

LIVING IN THE TREE OF LIFE 1-19-03

One of the most exciting things about last year was the cooperation with the other pastors. We had six different events in which we participated together. During the last six months of '02 we studied the book Primary Purpose by Ted Haggard. As we shared together what we had learned from chapter 9, the Holy Spirit showed us that we all needed to preach this chapter on the same day. I can't explain how it happened. One pastor suggested it, but it was already in my mind. There was no discussion like there almost always is on most issues. We all just knew it was the LORD. Our only concern was when. Today is that Sunday. You can attend any one of six churches today and hear the same basic message, *Living In the Tree of Life*.

We are truly sincere about seeing Sedona be transformed. We believe that if we pray and ask God to do what we know is His will, that He will hear us. If we pray in unity for the main influence of this city to be Jesus, instead of vortexes and New Age belief, we believe it will happen. There has been a spiritual battle going on for this city for the forty years that I know of. Through church fighting, pride and stubbornness we yielded our territory to Satan. The battle waxed and waned but two years ago was a real low point for us. In answer to prayer, God sovereignly brought in a group of pastors who were willing to work together, pastors who had been broken and remolded by the hand of God. We recognize we are not the only ones fighting in this war, but we certainly value and depend on the unity the LORD has given us, recognizing it is a supernatural work of the Holy Spirit. As we begin to encourage our congregations to get serious about prayer, about finding our call, about sharing Christ, we will see the reality of the spiritual battle in ever increasing ways. Remember, greater is He that is in you than he that is in the world. One and God are a majority! In the coming weeks our Sunday morning Bible study will be teaching us how to pray with authority and be effective in this battle.

But where does this battle begin? What is the base from which we launch this attack in the name of Jesus to win hearts to Him? It must begin with the victory Christ won on the cross, but then there must be messengers whose lives tell the story of that victory. If you come to me with a big sour puss and tell me you have discovered the greatest joy in life, I don't think I will be too excited to hear your story. 'Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr., was a member of the U.S. Supreme Court for over 30 years. At one point in his life, Justice Holmes explained his choice of a career by saying: "I might have entered the ministry if certain clergymen I knew had not looked and acted like undertakers.'" (from Gary Cooper via Sermon Central).

What do you think is one of the main reasons people are not interested in going to church to hear the Gospel? Many of them went to church at one time and were used and unappreciated or got in the middle of a big fight over next to nothing. The experienced too much religion and not enough Christ-likeness; too much power of man and not enough calling on the power of the Holy Spirit. One of the greatest detriments to Christianity can be Christians who do not act like Christ.

On the other hand, one of the most attractive things about Christianity is a transformed life. When you meet a person who was blind spiritually and now can see, a person who

knows they were saved from a dead end existence, you want to know what it was they found! Of course, the root of that difference is in your personal relationship with Christ. It is getting to know Him. It is that excitement that comes from relationship, not just the knowledge of religion. That is why my carpenter friend, George, had so many people at his funeral. He lived a life of intimacy with God and it spilled out in his relationship with people. We are effective for the Kingdom of God when we practice this kind of lifestyle warfare. Let me describe what I mean by lifestyle warfare: We can practice it by smiling instead of frowning. We practice lifestyle warfare when we are faithful to our spouse, when we encourage instead of judge, when we serve instead of control. We are effective for the Kingdom of God anytime we act in the fruits of the Spirit or act in obedience to the Holy Spirit. Our example and actions are a plus for the Kingdom of God and repel the works of darkness.

Haggard describes it as the difference between the Tree of Life, and the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. The Tree of Life is life giving, drawing us to Christ. The Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil is fault finding and condemning. It drives people away in fear of losing their freedoms or rights. Let me state that I don't believe that those trees main representations fit these descriptions, but I do believe we can use them as an analogy for attitudes of the heart.

Let me give you an example from my past of choosing the Tree of Life over the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. While in Hawaii one morning, I sent out a group of young people to distribute tracts at intersections, on sidewalks and parks. Everyone packed up his or her literature and left. Then my assistant came to me and told me that Joe was in his room crying. Joe was a big guy that was 20 years old. I had so much to get done that day, and now I had to deal with this 20-year-old crybaby. Did I have some Scripture for Him? You bet! "He who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God." Or how about, "If you are ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation I will be ashamed of you before my Father in heaven!" Yeah, I had some Scriptures for Him! Suck it up and be a man! -- But thank God the Great Shepherd whispered loud and clear, "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep." Now I was crying. How did I get so hard? I was about to slaughter this lamb because he wasn't bolder than one in a thousand. Instead of operating out of the knowledge of good and evil, that is, it is right to witness, you shouldn't be ashamed of Jesus, etc., I operated out of the Tree of Life. I asked what was wrong. I drew out that he feared the rejection. We talked about how to deal with it. We cried together, prayed together, and he went out and had a good day.

You can read the Bible from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It is really dry, but you better do it because you are supposed to. As you read, you are looking for verses to use. You are being a good Christian, doing what Christians are supposed to do. I can tell everyone I read my Bible for an hour today. If you ask me what I read, I probably don't remember, unless I have a word of conviction for you!

Or I can read it from the Tree of Life. I love to read it then. It is Jesus speaking to my heart, gently, lovingly guiding me. He is talking to me and I am responding to Him. He is giving me ideas, teaching me wisdom, and inspiring me to pray. I don't want to put it down. You ask me if you should read the Bible? "You don't know what you are missing!

It's wonderful. You've got to discover this book. It is the greatest thing I've found." Do you see the difference? 'Got to do' versus 'get to do', rules versus relationship.

Why are some good Christian people so mean? Why is that person that knows the Bible so critical and judgmental about everything that is said? They are living in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. How can they love God and yet be so bitter toward their brother? You get the idea don't you? It is the difference in the foundation of our attitudes. Are we the Holy Spirit, out to convince the World of sin, or God's ambassador's seeking to reconcile the lost to God? Do we want to bring judgment or life? Let the Holy Spirit do the job of conviction. We have a job that is Holy Spirit empowered to lead people to Life. Living from the tree of life means you joyfully serve others drawing them to the life of Christ. Living from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil means you become an expert in handing out judgments. You judge others and yourself so harshly that it results in death.

God has called us to be lifeguards, not umpires. Haggard uses the story of the woman caught in adultery. Both the Pharisees and Jesus wanted the woman to stop sinning. Their method was totally different. The Pharisees said, "The Law requires that she be stoned." That would end her sinful acts! That would end any kind of action. Jesus offered her life so that she could live in righteousness. Trying to accomplish the same thing, they had entirely different ideas of what would be most effective. One way ended in death, the other in life.

Many living in the tree of the knowledge of good and evil are convinced they are doing the right thing, the godly thing. But they've lost sight of the goal of Christ-likeness. He came to seek and save the lost, not seek and destroy the lost.

Children can be raised under either tree. Guess which one will rebel? Of course we have to be tough at times and set down rules, but are they guided by the tree of life, or knowledge of good and evil? Children react positively to the Tree of Life!

Bitterness and unforgiveness springs from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. They did wrong. They did not repent. I will not forgive. If the fact that you are right is the reason you hold on to bitterness, your being right is poisoning you and become more damaging than the offense that started it all. Just like in the Garden of Eden, blame is tossed around so that you don't have to examine your own heart. We do just what they did when we operate from that tree. We blame others, and then we hide from God. The tree of the knowledge of life insists on forgiveness. It demands that you release them and trust the Lord to resolve any injustices or errors. It believes in the Sovereignty of God that allows me to trust God to deal with it

When you choose life it defeats the plans of evil around you. When you choose forgiveness instead of anger you defeat the schemes of the enemy. When you choose to serve instead of demanding your rights, the enemy is confounded. This is basic training for the troops. We have to live out from the Tree of Life, the Life of Christ in us to be the examples in our community that will draw them instead of repel them. For too long the church in Sedona has been repelling unbelievers instead of drawing them. We have a lot to overcome. How can people be offended when we love and serve them? When

we choose to keep in step with the Spirit it keeps us free from ungodly control. Do you remember the Scripture that says mercy triumphs over judgment? (James 2:13) Mercy springs from the tree of life. Judgment comes from the knowledge of good and evil. When one knows to do good and yet chooses the evil there must be judgment. Mercy triumphed over judgment on the cross. Though our sins were judged, the mercy of God was then poured out on all who would receive Him so that we would not have to face judgment. If you know Christ, mercy has triumphed over judgment in your life. Now live like that toward others.

Commented [notes1]: 13 because judgment without mercy will be shown to anyone who has not been merciful. Mercy triumphs over judgment! James 2:13 (NIV)

Our first point then is to live in the tree of life, not the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Secondly, walk in forgiveness. One of my favorite expressions that is not exactly a Scripture is, "refuse to be offended". Everyday you have numerous opportunities to take things personal or hold something against another person. If we allow ourselves to be hurt, we can no longer be an effective witness to them. Sometimes we need to repeatedly forgive the same person as pain tries to dig its way into your heart. Give it to God. Say with Jesus, "Forgive them, they don't know what they are doing." Then you are free to serve and love them into the Kingdom of God. Realize that the battle is much more than your personal feelings. There are eternal souls at stake.

Third, discern the root of bitterness and reject it at all costs. Hebrews 12:15 (NIV) ¹⁵ *See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.* The bitterness is much more deadly than the act that caused it. When you allow yourself to become bitter you have let the enemy gain a foothold in your life. Deal with it immediately. Never let someone else's bitterness infect you. People love to share their bitterness. That is why the Scripture says, "many become defiled". Stop the person that is trying to share bitterness with you and pray with them for the one that offended them. The passage implies that if one goes on in that bitterness, they are missing the grace of God. Recognize that God has been so gracious to you that you should be gracious to others. It is a given that they have not been as offensive to you as you have been to God at times. Think about it. How often have you been offensive to God? How did God deal with you? Thank God that He is not like men! Ask God for His grace for others.

Fourth, let love cover the sins of others. (1 Peter 4:8) It takes the love of Christ to do that. Paul wrote that, "Love keeps not record of wrongs." (1 Corinthians 13:5) Just because I know something about someone doesn't mean I need to share it. I find it always best to think the best about others. Don't keep a log of their sins against you or others. Expect God to work in their lives. People love to share dirt. That is the flesh. We are all guilty. By the grace and love of God let's not allow ourselves to go there. The old song has a lot of wisdom. "If you can't say something nice, say nothing." When Isaiah saw the LORD, the thing that stood out in contrast with God's holiness was his vile mouth. May God sear our lips with a coal from the altar! Love past the sin. Let the Lord show you the pain and trouble in that person's life that was the source of their offensive actions. Then you can love and pray for them instead of judging them. That is the tree of life victorious over the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Commented [notes2]: ⁸ Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins. 1 Peter 4:8 (NIV)

Fifth, practice verbal spiritual warfare. Ask God to help you and others reject selfishness, pride, greed and self-pity and any evil spiritual influences. I like to pray that the Holy

Spirit will open the eyes of seekers to the deceptions of lying influences. Then invite the Holy Spirit to fill you with love for the lost and for the unlovely. Ask God to fill your heart with His will and plan for your life and for the church in which you fellowship. Ask the Holy Spirit to work in the hearts of those who are struggling, those who are seeking, and in your leaders.

Praying in this way keeps us aware that our enemy is not flesh and blood but spiritual powers. It keeps us operating from that tree of life perspective, seeking God's will for others instead of criticizing and condemning them. It keeps the blame where it is due, on spiritual darkness. That keeps us from feeling like victims. If we accept victim mentality we are accepting the lordship of the person that offended us instead of Christ. In Christ we never need to feel like victims, for Christ has made us victorious in Him. In Him we can operate in all the fruits of the Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, etc. When your heart is free from harboring any kind of judgments against others, you are free to let the LORD use you with anyone. Your conscience is clean. Your prayers are powerful. There is no reason for shame or embarrassment or to hide anything. What freedom we have when we are free in Christ with His perspective on the situations in our lives! What witnesses we can be for the Kingdom of God!

I want to close with a passage from Romans 12 that describes a person operating in the tree of life or you might say, 'walking in the Spirit'.
Romans 12:9-21 (NIV) *9 Love must be sincere. Hate what is evil; cling to what is good. 10 Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honor one another above yourselves. 11 Never be lacking in zeal, but keep your spiritual fervor, serving the Lord. 12 Be joyful in hope, patient in affliction, faithful in prayer. 13 Share with God's people who are in need. Practice hospitality. 14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. 15 Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. 16 Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited. 17 Do not repay anyone evil for evil. Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everybody. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone. 19 Do not take revenge, my friends, but leave room for God's wrath, for it is written: "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," says the Lord. 20 On the contrary: "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head." 21 Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.*

If the people that have heard this message this morning will live this message, will operate from the tree of life, the Enemy is going to lose ground in Sedona. If 400+ people in Sedona start to live to give life rather than criticize and condemn, more people are going to be touched by the Spirit of God. It is just a part of winning this city for Jesus, but it is a vital part. It is a necessary starting point.

¹³ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Romans 15:13 (NIV)