

ONE

THE SHOWDOWN AT STARBUCKS

I was right in the middle of one of those rare, unplanned you-just-had-to-be-there-to-believe-it moments at my favorite place away from home—Starbucks. Starbucks purposefully creates this affable, living room-type atmosphere in their stores. Their corporate mission actually involves creating a “third place,” after home and work, where a person can relax, make friends, and just hang out. Starbucks’ evil plan has worked so well in my case that I make it my second office when working on the talks I give to my home church each week. Much of this book was done there as well.

So I was hanging out, enjoying my vacation near Bradenton, Florida, reading and journaling and having my alone time with God. I like to be alone in my alone time, and I don’t like rude people who laugh too much on their cell phones inside my pristine coffee castle. Starbucks should feel more like a cool library than a train station, but some people are clueless and lack any kind of basic self-awareness and should have been trained better at home but weren’t. These same “some people” still have a problem understanding cellular technology and sound amplification and feel the need to raise their voices to be heard, even when talking about personal issues, which can be a little embarrassing and annoying at the same time. I have real issues with loud talkers who invade my ear space inside Starbucks. That’s all I’m saying. And if you’re one of them, you have no idea what I’m talking about.

Okay, I was about halfway done with my venti vanilla coffee when this all went down. And after you read this,

you may feel that I have taken liberties to make the story more interesting or colorful. Let me assure you—this is really what happened.

Feeling devoted and close to God in the moment, I was writing my prayer in my journal when this sixty-ish gentleman walked in and sat down and began speaking to this twenty-something guy at the corner table. I noticed the contrast in the way they were groomed. The older guy was obviously a local—dark tan to go with his white crew-cut. His affect was bulldog tough—very militaristic and confident.

The younger man, on the other hand, seemed to be the kind of person you would see hanging out at Starbucks in the mother-ship store on Pike Place in Seattle—very relaxed, with wavy hair and glasses. He gave off a kind of beatnik-European attitude. He probably liked Emily Dickinson and Robert Frost—that kind of look.

I assume from the way the older man entered and spoke that he had an appointment or was expected by the younger. But that's when things got strange and my assumptions were altered. The older man sat down and began what I can only describe to you as some kind of pseudo-Christian, I-want-to-help-you-on-my-own-terms tirade. He began by saying rather loudly, "Do you have any money or means of support?" He didn't wait for an answer and stated, "Fifteen years ago I was right where you are. No money, no house, no job, but now I'm out of that. My wife and I are Christian people, and I have some money. We want to help people

like you. But you need to take some kind of initiative in this deal.”

The young man—I later learned his name is Jason—responded by saying, “Sir, I don’t have much money, and I don’t have a place to stay right now.”

Again, without listening, the older man said, “Here’s the deal. I will take you right now to Salvation Army. You can stay there for three days and eat for free, and they can help you get on your feet. That’s my final offer, and you can either accept it or reject it. It’s up to you. Do what you want to do, but I won’t offer it again!”

Jason asked, “Uh, can I get your name and phone number?”

The man responded by saying abruptly, “No, I will not give you my number, but my first name is Bill, that’s all you’re getting!”

Jason said that he didn’t need a place to stay, and as he was trying to explain why, the older man interrupted again, saying, “Your problem is that you don’t want to take responsibility for your life. You just want to sit here drinking coffee”—to which the Jason replied, “Okay, now you’re judging me, and you don’t even know me.”

The older man became very agitated and replied, “Well, that was my final offer. I’ve done my Christian thing, so now I’m leaving!”

Jason replied kindly, “So this was just about appeasing your conscience? I don’t need your help, but I thank you for the offer.” And the older man walked out the door.

All of this took about three minutes—a lot of talking and a lot of listening, and the Christian wasn't listening. I was sick. Jason returned quietly to his book. Starbucks was silent, no steaming or chit-chat as the room had emptied. The only thing hanging in the air was the strong aroma of coffee originating from the mountains of Ethiopia.

I'm on vacation. Back home I'm a pastor; but in Bradenton, Florida, I'm a nobody with a tourist T-shirt and peeling skin from being overcooked on the beach. I have purposefully taken a longer-than-usual vacation to renew and relax as this particular year had been very stressful on me personally. I'm not at Starbucks to be a pastor, as if I had any choice in the deal. But this was something I couldn't overlook. I had just witnessed some kind of Christian drive-by shooting in which someone, speaking in the name of Jesus, had done everything absolutely wrong. By his attitude he blasphemed the very heart of our merciful Lord Jesus and killed the Lord's witness to anyone else inside the store at that moment. This was a conversation that everyone heard, and one that made the Christian look like the bad guy—which he was—and made Jason look like the victim—which he was. This was religion at its worst; the kind of religion keeping people away from Jesus by the millions in the United States. It's the same kind of religion that made Jesus sick in His day too.

It took me a couple of minutes of wrestling with God to muster the confidence to finally say something. By nature, I'm more introverted. I like to watch and think and write and learn and, when called upon, to express my ideas

after I have adequate preparation. I don't need a lot of social interaction to be happy. I find energy from being alone. I also know that the Bible says that in my weakness God is strong if I submit and let Him do the working.

My first words across the quiet coffee shop to Jason were, "Uh, I couldn't help but notice . . . what happened?"

He said, "Do you mind if I come over to your table?"

"Sure—come on over," I said.

I repeated that I had heard the gist of the conversation, and he said, "Yeah, the place cleared out pretty quickly, didn't it?"

This was a fact that I had somehow missed in the moment. "So what's up? What was that all about?"

Jason said the story was long, and I replied that I had plenty of time, which is the good part of being on vacation. I had decided up front that I could at least listen and maybe somehow attempt to rebuild a kind of bridge that the zealous "Christianator" had just blown away.

I found out a lot about Jason. He had just come back to the United States from Europe, where he had a first child on the way. He came home to stay with his father with the idea that he could perhaps find a job to support his new family and move them to the United States soon. The job search had not gone well, and neither had his reconnection with his family in the United States. He was staying with his grandmother, who had just asked him to leave.

I was a little wary on this point and still not sure I got the whole story, but he said their family disagreement

stemmed from the fact that he felt the need to point out their duplicity in life—how they said one thing yet did another. I know that was his view, and I didn't know the other side; only God knows why he got kicked out of Grandma's house. But at that moment the "why" didn't really matter.

He went on to say that his dad had promised to take him to another town to look for work. Early that morning Jason had put a note on his dad's car explaining that he was ready to go and welcomed a ride. He had spent the previous night on a bench outside a Wal-Mart and now at 10 A.M. was here waiting on his dad, who was obviously avoiding him.

All this made me even more curious about the origins of Mr. White Crew Cut. I said, "So who was that guy?" I still believed that he had to be a relative.

Jason replied that he didn't even know the guy. He was apparently a neighbor of the grandmother who took it upon himself to attempt to save the day—in the name of Jesus, of course. He walked into Jason's life and offered something right out of a Marvel comic strip: the hideous creature with a big mouth, little hands, and tiny ears, wearing a cross and a crew cut.

After twenty minutes of talking, Jason asked the big question—the question that sometimes ends conversations. He said, "So what do you do?"

I hesitated, took a deep breath, and replied timidly, "I'm a pastor on vacation," after which I quickly asked him his plans and hopes and about his life in Europe—anything to get the focus off me and my title.

He spoke very eloquently for a while, and as he talked, I got the impression from God that I needed to help him see the Father's possible involvement in the events of this day.

I said, "You know, I was just reading the Bible this morning, and there was once this guy named Hezekiah. The Bible says that he was a very righteous guy and that he tried to do his best and that because of this, God really blessed him." I did my best to explain how God wanted to bless him, Jason, as well. I hoped he would understand that God is a good God who has good plans for His kids.

To my surprise, he appeared interested in what I had to say. I can usually tell when people are tuning me out, but he wasn't. So I pressed on.

"You know about Jesus, right?" And he nodded. "Jesus had a favorite story about two brothers and a dad. The younger one said 'Dad, I don't want to wait until you die—I want my inheritance now.'"

Jason's eyes expressed shock, and he said, "No way!" This was a new story to him, and he was getting into it.

"So the young son took his money and partied hard and spent it all and was pretty-much homeless. He ended up working in a pig farm feeding pigs, which for a Jewish boy would be the worst job ever. He was so hungry he even wanted to eat what he was feeding the pigs! Remember: Jesus was a Jew talking to Jews. So then the young son had an idea to go back home. He reasoned that he could ask for forgiveness, work for his dad, and at least would have some

food to eat and a roof over his head.” Jason was still listening, so I continued.

“Okay, so when he heads home, before he even gets there, the father who had given him all the money sees him coming home and runs to meet him—meaning that he had been looking for him to come home for a while now. The younger son confesses his mistake and asks for a job, but the dad says, ‘Hey, forget that! It’s party time here at the ranch. You were lost, but now you’re home. I’m so happy you’re home!’ The Father didn’t do guilt trips. No condemnation, just joy that the son had come home.”

I said, “Jason, the father in the story is all about God our Father. He has a great plan for your life now, and what you’ve done in the past is over. He just wants to hang out with you and be your guide in life, and if you follow Him, He’ll bless everything you do.”

I said, “Now there was an older brother in the story. He complained about the father’s mercy. He thought he’d kept all the rules and that this was what being a good son was about. But the father corrected him and said, ‘Son, you’ve totally missed the point of being my son! Come on in and eat a big family meal, on me!’ But the older brother wouldn’t eat with the younger, and he missed out on the party of the decade. He thought he was better than all of that. He had kept the rules, and that was all that needed to be done.”

Then I slowed down and said, “Jason, the guy who was here earlier was a lot like that older brother. He missed the

point of being God's son. He was mad and mean-spirited, and I'm sorry that you had to deal with him."

I was stunned by the look on his face. He had something that he didn't have earlier. It looked a lot like hope. I was stunned also by the impact of this simple story. I had told it to congregations and small groups before but had never told it to a person one-on-one who was hearing it for the very first time. But after telling it to Jason, I wanted to find other guys like him to tell it to. It was a life-changing day for both of us.

At this point I didn't lead him in the sinner's prayer. Some would say that I failed to close the deal and missed my opportunity. I understand their critique, but I didn't see it that way. I just said to him what I would want someone to say to me in a similar situation. I said, "Jason, I'll be praying for you today. I know the Creator of the universe loves you, and He will reveal himself to you today. So when He does, I want to encourage you to talk with Him and ask Him for His help."

He said he would. We talked more about his view of spiritual things, and I probed a little into his New-Age-Eastern-mystic-I'm-still-searching background, but the seed that God had wanted to plant got planted. I gave him my card and encouraged him to e-mail me about his journey and told him I would be in touch as well. I still don't know what will come of Jason or what value our conversation will have in spurring any kind of change in his life. Change is always difficult.

All I do know is that when I was telling the story of the prodigal son to Jason, I saw the freshness and wonder in Jason's eyes that Jesus probably saw when He first told it. And as I told it, something inside me changed again. I can't get enough of that story. It's the kind of story a person can write a book about. And after feeling God's prompting and viewing what I viewed at Starbucks, I was sure that God wanted a reminder sent out to all who will read this.

This book will be broken into three different movements relating to the three characters in the story of the prodigal son: the youngest son, the oldest son, and the father. I know in these three characters you will find yourself in some of the scenes happening in life right now.

If you're like me, your current life story is something similar to reading the comics page in the morning newspaper. You have a lot of boxes representing a lot of problems and relationships and conversations and stories in various forms of completion. Most of the assorted chronicles aren't related, except that you're a part of all the boxes. You are in every scene, like it or not. On the front left-hand corner you probably have the funny stuff, like "Garfield" or "Marmaduke." These are the bits and pieces of life that are bringing you some measure of joy and serve as a great escape from the rest. But you also most certainly have some ongoing drama with a new twist today. I remember reading the pug-nosed policeman comic "Dick Tracy," and my mom used to read the serial "Prince Valiant." There was always a lot of drama happening with Dick and the good prince, as

is the case with most of us most of the time. (I live with a wife, three kids, and a female dog. My life has much drama.)

And then there's always the superhero section of your life. These are the scenes that are putting a knot in your stomach right now. You really do need a superhero to fix it and end the angst. And like the comics section, our lives are slowly paced where change moments happen over long periods of time.

I really believe the prodigal son was Jesus' favorite story. It's a story that can be part of the change process in all the different scenes you face today. My hunch and my hope is that you will find yourself relating to all three characters in some new ways during the course of your reading. I know I can learn much from the loving father, the grumpy son, and his wild and crazy brother. I'm sure that somewhere, with someone, right now, I share those same relational tendencies.

So whether you have followed Jesus since you were a child or you don't like the Christian message and are still searching for more answers in life—even if you may lean toward being the older brother in your story—God the Father's response to everyone is simple: Welcome home.

Can You Relate?

Read through the following questions and record your thoughts and reactions.

1. Do you think the term “pseudo Christian” is being a little tough on the man who approached Jason at Starbucks? Or do you think calling him a Christian is being a little too easy on him? Do you think he accomplished what he purportedly set out to accomplish? Explain. Can you defend his words and behavior? Explain.

2. Name some of the obvious and maybe not-so-obvious reasons Jason declined his offer. Describe Jason's feelings and thoughts.

[illegible]

3. Have you ever been on either end of a “Christian drive-by shooting”? Can you think of ways either of the participants in the conversation could have helped steer the exchange to a better end? Do you think Bill felt satisfied by the conversation? Why or why not? How about Jason?

[illegible]

4. There's a television show called "What Would You Do?" that is popular right now. Let's play the Christian version. If you had witnessed this showdown at Starbucks, what do you think you would have done? Would you have engaged Jason in conversation? Would you have interrupted Bill's tirade? Would you have spoken with Jason after Bill left and shown him what Christian compassion really is? Describe how you would have handled the same or a similar situation.

[illegible]

5. In the days following the Starbucks incident, which message do you think Jason spent the most time thinking about—Bill's or Brett's? Why?
