that aforementioned place in the third chapter of
Jeremiah.

The ground of the heart is as it were plowed by two things:

1. By being convinced of sin. In the soul’s being made sensible of its
sinful, miserable condition by nature, the fallow ground is broken up, and is
as it were plowed in repentance. ’Tis the same work of God by which the heart
becomes a broken heart, and the spirit becomes a contrite spirit, that this
ground, that is naturally overrun with briars and thorns, is subdued and becomes mellow ground.

This repentance is legal, or evangelical. Legal repentance consists in a sense of the great guilt of sin and the wrath of God for sin. Evangelical repentance consists in a sense of the vile and hateful nature of sin, as against a glorious and gracious God, and forsaking sin; and by this means, the hard and stubborn heart is subdued, and broken up, and becomes as mellow ground.

2. By being convinced of the vanity of the world and broken off from it. God is oftentimes wont, in order to this, to make use of some sore temporal affliction, whereby he as it were plows up the fallow ground of the heart and embitters the world to them.

But more especially is it convictions of conscience, under which men are suffered to find no rest in the things of the world, and so are beat off from them. And God uses both to convince ‘em of sin, and also to convince ‘em of the vanity of the world; uses the plow of his law--the threatenings of the law cut the heart, as the unsubdued earth; the fallow ground, that is full of rocks and briars and thorns, is cut and broke up with a plow.

And so the sinner is brought, or at least prepared, to renounce his own righteousness, and renounce the world both together: in which two consists the great duty of self-denial. And therefore this matter might have been explained in one word: the plowing up this fallow ground is effected by bringing the sinner to deny and renounce himself. And this is that which kills the briars and thorns; this makes the heart as mellow ground, so that the seed of the gospel shall flourish and be fruitful in it.

Prop. II. Though such hearers, whose hearts are as fallow ground and overgrown with thorns, may seem to show considerable regard to the Word of God for a while, yet these thorns do at length prevail and choke the Word, that it never brings forth any saving fruit.
There are three things contained in this proposition:

First. Such hearers of the Word as have been spoken of, may seem to show a considerable regard to the Word preached for a while. They may for a while appear affected with what they hear, and may show regard to the Word in their practice; may for a while be religious, may pray and read and ask counsel of others, and may, with Herod, do many things.

In a time of awakening, they may be moved with what they hear and see; when they hear of others being converted, they may be considerably stirred up by it to feel conversion themselves. They may have a great many thoughts about the concerns of their souls when alone, and may for a while be very conscientious in their behavior amongst men. But,

Second, the thorns having never been rooted up, do at length prevail. Their lusts, that were under some restraint and were kept down for a while, having never been mortified, do at length revive and exert themselves.

In some that before were addicted to youthful pleasures, their carnal appetites and sinful inclinations do at length prevail, and they return again to the same youthful follies and sinful pleasures and diversions that they were before addicted to. In others, whose iniquity was covetousness, a craving desire after the profits of the world again revives after they have for a season been affected with the Word, and concerned about their salvation, and they again return to a life of worldliness.

They are swallowed up in the world; their hearts are full of nothing but worldly inclinations and worldly care. Their time is all spent in groveling in the earth.

The vanities, pleasures and cares of the world do by degrees creep into the minds of many persons that have for a season been affected by the Word, till they get full possession of the heart.

Third. By this means the Word of God is hindered from ever having any saving effect upon their hearts. They prevent their being thorough in seeking
salvation. While the impressions last that are made by the Word, their hearts are so divided between the world and the concern of their souls, that they make but a poor head of seeking their salvation.

Very often persons, after they have heard some awakening sermon, take up resolutions that they will be more thorough in the business of their souls. They will be violent for the kingdom of heaven, and do according to the directions that are given 'em. But they go away, and the world comes in upon them and takes up their minds, and they soon lose their resolutions and are no more thorough than they used to be. Some seem to be under some convictions a long time together, and no saving effect appears of their convictions; and the reason of it is, they are entangled and ensnared in the worldly cares and worldly appetites, and vanities weaken all their resolution and enervate their endeavors, so that they never do anything to purpose.

The world clogs 'em and weakens 'em in everything they do in religion. It hinders 'em in their attendance on religious duties, and causes 'em to attend them in a poor, listless, lifeless manner. It hinders 'em in their prayers, and makes 'em cold and heartless in their addresses to God, very formal in their attendance on ordinances.

It prevents their seeing their own undone state and the absolute necessity they stand in of a Savior. And it is often an occasion of persons wholly losing their convictions; their worldly desires and cares and delights do at length quite overwhelm and drown them, and quench the Spirit of God. And by means of these things they are again led into sinful ways, after they have been for a while reformed; the world leads 'em into abundance of wickedness, and very often keeps them in stupidity and wickedness all the days of their lives. Worldly cares and desires and vanities are of a very stupefying nature; they benumb the soul as to its apprehension of spiritual objects.
This world and the other world are two rivals for the heart, and 'tis impossible that the heart should be given to both, so that it should be strongly engaged in pursuit of both at the same time. If one be violently pursued, the other will be proportionably neglected.

The world so takes up most men's thoughts, that there is but little room left for serious consideration of the things of eternity. Their time is all taken up in contriving how to get the world and in putting those contrivances in execution, in pleasing and entertaining themselves with worldly enjoyments, or bewailing their worldly losses and disappointments. They have no leisure to dwell much upon those great things that are held forth in the Word of God.

And if at sometimes they find leisure, that there might be time to think of these things, yet they are very ill disposed to it. 'Tis so out of their way in that which they make their main business, and so much beside the stream and channel of their usual predominant affections and thoughts, that they have no inclination but on occasion to it.

The mind that is all involved and overwhelmed in worldly things is but poorly prepared for religious exercises. And if it should be forced sometimes into exercises, the thoughts will be miserably broken and shattered, and it will be difficult to hold the mind in any considerable degree of fixedness.

And then the world tends to stupefy the soul, as it disposes it to call in question the being of those things that are spiritual and invisible. The mind being so much swallowed up with those things that are visible and sensitive, it is disposed to think those things the only real things, and disposes the mind to look upon other things as fabulous. Experience witnesses, that a great eagerness after the world and a deep concern about salvation, are not consistent one with another. When was it ever seen that a person was violent for heaven and engaged after this world at the same time? Thus the cares and desires and delights of the world make the Word of God
ineffectual, and forever hinder its having any saving effect on many that all their lifetime sit under the preaching of it.⁶

APPLICATION.

Use I may be of Self-Examination, in three branches:

First. Let this put those that have formerly had convictions, and lost them, upon examining themselves, whether or no their convictions were not choked and stifled by these thorns. You that had convictions in the last time of general awakening here, consider how you came to lose them. Were they not the vanities of this world that gradually came in and thrust out religious concerns? It may be in some, it was the pleasures and diversions of the world, the things that young people usually set their hearts upon. When the extraordinary work of God, that was here six years ago, was a new thing, you was affected; to hear the news of others’ conversion moved you; and while all the conversation seemed to be about such things, you continued under concerns: but afterwards, as other things came more in view, as worldly things became more the subject of conversation, your religious concern began to die away, and your heart began to go out after the vanities of youth, till you had wholly lost your convictions. Was not this the very case with many of you?

And are there not others that find their conviction choked with cares about the profits and honors of the world? What were the things that crowded into your mind, that occasioned your convictions by degrees to die away? Were they not the pains and business of the world? There are a great many ways that the minds of men are exercised about the things of the world: sometimes they are exercised in studying how to get the world, sometimes how to save it; sometimes they are filled with anxious concern at the worldly losses they meet with, or with fears of losses yet to come; sometimes their minds are taken up with their bargains, sometimes with some change in their
worldly circumstances, with building or removing; sometimes with marrying or giving in marriage; sometimes with contention with their neighbor about the things of this world; sometimes with exercise about public affairs.

Examine yourself, whether they are such things as these that have been a snare to your soul, that have stifled conviction and hardened and stupefied your heart. Is it not probable that you might before now have been converted, and been a holy and happy person, had it not been for such things?

Second. Let those that have long been seeking salvation, and han’t obtained, inquire whether they han’t reason to think those thorns ben’t the very cause that the Word has never brought forth any saving fruit. There are some that have been a great many years uneasy in their minds about the condition of their souls, and have been, after a sort, seeking salvation, and especially at turns have taken a great deal of pains; but yet are not converted to this day. And it may be some of them are ready to wonder what the matter is. Others are converted that have been seeking but a little while, but they are left behind still; and though they have had so many thoughts, and have taken so much pains and have done and suffered so much, yet they see no prospect of their obtaining mercy.

Let such inquire, whether or no our text don’t give a true account of the matter. The seed that has been sown in your heart has always been kept down; it always appears languid and poor; it never grows up nor brings any ripe fruit. Consider, is not this the very cause that it is choked with thorns? Has it not been so, that though you have for a long time had some concern about the state of your soul, yet your mind and heart have for the most part been very much filled up with the things of the world? Han’t worldly thoughts and worldly desires and worldly cares overcharged you? And han’t this been manifest in your conversation? Has not that very much savored of a worldly spirit, and han’t you from time to time been contending about the world? Han’t your spirit been often engaged and heated, and your will set
up in temporal affairs? And han’t this led some of you to a great deal of backbiting and evil-speaking?

If this has been the case, you need not wonder that you have been seeking salvation so long and han’t yet obtained. You need not wonder that others, time after time, step in before you, that have sought but a little while. You need not wonder that little children are converted, and you left behind still. Many such seekers as you are, seek to enter in and never are able. ‘Tis not the way to have success, to seek after such a manner, to have the heart so divided between this world and another; to worship the God of Israel and serve your own gods at the same time; to seek heaven and pursue after the world as much, or more; to pray to God and at the same time to quarrel with men, and sit and spend away one evening after another in talking against these and those neighbors, be engaged in public and private contention,’ and go about with a spirit of envy and malice, setting up your will, striving for the mastery in worldly affairs.

Striving to enter in at the strait gate, and being violent for the kingdom of heaven, is quite a different thing from this. It is to make seeking salvation the one thing that you do, that your whole heart is engaged in and taken up with, as setting aside all other things. If you had been truly violent for the kingdom of heaven, you would have had no heart to do as you have done: you would have had no heart to be striving about the world; you would not have been at all disposed to spend time in judging and backbiting others; you would have had business enough of your own, of a quite different nature, to have taken up your mind. The world would have been a little thing in your eyes; you would not have much cared what became of it, so that you could have obtained the kingdom of God and his righteousness. If you had sought salvation thus, you might have entered in the kingdom of heaven as well as others; you would not [have] been left behind as you are to
this day, it may be, much further from the kingdom of God than you were twenty years ago.

You need not wonder at all at your having been so unsuccessful. You may go on and seek salvation as you have done to the age of Methuselah, if you should live so long, and be never the nearer; but on the contrary, your heart all the while grow harder and harder, and your case more and more deplorable. You may possibly think with yourself, how you have sought salvation so long, and taken so much pains: but you make too much of what you have done; no such great matters, all that you have done, is not worth mentioning. ‘Tis true, you have taken pains sometimes, but you han’t been steady in it; you have proceeded by fits and starts. You have sought deliverance from hell, but you have sought the world as much, if not a great deal more. You think [it] hard that God han’t given you the kingdom of heaven for your seeking it so much, whereas in your very seeking heaven in the way that you have done, you have cast contempt upon that which you have sought. To seek eternal life after such a manner as you have done, is really to trample upon eternal life, and to reproach the salvation that Christ offers you. You have indeed despised and neglected this great salvation. No wonder that God han’t bestowed it upon you.

And you are never like to obtain salvation, unless you seek it in a quite different manner than ever yet you have done.

Third. Let those that now are without any great awakenings, inquire whether those thorns that you have heard of are not the cause. You have heard a great deal to awaken you and make you sensible of the miserable condition you are in, and the necessity you are in of an interest in Christ. Besides what you have heard in the preaching of the Word, God has in his providence set before you those things that have been of the most awful nature and awakening tendency. Now what is it owing to, that under all [this] you remain so senseless? Consider, is it not owing to your heart’s being overcharged
with the vanities of this world? Do you not give way to a covetous spirit, or don't you indulge some inordinate worldly appetite, or are not the briars and thorns of contention and ill-will still remaining, rooted in your heart? Though for the present it may be those things may be a little restrained and hid, yet are not the roots of those thorns still left whole in the ground, ready to spring up as soon as ever the restraint is taken off, and a new occasion offers? And is not this one reason that the Word of God takes no more rooting in your heart, and has no more effect upon you?

Use II may be of Exhortation.

First, to all in general, to root up out of their hearts the briars and thorns that choke the seed of the Word. You that would be saved, attend to that exhortation of God to the men of Judah and Jerusalem, in Jer. 4:3, “Break up your fallow ground, and sow not among thorns.” You have, many of you, been preached to a long time; the Sower has often sown seed in the ground, but there never has been any fruit of it; and the reason has been, the ground has never been broken up, and so is as it is naturally, overgrown with a wild and pernicious growth, which chokes the seed of the Word that it can’t bring fruit to perfection. Therefore, seek that the ground may be broken up, that the thorns may be rooted out, and that your heart may become as ground that is plowed and mellowed and fitted for the seed.

As long as the thorns remain, they will suck out all the fatness and sweetness of the ground to nourish them; there will be nothing left to nourish the good seed. They will drink up the rain that falls upon it. Let the sun shine never so pleasantly upon it, and the rain descend never so plentifully, all the effect will be only to nourish the briars and thorns, and make them grow the faster.

The sunshine of the gospel and the dews and showers of the Word that, it is said, drops as the rain and distills as the dew [Deut. 32:2], however beneficial they are in themselves, yet they will do no good to the heart that
is as thorny ground, but on the contrary will do it hurt. Instead of causing the good seed to grow and bring forth fruit there, they'll make that mischievous, pernicious growth that is natural to it to flourish the more, and the roots of the thorns will fill the ground, so that the good seed will find no place; neither will there be any room for the seed of the Word to shoot forth its branches above ground, for all space will be filled up with thorns.

Therefore, this is what you have to seek: even that those thorns may be cut up by the roots, and the ground plowed and this pernicious growth utterly destroyed. Which must be by your being convinced of the miserable condition that you are in by nature, and being made thoroughly sensible that none of the enjoyments of this world can make you happy, give you any relief, or make you any other than miserable. You must see that whatever of this world’s enjoyments you are possessed of, you are a miserable wretch without Christ. Such must be your sense of your misery, that all the silver and gold in the world, yea, and the pleasures and honors, the palaces and thrones, and robes and dainties of princes, would not relieve or give you ease without Christ.

Your heart must be broken off from those things, and you must be brought to be willing to sell all for the pearl of great price, to part with those lusts that have been dearest and sweetest of all, if by any means you may obtain peace with God.

You must have that sense of your sins, that your heart must be broken off from sin and off from the world. It doubtless seems hard to you to forsake the world, which has been your god. Micah said, Judg. 18:24, “Ye have taken away my gods which I made, and what have I more?” Men can’t bear to part with their gods. Laban complained most bitterly of the loss of his gods, Gen. 31:30. If you take away men’s gods from ‘em, they look upon themselves undone; but yet you must part with your gods, or you must lose your soul. You must be brought to cast away your idols to the moles and to the bats. Moles
and bats are wont to lurk and hide themselves in heaps of rubbish. You must cast forth your gods as heaps of rubbish, yea, though they seem precious to you, precious as gods of silver and gold. Your dear lusts you must part with, your right hands you must cut off, and your right eyes you must pluck out. For want of this you hitherto remain in a miserable condition, and are like to remain so till you come to this. Because you han’t come to this, others have entered into the kingdom of God before you, time after time. Little children have entered into the kingdom of God, while you have been left behind. They have been much more in the way of a saving effect of the Word of God upon their hearts than you, for they han’t been in the way of having their hearts so entangled in the thorns of worldly cares and pursuits as you have; and there has not been need of that force and violence in order to a breaking up the fallow ground of their hearts as yours, where the thorns have been growing undisturbed for so long a time, and have been strongly rooted and have grown so stiff and stubborn. It will be hard to you to have the fallow ground of your heart broken up, to have all its natural growth cut up by the roots. You don’t love to feel the plow on your hearts, among the roots, but you must feel it, and must be willing to have it cut deep, and to be plowed all over without sparing one thorn bush there, destroying both root and branch: and then, and not till then, will the seed of the Word have effect. Therefore, you must not resist the plow of God’s holy law: when you feel it cutting and breaking up the ground and violently tearing up the natural growth of it, when you feel the plow coming hard at the roots of the thorns, let it come and cut them in pieces. You must yield to it, however painful. It is your heart must be thus wounded in order to its being healed.

Here consider, to enforce this exhortation, two or three things:

1. Consider the experience you have had of those thorns, effectually hindering any good effect of the Word. I now appeal to your own experience: how has it been, time after time, when you have heard sermons on the most
important and awakening subjects, and have been warned and counseled in the
most solemn manner, and your mind has been something impressed—how quickly
and easily has all been choked by the vanities of the world? It is said in
the parable, Luke 8:14, they “go forth, and are choked with cares and riches
and pleasures of this life.”

And has it not been so with you hundreds of times, when you have heard
the most affecting truth, have you not gone forth out of the meeting house
and returned to the world, and all impressions have been presently erased out
of your mind, so that by that time you have entered into worldly talk and
worldly pursuits a few hours, all seemed to be gone?

2. If you don’t comply with this exhortation, you will take less care
of your souls than you do of your fields. The husbandman knows that, unless
he cuts up the natural wild growth of his field and breaks up his fallow
ground, it will be in vain to expect any good fruit of it. The husbandman
that should be seen going forth sowing his seed in unplowed and unsubdued
ground, would be thought to act like a madman. And yet how many are [there]
that make a show, as though they were concerned for their salvation, and
ready to hear and do the will of God, and come to hear the Word preached time
after time with that pretense, and yet never break up the fallow ground of
their hearts, never cut up the thorns of worldly affections, never consent to
part with the world for Christ.

You that live by husbandry know that when you plant your corn in your
field, it will come to nothing unless it be weeded. The weeds will soon get
above it and choke it, and it will languish and dwindle, and no fruit will be
brought forth. And therefore you are willing to take a great deal of pains to
subdue and till your lands. And is it not of infinitely greater concern, that
you should take pains to subdue and weed out worldly lusts out of your
hearts?
If your fields don’t bring forth fruit, you may want bread and be reduced to beggary; but if your souls remain unfruitful, you are lost forever. You are like to perish miserably, and will beg in vain for the least help or relief.

But this brings me to a third motive:

3. Consider, if this thorny ground ben’t broken up now, its end shall be to be burned in unquenchable fire. The ground that has the influences of the sun and rain, and brings forth nothing but briars and thorns, is nigh unto cursing, and its end is to be burned, Heb. 6:8. God will go through the briars and thorns, and burn them together. The Sun of Righteousness shall not always continue to shine upon such ground in vain. Instead of its pleasant beams to cherish the growth of the ground, shall at last come down a scorching, consuming fire; instead of refreshing dews and showers of the Word, God shall at last rain fire and brimstone, which shall continue in an everlasting storm. And then it shall be with such ground as is said in the thirty-fourth chapter of Isaiah, [vv.] 9 and 10, “And the streams thereof shall be turned into pitch, and the dust thereof into brimstone, and the land thereof shall become burning pitch. It shall not be quenched night nor day; the smoke thereof shall go up for ever: from generation to generation it shall lie waste; none shall pass through it for ever and ever.” Thus shall it be with all those hearts that remain under the power and dominion of worldly affections.

Second. I would particularly exhort those that are now under some convictions and have lately begun to seek their salvation, to take care that the thorns don’t hereafter spring [up] and stifle their convictions, and make [them] ineffectual. This there is great danger of. Thus it has been before with many persons: many that were under convictions, as you are, and had begun to seek salvation, as you have heard, after they had continued a while, the thorns sprung up at last and all came to nothing.
The time will probably come when you will have a far greater trial than now you have. There will [be] a great deal more to cherish the thorns, and make them to grow, than there is now.

Now you see and hear many things to stir you up, that it may be by and bye you won’t see and hear. Times may be greatly altered, and you may have many temptations to set your heart on worldly vanities that you han’t now. Therefore beware, now you are forewarned. Be exhorted now to make thorough work. Throw by worldly concerns. Let ‘em be esteemed as dirt and dung, and let your heart finally part with them. Sell all for Christ, and satisfy yourself with resolutions, watchfulness and prayer against backsliding.

It is for your own sake. If you harken to this counsel, you will be wise for yourself. If you refuse, you alone must bear it.

No doubt but some of you will be such sorts, after you have had the Spirit of God striving with you, and after you have taken pains for a while, as to lose all your pains you have taken, and all the benefit of your convictions. Let everyone look to himself and take heed to his own heart, and consider these two things:

1. If you now seek your salvation as you may do, and continue so doing, there is a very great probability that you will obtain. We see that now God is on the giving hand. We see that at such times as this is, a very earnest, constant seeking salvation is not wont to be in vain. We see by much experience, that ‘tis not a vain thing to call upon God while he is near [Is. 55:6]. In all probability, if you are but willing to be at the pains and trouble of a thorough use of means for your salvation now, and do but hold a resolution that you won’t leave off, you will have success. And though it would be a great thing if you should be converted, though it would be a wonderful infinite mercy, and would be more than if you were made the biggest prince on earth; yet in all likelihood you may obtain this mercy, though you may be a very great sinner. In all probability, if you thus take pains and
don't backslide, you may be delivered from everlasting burnings—and how great a thing will that be! Yet you may be a child of God and an heir of eternal glory, may be in such a state that death can’t hurt you, and in such a state that you may have reason to rejoice at the thought of the day of judgment.

And how happy will you be then! No man nor angel can set forth your happiness; 'tis beyond the power of numbers to declare. No arithmetic, no rule of multiplication can measure it. O then, is it not worth your while to improve your present opportunity? And is [it] not worth your while to continue steadfast and constant in striving to enter in at the strait gate?

2. Consider, if it should be so, that the thorns of worldly lusts and affections should at last so prevail as to stifle your conviction and put an end to your striving, there is very great danger that [you] will never be saved. It will dreadfully harden your heart, and if you should live long after it, there is great danger that you never will be converted.

To obtain conversion is comparatively an easy thing to them that never quenched conviction, as we see in children. But how hard a thing does it commonly prove to those that are past their youth, and have stood it out through times of the pouring out of God’s spirit, and have quenched convictions, and in whose hearts the thorns have long been growing, and getting deeper and stronger root.

And then consider how uncertain is life. You see by the late awful instances of sudden death,8 that when you go to bed well, 'tis uncertain whether you shall live till morning; and when you close your eyes to go to sleep, you are uncertain whether it is not your last sleep. You know not but your first waking will be in eternity. And you moreover see that when you go about, though in health, and are taking your steps on the ground, you are uncertain but that the next step will be into eternity. You don’t know how near you are to the edge of the precipice; the very next step you take, for
ought you know, your footing may fail, and if you are unconverted you may sink down into the bottomless pit.

Therefore, how can you have any rest in such a condition, and how can you ever entertain a thought of leaving off, crying and striving for salvation anymore, till you have obtained an interest in Him who has satisfied for sin, and in whom, and whom alone, you may be safe delivered from the sting of death, and be safe from that eternal hell that follows after.
Notes

1 Edwards' notations at the head of the sermon indicate that he preached it in Nov. 1740 and repreached it at Stockbridge in May. 56.

2 MS: "1 Joh 3. 15."

3 MS = "mark 3 :19"

4 MS = "Gen. 13. 17. 18"

5 KJV = “Cursed is the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat of it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee.”

6 This marks the end of the first preaching unit of No. VI. At the beginning of the next preaching unit, Edwards repeats the text and the two propositions.

Math 13 7

1. The hearts of some of the hearers of the word are so Carnal & Oly that they appear to be as Ground that never was plowed & so is over grown with thorns.

2. Tho such hearers may seem to show some regard to the word yet those thorns will at Length prevail & Choke it so that it never will bring forth any saving fruit

7 MS: “and contention.”