

Graduation sermon 09
Shout the Gospel with your lives

- *Shhh. Listen.*
- *Do you hear that? Do you know what that sound is? It's the sound of your life... what's it saying? What message is it speaking to those around you? I'm not talking about our words—words are cheap. And I'm not talking about what you say you believe—your actions reveal what you truly believe.*
- *But what does your life say? The things you do...the way you behave...what sort of noise does your life make?*
- *“Many spiritual seekers have not been able to hear the message of Christ because the lives of Christians are making such a horrible noise. It can be hard to hear the whispers of God amid the noise of Christendom.”—Shane Claiborne, The Irresistible Revolution.*
- *It's a shame so many Christians have become so normal. In a world where the message of Jesus is desperately needed, a lot of us make the same noise as the rest of the world with our lives, and wonder why nobody hears us when we talk about God.*
- *Shane Claiborne, when talking about ministering to the homeless in Philadelphia, had this to say about the Christianity we offer:*
- *“We were not interested in a Christianity that offered these families only mansions and streets of gold in heaven when all they wanted was a bed for kids now. And many Christians had an extra one.”*
- *So forget your words...what does your LIFE say? How do your actions reflect the love of God? Do they? Or are you a Christian noisemaker, drowning out God's message...I know I have been. But maybe today we can find a way to change that in our lives together so we can shout God's message with our lives.*
- *So how to do it?*

Step 1: Stop consuming, start giving

- *I was reading a story about a missionary who was talking with some high level executives about what it means to be a Christian. One of them confided, “I've been*

“thinking really hard about this...so I had this made.” He lifted his sleeve to reveal a 24kt gold bracelet with WWJD engraved in it.

- Now it's easy to chuckle at him, **but how many of us do the exact same thing just on a lower scale?** How many of us can relate to the **desire to serve God** but fail to see that living in such a materialistic culture has distorted the way we live it out?
- How often when we want to enhance our walk with God do we buy a devotional book or worship CD instead of serving in a soup kitchen? Or spend hundreds of dollars to attend a conference instead of visiting the lonely at a nursing home?
- We've forgotten the part where Jesus said, “Whenever you do this to the least of these, you've done it to me.” **When was the last time you found the face of God in the face of someone you were helping?**
- Before we delve too deeply into this I want to let you know that this isn't about making anyone feel guilty. This isn't about telling everyone how bad and mean and greedy they are. **This is about continuing to discover the Christian way.**
- We're all living in a very greedy, materialistic society and sometimes it's hard to separate our culture and society's beliefs from what the Bible says. It's only natural to want to throw money at problems, because it's so common in America (and other wealthy nations).
- But money doesn't grow dynamic relationships or build life-changing bonds. **Money doesn't make us grow as people and as a community.** That's what this is about.

- 2 Cor 8:12-15

¹² Whatever you give is acceptable if you give it eagerly. And give according to what you have, not what you don't have. ¹³ Of course, I don't mean your giving should make life easy for others and hard for yourselves. I only mean that there should be some equality. ¹⁴ Right now you have plenty and can help those who are in need. Later, they will have plenty and can share with you when you need it. In this way, things will be equal. ¹⁵ As the Scriptures say,

“Those who gathered a lot had nothing left over,
and those who gathered only a little had enough.”

- This last part is referring to Exodus 16, and how God provided manna to the Israelites. God commands them specifically in verse 16: "Each household should gather as much as it needs."
- The message was not, "gather a lot for I am blessing you". In fact, as we just read, those who did gather a lot only ended up with just enough. Whose who gathered just a little...ended up having just enough.
- We've been duped into confusing abundance with wealth. Somewhere along the line we got it into our heads that God's blessing involves having excess. But look at Proverbs 30: 7-9

⁷ O God, I beg two favors from you; let me have them before I die.

⁸ First, help me never to tell a lie.

Second, give me neither poverty nor riches! Give me just enough to satisfy my needs.

⁹ For if I grow rich, I may deny you and say, "Who is the LORD?"

And if I am too poor, I may steal and thus insult God's holy name.

- Having just enough to satisfy our needs seems wrong, seems so...un-American. But that's the thing. We've been told the American dream is good and right for so long that we've never bothered to see if it lines up with God's dream.
- God's dream involves everyone having enough. It involves sharing our excess to compensate for those who have less.
- It's amazing how many Christians can criticize professional athletes or Hollywood stars for having so much money and hoarding it, while they sit in huge homes with 5 TVs, 4 computers, 3 cars, a boat they use twice a year and never give a red cent to the needy. I'm ashamed of my own hypocrisy in this area, as I've caught myself asking God for money, promising (and intending!) to use it to help the homeless and needy.
- I'm beginning to see that God's response has always been, "What about the money I've already blessed you with?"
- The temptation is to ignore me now, because I'm making you uncomfortable...good. The cross should be uncomfortable to us. The call of Jesus should be difficult in a selfish society...otherwise I wonder if we're doing it right.
- But this isn't about you or me...it's about the community God envisions. This isn't about communism or capitalism.

- *This is about truly loving others as we love ourselves. As Will O'Brien puts it: "When we discover true love, capitalism will not be possible, and communism will not be needed."*
- *It's about returning to the love of the early church, where when there wasn't enough food for everyone, they would fast a meal so everyone could enjoy the next one together... I wonder what would happen if Americans were denied food until the homeless were fed. I bet we'd find that all the money we "don't have" to give to the poor would suddenly show up.*
- *But this isn't even about money—I want to be clear. Charity can be a blessing, but it can also be a curse. Charity is often just another example of us missing the point and going through the motions so we feel like we've accomplished God's will, instead of being honest and using our lives to shout his message.*
- *Think about it: when you give to charity, everyone feels better. The rich (us) give, and the needy get what they need and we all leave feeling better. But is this really what Jesus intended to set up? A distribution center?*
- *Jesus came to transform lives and everything he commanded us was centered around people changing for the better; becoming new creations. It was based on new, loving communities; about turning neighbors into families.*
- *How much personal, spiritual change happens when we drop clothes off at Salvation Army or drop a check into the missions offering? Those things are good and well but they rob us of the kind of powerful love Jesus brought.*
- *His love wasn't spread through organizations and structured distribution centers. His love was spread through touch and smiles and tears and sharing someone else's grief and joy.*
- *Jesus' way tells us to go to the wedding party and celebrate, but we often choose the 'charitable way' and just send a gift. He calls us to go to the funeral and weep with those in sorrow...but instead we send a Hallmark card and think it somehow has the same effect on them...and us.*
- *Is it any wonder America has some of the highest suicide and depression rates in the world? We're filthy rich and we're utterly miserable.*

Step 2: Do something!

- The story goes that a man once confided in his friend, “I want to know why God allows bad things to happen. Why does he allow so much suffering?” His friend replied, “So why don’t you ask him?”
- “I’m afraid to.” “Why are you afraid to?”
- “I’m afraid he’ll ask me the same question.”

Mark 7:5-13

⁵ So the Pharisees and teachers of religious law asked him, “Why don’t your disciples follow our age-old tradition? They eat without first performing the hand-washing ceremony.”

⁶ Jesus replied, “You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you, for he wrote,

“These people honor me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me.

⁷ Their worship is a farce, for they teach man-made ideas as commands from God.’

⁸ For you ignore God’s law and substitute your own tradition.”

⁹ Then he said, “You skillfully sidestep God’s law in order to hold on to your own tradition. ¹⁰ For instance, Moses gave you this law from God: ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and ‘Anyone who speaks disrespectfully of father or mother must be put to death.’

¹¹ But you say it is all right for people to say to their parents, ‘Sorry, I can’t help you. For I have vowed to give to God what I would have given to you.’ ¹² In this way, you let them disregard their needy parents. ¹³ And so you cancel the word of God in order to hand down your own tradition. And this is only one example among many others.”

- I love the phrase, “You skillfully sidestep God’s law...” How many of us skillfully sidestep God’s laws about generosity, giving to others, serving those in need and not ‘storing up treasures for ourselves on earth?’
- All of our reasons make sense, “I give to missions.” “I have to make sure I provide for my family.” But are these legitimate reasons, or just balms to soothe our guilty consciences?
- Jesus may be mentioning only one law, but it’s used as an example—note he says ‘for instance’. So what else are we missing? Look at this verse in Isaiah. Read along, let God burn this into your heart.

¹ “Shout with the voice of a trumpet blast. Shout aloud! Don’t be timid. Tell my people Israel of their sins!

² Yet they act so pious!

They come to the Temple every day and seem delighted to learn all about me.

They act like a righteous nation that would never abandon the laws of its God.

They ask me to take action on their behalf, pretending they want to be near me.

³ ‘We have fasted before you!’ they say. ‘Why aren’t you impressed?’

‘We have been very hard on ourselves, and you don’t even notice it!’

--Sound familiar yet? “Oh God, why me? I only have 2 cars and, and...no TV in my Kitchen!?! Obviously I’m over-exaggerating for effect...but how often do we complain out of our riches?--

--I know Steph and I have wanted to buy a house forever, but we still rent. And I’ve asked God to give us a deal, or maybe have some long lost relative leave us money so we can afford one. Instead of being thankful that we have a warm place to live that suits all of our needs.—

--When did I replace thankfulness with more asking? When did I substitute a grateful attitude with the idea that I need more? I know when. When friends and family started asking why I hadn’t looked into buying a house, yet. When they wondered what my plan was for retirement.—

--It wasn’t because I was being selfish, it was because I’m living in a world where money is king, and bit by bit, I lost sight of who MY king is—

³ ‘We have fasted before you!’ they say. ‘Why aren’t you impressed?’

‘We have been very hard on ourselves, and you don’t even notice it!’

“I will tell you why!” I respond. “It’s because you are fasting to please yourselves.

Even while you fast, you keep oppressing your workers.

⁴ What good is fasting when you keep on fighting and quarreling?

This kind of fasting will never get you anywhere with me.

--Don’t be deceived, this isn’t about fasting. It’s about doing everything to be a ‘good Jew’ or a ‘good follower of God’ but missing so many things that are actually important.

Don’t sidestep this by saying you don’t fast like that. This could just as easily say ‘tithing’ or ‘going to church.’

What good is tithing when 300 homeless people live on your streets?

What good is going to church when thousands in Bismarck have nobody to show them love?

⁵ You humble yourselves by going through the motions of penance— bowing your heads like reeds bending in the wind.

You dress in burlap and cover yourselves with ashes.

Is this what you call fasting? Do you really think this will please the LORD?

⁶ “No, this is the kind of fasting I want:

Free those who are wrongly imprisoned; lighten the burden of those who work for you.

Let the oppressed go free, and remove the chains that bind people.

⁷ Share your food with the hungry, and give shelter to the homeless.

Give clothes to those who need them, and do not hide from relatives who need your help.

--Here's the meat of what I'm saying today. Here is what we skillfully sidestep: freeing those wrongly imprisoned; lightening work loads; sharing food with the hungry; giving shelter to the homeless; giving clothes to the needy; helping our relatives, which today would probably be better translated our community and neighborhood, since in those days your relatives all lived nearby.

*God is calling us to an honest faith. Not one that 'suffers' just to suffer. Not one that sacrifices in order to show what good Christians we are. **How pointless is that?***

God doesn't ask for your sacrifice just to sacrifice, but in order to bless those who need our abundance more than we need it.

Your generosity isn't measured by how much you give, but how much you have left.

But it's not all doom and gloom...look at how this finishes up:

⁸ “Then your salvation will come like the dawn, and your wounds will quickly heal.

Your godliness will lead you forward, and the glory of the LORD will protect you from behind.

⁹ Then when you call, the LORD will answer. 'Yes, I am here,' he will quickly reply.

“Remove the heavy yoke of oppression. Stop pointing your finger and spreading vicious rumors!

¹⁰ Feed the hungry, and help those in trouble.

Then your light will shine out from the darkness, and the darkness around you will be as bright as noon.

- This is shouting the gospel; this is letting our light shine to all who need it. **It's not doing good Christian things, reading the right books or agreeing with the correct beliefs. It's giving, serving and fighting for equality.**
- *This is a hard truth to accept, I know. But aren't all of God's truths hard at some point?*
- *This is something I've wrestled with over the past few weeks and have been tearing myself up over. I've felt guilt and shame at my selfishness, because I found myself complaining in my riches. But as I've come to accept this truth, I've felt an indescribable joy that doesn't make sense but is so very real.*
- *See we're told that the way to get by here on earth is to protect our own. Go to school, get a well-paying job and find financial security—capitalism is built on the foundations of selfishness. So when we see God's way we don't understand it.*
- *Jesus says love your enemies—he doesn't say 'don't hate them.' Love them! Actively love them like you would your own child! That's hard.*
- *He says if someone would force you to go a mile with them, go two. He says that rather than store up money and possessions here to give them away so the needy have enough.*
- *Give. Love. Rip your own selfish ideas about being secure and safe and finding peace out from under your own two feet for the benefit of others...and in THAT you will find peace. A peace that is above all understanding because it doesn't make sense.*
- *How can I feel better about my finances by giving money away? How can I feel safe around my enemies by trusting and loving them?*
- **It DOESN'T make sense. It's impossible!**
- *pause*

- *And God says, "With man it is impossible. But with God all things are possible. The wisdom of this world is foolishness to me...so don't copy the behavior and customs of this world, but let me transform you into a new person by changing the way you think. Then you will learn to know my will for you, which is good and pleasing and perfect."*