



# The New England Church Pulpit

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The Joy of Risking It All

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Mark 10.17-31

*As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before Jesus, and asked him, "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; you shall not defraud; honor your father and mother.'" The man responded, "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have eternal life. Then come, follow me." When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.*

*Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible, for not for God; for God all things are possible."*

*Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."*

Readings of this short passage in Mark are introduced to Jesus the hyperbolist; Jesus the extravagant exaggerator; Jesus the master of turning conventional wisdom on its ear. Here is Jesus overstating the case in order to make his point, which is the way most cutting-edge intruders into culturally-accepted norms must do to wake people up to the social conventions we accept without critical analysis. Think Martin Luther as he challenged the church's acceptance of unholy activity. Think Martin Luther King, Jr. and his extreme reaction to racism in this country. Think Gloria Steinem, a leader, a spokesperson for the feminist movement in the 1960s. Think of the Stonewall uprising in 1969 that sparked the conversation about LGBTQ acceptance. When popular belief is challenged by minority opinion, those doing so must overstate and exaggerate their case to get peoples' attention.

In like manner, Jesus uses hyperbole to make his point: it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to get into heaven; go sell everything you have and give it to the poor and then you can have eternal life; everyone who has left everything for my sake will receive a hundredfold in this life and the next; the first will be last, and the last will be first. You can see why Jesus didn't make it on the big stage with the rich and powerful, the first and the stingy, and why he ended up on the cross instead, when he crossed those in power.

Ultimately some of them got the point, and they became his disciples. They learned that the rich were not favored by God, as was thought in that day. They realized that in God's world the people without anything are the first in line in God's eyes, which is not the way the religious folks saw it. These first hearers of Jesus were shocked to hear this, but it was good news to those who were on the bottom rung of the world's social ladder and the poorest of the poor.

But does this mean that the rich are ignored by God? Of course not; it's hyperbole to get their attention. It was commonly accepted that those who are rich were favored by God because their wealth was a sign of God's blessing. This rich young ruler who came to Jesus wants confirmation of his status in God's world, and he goes away sad because the good news is not good to him.

When this rich young man asks Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life, we should read it this way, says John Buchannan: what must I do to live fully, deeply, passionately, meaningfully now, in this lifetime, and in a way that has the significance of eternity about it? This is the question that all philosophy, art, literature, and religion attempt to answer.

(“The Best Question in the World” sermon. October 12, 2003)

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?” this man asks. “Obey the law,” Jesus says. “I do,” the young man responds. “I have all my life.” Then something extraordinary happens, which I wonder if you noted when you heard it a few minutes ago. Mark tells us that “Jesus looked at him and loved him.” He didn't chide him for being rich; he didn't judge him for being selfish; he didn't despise him for being insensitive to those poorer than himself. Jesus looked at him and loved him, admiring him for asking this great question: what must I do to find a meaningful and joyous life, a fulfilling and abundant life? Jesus responded with five imperatives: go, sell, give, come, follow. But the man went away sorrowful for he had many possessions he wasn't willing to give up for meaningful living. And this was the only time Jesus issued an invitation that fails to evoke a positive response, Buchannan notes.

The disciples on the other hand were stunned, bewildered, and amazed... amazed because Jesus had challenged one of their society's fundamental assumptions that money is a sign of God's blessing. They were astonished, not because they were rich—because they were not—but by cutting through one of the most basic conceptual assumptions, Jesus flung wide the doors of God's world, inviting all people—rich people, poor people—to think in new ways about their lives, what to do with their lives, and why they are here on this earth.

Many a preacher has launched into a critique of—or sometimes a diatribe against—consumerism. Like this young man, we are all rich by the world's standards. We have a lot of stuff. We think about, fantasize about, and spend our resources to buy more, to maintain our stuff, buying insurance and investing in stocks to be able to keep our stuff. Like this young man, we walk away, emotionally grieving, because there is no way we can live without our stuff. And while we must constantly keep our consumer mentality in check, I don't think Jesus was speaking about that *per se*.

So here's a different way to think about this perhaps. The Lilly Foundation does a lot of research on how we relate to our money, our resources, and what exactly we derive from it. Some years ago Lilly commissioned a project entitled “Thinking Theologically about Wealth,” which proposes that the topic is notoriously difficult for most American Christians and that it is more complicated than it seems.

Lilly's surveys showed that the mention of money stirs up lots of emotions in the mind of most Americans, and when asked if they have enough money, most people, regardless of their income level, responded by saying, "I need a little more." Most of us would agree that we are all materialists, which is not all bad because material things bring us joy and fulfillment in part. But we all tend to get caught up in the vicious cycle of saving, spending, accumulating, earning more, and ending up with more. It reminds me of that line from the operetta *Porgy and Bess*: Folks with plenty of plenty put a lock on the door; afraid somebody's gonna rob 'em while they're out a makin' more.

But the Lilly Foundation researchers pushed a bit deeper and did a study of a congregation in California, the members of which had a great deal of money. The researcher discovered that most people knew that money can't buy happiness; only healthy reciprocal relationships can do that. What most people want is a life that is abundant, fulfilling, meaningful, and joyous, essentially asking the question, "How do I get that?"

What she found was that people weren't driven so much by consumerism as much as by anxiety. They want more money to take care of their families. Anxiety drives their worries about having enough money to be secure, to have homes in safe neighborhoods, to have enough to send their children to safe schools, enough to pay for security systems and enough to save extra in case of illness. The list goes on *ad infinitum*. The researcher called it "SUV Theology." Her research indicates that people didn't drive an SUV because of its size or status but for safety and security. So the conclusion was that most of us are not caught up by selfishness and consumerism as by fear and anxiety. Philosopher Jacob Needleman observed that "Hell is the state in which we are barred from receiving what we truly need by the value we give to what we merely want." Listen to that again: "Hell is the state in which we are barred from receiving what we truly need by the value we give to what we merely want." (from John Buchanan's sermon of Oct 12, 2003)

Jesus shunned the opportunity to deliver a critique of materialism. Instead, he offered an invitation to a sincere and honest young man asking the great questions in the world, an invitation to let go of the strong hold driven by anxiety and fear that he had on his resources, and to trust God for his salvation to life eternal, life abundant, life fulfilling and meaningful and joyous. It is a risk to let go of the power of material things to control us, to give us status, to provide us with security to find joy in the things of the spirit.

The reality is that material things can bring us meaningful joy, abundant life, and fulfilling lives. A dining room table, for example, beautiful dishes to put on it, food creatively prepared that delights the palate as well as the eye as we share it with friends, with family, with new neighbors we want to know better is one way of seeing material things used to find spiritual well-being. Money we spend supporting the arts, food pantries, our Sunday school, the shelter for abused women and children, Emmanuel House is material goods spent for material things that provide security and a sense of well-being, not only for those who receive it but also for those of us who give it. In this way do we find a meaningful, joyous, exciting life.

Jesus invites us to follow him, by risking our safety, our fulfillment, our purpose by investing all we have—our love, our passion, our hope, our wealth—to know the joy of life with all of its eternal qualities. Amen.

--Gary L. McCann

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Eternal Spirit, today we give thanks for all that life affords us. The many blessings that often escape us because we're looking at other things or we are preoccupied with selfish desires that blind us to the joys of the day. We have been able to get out of bed in a warm house, get dressed in warm clothes; we have food in the cupboard for our breakfast and we have automobiles to bring us safely to this place where we can be surrounded by the love of friend and stranger within these walls. We pray today to find communion with you and with one another that will inspire us to go into a new week with love and purpose.

Speak to us through conscience. Let some authoritative word of righteousness come to our hearts when we most need it. Summon us to ideals that we have forgotten. Refresh within us the memory of times when we dedicated ourselves to things worth living and dying for. Challenge us, O God, in our consciences.

Speak to us through our ambitions. Make us aware of our low motives of greed and selfish acquisition. Give us strength to set our hearts once more on the things that matter most, the things that make the world a better place for everyone, the lifestyle that will reflect and affect the world as God would have it. Lift us up to the dream of nobler things for our world; give us a renewed sense of communion with all people all around the globe; encourage us in our lives of service that we will share generously with those who need it most.

Speak to us through our loyalties. We give thanks for the joy of our families, our friends, our neighbors, and all sacred threads that are woven into the fabric of our human network. Dignify our nobler loyalties to home, to country, to the world, and to the world as you would have it. Inspire us with loyalty to our planet and its salvation, so that our interest in ecology and stewardship of the earth will be more than just lip service. We are reaping the disasters of our ignorance of global warming, with super hurricanes, disastrous floods, extinction of animals, and the death of humans as the result. We think today of those in Florida who have suffered the effects of Hurricane Michael. We pray for their well-being, survival, and courage even as we send our money to help those who are on the ground offering assistance.

Speak to us through our salvation. Remind us that each of us matters, to you and to our world, and that the way we handle our lives, dedicate our strength, control our desires, live honestly and with integrity, and love other travelers on this journey of life, matters to you, to ourselves, to others, and to the world at large. In the name of the God who so loved the world, amen.