

Trampled by People Traffic

In Jesus' parable, the wayside was hardened by foot traffic. Similarly, our hearts are hardened by everyday traffic that moves past our lives. What's the nature of that traffic? We're going to explore that question because, when we understand the things that trample our hearts, we can guard and foster a tender heart before God.

As a reminder, the wayside was a designated footpath that ran alongside a farmer's field. Farmers allowed pedestrians to walk the wayside, as long as they kept from wandering off and trampling the crops.

On the positive side, when travelers kept to the wayside, the crops were preserved. But on the negative side, the path itself became compacted and hard. Thus, when seed would fall on the wayside, it would bounce on the surface and immediately be devoured by birds.

This applies to our lives. Jesus likened our hearts to a field, with part of our hearts becoming trodden hard by foot traffic. When the seed of God's word lands on these hardened areas, rather than penetrating our hearts it bounces on the surface. Jesus said that demons, like birds, descend immediately and snatch that word from our hearts, causing us to forget the word we heard.

What would have trampled a wayside in Jesus' day? For starters, people and beasts. We're going to look at various kinds of foot traffic and how they apply to our lives. Let's begin with the first kind of foot traffic—people.

People Can Trample Your Heart

When people brush past our lives in the course of a day,

they can trample our hearts with their words, attitudes, and actions. The only way to avoid this kind of trampling is to relocate to a remote wilderness somewhere and insulate yourself from all people contact. But if we do that, how can we possibly love our neighbor and make disciples as Jesus commanded? The only way to be a fruitful disciple is to live close to other people, but in so doing we make ourselves susceptible to their trampling.

Sometimes people trample us intentionally, but more often unintentionally. Either way, we can't stop or control their trampling; we can only control our responses.

Let's look at some of the ways people might trample our hearts.

Christians Can Trample Your Heart

For starters, other Christians can trample your heart. Maybe you assumed that mixing with other believers in the context of Christian community was a trample-free zone, but no. It seems odd to say it, but sometimes we can come away from times of Christian fellowship with our hearts made just a little bit harder because of the direction the conversation took. Just because the conversation was with another believer doesn't mean the word of faith was the only word on our tongues. It ought not to be so, but sometimes our tongues are set on fire by hell (see James 3:5-10). Sometimes we say things to other Christians that, instead of strengthening their faith, harden them to the word of faith.

Yes, other believers can trample our hearts with their words, attitudes, and actions. In fact, we can be especially vulnerable to trampling from other believers because we lower our guard when we're mixing with the family of faith. When they trample us, they don't even realize they're doing it, but we can come away from times of Christian fellowship

with our hearts trampled just a little bit harder.

How did they trample us? Well, maybe they complained about their family, or their job, or their finances, or their health, or the decisions of church leaders, or the way God is silent to them right now, and their complaints trampled us. Or maybe they criticized, demeaned, or slandered other people in our presence. Slander will harden us *really* fast. Or they might vent their opinions on *disputable matters*. By disputable matters I mean issues where there's room in Christ for differences of opinion (see Rom 14:1, 5). Or they might volunteer advice that's based, not on the mind of Christ, but on their human understanding. They may relate in a way that makes us feel rejected or overlooked. They might defile us with the offense they carry toward someone else. They might talk about things that are meaningless and empty. They might draw carnal comparisons. In these and many other ways, other believers can harden our hearts.

I'm writing this chapter in the wake of the international COVID-19 upheaval of the 2020s. It was a time when believers had emotionally charged opinions about disputable matters. People left their churches in droves during that time of social upheaval. Sometimes it was because they had a problem with the way the pastor was responding to the COVID crisis. But some people left their church, not because they disagreed with their pastor, but with other people in the congregation. They didn't want to fellowship with believers who supported a certain political party or candidate. Political preferences became a source of division. When secular politics became the conversation within the church, hearts got trampled.

Additionally, pastors and church leaders got trampled in that season more than ever. For example, if leaders said people *should* wear face masks during church services, they got

trampled by certain opinions in the church. Then, if leaders said people *shouldn't* wear face masks, they got trampled by other opinions in the church. Then, if leaders said everyone could decide for themselves about face masks, they got trampled by yet another set of opinions. It was virtually impossible for church leaders to make decisions in that season without getting trampled by *somebody*.

Pastors faced so many controversial choices that they came under decision fatigue. Should we meet indoors or outdoors? Should we practice social distancing? Should we obey or resist governmental restrictions? Almost every choice incurred some kind of pushback. Pastors were so trampled by Christians in that season that thousands left full-time vocational ministry.

This kind of trampling is not new to the church. It was happening in the time of Paul, who warned the Galatians, “But if you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!” (Gal 5:15).

Yes, Christians can trample your heart.

Your Spouse Can Trample Your Heart

What's more, marriage can trample your heart. If you're married, that's probably not news to you. Like foot traffic that walked the wayside in Jesus' day, spouses can trample each other until both hearts are hard.

The most common way spouses trample each other is with their words. Unintentionally, your words can harden the heart of your spouse so that, when they hear the word of God, their response to God is dulled and diminished.

A husband tramples his wife with his words, and then she tramples him right back. Back and forth it goes. God intended marriage to edify and strengthen each other, but if we're not careful, it can be a context where we demean and

devour one another.

Jesus addressed this. He said that, when believing couples divorce, it's because their hearts have become hard (Matt 19:8). He was describing a marriage in which two believers, married to each other, had so trampled each other that they lost faith for the marriage to be healed. Hardened in unbelief, they divorced.

A believer can have a soft heart in virtually every other area of their soul but, when it comes to their marriage, be hardened. They may love to worship and hear the word, they may weep with delight in their secret place, they may have excellent counsel for other believers, but when it comes to their own spouse, their heart is shut down and hardened with hopelessness.

If they're shown a Scripture that applies to marriage, they might dismiss it by saying, "Oh yes, I tried that." Or, "Tell that one to my spouse!" Or, "That verse doesn't apply in this case." When we're hardened, the word can bounce off our hearts like seeds on the wayside.

Trampling between spouses can sneak up on us. It might start as petty differences of opinion, but with time the arguments can heat up and the trampling can intensify. If we tolerate trampling in our marriage long enough, even skilled counselors might struggle to help us reverse the damage.

Sin Kills Marriages

When spouses trample each other, the problem—in a nutshell—is *sin*. When we pummel someone with our words, we're sinning against them (Gal 5:15). May I offer some marital advice?

Go after the sin in your marriage.

If you and your spouse are believers, resolve together by God's grace to get the sin out of your marriage—regardless

of its nature. Zero tolerance for sin! Why? Because sin kills marriages.

Sin is a cancer. Tolerate sin in your home, and it'll gnaw at your marriage until it's dead.

On the other hand, if you'll put on the full armor of God and go after the sin in your home, your marriage will revive, your romance will be restored, and your home will heal. Christ has provided everything we need, through the cross, for our marriages to rebound and thrive (2 Peter 1:3).

I can suppose a brother asking, "What should I do if my wife sins against me?" Do what Jesus told you to do: "If your brother sins against you, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him" (Luke 17:3). If you're married to a sister in Christ and she sins against you, rebuke her. When she repents, forgive her. If she sins against you again, but then repents, forgive her again. Over and over.

I can suppose a sister asking the same question, "What should I do if my husband tramples me with his words, attitudes, or actions?" Do what Jesus said in Luke 17:3. When your believing husband sins against you, rebuke him. If you allow your brother in Christ—that is, your husband—to sin against you without rebuking him, you disobey Jesus.

Jesus said, "But why do you call Me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do the things which I say?" (Luke 6:46). Some Christian marriages are in disarray because they call Jesus their Lord, but don't do what He says—that is, they don't rebuke each other when their spouse sins against them.

If your spouse is an unbeliever, then your spouse is not your brother or sister in Christ and Luke 17:3 doesn't apply. In such cases, look for verses that guide our relationships with unbelievers, such as 1 Peter 3:1 and 1 Corinthians 7:12-16. But if your spouse is a believer and sins against you, don't sin by trampling them back; rather, rebuke them. Then step forward, together, into repentance and reconciliation. When

you do, your heart can be healed and tender again to the implanted word.

People in the World Can Trample Your Heart

Interactions with non-believers can unintentionally harden our hearts. Their words proceed from an unbelieving heart, and words of unbelief trample a believing heart and desensitize us to the word of God.

Think of all the places where you interact with non-believers: work, school, sports, restaurants, stores, etc. Sometimes their words are idle, coarse, unkind, skeptical, proud, accusatory, critical, fearful, deceptive, boastful, or unloving, and their words can trample us.

Cultural values and institutions of a generation can also trample the hearts of a population. For example, young people go to university and get trampled all day, every day.

When people in the world harden us with their words or actions, what can we do to renew and soften our hearts? Consider this provision:

Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water (Heb 10:22).

When we've been defiled by unclean elements in the world, this verse mentions two things that cleanse and renew us: the sprinkled blood of Christ on our conscience, and the washing of the pure water of the word (Eph 5:26). The blood and the word provide the cleansing we need.

I find that I get defiled every day simply by living in this world. Therefore, I do two things every day: I receive by faith

the sprinkled blood of Christ on my conscience,¹ and then I wash with water through the prayerful reading of Scripture. This is one way I use my spiritual hoe to soften my heart. (We'll talk in Chapter 13 about more ways to soften our hearts.)

The first kind of foot traffic, therefore, that can trample our hearts is people traffic. But there's more to say about this in the next chapter.

1 The sprinkling of blood, as per Hebrews 10:22, is so precious to me that I've written an entire book on that subject. The title is *Power Of The Blood*, and it's available everywhere in both digital and paper formats.