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SERMON STARTER

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WEEK 1

CHRISTIANS IN CULTURE: PERCEPTION IS REALITY

The following suggestions are given to help you begin your preparation. Of course, your own personal stories, illustrations, and application to your context are vital.

Bottom Line of Message: Actions drive perceptions, and the perceptions that outsiders have of us aren't very good.

INTRODUCTION

- Consider beginning with a personal illustration of when you have been misunderstood by someone. Did your own actions contribute to being misunderstood or was it merely a case of mistaken perception? It was probably both.
- Christians in general are misunderstood by culture at large. What are some of the perceptions that our non-Christian friends, neighbors, and co-workers have of Christians? (Don't answer this question yet; consider actually asking for responses from the congregation or simply leaving the question unanswered for now.)
- It's no wonder that Christians are misunderstood because Jesus, too, was misunderstood.

BIBLICAL TEXT: LUKE 15:1

- Provide background on the Pharisees and teachers of the law and their expectations of a religious person or rabbi like Jesus.
- In that time, as in ours, perceptions were important. If one was perceived as keeping the Jewish law, maintaining purity, and avoiding contact with "sinners," he or she was considered a righteous person. But Jesus seemed to break all these rules. He didn't keep to the letter of the law (such as healing on the Sabbath), maintain purity (he touched lepers and impure people), or avoid contact with "sinners."
- Give background on the tax collectors and "sinners" of Jesus' day. (Explain the story of Matthew or Zacchaeus as hated tax collectors and/or the woman at the well as a sinner.)
- Who are the "tax collectors" and "sinners" in our own day?
- How did Jesus act toward the tax collectors and "sinners" and how did it impact perceptions about him?
- As a result of Jesus' teaching and actions, new perceptions arose about him. He was considered a breaker of the law, unclean, and a "sinner" himself. In a sense, Jesus was misunderstood.
- Was Jesus okay with being misunderstood? Yes—because his actions and the resulting perceptions were driven by his mission to bring God's love and grace to all people.
- This begs a question: are Christians today misunderstood and are the perceptions of us driven by our mission to bring God's love and grace to all people?

CONCLUSION/APPLICATION

- Unfortunately, the perceptions of Christians today are not very similar to those of Jesus. We are not known as people of unconditional love and grace toward outsiders.
- Instead, here are six of the dominant perceptions of Christians by young outsiders (unChristian, p. 28):
 - Judgmental
 - Anti-homosexual
 - Hypocritical
 - Sheltered
 - Only concerned with getting people saved
 - Too political
- Are these surprising? Are these really the perceptions we want people to have of us?
- More importantly, are these perceptions based on our mission to bring God's love and grace to all people?
- Perceptions are not bad; they actually reflect reality because they are often driven by our own actions. Actions drive perceptions. The problem is not the negative perceptions of us. The problem is us.

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- Over the next three weeks, we're going to look at each of these negative perceptions and ask the questions: What are we doing to drive these perceptions? And how can we change them?
- This week, consider how your actions—the words you speak, the people you engage, the ideas you communicate, the posture you present—drive people's perceptions about you.
- If our mission is to be judgmental, anti-homosexual, hypocritical, sheltered, political, or only concerned with getting people saved, then we're doing a good job—we're creating the right perceptions of us. But if our mission is different—bringing God's love and grace to all people—then we must make some radical changes.