

Looking Back at the 00s
The Decade of Living Vicariously
January 30/31, 2010

Who would have ever thought that TMZ would be interested in *our* staff? I guess you just never know.

Good morning everyone. I'm glad you're here today. As Irv said, we are in the third week of our *Looking Back at the 00s'* series – looking at the events and trends of the first decade of this century and how they have shaped how we live today.

- If you were here in the first week of our series, you know that we talked about the fact that the 00s were a time of shock and awe in which the world – our own personal world – became a much more dangerous place than ever before.
- Last week we saw how the 00s could also be characterized as the “I Rock” decade, as we were blessed with an explosion of ways to “Broadcast Yourself” (as YouTube puts it).

And today, we're talking about the “decade of living vicariously” – a term which I am borrowing from Rabbi Shmuley Boteach (who is host of the TLC show “Shalom in the Home”).

Last month, as the 00s came to a close, Shmuley wrote that ...

“This decade saw the advent of reality TV ... ushering in an era where people became so un-enamored of their *own* reality that they chose to escape to *someone else's*.

“It was a time where we developed an insatiable appetite for fame and learned to live vicariously through Hollywood glamour and celebrity train wrecks.”¹

Along the same lines, Wendy Atterberry, in her assessment of the decade, wrote ...

“With the growing number of print and online tabloids, the rising popularity of gossip blogs, and 24-hour cable ‘news’ stations ...

... the ‘00s have exposed celebrities — and their scandals — more than ever before.

“It's probably no coincidence,” she writes, “that our fascination [with] the imploding private and professional lives of over-paid and over-celebrated superstars comes during our country's biggest economic crisis since the Great Depression.

“So, thank you, celebrities, for allowing us to escape the sometimes messy realities of our own lives by watching you flounder through yours.”²

Whether or not you agree with Shmuley's and Atterberry's judgment that our increased absorption in the lives of the rich, famous and powerful is an escape mechanism from our own, one thing is hard to disagree with: *it sure is interesting to watch their train wrecks, isn't it? And there sure have been a lot of them. And we sure do know a lot more about the details than ever before.*

I mean, there's always been an obsession with celebrities in this culture, but the first decade of the 21st Century gave rise to a level of instant, up-close-and-personal in your face access to their lives far beyond what even the most dedicated star-watchers could ever have dreamed of. And celebrities from every walk of life certainly have done their part as the 00s provided an *abundance of scandal*: entertainment scandals, journalism scandals, financial & corporate scandals, leadership scandals and even sports scandals.

In fact, to illustrate this point, we're going to put a few pictures on the screen and you tell me who the people are and not what they're famous for but what they're *infamous* for. OK? Here we go ...

Who are they? What's the deal?

Rihanna & Chris Brown. What are they infamous for? Domestic violence.

Who is this guy, what did he do?

Bernie Madoff. Ponzi scheme – stole a bunch of money from people.

Who is she and why is she famous?

Paris Hilton. Why is she famous? We don't know. We're still trying to figure it out.

Who is this guy, what's the picture on the left?

Michael Jackson. What's he doing? It's weird stuff.

What about her – what happened to her?

Martha Stewart. She went to jail for insider trading.

Who is this guy? What did he do?

Michael Vick. The dog fighting thing.

Keeping with the sports theme, who is this guy and what's the deal?

Mark McGwire. He just admitted he did steroids all through the decade.

And this happy family?

Jon & Kate + 8. Plus or minus, we don't know anymore.

Who is this young woman?

Britney Spears. Just doing Britney stuff.

Who is this guy?

Jon Edwards. Most hated man in America right now according to statistics.

These folks?

Tiger & Elin. Everyone knows.

And if we had time the list could go on and on of all the important, privileged and famous people we know about who, in one way or another, fell off the high horse, so to speak.

Now, some might argue that “famous and powerful people behaving badly isn't any more prevalent today than it's ever been; we now are more aware of it.” And that may be true. You could also say that “the percentage of celebrities messing up is no higher than that of the general population. It only seems worse because they get national news coverage, while the average person does not.”³ And that might be true as well.

Still, there's just something about their screw-ups that's baffling to us “regular people.” These are people who, for the most part, have no financial worries; who are idolized by millions of fans; and who seem to be on top of the world. This comment, following the story of yet another professional athlete who messed up (he actually got himself killed as a result) sums up our thinking pretty well:

She wrote:

“It's really a shame that some of these athletes [and you could substitute “actor” or “politician” or “corporate head”] ... It's really a shame that some of these athletes (who earn a living that most would appreciate and be grateful for) ... It's really a shame they could not be more of a role model and avoid falling into the lifestyles of violence and drugs ... *I don't get it,*” she wrote.⁴

I think that's how a lot of us feel when we see and hear these things. “I don't get it – what's the deal here?”

Shocking Revelations

So, let's talk about what the deal is. Let's look at what's revealed about human nature, not only by these scandals but also *by our reaction to them.*

I think the first revelation is pretty obvious:

1. Success and stuff do not satisfy.

Success and stuff do not satisfy. That's what a lot of these celebrities discover.

And what they're discovering is actually something that was written in the Bible many many years ago. It was discovered by one of the authors of the Bible, his name was Solomon and he was the richest king in the history of Israel. And he wrote his life story, or at least part of it, down for us in the book of Ecclesiastes. He reports that in his life ...

- He built huge homes for himself, surrounded by beautiful vineyards
- He had many servants working for him
- He owned lots of property and livestock
- He amassed great sums of silver and gold which he describes as “the treasure of many kings and provinces.”
- Had his own personal rock band: “I hired wonderful singers, both men and women”
- Had many beautiful women – concubines – at his beck and call

He wrote, “I had everything a man could desire!”

Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure ... But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless—like chasing the wind. Ecclesiastes 2:1-11 (NLT)

Solomon discovered that success and stuff didn't satisfy and from his disillusionment it sounds as if he was quite surprised to find that out.

And I would bet that some of these celebrities – those formerly “ordinary people” just like us – who achieve the pinnacle are also shocked and surprised to find that out. And that disillusionment might even be part of the reason why they crash and burn.

The second thing that's revealed by these scandals – and this one is a little less obvious; you have to think about it for a bit before you see it – the second revelation is that ...

2. Even the best and brightest among us are “depraved.”

Even the best and brightest among us are depraved. Now, that's a pretty strong word. I thought about using “sinful” or “messed up” or “fallen” instead ... and those words would communicate truth and reality, but I don't think they communicate the depth of disappointment that we feel when we see in picture after picture, or video after video the level of foolishness, wastefulness, debasement and downright evil to which these celebrities are able to fall.

It's truly shocking – and depressing – to see how someone with so much going for them can just implode and self-destruct. And it's evidence that what the Bible says in Romans 3:23 is true:

That ...

Everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God's glorious standard. Romans 3:23 (NLT)

... even those with the greatest advantage and privilege in our culture. They, too, are subject to the forces of human depravity.

And I think in some of their most reflective moments, some of these “falling stars” might say that they were shocked to discover the depths of what they were capable of.

- For instance, I seriously doubt that Bernie Madoff ever planned, as a young man, to be a swindler. I don't think he thought as a third-grader, “You know, I think that one day, I want to figure out a ponzi scheme to steal millions of dollars from innocent people.” I just don't he ever thought he could sink that low.
- I don't think Paris Hilton as a little girl planned on being perceived as a floozy. I don't think she looked around at the age of 8 and said, “One day, I want to figure out how to make everyone think of me as America's bimbo.” And honestly, that's what a lot of people think of her. I just don't think she ever thought she could sink to that level.

I think there have had to be moments of shock to both of them (and to many others like them) when it hit them just how depraved they really were.

Now, if it sounds like I'm singling out these folks and others like them, I'm not. Because here's a question that we need to ponder: if the best and brightest among us are depraved, what does that say about you and me? If the people with the greatest privilege, greatest advantages and greatest resources are depraved, what does that say about the rest of us?

Logically, I think it says that we've got to be depraved, too. In fact, logically, it says that ...

3. Our depravity is at least as bad as theirs – and maybe even worse ...

... because we're lower down the “food chain” so to speak.

And this is the third revelation that comes out of the “Decade of Living Vicariously” ... and quite frankly, it's the most shocking of all – so shocking that very few of us actually believe it. Very few of us, as we watch others flame out, believe that our propensity for depravity is equal to or exceeds theirs. Instead, we believe that if we were in their shoes, we would do so much better. We'd appreciate what we have and we'd behave more responsibly.

Just read the blogs and the comments that follow a lot of these crash and burn stories. Over and over again people post things like:

- “If I had that kind of money there's no way I would ...”
- “If had her talent and skills, there's no way I would ...”
- “If my wife looked like Tiger Wood's wife there's no way I would ...”

Maybe that's true. Maybe there is no way you would ... I don't know.

But I tend to doubt it – not just because of what I’ve seen in other “regular people” like you and even in myself ... but because of something Jesus once said:

He said:

If you are faithful in little things, you will be faithful in large ones. But if you are dishonest in little things, you won't be honest with greater responsibilities.

Luke 16:10 (NLT)

Now, the context of this statement, just to be clear, is a teaching He was giving about how people handle and relate to money. (You think I talk about money a lot? This guy never shuts up!)

Anyway, he’s talking to people about money and he’s dealing with this attitude that people sometimes have where they say, “If I just had more money, I would be a better steward of it. If I had more money, I wouldn’t go into debt; I’d be way more generous; I wouldn’t be so worried about it; I would know where to draw the line between materialism and simplicity.” And on and on.

Jesus was saying to them, in essence, “No, you wouldn’t. No, you wouldn’t. What you do now, is what you would do then because, the only difference between now and then is a few more zeroes after the dollar sign. If you’re honest and faithful with a *few* zeroes you’ll be that way with a *lot* of zeroes. If you’re not honest and not faithful *now*, don’t kid yourself. You will not be *then*, either.”

The Truth About Zeroes

Now, as I said, Jesus was talking specifically about money, but I think he was speaking more generally about you and me coming into the kind of fame, fortune and power that these celebrities have, I think he would say the same thing: “what you’re doing now in your *ordinary life* is pretty much what you’d do then in your celebrity life. It would just be bigger and badder because you’d have more zeroes to work with.”

To illustrate the truth of what he is saying, imagine for a minute that for some reason you had your own personal paparazzi. Imagine the kind of instant up-close-and-personal coverage of the intimate details of your life that TMZ apparently has with the rich and famous of our culture. What would everyone discover about you? I think people would discover that, at the very least, you tell some little white lies from time to time. I think we might discover that sometimes you sneak a midnight snack because you don’t want anyone else to know the kind of junk you’re eating. I think we might discover that ...

And guess what? If you tell little white lies, then you have what it takes to tell big fat ones. If you sneak a midnight snack, then you have it in you to sneak around at midnight and act like John Edwards. If you ever get “just a little” wasted at a friend’s party, then you have it in you to be as wild as Britney. If you fudge just a tad on your income tax then you have what it takes to scheme and steal just like Bernie. It’s just a matter of opportunity. It’s just a matter of zeroes.

Now, again, we don’t want to believe this about ourselves. We don’t want to believe how fallen we really are. The truth

is too shocking for us to handle. That's part of the reason why we make people into stars. We put people on a pedestal – many who have never asked to be there – we make them bigger than life because ...

Making “them” big serves to magnify their sin and minimize our own.

“How could someone with all of that (whatever *that* is) screw up so badly?” we say, because that makes little old me with so much less than all of that (whatever *that* is) so much less of a screw-up. See how it works? Making them big serves to magnify their sin – their depravity – while minimizing my own.

But it's only an illusion because Jesus says it doesn't work that way. He says the only thing that separates us from them and them from us is a bunch of zeroes after a dollar sign and the zeroes *really don't matter*.

And to put to rest any doubt whatsoever about this, the Apostle Paul lays it out even more directly. In the first chapter of his letter to the “good Christian people” at Rome, Paul describes the celebrities of *their* day, (it's amazing because their culture had some similarities to ours) these were the trendy people of the culture who were setting the pace for the rest of the culture. Their lives were on display for all to see, and this is how Paul describes them,

[They are] ... full of every kind of wickedness, sin, greed, hate, envy, murder, quarreling, deception, malicious behavior, and gossip. They are backstabbers, haters of God, insolent, proud, and boastful. They invent new ways of sinning, and they disobey their parents. They refuse to understand, break their promises, are heartless, and have no mercy. They know God's justice requires that those who do these things deserve to die, yet they do them anyway. Worse yet, they encourage others to do them, too.
Romans 1:29-32 (NLT)

It's hard to believe that was written almost 2,000 years ago. It could easily be the sections of the latest National Enquirer, right?

But listen to what Paul writes next:

You may think you can condemn such people, but you are just as bad, and you have no excuse! When you say they are wicked and they should be punished, you are condemning yourself, for you who judge others do these very same things.
Romans 2:1-2 (NLT)

“You may not do them to the same degree ... you may not do them at the same magnitude because you lack the opportunities afforded by the zeroes, but you do the same things,” Paul says. “The same stuff that is in them is in you as well.”

This is a very hard, hard truth. And even after hearing it from Jesus and Paul so many of us still doubt it. We still doubt it ... which leads to another good question to ponder: why do we feel the need to defend ourselves? Why do we feel as if we must make our propensity to depravity seem less than it really is? Why is it so offensive to so many of us that we could really screw-up as badly as anyone we saw on the screen just a few minutes ago? Why is that so hard for us?

Obviously, there's a pride issue involved. We naturally tend to think more highly of ourselves than we ought. But I think it goes even deeper than that. I think a lot of us – *even those of us* who can recite all the spiritual, scriptural facts about Jesus dying on the cross for our sin and how that “pays” for our depravity – I think a lot of us believe that ...

1. We need to prove ourselves worthy ...

... or we're going to be in deep doo-doo with God. I think a lot of us think that we need to prove ourselves worthy because we know there is a judgement coming someday and we believe that there is a divine ledger out there somewhere where God keeps track of all the good deeds we do and all the bad deeds we do and weighing them out to determine if we're better or worse than anyone else ... because we know, only the good people escape punishment, whatever that may be.

For some reason we just haven't truly grasped the fact that ...

When God our Savior revealed his kindness and love [when Jesus came and gave his life on the cross], he saved us, not because of the righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. Titus 3:5 (NLT)

Paul is saying, "Remember, God is not evaluating our lives saying, 'Ok you have done enough righteous things, so now you are accepted.'" But a lot of us believe that's how it works, and because of that we think we have to shine up our sinfulness and our depravity. We have to deny, rationalize and screen out the truth about us any way possible.

Sadly, the result of that is a life filled with fear and uncertainty toward God because we just never really know where we stand with Him.

That's one reason we want to make ourselves look better than we really are. The other reason, I think, is that ...

2. We're afraid that God's grace isn't enough for our sin.

I mean, we may understand that acceptance with God isn't dependent on proving your own worthiness, but ... in our case, we think, we've just done some things that are really, really bad. If there's an unpardonable sin, we've probably committed it. (You wouldn't believe the number of people who believe that). Or maybe we haven't done that unpardonable sin, but we've done the same little sin over and over so many times that surely by now we've exhausted whatever grace there might be.

You know, that's just what those good Christian people Paul wrote that letter to in Romans, thought too ...

... which is why he asked them:

Do you think lightly of the riches of God's kindness and tolerance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance? Romans 2:4 (NASB)

And this is a rhetorical question here friends, in case you don't get it. What Paul is saying is, "You *don't* think *enough* of God's kindness and tolerance and patience. That's why you judge these celebrities of your culture as being so bad and awful and think of yourselves as being better. That's why you cannot see that your sin is just as bad. You won't repent because you don't think God's grace – his undeserved kindness – is big enough for you."

Scandalous Grace

Now, at this point, someone could say, “so what, Rick? What’s the big deal if I’m afraid to say that my sin is just as bad and maybe even worse than anyone else’s?”

The big deal is that you cannot embrace the full magnitude of salvation without also embracing and admitting the full magnitude of your sinfulness. But we’re afraid to admit the full magnitude of our sinfulness because we doubt the magnitude of the salvation God offers. It’s like a catch-22. It’s a chicken and the egg thing. We’re just afraid to believe it.

So, what I want to do in the time that remains (both between what I’m going to say and how we’re going to close the service this morning) is just to try to overwhelm you with the grace of Jesus. I just want to overwhelm you, and my hope is that maybe, as you see just how amazing this grace is, you won’t be afraid to admit just how amazing your sin is. You’ll get off the treadmill of trying to measure up. You’ll realize that the grace that God offers sinners is far greater than anything you could ever imagine. I think you’ll see that it’s shocking. It’s scandalous even.

John 8 tells us that ...

At dawn [one day, Jesus] appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them.

The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such women. Now what do you say?"

Now truth of the matter was that Moses actually wrote that both the man *and* the woman were to be stoned, judged, but only the woman was dragged through the streets and set up as an example in front of everyone. The man, apparently, was let go. Again, this rank ordering of sinfulness, somehow she’s worse than he is so we’re going to take care of her.

Anyway, they’re asking ... “Jesus, what should we do here?” But it wasn’t a simple question of ethics or theology. John writes that ...

They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him.

They were setting up a catch-22 for him, because if he said “yes, stone her,” then he would be in trouble with the Romans, but if he said, “no, you shouldn’t do that,” then he wouldn’t be honoring the Law of Moses and wouldn’t be a legitimate rabbi.

Then it says, instead of answering them,

Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger.

When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her.”

Again he stooped down and wrote [katagraphein] on the ground.

[And for some reason] *At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?"*

"No one, sir," she said.

*"Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."
John 8:1-11 (NIV)*

Now, I want to take just a few minutes to make a few observations about this story ... with the first being that if you look into your Bible at John 8, you may see a footnote at the bottom of the page that says something to the effect that this particular passage is not found in the earliest Greek manuscripts. This part of John does not show up in the manuscripts of the book of John until about 150AD, maybe 60 or 70 years after the original copy was written.

What happened? Is this just something someone made up. No.

1. Scholars believe this story was not included in the original manuscripts of the New Testament because it presents too scandalous a picture of grace.

What scholars believe and have determined from examining the writings of the early church fathers (the guys who lived about 120, 130AD is that this story was well known. They knew this story – it just wasn't in the Gospel of John at the time. And the assumption was, the wild culture into which Christianity was entering (a culture much like ours), the authors were afraid to write it down for fear it might give the wrong impression, that somehow adultery was being condoned by Jesus.

It's amazing, even in the minds of the first followers of Jesus, there was doubt as to how far forgiveness could go. Could sin this blatant – where you are dragged half-naked in front of everybody – could sin that blatant actually be forgiven? Jesus' answer, scandalous answer, was yes.

I think some of us just need to realize that this morning. I think some of us, we walk around and we think about the things that we've done and we go, "oh, if you just knew. *If you just knew...*" And, I think you just need to imagine and see that that is the truth of Jesus' grace, it covers even the most scandalous of sin.

However, having said that, this is the second observation, I think it's important to realize that ...

2. Jesus did not minimize sin.

In dealing with this woman, he didn't pretend with the woman that it was no big deal. He didn't say, "You know these Pharisees and Scribes, they're just a bunch of old fuddy-duddies, legalistic and all that. Who cares who you sleep with, just make sure that you love them." He didn't say that. He said, "Go, and leave your life of sin." He named it. He judged it. And then he forgave her.

By the way this gives us a clue as to how we can deal with the sinners in our lives, whether they are the people closest to us or "the stars" we're so enamored with.

Dealing with people's sin doesn't mean minimizing it. It actually means judging it. Ruthlessly judging it.

“Wait a minute, Rick. Didn’t Jesus tell us not to judge people.” Yes he did say that, but that’s only part of what he said.

"Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use [the evaluation plan you use], it will be measured to you [that’s how you yourself will be measured]."

Matthew 7:1-2 (NIV)

What that means is that I need to judge and measure other people the same way I judge and measure myself. But we’ve just seen that I’m not supposed to minimize my depravity. I’m supposed to ruthlessly admit and judge the sin in me, BUT, I am also to just as ruthlessly believe, embrace and apply the grace and forgiveness of God to that sin. I’m not supposed to live in condemnation, I’m supposed to live in grace.

By the way, once you really embrace this grace towards you, something amazing begins to happen in how you see other people. You offer the same grace that you have received.

And what happens is, when you start thinking like this, when you start really embracing this grace towards you, something amazing begins to happen. It’s not perfect – it’s a lifelong process. What happens is, you start seeing other people differently. You start seeing their sin, and you don’t minimize it. You can be ruthlessly judgmental about their sin, but you are ruthlessly gracious about the love that God has for them. And even how you begin to offer that grace that you’ve received. You start treating people with a lot more grace at the same time you are a lot less prone to minimize their sin. And, I think if we started living like that as Christians, instead of being known for radical criticism and judgment, we might actually get to be known for the scandal of loving people radically – the way Jesus loved this woman.

One more observation from the story ...

3. Everyone in the story needed grace – the big sinner (the woman who was dragged out) and the little sinners (the guys standing around who were figuring out how to stone this lady).

The way we know that is, in the text, the normal Greek word for write is *graphein* but the word used in the text is *katagraphen*, and *kata* is a preposition in Greek that means against. So, Jesus was writing against. And when you read some of the other Greek literature from that period, that word is actually used to record a record against someone. So, the picture is that Jesus is standing there with these guys as they are going on about how terrible and horrible she is, and Jesus was just standing there, writing, maybe not the word adultery, but maybe – lust, selfishness, arrogance, bitterness, unforgiveness, ungratefulness, complaining – He’s just writing out their list.⁵ The point is, everybody needed grace. Those guys were using her big sin so they didn’t have to look at their little sin and admit that they too needed grace.

And I think maybe that’s the way we need to end this talk this morning. Some of us in this room are like the lady that was caught in adultery and was dragged up front for everybody to see. But a lot of us, we’re like those guys sitting around going, “*He’s so bad!*” And Jesus is saying, “You need grace just as bad. And, here’s the list why you need the grace too. Will you come and receive my grace as I offer it to you as well as to her.”

Communion

And that's how we're going to close this service. We have a thing we do every once in awhile around here – it's communion. We symbolize what it meant for that grace to be given to us through the blood and body of Jesus. When we take this cup of juice and we dip the bread in the juice, it's what Jesus said to do, he said, "Remember that my blood was shed for the remission of sins and my body was broken for you."

We're going to do that in just a minute and I'm going to ask the band to get into place.

Here's what we're going to do: The Band will start a song ... when they sing "come as you are" then if you feel led to, come to the table. And after everyone has come to the table, we're going to stand and sing a couple of songs together and worship God for this grace and forgiveness as maybe a way to cement this into our hearts.

I want to ask that as you come up today, *don't* focus on your sin first ... but today, let's focus on the *incredible* grace – bigger, broader, wider than we can ever imagine. That's what this is about.

Let's pray.

ENDNOTES

¹ See <http://blog.beliefnet.com/rabbishmuleyunleashed/2009/12/the-alternate-reality-decade.html>

² See <http://www.thefrisky.com/site/post/246-the-10-biggest-celebrity-scandals-of-the-decade/P0/>

³ <http://christianity.about.com/od/topicaldevotions/a/celebrityscanda.htm>

⁴ <http://www.people.com/people/article/0,,20331463,00.html>

⁵ William Barclay, Barclay's Daily Study Bible (NT), WORDsearch CROSS e-book, Under: "Chapter 7".