

OVERHEARD AT STARBUCKS

Why Are People Turned Off By Church?

Matthew 23:1-15

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Two boys--brothers--were sitting in Sunday School class one Sunday. The younger one was fidgeting and said, "This is boring." His brother poked him in the ribs and said, "Shut up. Church is supposed to be boring!" Well....Those two brothers may have spoken for many Americans. Why are people turned off by church? Worth exploring over a cup of coffee.

Here are some startling statistics reported in a book you may want to know about: *Why Nobody Wants To Go To Church Anymore*, by Thom and Joani Schultz. Every year, 2.7 million Americans become inactive in church. To be more age-specific, seven in ten Protestants, ages 18-30, who went to church regularly in high school, will quit church by the age 23. And only one-third of them will return by the age of 30. And this may be the most interesting fact: nearly two-thirds (64%) of Americans are interested in pursuing faith in an environment different from the typical church [ch. 1, *Why Nobody Wants To Go To Church Anymore*].

Now to understand why people are turned off by church in our day, perhaps we can learn something about why people were turned off by church in Jesus' day. This morning's text shows Jesus getting very honest.

TURN-OFF NUMBER ONE: HYPOCRICY, THE DISTANCE BETWEEN WHAT WE SAY AND HOW THEY LIVE. Read vv. 2-3. It's a distance between saying and doing. Between appearance and reality. Scribes were professional scholars who interpreted God's teachings and Pharisees were laymen who formed a kind of brotherhood, trying to live the Law to the nth degree. Did they love the Bible? Yes. Did they want to live for God? Yes. Were they sincere? Yes. Were their outward lives pure regarding rules? Yes. Were they missing the point and turning people away? Yes!

TURN-OFF NUMBER TWO: JUDGMENTALISM--USING GUILT TO CONTROL AND BURDEN OTHERS--v. 4. Surveys have revealed that 87% of Americans believe that Christians are judgmental [Lyon and Kinnaman, *UnChristian*, cited in *Why Nobody Wants To Go To Church Anymore*, by Thom and Joani Schultz, p. 23]. We do that by majoring on the minors, by the church's version of Trivial Pursuit. Listen to this quote: "The Church has sometimes locked itself up in small things, and in small-minded rules." Guess who said that. Pope Francis. The Swedish Christians tell of an aged and pious church member who was always quoting Jesus and was sharply critical of her fellow church members for drinking wine. If her congregation ever started using wine for communion, she said, she would leave the church. When someone reminded her that Jesus drank wine, she replied, "You know, that's the one thing about Jesus I've never liked." There you have it. Even Jesus couldn't get into some of our churches!

We may laugh now about old arguments: Should we allow a newer translation than the 1611 KJV to be read in worship? Should women be allowed to wear slacks? Should we let people who aren't members here take communion? But 30 years from now, what will they be saying about our pettiness? Here's a helpful distinction I heard once: religion is a burden that we are forced to carry. Faith is that which lifts and carries US.

HERE'S THE THIRD TURN-OFF: SELF-IMPORTANCE AND HAUGHTINESS--. Religion to impress others is sort of nauseating, isn't it? Read vv. 5-7. Jesus blasted those who wore large phylacteries (leather boxes on their arms and foreheads, containing passages from the Torah, the Bible of the day). And for wearing long fringes on their robes, drawing attention to themselves. Just ask yourself a tough question: How much of the time and energy I invest in church is for the purpose of making me feel and look good vs. helping and serving others? Listen to Jesus' approach. Read vv. 8-12. We're all students. We're all servants. And we're all sinners. There is a democracy about the church. We're just folks.

It's a really simple test, Jesus seems to be saying. Is your life making it easier or more difficult for people to find and experience God? Is our church making it easier or more difficult for people to find and experience God? Can we come to the place where we see the church, not as the guardian of doctrinal purity, but as the greatest place on earth to go for relationships? Not as the protector of its own interests but as servant to hurting lives. Not as clinging to its own privileges and security but as risking for the poor, needy and lost. Committed to transformation, not comfort.