

INTRODUCTION

This is the final episode of "The Gospel According to TV." Before we leave this subject, I have a couple of TV trivia questions for you. Of all the single episodes of television shows through the years, do you know what the most watched television show was? I'm not talking total viewers, but what show had the largest percentage of U.S. households tuned in? Here are four choices for you to rank: Was it the 2009 Superbowl? Or the "M*A*S*H" series finale in 1983? Or the 1967 series finale of "The Fugitive"? Or the "Who Shot J.R." episode of "Dallas" in 1980? The correct answers are: Fourth most watched was the 2009 Superbowl with 42% of Americans tuning in (with 94 million viewers that was the most watched show in terms of total viewers, but these next three had a larger percentage): Third was the finale of "The Fugitive" with 46% of Americans watching; Second most watched was the "Dallas" episode, "Who Shot J.R.?" with 53% of America watching that episode. And THE most television episode was the finale of "M*A*S*H" with a whopping 60% of Americans watching it. Of course, those three shows were broadcast back when there were only a few channel choices, instead of the hundreds we have today.

TV trivia question two: Of these four current shows, what has been on the air the longest time? "Good Morning, America"; "Family Feud"; "Guiding Light"; and "Saturday Night Live." Here's the correct order: "Good Morning America" has been running for 32 years; "Family Feud" has been running 33 years; "Saturday Night Live" has been on for 34 years; And the winner is "Guiding Light" which has been on for 56 years! In fact, the longest running television dramas are all soap operas like "As the World Turns," "General Hospital," and "Days of Our Lives," all of which have been on more than 40 years.

I was surprised to see that "Saturday Night Live" is among the longest running shows in television history, and it is the longest running comedy show in television history. It was first broadcast as "NBC Saturday Night" in October 1975, and since that first show, there have been almost 700 episodes.

Once again I conducted a Facebook poll asking people who their favorite SNL characters were. Characters receiving a few votes included "Two Wild and Crazy Guys," played by Steve Martin and Dan Akroyd. They were two really obnoxious guys from Czechoslovakia out to find some foxes. Also a favorite was self-help expert, "Stuart Smalley," played by Al Franken. His affirmation motto was: "I'm good enough! I'm smart enough, and doggone it, people like me!" I guess people in Minnesota liked him enough to elect him to the U.S. Senate this past year! (They also elected a professional wrestler as governor!).

But the top four vote-getters for favorite characters were: "Matt Foley" played by Chris Farley. Matt was a wannabe motivational speaker who lived in a van down by the river. Next popular was Will Ferrell playing George W. Bush and his use of "strategy." Second most popular character was "The Church Lady" played by Dana Carvey. The Church Lady conducted sarcastic interviews with famous people and was known for her saying, "Well, isn't that SPECIAL?"

But by far, the #1 favorite SNL character was played by the late Gilda Radner, "Rosanne Rosannadanna." Rosanne Rosannadanna would appear on weekend update chewing gum. She

would read a letter (from the same person each time), and then her comments would go farther and farther off track until Jane Curtin called her down. Rosanne always ended with, "Well, Jane it just goes to show you, it's always something."

As I was planning this series, I got to thinking that if there is one time when people ought to be a part of a living, laughing experience it is at church on Sunday morning. Sunday mornings shouldn't be like a funeral service, there should be smiles and laughter. Laughter is healthy. Scientists are conducting research into how neuropeptides are released by the brain when you laugh—these in turn produce endorphins. That's why people feel better when they laugh. Let the research continue, but Solomon had this figured out 3,000 years ago. He wrote in Proverbs 17:22 that "a merry heart does good like a medicine."

But dead people don't laugh and dead churches don't laugh. Jesus had some words to say about a dead church in Revelation 3.

Revelation 3:1-6. "To the angel of the church in Sardis write: 'These are the words of him who holds the seven spirits of God and the seven stars. I know your deeds; you have a reputation of being alive, but you are dead. Wake up! Strengthen what remains and is about to die, for I have not found your deeds complete in the sight of my God. Remember, therefore, what you have received and heard; obey it, and repent. But if you do not wake up, I will come like a thief, and you will not know at what time I will come to you. Yet you have a few people in Sardis who have not soiled their clothes. They will walk with me, dressed in white, for they are worthy. He who overcomes will, like them, be dressed in white. I will never blot his name from the book of life, but will acknowledge his name before my Father and his angels. He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'"

Jesus didn't write off any of these seven churches, or any of the people in them. He just challenged them to improve in some specific areas. As we think about Sunday Morning Live, I want to make three statements about having a living faith.

1. SOME CHURCHES ARE DEAD AND OTHERS ARE ALIVE

Jesus clearly said about this church, "you have a reputation for being alive, but you are dead." (Revelation 3:1). Sadly, that same diagnosis applies to many churches today. Many churches are dying and some are stone cold dead. According to statistics quoted by Pastor John Piper, there are about 350,000 churches in America and 80% of them are either stagnant or declining. Each year about 3,500 churches close their doors. In the same 12-month period about 1,500 new churches are started, so we're losing about 2,000 churches per year. Some churches probably need to die. The kindest thing you can do for a corpse is bury it. Have you ever attended a dead church? Vance Havner used to say, "Some churches start at 11:00 sharp and end at 12:00 dull!"

When I was in college I was a youth evangelist. On most weekends I traveled to a little church around Alabama and we'd hold weekend revival services. I looked like a typical image of an evangelist. I had an all-white suit with a white belt and white patent leather shoes. I wore a navy blue dress shirt with a wide white tie. My hair was long, below my ears and collar. I was really

pumped up about preaching. I recall being in one country Baptist Church near Elba, Alabama on a Friday. I was in a back room with the pastor and we had just finished praying before the service. As we prepared to walk into the sanctuary, I was like a dog pulling at the leash, I was ready to go! But right before we walked out, the pastor turned to me and said something that was like a throwing a wet blanket over a fire. He said, "Now, young man, don't expect much tonight. The people here are kinda' sluggish." Those were his exact words. But he was wrong, they weren't sluggish. They were dead! It was like rigor mortis had set in on that congregation. Nothing happened that weekend because nobody expected God to do anything.

Do you know the difference between a live church and a dead church? I've put together ten differences:

- Live churches are full of people with open Bibles, but dead churches are scattered with people with closed minds.
- Live churches have parking problems, while dead churches have plenty of empty parking places.
- Live churches generously support missions, while dead churches spend it on themselves.
- Live churches see the possibilities while dead churches see the problems.
- Live churches plan for the future and dead churches live in the past.
- Live churches ask, "What does God want?" Dead churches ask, "How much is it going to cost?"
- Live churches reach out to all kinds of people while dead churches take care of their "own kind."
- Live churches are lighthouses to their community while dead churches are a 20-watt refrigerator bulb (with the door shut).
- Live churches evangelize while dead churches fossilize!

Thank God, Green Acres is a LIVE church!

2. SOME PEOPLE HAVE A DEAD FAITH AND OTHERS HAVE A LIVING FAITH

Just performing religious activities isn't a mark of a living faith. In fact you can be so busy doing religious stuff that you strangle your faith. As Baptists, we often have so many activities that people are worn out. I heard a poem that says, "Mary had a little lamb; it would have been a sheep; but it became a Southern Baptist; and died from lack of sleep!" Dead churches are populated with people who have a dead faith. I heard about a discouraged pastor of a small church that was struggling. He announced one Sunday that since the church was basically dead, he was going to preach the church's funeral on the following Sunday. Word spread and the little church was filled on Sunday. The pastor had an open casket in front of the pulpit. The organ was playing solemn music and the lights were dimmed like a funeral. The pastor said, "Some of you may disagree that this church is dead, so in order to prove it, I want you to file by and view the remains of the deceased in this casket." As each person passed by and looked into the casket, they saw that a large mirror had been placed in there at an angle so they saw their own reflections!

James wrote some strong words about dead faith: "Faith, by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead...Was not our ancestor Abraham considered righteous for what he did?...in the same way, was not even Rahab the prostitute considered righteous for what she did?...As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead." (James 2:20-21, 25-26)

A dead faith just likes to talk, but a living faith *does* something. James gives two totally different people as examples of living faith, Abraham and Rahab. Abraham was a Jew. He was considered to be the Father of the Jewish nation. Yet it wasn't his bloodline or his religion that made him righteous. It was something he DID. When he willingly offered his son Isaac to God, then God gave him the status of "living faith." Rahab, on the other hand, was a Gentile. And worst than that, she was a prostitute. But it wasn't her sinful past that kept her from finding righteousness. Instead, it was something she DID that gave her status of "righteous." She risked her life by hiding and helping the Jewish spies at Jericho. God can transform a prostitute into a princess. The trait Abraham and Rahab shared was that they DID something about their faith. Works do not get us into heaven; it is by faith alone that we please God. But faith without works is as dead as a doornail.

3. HOW TO DEVELOP A LIVING FAITH THAT WORKS

If you have a dead faith, don't worry, there's hope for you. Every hour across America an ambulance pulls up to the scene of an accident or to a home where a 911 call has been received. As the EMT rushes up to the patient the first thing they do is take their pulse. But if there's no pulse, they don't give up. They apply CPR to the patient. They may pump air into the lungs, or they may use defibrillators to shock the heart back into beating.

Check your spiritual pulse. Is there any life there? If you're honest, you might admit that to you Christianity is a dead, dull, dry experience. You're involved in this service the same way you watch a television show, you feel more like a spectator than a participant. You're here now, but you'd really rather be somewhere else doing something else. If there's no life, don't give up. In Revelation 3 Jesus gave some CPR advice for the dead Christians in Sardis. These same three jolts may help to shock your spiritual system back to life:

(1) Accept that you'll never have a perfect faith—only a perfect Savior

"Saturday Night Live" performed live—almost. Ever since Richard Pryor used some foul language, NBC employs a five-second delay in case they need to bleep something out. But it's *mostly* live. That means if something goes wrong in a skit, or if the actors break character and start laughing, they can't say, "Cut" and film it again.

We don't do live television here at Green Acres. We tape everything and edit it down before we broadcast it. Why? Because sometimes singers forget words. I sometimes get my tang all tongued up and say things like Jonah was in the welly of the bale. So editing allows us to cover up our mistakes. But life can't be lived that way. Life is, for lack of a better word, live. This isn't a dress rehearsal, this is it. And we're all going to make mistakes, just like the Christians in Sardis. Jesus didn't reject them; He just encouraged them to move on toward maturity. If you're trying to be perfect, you're going to be constantly frustrated because only Jesus is perfect. We

are all works in progress. So take a deep breath. God doesn't expect perfection from you. He wants to have a love relationship with you. Life has to be lived live, so we're going to make mistakes. When we do we must be willing to confess our faults to Him and claim His forgiveness.

(2) Choose to be among the faithful few rather than part of the crowd

In verse 4 Jesus mentioned there were still a "few" there who were faithful. That's actually true in every church. We have about 15,000 members on our rolls, but only about 5,000 people show up occasionally. My heart hurts for the 2/3 of our members who may be duped into believing that just because their name is on the church roll they'll go to heaven. In Revelation 3:5 Jesus mentioned another book much more important than the church book. It's the book of life. And Jesus said those who overcome (persist) will find their names there—their names will never be blotted out. Isn't that good news?

We hold precious the doctrine of the Persistent of the Saints. That's sometimes called "once saved always saved." But it's misunderstood. We don't believe "once a church member always saved." A person with a living faith may drift away from God for awhile, but they always return to the fold. One of my seminary professors used to say, "The faith that fizzles before the finish was faulty from the first." So don't be like the crowd, be one of the faithful few whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life!

(3) Live every day looking for the return of Jesus

Jesus mentioned in Revelation 3 that He was going to return like a thief. This is a theme He repeats several times in the New Testament. When Jesus returns to rapture the church, it will be totally expected. Some people think Jesus is going to parachute down and they'll have plenty of time to fall on their knees and get right with Him. But He is going to return in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye.

Father Guido Sarducci was an early character on SNL. He was a chain-smoking Catholic priest who gave spiritual advice. He wasn't really a priest, he was a comedian named Don Novello. In one of his appearances he said, "Mosta people justa wanta know: how mucha sin can I really commit and stilla just barely make it into heaven?" That may be true because most Americans want to go to heaven, but they also love their sin.

As followers of Jesus our passion should be just the opposite. We should be striving to do as much good as possible before Jesus returns! Paul wrote: "We should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ." (Titus 2:12-13 NKJV)

What if an angel appeared before us right now and announced Jesus was going to return at 7 p.m. tomorrow night, what would be different about your life this afternoon? What would you do differently tomorrow? Well, that's not going to happen because not even the angels in heaven know when Jesus is going to return. But we should be living as if it would happen every day.

CONCLUSION

Television has changed our lives. How many of you, like me, can remember when you got your first television? And how many of you can remember when television stations signed off at midnight with the playing of the National Anthem? That's right, kids, until just a few years ago, all the channels used to go off the air at midnight and if you turned on your television between midnight and 6 a.m., all you saw was a test pattern. In 1980 Ted Turner launched a 24-hour cable channel called Cable News Network. People laughed and said 24-hour television broadcasting was a stupid idea. CNN was mocked as the Chicken Noodle Network, and it lost money for several years. But in 1986 when the Space Shuttle Challenger exploded, only one network was showing it live: CNN. And since the spread of cable and satellite television, you can watch hundreds of channels 24/7.

There's a lesson for us there. Some people are content to be part-time Christians. They sign off when they leave church. Sunday morning is the only time they show a little spiritual life. They try to be one-day-a-week Christians, which is pure hypocrisy. I know this because there was a period of my life when I was a teenager that I was living two separate lifestyles. On Sunday I looked and talked like a nice Christian guy. I dressed up in my white shirt with the clip on necktie and carried my King James Bible to church. I went to Sunday School, Worship, Training Union, and sang in the Youth Choir. But on Monday through Saturday when I hung out with my fellow athletes, I lived a different lifestyle, and had a different vocabulary. This went on for a couple of years until God got my attention. When I was 17, I discovered the Christian life is a 24/7 lifestyle—not one day a week. Since that day I have been walking in a full-time relationship with Jesus Christ. Is your faith like the old television stations that were only on part of the time? Or do you have a daily experience with Jesus?

We love coming together on Sunday mornings for a live experience of worship, fellowship, teaching and encouragement. But the Christian life can't be confined to a Sunday morning experience. Jesus said, "If anyone will come after me, he must deny himself, take up his cross DAILY and follow me." (Luke 9:23)

I read a true story recently that reminded me we have it easy as Christians in America. Unless you're a student of history, you may not be aware of the terrible atrocities committed against Christians in Armenia during World War I. While Britain and the U.S. were focused on fighting Germany and Italy, the Turkish Muslims invaded Armenia and killed hundreds of thousands of Christians. After WWI, some American relief organizations went to help the Armenian refugees. Jeannette Emrich was working at one of the refugee camps and in 1922 she described an encounter two nurses had with a young Armenian woman who stumbled into the camp holding a lifeless baby in her arms. At this point I'll read her words: The nurse looked at the baby and asked, "Yours?" The girl said, "No, but I held it as it died." And as the girl's face lifted, the relief worker saw her eyes and exclaimed, "Your sufferings must have been..." "No," the Armenian girl interrupted softly. "Only it was given me to know the Cross with Christ."

"She is quite mad," muttered the older woman as she listened.

"What do you mean?" asked the American with a quick glance at the hands and the bare feet of the girl. Again came the patient explanation as she said, "It has been given to me to know the

Cross with Christ. You shall see.” Turning, she slipped back the one loose garment she wore and there, branded deep into the flesh of her back, was a perfect cross. “Tell me about it,” the American said, as she drew the covering carefully back into place.

“There is nothing to tell, only, not all at once was my cross given me. Each day for one week the Moslems in my village said to me, “Mohammed or Christ?” and I had but one answer, ‘Christ’ and each day they burned into my back another piece of my cross. The last day they said to me, ‘Mohammed, and you live, Christ, and tomorrow you die,’ and I said, ‘I shall have died knowing the cross with Christ.” That night some of us escaped for we had heard the Americans were near and there was hope for us. That is why I’m here. Can you help me?’”

The nurse took her to the relief doctor and he asked, “What is this case?” As she saw the wonder of the sacrifice in the eyes of the Armenian girl the nurse simply said, “It was given to her to know the Cross with Christ.” Then they tended to her wounds. (*The Herald of Gospel Liberty*, Volume 114, Number 8, February 23, 1922, Dayton, OH)

When Jesus said we must bear the cross *daily*, it means different things to different people. As Jesus followers in America, we don’t have to suffer as much as this young lady. Jesus isn’t asking us to die for Him, He’s just asking us to live for Him.

So, don’t be content with a Sunday Morning Dead church. But don’t be satisfied with a Sunday Morning Live ONLY. When you have a 24/7/365 days a year faith you can wake up and say, “Live from Tyler, Texas, it’s Monday morning! Live from Tyler, Texas it’s Tuesday morning!” And when that happens, you can be sure your Sunday morning experience will be full of joy and laughter too!

OUTLINE

Most watched television show (% of U.S. households)

- [4] Superbowl LXIII (2009)
- [1] "M*A*S*H" series finale (1983)
- [3] "The Fugitive" series finale (1967)
- [2] "Dallas" "Who Shot J.R.?" (1980)

Longest running current television show

- [4] "Good Morning America"
- [3] "Family Feud"
- [1] "Guiding Light"
- [2] "Saturday Night Live"

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2. SOME PEOPLE HAVE A DEAD FAITH AND OTHERS HAVE A LIVING FAITH

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- (2) Choose to be among the faithful few rather than part of the crowd
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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes