

# A Thistle in Your Heart?

[A Hidden Idol in Plain View]

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Is there a thistle in the corner of the garden of your heart? Perhaps a patch of growing and expanding thistles? I refer to the metaphor of the parable of the sower, and through it I challenge you to consider the theme of idolatry as it applies to a specific area in our lives today.

In Matthew 13 Christ teaches by means of the parable of the sower. Because the parable's emphasis is on how the preaching is heard using the idea of different types of soil, it would be better to call it the parable of different soils.<sup>1</sup> In the parable Christ makes it clear that he is speaking to us, the church, as those who hear the gospel. In this particular application, we think we are good soil hearers, but we have a serious problem, namely, weeds. The sin of idolatry certainly is such a weed. One very thorny weed is a particular device. It is highly favored, sought after, and loved. It is particularly loved by the youth. It is small as idols go. It is shiny. It only requires a small amount of cheap electrical energy in exchange for 16–18 hours of awesome, powerful access to ALL that the world has to offer. I suspect you know to which idol I refer. Yes, it is your smart phone. We can include its bigger cousins, the android tablets and iPads.

“Oh, stinking my!” Where would we be without our precious digital devices? As I type this article, my smart phone is inches from the keyboard, second only to my coffee cup. Where is yours right now? That we are too often overly attached to them hardly requires proving. While doing internet research, I was shocked to learn how many hours per day the average American spends on his or her cell phone. I checked other reputable web sites and the data checked out. If you're between ages 18 and 24, you look at your phone the most often, with an average of 74 checks per day.<sup>2</sup> This comes out to 4.7 hours per day!<sup>3</sup> This is close to 30% of your waking hours. Is it true for you and me? Do we spend nearly a third of each day on our phones?! Do I smell an idol hiding right in plain sight? In a certain sense, we are in a love/hate relationship with our smart phones. This is, I trust, understood by all. We need them, or we think we do, to survive each day. Some of us—usually adults in business—often wish we were rid of them, since they cause an uninterrupted flow of annoying interruptions. Text messages, emails and calls stream in incessantly. Modern daily business makes this

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<sup>1</sup> Hanks, Herman C. *The Mysteries Of The Kingdom*, p 14

<sup>2</sup> <http://time.com/4147614/smartphone-usage-us-2015>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.informatemi.com/newsletter10022015.html>

necessary. Vacation for many of us older ones isn't truly vacation unless we can be freed from this annoying technical tether. But for many a Christian young person (far too many, I fear) to be disconnected from this glowing god of glass, plastic and metal is to be disconnected from society; separation from it would be as if you were made to disappear.

If being separated from your smart phone makes you feel you disappear, it would be better that you make your smart phone disappear permanently. It would be for your good. On the other hand, there is a proper, even a good place for smart phones, tablets and similar portable devices. Under control such a tool is an amazingly valuable gift. As such it can be used profitably for the service of kingdom causes and the glory of God. Keeping in touch with friends isn't sinful unless we lack discretion and go in the direction of worldliness. There is, for example, a world of difference in the following two examples: First, young people who strengthen and build one another up via Facebook, Chat, Skype, or other forms of messaging across the many miles after they have become friends through young people's conventions, youth retreats or a trip to the BRF. Example two is the young lady and young man who use so-called "private chat." (Perhaps they use Snapchat or a similar app. These are highly questionable apps, since their selling point is that the video and pictures sent disappear after 10 seconds. Most likely, if you need to cover your tracks, you shouldn't be using the app!) At some point in their interaction this couple becomes inappropriate in speech and behavior. Shameful this is because they have given in to willful temptation. By bad behavior they break each other down. Example one serves God's glory. Example two serves self and sin. How we choose to use our smart phones is the big difference. What we do with it determines if our smart phones serve us or we serve them. Do we let them become the thistle of our idolatry? Do we use them to produce good fruits from the seed of the word? Or, do we bow ourselves to an idol of self-indulgence and bring forth foul fruits of faithless filth?

The use of our smart phones as a tool of temptation is the major way they can become a favored idol, but the device itself can also be an idol. First, we should ask ourselves if we can justify the cost of owning a smart phone. When you take away the slick marketing of monthly contract payments, a new device costs between \$400 and \$650. They can be bought for less, but that almost free phone isn't free at all when you do the math for monthly payments to the provider. In 2015 Pew Research showed 43% of Americans paid between \$50 and \$100 per month, while 34% paid something less than \$50 a month.<sup>4</sup> A conservative average would be \$60 a month. That's \$720 a year! No matter how you pay, it is a costly little idol and often coveted by young people each time a new style is released. Back in 2004, I was teaching junior high school students. Already then when Motorola's legendary RAZR came out, it was coveted. It clearly made idol status. I remember one day at recess break a handful of girls noticed the new flip phone on my desk. They quickly gathered around. Teachers certainly aren't popular, so I knew it was

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.pewinternet.org/2015/04/01/chapter-one-a-portrait-of-smartphone-ownership>

my phone that drew them. They all began asking to handle, hold, and caress it. They wanted to try the latest features on this new super cool flip phone. I asked them, “What’s more important, an expensive pair of the latest style shoes or a phone?” Without hesitation, they assured me a cool phone is FAR more desired. I had the opportunity to ask the same question of college age girls. The answer was the same. Guys also highly valued a good cell phone; they also saw it as very important. While guys looked mostly for function, girls saw the phone as an accessory that needed both to look good and function well. Except for a great increase in cost and capabilities, nothing has changed in the world of phones since then. Smart phones have too easily become coveted gadgets. Too often, with thoughtless ease, we have allowed room for the seeds of this small thorny idol to sprout!

Coveted? Today’s smart phones certainly are! According to Consumers Reports, already in 2012 1.6 million smart phones were stolen in the USA. In 2013 the number rose to 3.1 million.<sup>5</sup> Over the following three years the number dropped off again due to protective features on newer phones. The data reveals a shocking over-attachment to these treasured idols. Even the unbelieving world is worried about the strong attachment young people have and the real physical danger this deadly digital device presents.

It is true, smart phones endanger lives; they have literally killed people. In auto accidents, yes, but also in “walking while distracted” accidents. In 2013 there were 3,154 deaths in auto accidents due to distracted driving. Of these distracted driver fatal accidents, 49% were because drivers age 15–29 were using cell phones. This according to data gathered by the US Department of Transportation.<sup>6</sup> Such startling statistics don’t exclude us and people we know. If the general population is so over-attached to their smart phones certainly we are too. More strange than than auto related deaths is the number of people killed due to walking while distracted. Erin Dooly of ABC News wrote about a government report from August, 2015 revealing an alarming increase in pedestrian fatalities. “Petextrians”—people who text while walking—may be partly to blame. Research done by Ohio State University found the number of pedestrians injured while on their phones more than doubled between 2005 and 2010. “The problem is particularly prevalent among teens, who tend to believe it’s okay to cross the street while texting or tweeting. Nearly 40 percent of U.S. teens have been hit or nearly hit by a passing car, motorcycle, or bike” (Erin Dooley, *Distracted Walking*).<sup>7</sup> In 2011 an 18-year-old Hope College student was hit and killed by a 20 mile per hour freight train. He was thought to have been distracted by the ear buds and smart phone he was using at the time of the accident.

Young people, have you become so infatuated with your smart phones that they may cause injury, or worse, result in the death of another or yourself? It is a sobering thought. Yet, a more serious question

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.consumerreports.org>

<sup>6</sup> <https://crashstats.nhtsa.dot.gov>

<sup>7</sup> <http://abcnews.go.com/US/distracted-walking>

is whether we become so involved with our digital devices that we are led to the point of risking spiritual death. Sin, self centeredness, and smart phones. Sadly, taken together, these three can quickly become symptoms of deep spiritual sickness.

Thankfully we may look to the Great Physician for our spiritual healing. For this we return to Christ's parable in Matthew 13. Our Savior instructs us that we are called by the Father and made capable by the Holy Spirit of being good soil hearers. However, there are thorny thistle temptations that can use up the good soil and choke out the seed of the living word. As described in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, Jesus calls these thorns anxieties of living, deceitfulness of riches, and the pleasures of life. These three things are fitting descriptions of misused smart phones. Facebook pics/posts, Tweets, Instagram posts, uncomplimentary video clips, and caustic-unkind-cutting comments can quickly lead to high anxiety for others in the broader social network of friends and contacts. How quickly we can hurt (intentionally or not); how hard it is to heal those wounds!

Deceitfulness of riches? We deceive ourselves when we don't control our use of the gifts God gives. Time, a gift from God, has intrinsic value. Time has a dollar value built right into it. To waste time is to waste money. For example, if your boss pays you for the time you work, but you fail to work, you have stolen money from him. Therefore, time wasted on our smart phones is really the same as wasting the wealth or riches God has given. The high cost of our favorite tech gadgets was discussed earlier. We know that we spend a great deal of money on our smart phones. Do we match the dollar amount spent on our phones with the amount we put in the collection plate? Is this money ours? Is it not God's, given to us so that we may serve him through our use of it? If we waste vast amounts of time and money on our devices, we make these devices the mother of all idols. By doing so we displace God and we place ourselves above our Maker.

It is by the pursuit of the sinful pleasures of life that our smart phones can become the greatest temptation we face. Young people, especially girls, are likely to spend too much time pursuing the pleasures of social networking. There are good, appropriate ways to use social networking; there are inappropriate ways to network. You only need to ask this of yourself, "Is what I'm doing God glorifying, or am I serving myself and hurting God's glory?" Boys are more often guilty of wasting excessive time in pursuit of online video games. The same guidelines for seeking God's honor apply. Young men, do these games have clean themes? (Not too many, right?) Would you be ashamed if, while you were gaming, Jesus were to look over your shoulder at the screen? Don't forget: God does watch; he sees all! Then there is the temptation of whiling away hours just entertaining ourselves with short video clips of everything from curious animal behavior to the world's worst airplane crashes or the greatest moments ever in one sport or another. This behavior is time wasting and can readily become addictive. Too many of the videos that draw our eye, are at their core, pleasure centered.

Topping this list of addictive pleasures is pornography. For the godless hordes, this is what the internet is for. Much of today's world readily admits this. For them there is no God, no strict rules, no biblical absolutes, no Ten Commandments. And those in the world have little if any guilt for their pursuit of twisted pornographic pleasure. We read in Romans 1 that they are given over to this by God: "Wherefore God also gave them up to uncleanness through the lusts of their own hearts, to dishonour their own bodies between themselves: 25. Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator. ... 28. And even as they did not like to retain God in [their] knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient) (Rom. 1:24–25, 28). We are *not* immune to the temptation of abusing mobile technology to access the filth of pornography. We *must* be warned! Satan goes about as a roaring lion. He has no interest in tempting those in the world. he has them. They are lost. Satan seeks to devour *you!* 1 Peter 5 speaks of this: "Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour: 9. Whom resist stedfast in the faith" (1 Pet. 5:8–9).

The parable of the different soils also speaks an encouraging word. Through scripture, our Father builds us up through the gospel. This Seed, once sown, does not return to the Father fruitless. The seed actually is Christ, *the* word. The sower is also Christ. This word, being Spirit-worked, bears fruit in each of us, some an hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty, (Matthew 13). Although we have to battle the thorns of our weak natures, the promise of God cannot fail. We are encouraged by the gospel in Romans 6: "Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. 13 Neither yield ye your members [as] instruments of unrighteousness unto sin: but yield yourselves unto God, as those that are alive from the dead, and your members [as] instruments of righteousness unto God. 14 For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace. ... 22 But now being made free from sin, and become servants to God, ye have your fruit unto holiness, and the end everlasting life" (Rom. 6:12–14, 22).

Sin need not dominate our flesh. We are empowered by grace. We are in Christ and Christ is in us. Colossians 3 puts it this way: "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. 2. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. 5. Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (Col. 3:1–2, 5). Young people, be encouraged as members of the body of Christ. In singleness of your thorn-free heart, according to the grace worked within you, put to death the sinful; put on the living things which are from above.

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Originally Published in:  
Vol 76 No 7 July 2017