

THE RICH YOUNG GUY

“Hi, my name is Russell and I’m a yuppie.”

I’m a recovering yuppie and this is my story. All my life I’ve been raised to become a yuppie. My parents worked hard so that they could afford to send me to college and then maybe become an accountant, a lawyer, or even, if fate were gracious, a doctor! At the same time, they made sure my siblings and I receive the best they could afford—camps, vacations, musicals, dinners out. My friends were all on track to become yuppies as well. We took college prep classes together and assumed that we would all be successful someday.

I went to Stanford University and there, my expectations for life were raised even higher. With my degrees came a sense of entitlement. I deserved to be fulfilled professionally. I ought to be able to make a difference and to have an impact.

And slowly but surely, my siblings and my friends soon came to obtain the American Dream. After getting jobs in corporations and buying their first Hondas or Acuras, they purchased condos or stayed at home to save more and more money. Then they married, bought homes in suburbs and had cute little babies. Once the babies came, they had to remodel their homes and get a minivan. Their kids would be doted upon, and properly stimulated, fed and dressed. Once their kids were older, they were chauffeured to gymnastics, ballet, soccer, gung fu, and piano lessons. That was Monday. On Tuesdays, they would be sent to tap dance, swimming, basketball, and computer class.

As an Asian American and even as a Chinese American *Christian*, I had a certain pressure to become a Yuppie because most of the community was oriented toward helping me become one. I had role models wherever I looked. What should I major in? Look around and see what is the most marketable. Where should I work? Go wherever the best job is offered to you. What do I do with my income? Spend it at name brand stores. What do I do with my friends? Enjoy life. How do you find a marriage partner? Look for whoever is attractive and successful. In so many ways, my path was laid out.

Being a yuppie is part of my inheritance, my identity, and my community. I can't escape it. I have to acknowledge that yuppiedom isn't just a lifestyle, but a mode of thinking and a set of values. My name is Russell and I'm a Yuppie.

RICH YOUNG MAN

As a yuppie, it is difficult for me to hear the story of Jesus and the rich young man. Like the young ruler, I grew up in the church and learned to do all the right things to be a good Christian and to be right with people. I figured that if I followed the rules, I couldn't go wrong. The rich young ruler had followed all the Ten Commandments except the first and foremost: to love God and have no other gods.

I love how in this passage, Jesus looked at the young man and loved him. It's because of this love that Jesus had to say those hard words to sell everything. And because he wanted the best for the young man, he gave the greatest of all invitations—"Come follow me."

The rich young ruler went away sad because he couldn't let go of his possessions. You can't just go halfway with God; you can't serve both God and mammon. But that's what we try to do. We try to be good Christians, but also try to be yuppies at the same time. What's wrong with enjoying God's blessings?

Well, Jesus said, "It's easier for a camel go through an eye of a needle than for the rich to enter the kingdom of God." His disciples were surprised. Like many of us today, they thought wealth was a sign of God's blessing. What would it look like to be happy and successful? It would be to have your material needs met and to have no worries. In many ways, we agree—we need to be successful and "blessed" in order to be a witness to non-Christians. But Jesus says, "Blessed are the poor and woe to the rich." Clearly, we shouldn't view wealth as a blessing, but more of a hindrance to God's kingdom.

And it's not just an inner detachment from our possessions or from greed that Jesus talks about. He said that if we leave our family—and those strong Asian attachments and obligation—for him, we'll receive much. He argues that if we give up the homes we work so hard to afford and the fields and careers that define us so much, we'll receive a hundredfold.

These values--thinking we can please God and get ahead by doing just a couple of the right things, believing "financial success= blessing," valuing family and career before following Christ—are all parts of a yuppie value system that Jesus tells us to give up. Are we willing?

What would it look like if we did sell all that we had and followed Jesus? Instead of focusing on following rules, getting ahead, and making life secure for

our families, what does God call us to do? In Micah 6:8, we get a simple statement of what God really wants. He says to please God, to reflect His heart, to obtain his blessing, we're to do justice, love mercy and to walk humbly before the Lord. To show the journey of this rich young guy, I'd like to share some stories about Jesus in inner-city Oakland and the apartment complex where I live, Oak Park.

LESSONS FROM RICH YOUNG PEOPLE WHO WANT TO FOLLOW JESUS

If you enter Oak Park apartments, you'd immediately feel like you're in a developing country. The smells of Cambodian soups waft through the air. Latina women hang their laundry on lines hung between trees as cart vendors hawk tamales and ice cream. Families with three to nine kids live in one bedroom apartments which all border a dirt courtyard. There, dozens of barefoot brown kids, like flocks of little chicks, skirt to and fro. Actual chicks also wander the courtyard, as well as assorted little pets.

This is the place where God has led nine yuppies, all college educated, to follow in Jesus' footsteps. In addition, others come regularly to help out in tutoring programs, citizenship classes, and discipleship groups. We've come with the intent to care for the poor, but what we've learned is far deeper. God's shown us His heart and His kingdom values.

These lessons have come the hard way. Despite the idyllic peasant scene I just painted, we live in an urban slum beset with the tragedies of race, class and gender. All our neighbors are poor people of color who inhabit some of the worst housing in the Bay Area. The majority of adults don't have high school

degrees and either live off of welfare or occasional day labor. Our ceilings leak, our walls are poisoned with lead paint and asbestos, and our floorboards are infested with roaches and mice.

Once, a 10 year old girl came screaming and banging on the door of one of the yuppie Christians at 11:30 at night. “My dad’s going to kill my mom!” she cried. They ran over to the girl’s apartment where the dad was brandishing a knife at his frightened wife. The husband accused the wife of gambling all his earnings away. The wife bitterly complained about his womanizing, abuse, and alcoholism. Meanwhile, their kids and neighbors watch in horror—one daughter cried hysterically, another shut down catatonically, and their brother just giggled nervously. Somehow, they all seemed appropriate responses.

This scene of domestic abuse is not uncommon. Neither is the drunkenness, the gambling, nor the deep rooted anger and resentment. I see these attitudes passed down to the kids, who can’t concentrate and sell drugs for quick money. I watch the kindergarten daughter become extremely violent and yell at other kids, “I’m going to kick her ass!” Our personal sins get passed down to the next generation.

DOING JUSTICE

While we evangelicals would tend to focus on how Jesus needs to redeem these people and how they need to repent of these personal sins, God has shown us Christians living at Oak Park another view of God’s distress. As we live closely with our neighbors and in the same conditions as our neighbors do, we better understand why people resort to such acts.

The mother and father, like many of our neighbors, come from Cambodia, where they didn't see the Killing Fields as a movie, but experienced the Killing Fields firsthand. The Khmer Rouge slaughtered their parents, spouses, siblings, and even children. Refugees from a war that the U.S. helped instigate, they had to flee to camps in Thailand and later the Philippines. They had no choice but to come.

Once here in Oakland, they find themselves locked out of jobs because they can't speak English. As they insulate themselves from the violence and racial hatred around them, they retreat to fearful lives within the apartment complex. Their children assimilate into the ways of the urban underclass—drugs, gangs, and street crime make up the daily landscape. I've had two computers stolen, my car broken into a couple of times, and have been physically threatened by drug dealers and addicts. So I've come to understand how we who live in poor areas hunger and thirst for righteousness and justice, the marks of God's Kingdom. We fervently pray daily, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done" because we see Satan's work all around.

In the midst of this tenuous situation, we learned that Congress wanted to reform welfare and that non-citizens might be cut from receiving government aid. While we hope the reform would encourage many to find work, we were direly concerned about the elderly and disabled in our complex. Why cut them from SSI when they were too old or disabled to work anyway? A grandfather bitterly complained, "They said that when they brought us here, they would take care of us refugees." When asked what she would do if her SSI were cut, another 78

year old grandmother wept, “I’ll become homeless and just die.” God commands that we should care for the alien and widow, but America’s yuppie orientation is to use power to maintain our own lifestyles and privilege.

What would Jesus do in response to this unfair legislation? We helped our neighbors write letters and petition to our legislators. We shared their plight with the media and got on NPR, the New York Times and local newspapers. We even took them to Sacramento to lobby. Our spiritual warfare, our fight isn’t only against personal, moral sin. It’s against evil in all its forms—we need Jesus to save us from ourselves and from the systems that oppress us. It’s against the poverty that breeds violence, the politics that promotes selfish concern for one’s own lifestyle, and the consumerism that takes up our time and energy in pursuit of fun.

Yuppies rarely confront injustice. Maybe we might get passed over for a promotion, or we might get a parking ticket right when we’re about to leave. But Jesus was often mistreated and he suffered the greatest injustice—being punished by a system while he was innocent. As we identify and suffer with the poor, when we’re victims of injustice and violence, we better understand what Jesus went through for us. And then we know better the extent of his love.

We do justly because it’s another way to love, another way to represent God’s Kingdom to a fallen world. We live in one bedroom apartments and sleep on mats because by living simply, we have more money to share with our neighbors. We try not to buy too many things because by having less things to take care of, we have more time to minister and advocate on behalf of the

voiceless. God's given us yuppies so much—it's only fair and just that we learn to share and be generous.

LOVING MERCY

As we confront urban evils, we are often worn down by the daily struggle. One summer, I spent everyday reading to prepare for my qualifying exams. It was a tortuous, agonizing, and solitary process. Then I received a postcard from a girlfriend whom I had broken up with a few months before. She was in Tahiti for her engagement party to a rich doctor and she recounted all the luscious meals she had been having. When I read the postcard while I sat on a straw mat in some ugly slum, I felt sorry for myself and enjoyed feeling sorry for myself.

At about midnight that day, after I had been feeling sorry for myself for eight hours, I got a knock on the door. One of my neighbors, an undocumented resident from Mexico, wanted to give me some fish he had caught that day. I politely declined but he insisted I have them. Besides he didn't want to clean them. So I took the fish and wondered what to do with them. Do I just stick them in the freezer with all their guts still inside?

I decided to scale the fish and then return them cleaned to my neighbor. It was all rather incongruous—living in a slum, hearing from friends in tropical islands, reading Karl Marx for ten hours, getting knocks on the door at midnight from my neighbor who's undocumented, and me cleaning fish at 1 in the morning. But as I rinsed the fish for my friend, my outlook became brighter and brighter. I was touched that he wanted to give me some fish, and I was glad to

be able to serve him. By the time I finished cleaning the fish and returning them to my friend, I found myself to be quite joyous.

I love mercy, because it's a divine act that takes us outside of our own small preoccupations and brings us in touch with God's larger, greater presence. When I'm on the receiving end of mercy, I come to recognize that I need God and others. I realize that though I try to be a self-sufficient yuppie, I am human. And that freedom to receive grace, that acknowledgment that I am loved, is what God wants. When I find myself being merciful, I'm fulfilling the potential that God has granted to humans. He told us to be compassionate because God is compassionate. Our acts of mercy are the end products of His creation and re-creation of us.

Loving mercy is difficult, just as doing justice has its costs. When Jesus came into our world, he bore our pains and sufferings. Similarly, when we care for others and stand beside them, we cannot help but mourn with them when they mourn. When I reflect on the fight between the two parents, the anger they feel, and the dissonance their children experience, my heart is severely burdened. And because I live so close to them, I'm confronted by their suffering daily. Someone asked me how I could stand it living in the ghetto and seeing children shot, abused, and neglected. Well, I can't stand it. I don't want to be able to get used to it. I don't want to sequester myself from the world's sufferings and escape to suburbs in order to preserve my own self-assured contentment. Instead, I want these things to bother me more and more. Because then I'll know

I'm learning compassion. Because then I'll be as pained as Jesus is pained.
Because then I'll be more fully human, just as God intended.

WALKING HUMBLY

This radical servanthood, this way of doing justice and loving mercy at the expense of our own yuppie privilege and self-comfort, is impossible for me. I want to live justly and love mercy so that I can seek God's Kingdom first and love my neighbor. For the most part, however, I fail. I fail often and I fail well. These failures can lead to cynicism—that nothing will change so why bother—and to apathy—I can only take care of my own little world. Although I want justice now, justice doesn't always come about. At so many sites and despite our best efforts, systems oppress the poor at Oak Park. God's been showing us at Oak Park that His Kingdom isn't about our success or failures, but about His movement in this world. We must learn to simply join in, wait, and hope.

On a personal level, although I want to live simply and avoid oppressing others, I can't help but be complicit in this structure of competition, exploitation and domination. Even the food I eat and clothes I wear have probably been made with exploited labor. Recently I went on a cruise with my family and it was an exercise of gluttony. I slipped into the easy life so quickly. All around me, people were living it up and seemed to have no problems with enjoying what they felt they deserved. I went from doing justice, to just do it—do whatever you want, even if your lifestyle deprives others.

Even though we recently won a \$1 million lawsuit to improve the substandard housing conditions at Oak Park, our families are still confronted by

urban poverty. Sometimes it doesn't seem like our mercy is much appreciated. The son of the fighting couple has often gotten in trouble with school because he cuts and sells drugs. We've invested a lot of time in him, encouraged him, monitored him, provided incentives and opportunities, but he still gets into trouble. Five years of living and working with these kids—starting when they were young and impressionable—and still they turn out to be selfish brats. I don't like them as persons much and they're not very cute anymore. I certainly don't love mercy.

Each of the Christians at Oak Park has made choices to live differently for Christ. I can easily become self-righteous and legalistic that others should live as we do. But when I really examine my own intentions, my own attitudes and even my own behaviors, I'm still a yuppie. Loving mercy usually comes after loving my own agenda first. Yet God desires that we walk humbly before Him.

Humility recognizes that we're not the ones who bring about the Kingdom, but only God is sovereign and in charge. Humility realizes that despite our best intentions to do justice, we're still complicit in oppression and in need of grace. Humility calls for mercy that isn't based on our own kindness or fickleness, but stems from a knowledge of God's overwhelming compassion. This humility hides our acts of righteousness but brings to light God's glory and goodness.

CONCLUSIONS OF A YUPPIE

My name is Russell and I'm a yuppie. In 12 step programs, we learn to admit that we're powerless to our condition and to recognize the exact nature of our condition. As a yuppie, I have certain expectations for my career, my

lifestyle, my time and my family. Like the rich young ruler, my values and wealth make it difficult for me to follow Jesus. Because being a yuppie is an integral part of my identity, I need to daily disavow this heritage and humbly ask God to remove the effects of this illness. As a yuppie, I have harmed others by thinking about my own needs and desires instead of doing justice and loving mercy. So I need to make a list of those I've harmed, make amends, and continue to take a personal inventory to discipline myself.

Only by praying and walking humbly before God can I find hope for my situation. And by sharing my story with you today, I invite you to join the Christians at Oak Park in this never-ending battle. One day at a time, we need to pick up our cross, deny ourselves and follow Jesus.