

Are You a Sheep or a Goat in the Imperfect Church?

You know the drill. It was the end of a long workday. I was racing from one errand to another before it was time to pick up my daughter for our dinner date. I didn't have a moment to spare...

So when Richard, a disheveled character with enough sand on his face to nearly disguise the scar on his cheek, approached me asking for money to buy food, it took me a minute to catch on to what the Lord was doing. I honestly didn't have as much as a penny in my pocket and apologetically told him so. After Richard walked on by, it suddenly dawned on me that I was standing in front of an ATM machine!

"Hey mister!" I cried out after him.

Richard turned around slowly as I raced up to him with my debit card in hand. We were standing in front of a Subway, so I invited him inside for a meal. Richard had a grateful heart, but also an aching one. He hugged and kissed me and thanked me profusely for the double meatball and tuna fish footlong sub—then he dropped the "S" bomb. Richard told me he wanted to kill himself.

"Brother, do you know where you'll go when you die?"

"Yes, I do. I am going to be with Jesus Christ in heaven."

"Do you really believe that?" I asked.

"Yes," he said beginning to weep, "I just want to go now. I don't want to live here another day. Nobody cares about me. Nobody loves me."

Richard told me how the Lord talks to him about everything from quitting his cigarette habit to receiving healing for his

chronic health conditions. Richard vowed to the Lord more than once that he would launch a ministry to help homeless people if he only had the money. Then Richard preached a message from Matthew 25:31-46 right there in the parking lot. You know the one. It's where Jesus talks about feeding the hungry and visiting people in prison—the one about separating the sheep from the goats. (In case you haven't read it in a while, the sheep enter eternal life and the goats eternal punishment.)

Some may have seen Richard's sermon as manipulation. Yes, I knew he was angling for some cash. But by the grace of heaven I purposely looked beyond his desperation to the heart of a hurting man who was physically wasting away day by day. Richard was so full of the Word of God, even in his malnourished condition, that I finally asked him, "Did you grow up in the Church?"

"I grew up on TBN," he answered. "The Church doesn't care about me."

That floored me. Here was a man full of the Word of God who felt totally rejected by the Church. He wasn't always homeless and distraught. Somewhere along the line, Richard lost his hope. Now, he was living with a group of homeless men behind Walmart in the bushes, waiting to die. What went wrong?

God's love never fails. And this man clearly had a running dialogue with God in which the Father was continuing to woo Him to His heart. I dare say Richard understands the heart of Jesus better than some career pew-warmers. Again, what went wrong?

I don't know all the circumstances of Richard's life. But as I continued to stand there before him, I also continued to ask the Holy Spirit what was going on in Richard's heart.

Richard is a man who never found God's love manifest in God's Church. Don't get me wrong. I'm grateful for Christian television. But Christian television alone is not enough to

sustain the human spirit. We need real fellowship with other believers who can weep with us when we are weeping and rejoice with us when we are rejoicing. True brethren who don't judge us, but embrace us with all our weaknesses with the unfailing love of the Father.

There are plenty of wonderful local churches that are full of the love of God. It seems Richard never found one. Instead, he found churches that were full of religion, and not the pure and undefiled type James talks about. Unfortunately, there are plenty of those, too.

I've visited many churches in the past year. I've learned that there are many different flows—and as long as it's flowing from the heart of Jesus it's all good. But I've also seen far too many local churches with cultures that profess love but embrace cliques; that preach a heart for the lost, then rebuke people for evangelizing "without permission;" that confess children are the priority, but unless the parents have money to give to the offering the church van won't stop in their neighborhood anymore.

What is going on? I don't claim to have all the answers. And I'm not prone to focusing on everything wrong about the Church. Jesus loves the Church—and so do I. But I'm grieved when I see the cliques, the hypocrisy, and the control. That spiritual climate doesn't leave much room for people like Richard.

Sure, maybe Richard never found the right local church. Maybe he didn't look hard enough. But should it be so hard to find a local church full of love and grace? No church is perfect. I mean, as soon as I walk in the door any supposed perfection goes out the window because I am so far from perfect myself. But I strive to be a sheep and not a goat.

I ended up spending about an hour with Richard; an hour I didn't really think I had to spare. But I am glad I did. I

couldn't get Richard out of my mind the rest of the evening, or even the next day. Here's the bottom line: We can't blame the Church as if it's some separate entity that's not living up Christ's stature. We are the Church. And the Great Shepherd is coming soon to separate the sheep from the goats. Which side will you be on?

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