

CHAPTER 1

THE WHEAT AND THE TARES

*When the wheat sprang up and bore grain, then the tares became evident also....Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.
Matthew 13:26, 30*

It was another typical day at my church office. I had prepared spiritually and mentally for a day of counseling – prayer, reflection and meditation on some of my favorite psalms with one of my favorite praise CD's playing in the background, and a review of the files of my counselees that I would be meeting. I thought I was ready to once again enter the dark caverns of human misery and confusion, praying that the Holy Spirit could use me to point them to the Light of the world, and allow Him to lead them to safety and a God-honoring life.

The ministry of restoring people who are caught in the web of sin – bearing their burdens and thus fulfilling the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2) – is a task which can often exhaust even the strongest of counselors. After all, *our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places* (Ephesians 6:12). The apostle Paul warned us *the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations* (i.e. false ideologies) *and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God* (2 Corinthians 10:4-5). Certainly anyone who has even casually wrestled with their own personal life issues, much less other people's problems, will quickly concur that sin can so tenaciously grip our hearts that nothing less than the convicting hand and power of the Almighty can pry us from its grip.

But sometimes we encounter individuals who seem to be in a category all their own – a category beyond mere spiritual ignorance or even the remnants of indwelling sin patterns. People who seem to epitomize evil. Those who seem to never be able to stop the momentum of offending those they claim to love – especially God. People who never really change; who never grow into spiritual maturity. Regardless the counsel, regardless the consequence, they continue

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with a seemingly resolute determination to lead a life of flagrant disregard for the commandments of God. It's as though they enjoy their sin, and do it with impunity. What makes this even more treacherous is that more often than not, their true character is typically so well disguised with the veneer of religiosity and personal charisma that even their most intimate acquaintances have great difficulty in recognizing and confronting the insincerity and hypocrisy of who they really are.

I encountered such a person that afternoon. It was an eerie, demonic sort of experience, but one that is, tragically, becoming increasingly more common in our “everyone-who-goes-to-church-is-a-Christian” culture. The following true story illustrates the dilemma of religious externalism. This story has only been changed for confidentiality purposes without compromising the central concepts.

A GRIP AND GRIN...SHUCK AND JIVE: THE STUFF OF RELIGIOUS HYPOCRISY

As soon as I saw Tom and Lisa in the waiting room it was obvious that she was mortally wounded. I've seen that glazed over, hollow look in a person's eyes hundreds of times before. I call it the “concentration camp” look: trapped, hopeless, dying.

As I introduced myself, Tom immediately jumped to his feet, smiled gregariously, shook my hand firmly, and nervously initiated some small talk. I had to deliberately turn away from him to acknowledge Lisa, who remained seated. Had I not done so, no formal greeting or introduction would have taken place. And Lisa wouldn't have noticed it. Years of being ignored had left her numb.

Tom had a deep tan, a lot of gaudy gold jewelry, permed hair, and flashy GQ-type clothes. He had what would commonly be called the “mid-life crisis” look. It was obvious that he loved attention and got lots of it.

Lisa rose to her feet as I moved toward her. She mechanically stretched forth a trembling hand. Her handshake seemed to be an extension of her inner self – ice-cold and lifeless. Her appearance was that of one who was professionally groomed, right down to her long, painted acrylic fingernails. Though she was modestly dressed with an understated elegance, her natural beauty was

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overpowered by a thick veneer of makeup, an attempt at disguising the deep wrinkles of many years of relational pain.

We entered my office and, as I expected, Tom and Lisa chose seats as far apart from one another as possible. You could have cut the tension with a knife.

Tom was a well-known evangelist and author; Lisa was the typical “ministry widow” who stayed at home to raise their three children. I soon discovered that they had been married for eighteen years. Although none of their married life had been rich and rewarding, the last eight years had been especially miserable due to Lisa’s suspicions that Tom was having an affair – or affairs. She described the strange phone calls from other men and women, Tom’s extensive travel without accountability, his secret collection of pornographic videos, and his repulsion when it came to anything romantic with her.

As she related her story, I was struck with the incongruity between her plastic smile and her tears. Deep lines around her mouth and eyes betrayed years of trying to project an image that everything was “fine...just fine!” when in reality, she was miserable inside.

Her tears quickly degenerated into heart-wrenching sobs as she finally told me that her worst nightmares had proven to be true. Tom had recently admitted to years of illicit relationships with women, and occasionally even with men. He had lovers scattered, literally, all over the world.

As I listened to her story, I watched Tom closely. He nodded his head in agreement with her tragic tale, but showed no emotion whatsoever. Certainly no remorse. Occasionally he would look at her, then the floor; but mostly he looked at me. It was as though he were studying my reactions to his wife’s allegations. He had a disconcerting smirk on his face. A look of haughty pride. An arrogance which seemed to permeate the room like a poisonous gas. He said nothing.

I distinctly remember that old familiar feeling deep inside of me as once again I was immersed in the cesspool of human iniquity. A choking, agonizing feeling combined with an almost overwhelming urge to throw up my hands in frustration and run out of the room. But, like so many times before, the Holy Spirit constrained and comforted me as I silently cried out for strength, courage, and wisdom. I then asked them specifically about their expectations of me and of our meeting together.

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Tom finally spoke for the first time. He calmly concurred that what Lisa had said was “absolutely true.” His response showed no emotion, only a duplication of Lisa’s plastic smile, but without the tears. He went on to say that the reason he had come to see me was to get some help for his “addictions” and, hopefully, “to rebuild” their marriage. It was apparent by the look on Lisa’s face that she didn’t agree, so I asked her what she hoped for.

Lisa’s answer revealed both fear and guilt. She was afraid that the marriage was “dead – so dead that the corpse was rotting and burial was long overdue.” Guilt, because she didn’t “trust God enough to somehow miraculously heal the marriage – raise the dead, if you will.” She admitted that she didn’t really know why she was there, but she was quick to add her confusion over the simultaneous love and hatred she had for her husband. Her desires to “make it work” were often overshadowed by a stubborn unwillingness to even entertain the thought, especially if she had to ever “do anything sexual with him.” She was not only afraid she couldn’t physically respond, she was also horrified at the possibility of getting AIDS.

I then asked Tom why he wanted to rebuild the marriage now, after all these years. Before he had a chance to respond, Lisa very angrily answered for him. I suddenly saw a different side to her – a side I respected. There was at least some life left in her. “I’ll tell you why he wants to rebuild the marriage,” she said. “I’ll tell you exactly why.” She glared at her husband. “His precious bookings are beginning to suffer because word of his immorality is leaking out. No bookings, no money...and no more romantic rendezvous. And then there are the publishing contracts. Those guys are getting pretty nervous with all the rumors floating around. If the marriage falls apart, as if it hasn’t already, he’ll lose it all. And he’s afraid I’m going to blow his cover and file for divorce. So he’s here to use you just like he has me all these years.”

Maintaining a condescending smile, Tom coolly replied, “Oh, don’t be silly. You know as well as I do that I’ve had problems with my addictions for years and I’ve always been too busy or stubborn (said laughingly) to deal with them. I’ve been to several counselors over the past few years, and they agree that I take after any number of men in my family, especially dear old dad who had the same types of problems. And I’ve been doing a lot of reading lately.” He named three or four Christian pop psychology books, then went on to say, “I can’t believe how accurate they were in describing me. It’s as though they’ve been reading my mail for years! And the good news is that I’m beginning to recover!”

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He then began to summarize what he had discovered through his previous counseling experiences. “Bottom line, I’ve been diagnosed as having a Histrionic Personality Disorder” (i.e., a secular psychological diagnosis which has as its essential feature pervasive and excessive emotionality and attention-seeking behaviors, commonly characterized by inappropriate sexually seductive or provocative behavior). Tragically, his diagnosis, indicative of all psychological diagnoses, had no authority and merely provided a sophisticated method to repackage sin. He went on to say, “I have an addictive personality. And I’m also an adult child of a family of closet alcoholics; I’m severely co-dependent, and my drug of choice is, and always has been, sex – with a little alcohol thrown in on the side. But I can’t get enough sex! I’m a classic case of sexual addiction! I’ve discovered that virtually everything I do is a result of my shame-based, addictive personality, especially my tendencies toward bisexuality.”

He then turned to Lisa, and with a sarcastic tone continued, “If Lisa would be honest with you – or maybe I should say, with herself – she would have to admit that she is also a shame-based co-dependent, highly addicted to everything but sex. Her drugs of choice are prescription drugs, fad diets, and shopping. She’s also a churchaholic, addicted to women’s Bible studies and seminars. And she absolutely cannot go one day without calling her mommy and daddy to bad-mouth her husband and get a little sympathy.”

The veins in Tom’s face and neck bulged as he continued to spew forth the venom of years of pent-up hatred toward his wife – and anything else that assaulted his conscience. Lisa just sat there. No tears. No rebuttal. No comment. She just stared out the window as if she were trying to mentally escape. It was as though she had left her body to go somewhere else and all that remained was a well-groomed corpse with a heartbeat.

THE NATURE OF TRUE SAVING FAITH... QUESTIONED

My mind was flooded with thoughts as this scenario played on. It was obvious that Tom had swallowed – hook, line, and sinker – all the clever theories which had not only provided him the necessary psycho-jargon to abdicate any personal responsibility but had also short-circuited any recognition of the heinousness of sin. He wore his labels like a badge of honor, labels which could only describe, albeit superficially, but never restore. Yet he honestly felt he was “in recovery.”

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I couldn't help but notice the blatant absence of any reference to spiritual things in Tom's recap of his "diagnosis." Yet there he sat: a highly visible "Christian" leader, a man who was supposedly a new creature in Christ...called according to His purpose...in the process of becoming conformed to the image of Christ...and supposedly a man who was called by God to be a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

But how could this be true? My mind filled with Scripture that challenged all that this man claimed to be.

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I thought about Christ's parable about the wheat and the tares, and how true believers can be identified by the fruit they bear and the commandments they keep. My thoughts especially focused upon our Lord's words in Matthew 7:22-23 where He warned:

"Many will say to Me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.'"

Could this man sitting across from me be a man who had what James called a faith without works...a dead faith that cannot save (James 2)? Why was there no mention of sin or repentance? Why was he not even remotely sensitive to his wife's pain – not to mention God's? Why was nothing said about prayer, about the Holy Spirit and His convicting and cleansing role? Why wasn't his heart so overwhelmed with his sinfulness that he would literally cry out for forgiveness and mercy, absolutely brokenhearted over offending and mocking the One he claimed to represent?

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Didn't the man have a conscience? How, in the name of heaven, could he possibly stand before an audience and extol the transforming power of Christ? How could he talk about loving a Master he so routinely disobeyed? How could a man who claimed to be a new creature in Christ live such a consistent life of unbroken and blatant sinfulness? Most Christians I know couldn't live with themselves if they had been involved in even a fraction of this man's escapades. Guilt and shame would so assault their consciences that they would eventually throw themselves at the feet of God's mercy and beg for forgiveness and cleansing. Surely this man was more than a "carnal" Christian. Far more than a "backslider." This man was seriously sinful. Something far beyond hypocrisy!