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# The Truth in Broken Glass

by Jeff Scott

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"His finger prints were all over the shattered window," was the response the police gave regarding how they caught the guy who broke into our church a few weeks ago. In the "Local News," they later reported that our burglar had Dennis the Menace like qualities — he was into everything. In a span of a few days, he had subsequently robbed another church and three elementary schools. At each stop he left his unique, identifying signature: his fingerprints. When our burglar exploded the accountant's window and destroyed her desk, all he took from us was a measly \$40. It actually cost us more to replace the glass and repair the desk than \$40, but he left his calling card.

"What kind of demented person breaks into, and robs, a church?" I wondered. A bank ... now I get that: there is the possibility of making off with a lot of loot. I mean, really, who hasn't dreamed of garbage bags full of \$20's and \$50's? But who robs a church? Was this person so callused *to* the world, or maybe *by* the world, that he had no regard for the things of God? Can a person be so angry at life that he almost dared God to retaliate? "Is this your house, God? Are you watching, God? I'm throwing a brick through your window, God. I'm taking money from your wallet, God?" Who could be so bold to challenge the Creator of the Universe in such a defiant way? I was incensed and had to know.

So, last Friday I made the seven-mile trip to the county jail to see "our guy." I was a bit skittish about the visit for a couple of reasons. One was saying the "right thing," the other was my attitude. What do you say to a complete stranger who has wronged you? In my mind I had imagined a number of different possibilities.

Despite the fact that I was a bit miffed with his busting up a

window and desk for two \$20's, I knew my opening line couldn't be, "HA! They caught you!" Whoever I was about to see didn't need my anger and sarcasm dumped on them. Whoever I was about to encounter was behind bars; was indicted on five counts of robbery; and was, at the very least, as angry at life as I was toward him. I knew my role. I am a minister. It is my responsibility to represent the God this person was challenging. The mission had to be one of forgiveness. In all the words spoken in that jail, somewhere the phrase, "You are forgiven!" and "You need to know God loves you!" had to be said — and said by this annoyed minister.

I passed through the ID check, through the metal detector and into a stainless steel elevator where cameras in every corner captured every blink. I was directed into a long hall lined with more stainless steel and bullet proof glass. Stainless steel stools were bolted to the floor, immovable as Mt. Rushmore. A police woman at the end of the hall, locked behind more glass, pressed an intercom button and said, flatly, "Room B," while pointing her finger to her right. I heard a low buzz and a click.

Pulling open the 400 pound steel door marked "B," I spied our guy. He was standing apprehensively. One-quarter inch steel mesh painted white, but scratched brown in many places, separated us. "I'm Jeff, a minister from Western Hills," I muttered trying to keep the irritation out of my voice. "Oh," he said hesitantly. "I didn't know who wanted to see me." Our guy was in his mid 30's, wearing a county provided orange jump suit, and sporting an untrimmed mustache. We both stepped toward our stainless stools and before our feet settled; I decided it was now or never. I had to get the forgiving words out right then before the situation got awkward and I lost my nerve. "I'm here because Western Hills was one of the places you broke into, and I just wanted you to know that ..." "ALLEGEDLY broke into!" he interrupted. And he repeated it, "Allegedly. I don't know where your church is and I didn't know why I was arrested until my lawyer informed me. They indicted me, yeah. But I'm not

pleading guilty."

His revealing words immediately transformed my pre-rehearsed speech. How could I now say, "You're forgiven," when he wasn't admitting he needed forgiveness? My mission was defeated. I felt let down some how. So, instead of just getting up and leaving after 5 seconds, I asked a few questions. Our guy talked a little about his past, his broken marriages, his drug addiction, his previous incarceration, and his two children under the care of Child Protective Services.

Never once did he indicate his guilt and never once did he let on that there was a problem with the choices he'd made in life. The word "deny" and the phrase, "I didn't do it" cropped up a number of times. I wanted to yell, "Man, you don't have to lie to me. Just admit it!" As much as I felt like confronting him, I didn't. At one point, however, I did manage to get out the words "You need to know God loves you," but they seemed to dissolve in the air like steam before they registered in his heart. He gave no response to the words, just a hollow stare.

Driving home, I reflected on the few minutes in that 6-foot cinder block room. Why wouldn't he just admit his guilt? His finger prints were all over the window and the desk. Why wouldn't he just say, "Yeah, I did it? I'm sorry. I have a lot of problems and I really need some help." The more I thought about his denial, the more indignant I got.

What a dolt! If he admits his offense, he gets only 4 years. But, if he continues to deny his crime and is found guilty — which the finger prints prove — he gets 14 years. Why be so blatantly stubborn? Why not come clean? All the evidence is against him. Why not accept the consequence? Why not receive the forgiveness God and I were generously offering? Why not?

Watching the yellow lines on FM 317 pass by at 55, I could think of nothing else. With my hair rising as fast as my blood pressure, I heard the misty words, "Why do you look at the speck of

sawdust in you brother's eyes and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye? How can you say to your brother, 'let me take the speck out of your eye,' when all the time there is a plank in your own eye?"

Like the sharp point of a needle, those words from Jesus in Matthew's gospel, punctured the expanding balloon of irritation in my soul. I swallowed hard and my racing heart began to slow, and then it began to hurt. How many times had I unnecessarily denied sin in my own life? Even when the evidence was totally convicting, I ignored it. How often had I sat across from God who just wanted to say, "I forgive you," but I didn't want to hear it?

It was my own pride, my own stubbornness, my own sense of accomplishment that interrupted those cleansing words from the Father. The piercing truth of my own guilt sliced into me. Like many who came before, I too am a burglar. In the broken window, I see my reflection; and I recognize the stare of rebellious Israel in the wilderness. There is the brow of idolatrous Judah who forsook the one true God. There is the mouth and chin of Judas, betraying salvation for money. So many times I, too, am the one robbing God.

Guilty? Yes. Our guy was guilty — his prints proved it. But, he isn't any guiltier than I. It took a busted church window, with clear identifying prints, for me to see the prints are mine.