

I. Introduction

- A. Thank you for coming today. How many of you joined us for our Easter Services? It was great to see our church come together like that. You have to realize we had two services, so nobody saw everyone from our church all at once. You only saw half.
- B. So, we are very excited about what God is doing. Again, a big thank you if you helped, prayed, served, sang, played or gave so we could worship like that. Great job!
- C. Today and next week, I'm doing a two-part series called How to Be Spiritual Without Being a Freak.
- D. And you think, Why this topic?
- E. A couple of reasons. There's a coffee shop down the street called YAKS. You might know about it. What you might not know is that it's owned and operated by the church next store, the Vineyard City Church.
- F. Mike, the Vineyard pastor, told me about a guy who came in for coffee and struck up a conversation. This customer had no idea the church ran YAKS or that Mike was the pastor.
- G. The man said, "I can't even go over to Starbucks in Discovery Village any more. All these people come up to you and talk about Jesus. Jesus this, Jesus that. I just want some coffee and total strangers want to tell my fortune. So, I come here because nobody's shoving Jesus down my throat."
- H. In case you are out of touch with contemporary culture, you need to know Christians do not have a good name these days. For most people born after the Vietnam war, Christians land somewhere between Ned Flanders and the Church Lady on Saturday Night Live.

II. Data (from <http://www.lovejesushatechurch.com/>)

- A. During the past 10 years, approximately 50 million Christians left the church. In fact, the percentage of American adults who attend religious services has dropped from 49% to less than 32%. More recent studies have shown the decline in church attendance is actually much worse.
- B. In addition, a 2002 USA Today/Gallup poll reported almost half of all Americans appear to be alienated from any form of organized religion.
- C. If the current trend continues, in a few years most Americans will not call themselves religious.
- D. Of the roughly 140 million Americans who do make their way to church on any given weekend, an amazing 74% are not engaged in their church at all.
- E. Moreover, a 2004 study from the Barna Institute concluded that, by the end of the next decade, up to 40% of all church-attending Christians will be worshipping God, serving others, studying the Bible, etc., outside of a congregational church setting.
- F. Something is driving people away from the church. I have three suspicions about what it is. Would you like to hear them?

III. Three Factors

A. *Factor one: People do what they want to do and most people do not want to submit their lives to God for approval.*

1. I want to do what I want to do and today's culture supports that. But, we can't really hang our hats on that factor and be satisfied, can we? After all, do you think this is the first time in world history people do what is right in their own eyes? The early church turned the world upside down and they did it in an extremely anti-Christian and pluralistic culture. So, in fairness, I think we have to address two other factors with more energy than factor one.

B. *Factor two: You.*

C. *Factor three: Me.*

1. Now, it's personal. I'm meddling. An old time Irish evangelist named Gipsy Smith, said, "There are five gospels [five stories of the life of Jesus], Matthew, Mark, Luke, John and the Christian, and very few people read the first four."
2. May I respectfully submit this is why it is all important for each one of us learn how to be spiritual, how to be a Christian who lives by the power of Christ, without being a freak.
3. We are supposed to 'adorn the gospel' says the Bible. We are supposed to attract people to Christ.
4. I spent many years working at a Christian camp called Camp Awana, in Wisconsin. One of the best camp high jinks was pulled by my friend, Rich. He brought to camp something hunters use to mask their scent, a bottle of fox urine. Think skunk smell.
5. On the first day of boys camp, Rich sprinkled just a couple of drops on the threshold of the girl worker's cabin. Not enough to smell really bad, but just enough to get on their shoes and get tracked through the cabin.
6. Every day, Rich sprinkled a few more drops, just on the threshold. By day three, the cabin had a funny smell. By day five, the girls were convinced something died. By day seven, workers were crawling under the cabin to find what died. By day ten, the girls were begging to be moved into a different cabin.
7. You, Mr. Christian, Ms. Christian and I: I am not saying we send people running away from church and Jesus as fast as their unregenerate legs can carry them. But I am suggesting that we, much too often, smell like that cabin smelled on day three. A funny smell, but I can't quite put my finger on it.
8. We are supposed to 'adorn the gospel' says the Bible. We are supposed to attract people to Christ.
9. That means we have to be mighty, growing, serving, followers of Jesus. Spiritual men and women,

tapped into a supernatural universe and we have to do that without being freaks.

IV. The Parable of the Unjust Steward

- A. That is the introduction to the most confusing parable Jesus ever told. I'll read it and you'll understand what I mean.
 1. *"He also said to His disciples, 'There was a certain rich man who had a steward, and an accusation was brought to him that this man was wasting his goods. So he called him and said to him, 'What is this I hear about you? Give an account of your stewardship, for you can no longer be steward. Then the steward said within himself, 'What shall I do? For my master is taking the stewardship away from me. I cannot dig; I am ashamed to beg. I have resolved what to do, that when I am put out of the stewardship, they may receive me into their houses.' So he called every one of his master's debtors to him, and said to the first, 'How much do you owe my master?' And he said, 'A hundred measures of oil.' So he said to him, 'Take your bill, and sit down quickly and write fifty.' Then he said to another, 'And how much do you owe?' So he said, 'A hundred measures of wheat.' And he said to him, 'Take your bill and write eighty.' So the master commended the unjust steward because he had dealt shrewdly. For the sons of this world are more shrewd in their generation than the sons of light."* Luke 16:1-8
- B. Weird one, isn't it? In case you didn't know, Jesus taught this. I'm sure He left a lot of disciples scratching their heads. What? A rich man who fires his steward who's cheating on the books, a steward who doesn't act like he's fired, but then lets off his master's debtors for pennies on the dollar and then the rich master finds out about it and actually pats the unjust steward on the back. What gives? What does this have to do with any of us following Jesus without being a freak?
- C. Let's see. We're going to apply this story on two levels. The two levels are related. Level one, practical. Level two, 'theo-practical' (my new word that combines theological and practical).

V. First a review

- A. So the owner of an agribusiness hears his head manager is somehow cheating him. So he confronts his employee, demands to see the books and fires him on the spot.
- B. Don't answer this out loud, but has anybody here ever been fired? Do you know what it feels like? Even if you deserved it, it feels like a death. Not a good feeling, especially when you don't see it coming.
- C. So the owner says, "Turn in your keys, surrender the books, you're out of here at the end of business today."
- D. At this point, the manager gets craftier than Wile E. Coyote. He sits down and thinks, "Hmmm, what else can I do? I could dig ditches, Axner is hiring. But no, I'm too small and my bad back won't let me. Nobody else is hiring. I am not good at groveling, so I'm not going to beg."
- E. This is so important, because this man refuses to hide his head in the sand. He is totally realistic about what is happening and what he needs to do about it. He is committed to dealing with reality, and the reality is that he was fired. He doesn't waste one minute arguing, not one minute making excuses, not one minute wringing his hands, not one minute firing off e-mails to the rest of the company.
- F. Nor does he spiritualize it. He does not wait for God to miraculously drop a new job in his lap. He grounds himself in reality and moves forward.
- G. So, he's musing over his options and suddenly the lights come on. In verse four, he says, "I have resolved what to do." He makes a plan and immediately works it. What is the plan? You have to read to find out.
- H. The steward takes advantage of the fact that nobody else knows he's been fired. He calls in his master's debtors and writes off a large part of each of their debts. They'll be so impressed and grateful for what he's done that, when he's out of a job, they'll hire him, they'll help him out. That's the statement, "They'll welcome me into their homes. They'll allow me to manage their households."
- I. So, he calls in the accounts receivables and settles one by one for pennies on the dollar.
- J. The first debtor owes 100 measures of oil and the steward cuts his bill in half.
- K. The second debtor owes 100 measures of wheat and the steward reduces his debt by 20%.
- L. He contacted every one (verse five) of his master's debtors, one by one, and settled their debt at a reduced rate. Until the end of the day, when the master finds out about it.
- M. Now, if you or I were crafting this parable, I can guarantee a wildly different ending. I can guarantee when the master discovered the steward had cheated him out of money and had done so to protect his own rear end, so he could move into another cushy job, that you and I would have crafted a very different ending.
- N. May I suggest this is exactly why Factor Two (you) and Factor Three (me) are driving people away from Christianity at the speed of light.
- O. Because, as Jesus tells the story, not only is the Master PLEASED with the UNJUST dealings by the steward, in verses eight and nine, he actually holds this guy up as a model how we Christians should operate as children of light in a darkened generation.
- P. All of that makes me scratch my head and ask, "What is going on?"

VI. The Practical Level

- A. Let me reduce your stress level a little by saying that Jesus is not advocating dishonest business practices. There are plenty of other places in His teachings where He makes that clear.
- B. But, He is advocating a shrewd approach to life (verse eight: "For the children of this world [non-Christians] are more shrewd in their generation than the children of light [Christians].")
- C. That manager modeled the kind of shrewdness we need to model if we are going to be both; a) faithful to Jesus

and b) non-freaky to the world around us.

- D. The steward has a crisis and he takes four distinct steps.
1. First, he admits the problem, I've lost my job. But, he doesn't get paralyzed by this and wait around for the magic job fairy to tap his shoulder with her magic wand. So, I have a problem leads to:
 2. I will take total responsibility. He knows if he's going to have the kind of life he really wants, nobody is going to drop it on him. I have a problem; I take total responsibility. Then:
 3. I will form a realistic plan. He doesn't let his problem paralyze him. He faces reality head on and forms a realistic plan and Jesus commends him for it. After he formed his plan, he immediately executed it. That's step four.
 4. I will take action.
- E. Because, here is our tendency as spiritual people.
1. Our tendency is to deny reality instead of facing it (step 1).
 2. To wait for God, the church or other Christians to bail us out, instead of taking responsibility (step 2).
 3. Then live on vague, ethereal dreams, we say come from God's spirit, but really come from last night's pepperoni pizza. Instead of making wise, concrete plans (step 3).
 4. Finally, we much prefer to procrastinate, only we don't call it that. We call it 'waiting for the Spirit to move me' or 'waiting for God to speak to me.'
- F. Listen, if you have a problem that needs action, God has already spoken to you. It's called the Bible. You need to face reality, take responsibility, form a plan and take action. Your family needs you to be a man of God or a woman of God. Your neighbors need to see what God can do through a person who lives a bold adventure called "faith."
- G. Jesus says, "For the children of this age are more shrewd in dealing with their own generation than are the children of light." The children of this age show more street smarts, more savvy, more willingness to face reality than the children of light.
- H. Jesus is criticizing and challenging those of us inside the community of faith. He's saying, "Those outside the church often show more willingness to face unvarnished reality head-on, a greater determination to deal with it in realistic terms, than those inside the church—more than Christians do."

VII. Back to not being freaky.

- A. I don't know what your life is like right now. You might have money problems or marriage problems. You might struggle with your sexuality or with an addiction to alcohol or drugs. Maybe you live with a group of Christians and they all seem spiritual. So, like a chameleon, you imitate their actions but have none of their heart.
- B. I don't know what problems you face, but I can tell you God wants you to face them head on. He probably won't let you pray them away, wave a spiritual wand and declare them away or name them and claim them away.
- C. Nine times out of ten, God loves to see you face reality, take responsibility, formulate a plan and take decisive action.
- D. That's called maturity. Jesus called it shrewdness. The world will call it, 'normal people I can relate to who have a lot of courage.'
- E. Will you be like this unjust steward? Not by cheating anybody, that would only compound your F.U.P. (Fox Urine Potential). But will you face reality and, by God's power, take the steps of faith you need to take to solve your problems according to the Bible?
- F. There's a deeper level to this parable. It will blow you away.

VIII. The Theo-practical level

- A. First, let me point out this parable comes right on the heels of the most famous of all parables, the Prodigal Son. In fact, it comes right on the heels of the father saying his son was dead and is alive again.
- B. The great lesson of that parable is that God doesn't work by improving the improveable; He only works by raising the dead.
- C. Just to make sure you get the connection, Jesus uses the same word in both parables: In the prodigal son, the son "wasted" his father's money. In the unjust steward, the steward "wasted" his master's goods. Maybe there's something deep, and really cool, going on here.
- D. The second parallel I can find is this: Just as the prodigal son is as good as dead when he goes away from his father, so the unjust steward is as good as dead when he loses his job. He loses his livelihood and has nothing to replace it.
- E. He is dead to his old life, dead to his old job, dead to any hope at all. He's a goner. Maybe it's because God is trying to teach us, over and over, that His ways are not our ways and God doesn't work by improving the improveable, but by raising the dead.
- F. Don't miss this: *HOW will the owner form his judgment against his manager? What does he ask to see?* He asks to see the books, the records of his performance.
- G. So, the steward figures, if the owner is going to judge me based on bookkeeping, I'm going to give him the books—right after I make a few creative adjustments.
- H. So he goes to work settling accounts for pennies on the dollar. Which raises two possibilities and one certainty

1. Either the boss will be mad the steward settled for a reduced price, so mad that he'll fire the steward. But, oops, he's already done that, so what does he have to lose.
 2. Or, the boss will be very happy to have collected anything on these deadbeat debtors. We can't be sure which.
- I. But one thing is certain
 1. All the debtors get away with not paying their debts in full. That is why this is the parable of the Unjust Steward. There was no justice here. Justice would be, you owe a \$100, you pay a \$100. But that doesn't happen here.
 2. Instead of justice, we have something else. Instead of justice, we have something called grace.
 3. The unjust steward becomes a vehicle of grace for every debt-ridden character in the story.
 - J. Then, look what happens
 1. The Master comes back and 'loudly praises' the steward. Why? What is Jesus teaching?
 - K. Hold that question for one more second and answer this one
- IX. Who is the Christ-figure in the parable?
- A. It's a fair question. Jesus talks about Himself in most of His parables. We should look for the Christ-figure, if we can. So, who in this story most resembles Jesus? It's a tough question, because none of us is willing to identify Jesus as either the unjust steward or as the ultimately unjust boss.
 - B. It is exactly that unwillingness which makes YOU Factor 2 and ME Factor 3. Think about the symbolism of the unjust steward.
 1. In verse two, he gets fired; he's as good as dead.
 2. In verse eight, he gets praised; he's back from the dead.
 - C. He is
 1. Identified as a crook.
 2. Ready to write off bad debts.
 3. Operated according to a standard that none of us could call 'strict justice.'
 4. And, when he has done all his work, everybody discovers the Master wasn't going to be the strict bookkeeper we all thought he was going to be. In fact, he was willing to throw the books away and let guilty debtors off the hook for their debt.
 - D. We Christians have to get over this incredible urge to make ourselves holier than Jesus. We have to quit erecting hurdles people have to jump over before we'll approve of them. We have to meet Jesus as a Savior who can only help people who feel their debt, their death and their lostness. We want to make Jesus a celebrity. He made Himself a friend of sinners. We want to make Jesus a pious saint. He numbered Himself with transgressors. We want to make Jesus a forgiver of the forgivable. He made Himself a forgiver of the unforgivable. We want to make Jesus the ultimate avenger of justice. He made Himself the unjust steward. You should be very, very happy you don't have to deal with a just one.
 - E. The Jesus of history and the Jesus of the Bible are one and the same: The Jesus who really lived, the Jesus who walked, joked, snacked, fished, barbecued, laughed, teased, got angry, got hungry, turned water into wine, got tired, died and rose again.
 - F. The Jesus who let a hooker wipe His bare feet with her hair, who told a woman caught in adultery, "Neither do I condemn you," who hugged an unclean leper and told the church people to shut up and quit being phonies.
 - G. Until we get Him straight, the church will continue to repel hurting people who so desperately need a Savior.
 - H. It's not about you being super spiritual, ultra-holy, massively involved in church, doing miracles, reading people's 'spiritual mail' or operating in the supernatural. You don't have to be freaky to follow Jesus.
 - I. Just be you. A debtor whose debts have been paid. A moral corpse who's been raised up from the dead by Jesus.