

THE CHURCH HAS BEEN ROBBED!

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Matthew 7:21-23

Last Thursday morning about 8:45 my telephone rang and Dorothy Folz, our membership secretary, was on the other end of the line. AThe church has been robbed!@ she shouted. APlease get over here right away. I= a nervous wreck.@ I told her to call the police and rushed over to the office.

The place was a shambles. The doorjamb leading into the office had been shattered with a crow bar. The desk drawers had been forced open and lay upside down on the floor with their contents scattered across the room. The filing cabinet door hung open. The metal door to one of the closets in the conference room had been literally ripped apart and a small section of the beautiful walnut paneling had been bruised and splintered. The place was a mess.

We started through the building to see if other damage had been done and found that they had opened the Coke machine in the basement and had taken the money, drank the Cokes, and put the empty bottles back in the machine. In trying to get into the youth center, they jammed that door with a crow bar and then apparently feeling it was too much work, broke out a window in the hallway so they could see what was inside.

The police finally concluded they had gained entrance by forcing a window in the dining room and then, breaking open any doors that blocked their path, made their way through the maze of hallways until they came to our church office which they burglarized.

When we began to figure up the loss, we were relieved to learn that they had touched none of the expensive equipment. Nor had they bothered any of the checks which the financial secretary keeps under lock and key in the desk. Apparently, they were only after money. And by rifling the petty cash drawer, they had made off with a grand total of \$15.00 -- \$20.00. (Oh, yes, they

got off with one red apple which Muriel Petrillo, my secretary, had left in her desk. One of the thieves ate it and threw the core on the floor.) They did hundreds of dollars worth of damage and created a complete mess which took hours to reorder. The result was terrible inconvenience, a real loss of time, and the misuse of the strength and ability of our staff.

I must say the police were AJohnny on the spot.@ Within a matter of minutes the place was crawling with them. And believe it or not, one actually looked like a detective. He was a fingerprint expert and had on a Sherlock Holmes-type cap. His collar was pulled up and he went around with powder and brush, dusting for fingerprints. Whenever he saw one, he pulled out a little magnifying glass and peered at it intently. It was all quite exciting.

He didn't have much luck for, according to the detectives, the thieves had used a substance similar to nail polish on their fingers to keep from leaving fingerprints. He pointed out that just a few months ago, this technique had been shown on ADragnet@ and that ever since, their work has been incredibly difficult as they find fewer and fewer fingerprints.

However, this Sherlock Holmes detective did find one good print and his eyes lit up with a great deal of hope. He peered at it for a while and, from the frown on his face, we thought for sure he had found the fingerprints of a very dangerous, sinister criminal-type. But it turned out to be Muriel Petrillo's!

Well, after all the excitement had died down and the shock of the robbery was over, it struck me this wasn't the only time the church had been robbed. Nor would it be the last. Oh, to my knowledge, this was the first time a band of thieves had broken in and burglarized the place and we certainly hope *that* never happens again. But in a completely different way the church has been robbed and is *being* robbed this very minute. And, believe me, the extent of loss is vastly more than the pittance taken by the thieves who broke into our building last Wednesday night.

Who is the thief? He is many people. To begin with, he is

The Man Who Takes His Christian Faith With a Grain of Salt.

The fellow who not only stays away from church on Wednesday night, but is extremely irregular on Sunday mornings. To him everything else comes first. Be it a golf game, an extra hour of sleep, a television program or a social engagement. He just doesn't want to be disturbed. He has climbed aboard the Gospel Train all right. But he is riding in the sleepers.

He wouldn't think of not belonging to a church. Neither would he think of putting the church first in his life. When it suits his convenience, when there is nothing more important to do, or when he is faced with a personal crisis, he manages to come to church. But the rest of the time he hangs a neatly lettered ADo Not Disturb@ sign over the doorway of his life. *And, he robs the church!* He robs it of its vitality. He robs it of its power. Because of his lackadaisical attitude, the church, which should be a strong, virile, aggressive marching army, becomes a poor, weak, emaciated thing reaching only a fraction of its potential.

Look at the effect this man has upon a church like ours. With a resident membership of 700, we struggle to get 400 people to church on Sunday morning. Slightly more than half. Attendance varies as much as 100 from one Sunday to the next for no apparent reason. We had fewer than 400 last week. We had more than 400 the week before that. Same church. Same choir. Same God.

More than one hundred of our members attend church five times or less a year. Several hundred get to church two times or less a month. The larger tragedy is that this kind of participation is *above average* for Protestant churches in our country.

As a result, ministers who gave their lives to help build eternity into the hearts of people have to spend nearly two-thirds of their time developing programs and creating promotional schemes to get church members to go to church.

Instead of being busy winning the lost for Christ, nearly two-thirds of our time and effort are

spent in begging, cajoling, inviting and encouraging Christians -- people who name the name of Christ -- to give God an hour of their time on Sunday morning and another hour on Wednesday night. Is it any wonder I say the church has been robbed? And, the extent of our loss is vastly greater than the damage done last Wednesday night.

And then, the man who is guilty of this spiritual felony is --

The Man Who Refuses to Apply His Christian Faith During the Week.

As a result, he robs the church of its healing influence in a world of sin. And after all, what is the whole idea behind this pile of stone located at 110th and Bell Avenues in Chicago, Illinois?

What is the meaning of the activity that goes on within these walls throughout the week? What is the purpose behind the hours and hours of toil and thought put into this church by your leaders? Is it just to provide one hour of escape on Sunday, another hour of spiritual nourishment on Wednesday, with a few social events tossed in for good measure? No!

The church is to be to the world what Christ would be if he were here himself! The church is Aa colony of heaven on earth.@ A saving, redeeming society. A bit of spiritual leaven which *should* succeed in raising the whole loaf of life. But it isn't. Why? Because instead of the church permeating the world, the world has permeated the church. It has become captive to the very society it seeks to redeem. So, while there is more religious activity today than at any time in history, there are also more crime and terror, more corruption and uneasiness than our world has ever known.

The church has been robbed! It has been robbed of its heavenly influence in the world by the man who refuses to take his Christian faith seriously. Who is the thief? He is B

The Man Who Believes in His Own Helplessness.

He looks at the mammoth forces of evil at work in the world and knows these things ought not to

be. But he argues life is just too big for him to change. That he is only one. That there is nothing he can do. And so, instead of struggling against the tide, he goes along *with* the tide like a dead log floating downstream. He does nothing bad. He simply does nothing -- period! His spiritual neutrality on Monday, Tuesday and the rest of the week nullifies that which the church has proclaimed in power on Sunday.

They say it took the government of China 1,000 years to build the Great Wall of China. It was intended to provide protection against invaders. And yet, *before it was completed*, the Great Wall of China had been breached many times. How? Not by battering it down. Not by climbing over it. Not by tunneling under it. It was breached by the simple device of bribing the gamekeeper.

And that's how Satan is succeeding today. He knows the church is no stronger than its weakest member. So he bribes us with the coins of pleasure, material possessions, social acceptance, and economic gain. He argues that Christianity may have some dubious value on Sunday. But it's not really unimportant on Monday. He reminds us we are only one against a crowd. That there's nothing we can do. *And we believe him!* As a consequence, the church has been robbed. Robbed of its healing influence in a world desperately in need of a healing touch.

And then, the thief who has robbed the church is --

The Man Who Is Content to Be a Hitchhiker to Heaven.®

He is satisfied to gain a free ride at the expense of others. He has no sense of the stewardship of time, talent or money. He has the erroneous idea that things just happen. That the church has always *been* here, and will always *be* here, even though he does little to assure its presence.

I have often wondered what would happen if God suddenly made this man as poor as he says he is when he is asked to finance God's program.

I have often wondered what would happen if God suddenly made him as sick as he says he was

when he stayed home last Sunday.

I have often wondered what would happen if God suddenly made him as completely untalented as he claims to be when he refuses to teach a Sunday school class.

I have often wondered what would happen if God suddenly left him with the Asmall amount of time@ he claims to have, when he says he is just Atoo busy@ to serve Christ, or even attend his church on Sunday.

The church has been robbed! Robbed of its power because of the man who is content to be a Ahitchhiker to heaven.@"

And then the church has been robbed of precious and eternal souls by --

The Man Who Feels His Religion Is Too Personal to Talk About.

He never witnesses to his faith. He never tells others what Christ means to him. He never attempts to reach out in an effort to win some friend for Christ. And yet, that is the reason the Church exists -- to win people to Christ!

Christians are the bride of Christ. In the truest sense we are married to him. The purpose of this marriage is procreation. We completely frustrate this holy purpose -- we nullify our marriage vows, so to speak -- when through our relationship newborn babes in Christ are not brought into God's family.

Truman Douglas put it this way:

AThe church does not *have* a mission. The church *is* a mission!@"

That mission is evangelism: to win and woo men and women, boys and girls to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ. And yet how many there are who have been Christians for one, two, five, ten, twenty years and cannot point to even one person they have led to Christ.

As the old gospel song puts it: AI am saved, saved to tell others of the man of Galilee.@" But if we

do not share our faith -- if we do not witness to the meaning of Christ in our lives -- if we do not tell others of the man of Galilee, (let me say it in love) we are thieves. We are robbing the church of eternal souls who could be won if we only cared enough to tell them about God's redeeming love revealed in Jesus Christ.

And then the church has been robbed of its oneness by --

The Man Who Refuses to Work Together With Other People.

Usually, this is because others don't always do things the way *he* would like them done.

The great burden of Christ for his church was expressed in his prayer in John 17 when he said,

AThat they all might be one.@

He wasn't talking about denominational unity. There were no denominations then. He was talking about spiritual unity. He was talking about the littleness of people which often negates the greatness of the church.

I like the spirit of John D. Rockefeller, as described by Harry Emerson Fosdick, his pastor. Dr. Fosdick tells how many times Mr. Rockefeller would disagree strongly with some action contemplated by the Riverside Church, where he belonged. He would speak as eloquently and forcefully as he could against that action.

ABut,@ Dr. Fosdick goes on to say, Aonce the church had acted and the will of God was known, Mr. Rockefeller got behind that action with every bit of his prestige and power. Never once,@ says Fosdick, Adid I ever hear John D. Rockefeller say, A I told you so.= But a good many times, after having disagreed with some particular program that was proposed, Mr. Rockefeller became chairman of the very committee whose formation he had voted against, and led our church in the very program to which he had objected.@

I think that's the spirit of greatness. The sort of attitude Jesus sought when he prayed:

AThat they all might be one.@

And that's certainly the spirit *I* have in mind when I say we must learn to distinguish between our prejudices and our principles so, as we participate in the formation and activation of the various ministries of this church, we will not be guilty of robbing it of its oneness simply because the group does not always do things the way *we* would like to see them done.

Right now I am thinking of the story of a man who was drowning. A fellow saw him fall in and jumped in to save him. But, when he grabbed the man by his hair, lo and behold the man had a wig! The next time he came up, his rescuer grabbed him in the mouth, but the man had false teeth. The third time he came up, he grabbed him by the leg, but the fellow had a wooden leg. In desperation the lifesaver said,

AHow do you expect me to save you if you don't stick together?@

The church is like that. As Christians we cannot afford to be a wig or a wooden leg that is easily distracted. We must not be a pair of false teeth -- sitting off on the side somewhere -- chattering away with this gripe or that. We must be an integral part of the body. We must be wholeheartedly attached to the eternal purposes of Christ's church. We must stick together. Even though at times we'd like to see things done differently.

And then, may I say quite seriously, the church has been robbed of its future by --

The Man Who Is Only Concerned About Holding the Church Together For the Present.

In a recent editorial in the Saturday Review, Norman Cousins points out,

AThe number one enemy in America is not, the atomic muscled totalitarian power that stalks the earth. Rather it is the man whose only concern is that the worlds stay in one piece during his lifetime. He is neither concerned about the past nor the future. He is only concerned about himself and his present pleasures. Hence, when he thinks about the world, if he thinks about it at all, it is usually in terms of his hope that the atomic fireworks can be postponed for 15 or 20 years because, by

then, he will be gone and it will make little difference what happens on the earth.@
I am afraid there are some people who feel that way about the church. Any talk about the legacy of the past or the possibilities of the future leave them cold. They are only concerned about the present and protecting themselves so they can enjoy it. Well, my friends, we owe something to the future. God knows we've made a mess of the past. And our only hope is that the generations to come will be God's people who run God's world in God's way.

One of the detectives investigating the burglary last Thursday morning overheard me say I was going to change my sermon subject and preach on AThe Church Has Been Robbed.@ He said,

ABe sure to say a word about the responsibilities of parents to their children and the need for more supervision of juveniles.@

Then he pointed out that in all likelihood the robbery had been committed by a band of teenagers because professional criminals would not have left expensive pieces of equipment laying around. Nor would they have overlooked checks which they could sell for a dollar or two to someone who was not afraid to forge them. He pointed out the robbery techniques which had been used and how they were definitely the work of inexperienced kids.

Well, the church has a responsibility in that area, and this church, in particular, is conscious of doing something for our youth. But we can only do so much. We can provide the opportunity for them to grow. We can make it as attractive as possible. But parents must help us. They must add (to our effort) their support at home.

One of our challenges in reaching young people in this upper middle class community is that everything else comes first. The leader of our youth department suggested a very enticing program to her group. But one girl said,

ALet's not decide tonight. Let's wait to see what the sorority is doing that night.@

Another youngster said,

AI want to make sure there is no conflict with the AY.@@

A third was afraid some other group to which she belonged would have something going on. So the very worthwhile activity their leader suggested never got done.

For three-and-a-half years now, we have been trying to build a youth program for Wednesday nights so our youth could have this Afaith lifting@ in the middle of the week. I was raised in a church which provided that kind of spiritual opportunity for me. I know what it meant to me as a teenager. It provided me with spiritual experiences in my youth which have completely altered the direction of my life. Things happened in those youth prayer meetings which would never have happened on a Sunday morning or in Sunday school. I learned to pray in our youth prayer meetings on Wednesday nights. I have coveted that for our kids. But we cannot do it alone. We must have the support of you parents.

When I was in high school and a conflict arose between our church and some other interest, my parents made it very clear where my obligation as a Christian lay. I don't think my personality was warped as a result. I don't think I became maladjusted or missed out on much fun or developed a fear of Anot belonging@ or failed to learn the social graces.

But I did learn some of the spiritual graces. And these later sustained me during my college years when I went through the valley of doubt. When my childhood faith was questioned and all I had been taught at home and church was attacked, it was then that I learned to appreciate my high school days in church, for I was able to stand fast in the faith. I had some inner braces. I had some spiritual discipline which had been built into my life in my early youth and they sustained me. I thank God for parents who had a set of values which put Christ and the church first, and who passed those values onto me through the exercise of parental authority.

You see, mom and dad, there is a matter of an example involved. What's important to *you* will eventually become important to your children. And I speak now, not as your pastor, but as a fellow parent who has brought two young lives into the world and realizes more and more each day the staggering responsibilities I have undertaken.

Your values will become the values of your children. If *you* place a premium upon social acceptance and belonging to the right group (whatever that means), *those* ideas and values will become important to your kids. If by *your* actions and attitudes you convey to them the feeling, even subconsciously, that the church is just one more pot on an already crowded stove, *they* will soon feel the same way. And you will be thieves. You will have robbed the church of its future.

May I point out in closing that the church is not the only one being robbed.

The Thief B Himself -- Actually Suffers the Greatest Loss.

ACrime does not pay@ is not just a slogan. It is a declaration of fact. The kids, whoever they were, who broke into our church last Wednesday night, will eventually suffer a far greater loss than we did. They need our prayers and they certainly have mine. Sooner or later -- quite possibly at the price of spending part of their life in prison -- they will learn they cannot break the law and get away with it.

May I say to you with desperate solemnity --

The same hard lesson will ultimately be learned by those who
think they can break God's laws and get away with it.

ACrime does not pay.@ Whether it is robbing the church of its physical property, or robbing the church of its spiritual power. Its influence. Its growth. Its virility. Its future. The effect is the same. Ultimately, it is the thief himself who suffers the greatest loss.

The church has been robbed! The thief is many people. Interestingly enough, he is not a bad man. As a matter of fact, he is quite respectable. He may be a member of the church. He may even be a leader of it. But whoever he is, he is a dangerous man. He is depriving the church of the life it must have if our world is to be redeemed.

The church has been robbed! Are you the thief?