

LIVING IN THE SHADOWS

By Tim Wells

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I have something very important to say this morning and I ask you to stir up your minds and actively concentrate and listen. None of us got out of bed this morning, got dressed, drove all this way to sit and daydream—at least I hope not. God has a message for His people. Pastor said it two weeks ago at the beginning of his message. I am repeating it today.

This morning I am speaking to the people who are here, not those who are not here. However, what we discuss this morning will greatly affect those that are not here—those we would like to see here.

For the past two weeks we have been exploring Jesus' Parable of the Sower, found in Matthew 13, Mark 4, and Luke 8.

We have been asking how we may improve the "Gospel Receptivity Level" of the people we are close to.

Some seed falls on the foot path — hard-beaten soil that does not permit the entry of a seed. To make room for growth, the hard ground must be plowed; hard hearts must be plowed with worship of the Lord.

Some seed falls on shallow soil, with underlying bedrock. For roots to reach moisture and take hold, the bedrock must be cracked; hardened hearts must be broken by the power of God's Word.

Today we talk about the seed that falls among thorns. Let's review the parable and establish the metaphors in our minds again.

One of the most amazing things about this parable is that, although Jesus explains the metaphors, He does not explain the overall meaning of the parable. He doesn't say "Here is what you should do about it." He is saying "This is the way it is."

It is important to not over-analyze the metaphors because I believe parables were meant to be simple. They are pictures that Jesus painted through storytelling. When we complicate them, we often lose the meaning. However, by not explaining the purpose of the parable, He allows it to be used in many ways in our lives.

An important thing to remember is that He spoke to a mixed group of people: sinners and saints, disciples and self-righteous, and the committed and the curious. He spoke to them all. Everyone could glean something from this teaching.

And the greatest point to realize is that none of these first three scenarios is the end of the line. Whether a person is the one whose heart was hard, rocky, or thorny ground, God is full of grace. He will continue to work with each heart over and over to attempt gain access, to heal, and give life.

Every single one of us comes to God with baggage, and we carry some of it for our entire lives. Because of his grace, forgiveness, long suffering, and patience, He walks with us every day to ensure that someday we will live with Him in eternity.

What are Jesus' Metaphors?

The field is the world (told in next parable). I don't believe Jesus changed His metaphors from one parable to the next.

The sower (2nd parable) is the Son of Man. But we know it is also us. We are the salt of the earth; we are the light of the world.

There's almost a progression in His thought.

- In this scenario, the seed has not fallen on hard ground—little chance of taking root.
- It has not fallen on rocky ground—takes root, but unless it cracks through the hardness, it has a short life span.
- It has fallen on fairly decent soil. It is growing, but is at a disadvantage due to its environment.

What is the seed? The seed is the Word of God.

What does it produce? Sons of the kingdom (2nd parable).

Is this plant that has grown up among thorns a son/daughter of the kingdom? Does this plant represent a Christian? Was not the prodigal still a son?

This was not a seed planted in a plowed area, but it was tossed in an area that already had thorns.

v.7—*“And others [seeds] fell among the thorns, and the thorns came up and choked them out.”*

What are the thorns? They are “cares of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches.” v.22

Let's identify what the thorns or cares are not:

- Everyday responsibilities (paying bills, going to work)
- Families or people, per se
- They are not little weeds; they are thorns

Thorns are the things in life that become so great and powerful that they can literally choke out the life that God has placed in us. They are dangerous.

What is living in the shadows? It is not living to the fullest. It is a struggle to survive. It is the stunted growth and fruitless life of a plant that cannot get enough sunlight.

Jeremiah 4:3

“For the Lord says to the men of Judah and to Jerusalem (who also represent the people of God today): ‘Break up your fallow ground, and do not sow among thorns.’”

Don't sow where plants will be fruitless. Don't sow where you cannot harvest.

Do you think that maybe some of the people to whom Jesus told the parable might have remembered this ancient Scripture?

We are to take some responsibility for where we throw seed—the Word of God. We are going to talk about how to do that.

As stated last week by Florence's daughter, as we "sow in tears," we will "reap in joy." I believe that sorrow is not just an empty crying, but a bearing of the sadness that Jesus has for the world itself, being aware of how we sow.

Because it is certain that there will be people who will begin to believe because of our testimony *without* our knowledge (viz., non-intentionally sown among thorns), we need to be prepared to deal with all kinds of situations.

- How do we identify thorns and make sure that we do not sow among them?
- How can we prepare someone who is living among thorns to receive the Gospel?
- How do we help someone among the thorns who is obviously growing already?

I believe the thorns are other gods: idols.

We are His Messengers

First commandment: Exodus 20. It is the most important, and that is why it is first. But it is the least talked about. We assume that we keep it because we are Christians.

Before we break any of the other nine commandments, we must break the first one.

"You shall have no other gods besides Me."

These are not sculptures made out of clay or carved out of wood. That is the second commandment. These are things in our lives that become so important that they replace the living God in our lives.

An idol is a good thing that becomes an ultimate or supreme thing. That is why they are so deceptive, insidious, and that is why we struggle with them so much. That is why it was the primary thing about which God struggled with Israel and also with us today. Yes, it's still first in our distractions.

- It's when a job becomes all-consuming.
- It's when wine is no longer just a drink with dinner but becomes a pain killer.
- It's when a spouse or family is the totality of our happiness.
- It's when sex becomes an unsatisfiable, addictive hunger.
- It's when we think a church building defines us, doing what only God Himself can do.
- It's when fear disables us.
- It's when success becomes the measure of our lives.
- It's when friends become our source of validation and love.
- It's cares that begin to choke us and riches that deceive us.
- On and on...

First, Cleanse Ourselves

To be effective and to recognize the idols of others, first, we must cleanse *ourselves*.

Isaiah 6 is extremely significant to our discussion. Isaiah has an eye-opening experience with God that changes his life, the life of his people, and the way He viewed God's people. There are two important points.

1) His idol died. Many believe King Uzziah had an unusually powerful place in Isaiah's life. When he died, Isaiah was able to see the true God again fully.

2) When he again saw God, he was able to see himself, his sin, and the sin of God's people.

If Isaiah were alive today (the man with unclean lips), would he be a Christian?

Who were his people (the people with unclean lips)? If his people were alive today, would they be the church?

When we are cleansed by God, we are able to see clearly, and we then, like Isaiah, become people who can go into the world.

Jesus said, *"Before you remove the speck in your brother's eye, remove the log from your own."* I can't help my neighbor remove the idol that is choking him if I haven't removed mine first.

While we only have a short account of Isaiah's experience, we can believe that the removal of his idol was extremely painful, as is ours. The death of his friend was as painful as the burning coal on his lips. Idol removal is often painful. We do not give them up easily.

In the book *Counterfeit Gods*, Timothy Keller wrote: "People who have never suffered in life have less empathy for others, little knowledge of their own shortcomings and limitations, no endurance in the face of hardship, and unrealistic expectations for life."

If we have idols in our own lives, we cannot see the needs of others nor will we have the ability to help them remove theirs.

Since we are messengers, and we represent Christ, when we have idols, not only will people see them, but we are in danger of transferring them.

II Kings 21:21 *"And he walked in all the way that his father walked in, and served the idols that his father served, and worshipped them . . ."*

The scripture also says in Leviticus, *"Do not sow with mixed seed."*

The first thing we must do is cleanse ourselves so that, not only do we not sow among thorns, but we sow pure seed. We aren't interested in getting people to believe in our god-who-is-not-god, but we want them to believe in the only true God.

Have you ever heard someone say something like, "I couldn't participate in what the church was doing because the family wanted to do such-and-such. You know, family is first." Really, when did that happen?

I'm not advising the abdication of family; I'm referring to the elevation of family to "first."

Idols cannot be merely removed; they must be replaced. And the replacement is to return to the worship and adoration of the One Who only can be on the throne.

We haven't even gotten to the person who is growing in the shadows or thorns because it's imperative we are clean before we go to them.

I did not say perfect; I said clean. This is not a one-time process; it is a continuing, growing process. We will struggle with idolatry all our lives from time to time. But as long as we are coming continually

to Him with our shortcomings, letting Him cleanse us, we will be able to reach out effectively to others.

Build a Bridge of Trust

So, once we've cleansed ourselves, how do we reach out? How do we sow or even know where to sow.

Build a bridge of trust. Why? In our present culture, people do not trust Christians nor the church. They cannot relate to the Scriptures, to our dogma or doctrine, or anything that we often think of as super spiritual. They don't understand our clichés nor our "God-speak."

We can't just swoop into someone's life and tell them they have idols and to repent so they don't go to hell, while quoting 20 scriptures. They will reject us; our efforts will be wasted and futile.

Here are some of the ways we build a bridge of trust.

1. We pray for them.

Prayer will pave highways into people's hearts where they literally will never even open the door to us otherwise.

Jesus tells us to pray and not lose heart. Everything in scripture points to prayer as the one activity that can change people. Frankly, I think it changes both us and the people we love and care for.

This message this morning is not on how to pray, so I'm not going to belabor the point, but it is a first step and continuing ingredient in the success of the sowing and the harvest.

If we see someone in need, who is struggling with thorns—whether Christian brother or non-Christian seeker—we must continue to pray for them.

2. Friendship and genuine concern.

While prayer paves the way to the heart, friendship is the vehicle with which we enter.

True genuine concern and uncompromising love for someone are the most effective ways to persuade someone to give up their idols and choose the only living God.

If we want someone to hear our message, friendship will build the bond of trust needed.

This friendship must not be feigned while pounding them with the truth in order to get results. That won't work.

3. Coupled with friendship is patience

It is no secret that we may spend years praying for and being a friend to the person we wish to enter fully into the kingdom. In fact, we may never see the results.

While we would often like to rush in and manipulate the situation into a "trophy" for God, what the Lord wants is not a trophy but another *child*. He is willing to wait patiently, as He did for us. We must also.

4. They must feel safe

Last, and certainly not least, the person in whom we wish to sow seed must feel like whatever they do or share with us is safe. They must know that if they confide a problem or wrongdoing with us, that we are not there with a club to pound them into a place of shame.

Yanking the thorns out will not work!

We must have and exhibit the same forgiveness and grace that Jesus Himself shows. We are His ambassadors.

People have a load of shame they are carrying about. Shame is one of the primary ingredients that keep people from succeeding, not only in life, but in God. Our purpose is not to reinforce shame, but to reinforce grace. The Holy Spirit will deal with the shame and its source.

I think we will be amazed at how much people will open up on their own once they feel safe and can trust us.

Although we personally must be a safe haven, the church body must also be that. When someone comes into our body of believers, hopefully they sense that this is a safe place to expose and get rid of their sin. We don't exist to shame people; we are not the keepers and enforcers of the law (like the Pharisees thought themselves to be).

This is God's Work Through Us

We are *all* God's messengers and His message is demonstrated through *all* of us.

It is not God's will that we bring people for the "church" to save or for the pastor to convert.

In Galatians 6:1–2, Paul instructs us all to bear *one another's* burdens:

"Brethren, even if a man is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, lest you too be tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ."

This is phenomenal! Notice:

- Spiritual people work to restore people caught in sin. Remember: the plant growing in the shadows is a brother or sister!
- We do it with "gentleness" not a barrage of hard "truth." What a concept!
- We recognize our own ability to fall and identify with the sinner. We work to remove our own idols.
- We lift and carry because that is what Jesus does. We do this as long as it takes to make our brethren whole.

Merely bringing someone into the church building will not accomplish the objectives I just outlined.

Using the church to convert our friends is in itself idolatrous. It is expecting a church service to do what only the Holy Spirit can do and what He has commanded us to do.

Don't misunderstand: the church body is a wonderful place to bring people when they are ready. However, I am saying, don't substitute what God has directed *you* to do for an "easier" way.

When we bring people to church, it should be because we are praying for them, befriending them, being patient with them, and they are safe with us. This should be the case before they come, and continue after they leave our service.

This is Hard Work

Be willing to not only be patient, but to work hard in the lives of the seekers. Bearing burdens is difficult.

If we see someone who is obviously struggling to grow in God because of being overshadowed by thorns, do we give up? Do we say, "That's too bad"? Do we walk away?

In the Old Testament, the Temple was a dirty place to work. The priests labored long and hard to make sure the sins of the people were atoned.

Jesus demonstrated that for us. He labored long and hard for the objects of His love. He has sent us to do the same.

We can't if our idols get in the way.

Patience and long-suffering are godly traits that we often put aside because of our desire for results. Don't do it.

Don't Look at Their Faces

Without the help of the Holy Spirit, it is impossible to see where a person is in their journey.

Because we are often swayed by appearances and actions of other people, we easily misinterpret people's intentions and their "closeness" to the cross.

It's interesting that God told Jeremiah to not be swayed, dismayed, or influenced by the way people looked when he told them the truth.

God also says through Jeremiah that *"the heart is deceitful above all things. Who can know it?"* Only God knows the heart.

Don't try to read hearts; try to obey God as He reads the hearts. I believe one of the greatest mistakes we make as Christians is to try to read hearts like the Holy Spirit does. Let Him do His job; let's just do ours.

The person that seems the farthest away from God may be the closest. If we don't understand that, we may pass them by.

If we are exercising the love and patience God has given us and obeying His commands with people, He will be able to work effectively in their lives through us.

In Conclusion

I would love to talk more about idolatry, how to pray, how to be a friend, and creating a safe haven for seekers. It is not within the scope of this message.

However, I hope some key points have impressed us about how to deal with that bed of thorns.

- We are to look to our own hearts, remove our idols, and move forward to do His will.
- We must build a bridge of trust if we ever hope to win the lost for Christ.
- If a brother is living in the shadows because he/she is struggling to see and absorb the light, we can come into their lives as the “light of the world” to help them not only see their idols but to remove them with the help of the Holy Spirit.
- We must never give up on someone, decline to bear their burdens as Christ would, nor turn away.
- We cannot read or cleanse someone else’s heart. However, we can bow to our true God to let Him lead us into their hearts.

Perhaps this morning God has spoken to you.

- Do you need to remove idols to be effective?
- Is your life “safe”? Do you need to begin building bridges of trust?
- Perhaps you have so much shame in your life that you are finding it difficult to succeed or function.
- Are you living in the shadows and struggling everyday to see the light of Christ?

This is the best place to be, surrounded by people who would love to minister and pray for you—not just here but on a continuing basis. We want to be your friend. Because Jesus *is* your friend.