

**HOW THE RICH YOUNG RULER INFORMS IDENTITY FORMATION AND
DISCIPLESHIP IN A MATERIALISTIC AGE**

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This dissertation explores the thesis that the story of The Rich Young Ruler is analogous to American materialism, such that Mark 10:17-31 challenges the contemporary Church and culture to disconnect who-we-are from what-we-have in order to receive the unconditional love and acceptance offered by Jesus Christ. Jesus' encounter with the Rich Young Ruler in Mark 10 provides the basis for a biblically balanced and pastorally appropriate response to the challenges and opportunities presented by materialism. The teachable moment between Jesus and his disciples further provides an important corrective for Christian communities that have difficulty separating concern for people from interest in their pocketbooks. A proper reading of Mark 10:17-31 will enable readers to see that Jesus' command to "sell what you own . . . then come, follow me" was an invitation—both to the Rich Young Ruler and to the disciples—to unhook from the grip of materialism in order to have an authentic experience of God's unconditional love and of Jesus' unconditional acceptance through inclusion in his community.

Chapter 1 will include contemporary readings in sociology and psychology will be reviewed to show that materialism is "the religion of the age" and is detrimental to the health and well-being of persons and societies. Chapter 2 will provide a brief historical survey of Christian responses to affluence and materialism in order to demonstrate how contradictory teachings undermine an effective apologetic to our materialistic culture. Chapter 3 will include a close reading of Mark 10:17-31 in order to demonstrate that: (a) Mark presents an essentially sympathetic portrayal of the Rich Young Ruler as a person gripped by materialism, unable to differentiate who-he-is from what-he-has; (b) Jesus' command to Rich Young Ruler is as challenging to the disciples as it is to the Rich Young Ruler because it reveals their materialistic motivations; and (c) Jesus' teaching on the kingdom provides a foundation for living out faithful discipleship in a materialistic culture. Finally, Chapter 4 describes how particular spiritual disciplines—namely pilgrimage, solitude, community, and stewardship—are essential to authentic discipleship in American culture.

Theological Mentor: Kurt Fredrickson, DMin

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To Veronica, Aidan and Liam

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INTRODUCTION:

HOW THE RICH YOUNG RULER INFORMS IDENTITY FORMATION AND DISCIPLESHIP IN A MATERIALISTIC AGE

In the acknowledgements section to his classic *Christ in Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr describes his work as an “essay on the double wrestle of the church with its Lord and with the cultural society with which it lives in symbiosis.”¹ This dissertation will explore how the Church in North America wrestles with its Lord and with its culture specifically around materialism. Materialism is a value shared by members of every economic class and expressed through constant consumption. As the crowning achievement of capitalism, the economy of the United States has been built upon a foundation of consumerism. Here manufacturers, retailers and advertisers choreograph a dance of desire in which we the consumers participate as both audience and lead performers. The effects of rampant consumerism are evident: Urban landscapes saturated with advertisements, families struggling under massive credit card debt, and landfills filled to overflowing—all testify to our insatiable desire for more and better products. Even as a severe recession leads to the closure of shopping malls and the bankruptcy of major retailers, consumerism is the basis of our common economic life and our common story. In her essay, “A New Story to Live By?” Susan White succinctly describes how the never-ending pursuit of things has become the underlying theme of our existence:

Sociologists tell us that people interpret their lives through basic narratives that provide a framework within which to understand the world and to establish goals and values. If there is any overarching metanarrative that purports to explain the reality in the late 20th century, it is surely the narrative of the free-market economy. In the beginning of this narrative is the self-made, self-sufficient human being. At the end of this narrative is the big

¹ Helmut Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, Revised ed. (New York: Harper San Francisco [Imprint]; HarperCollins Publishers, 1956), xi.

house, the big car, and the expensive clothes. In the middle is the struggle for success, the greed, the getting-and-spending in a world in which there is no such thing as a free lunch. Most of us have made this so thoroughly “our story” that we are hardly aware of its influence.²

A glance at the front page of any newspaper will confirm that the metanarrative of the late twentieth century is unraveling for Americans in the early twenty-first. When the big house is in foreclosure and the big car has been repossessed, the need for an alternative story that affirms human value apart from possessions is acute.

For Christians who would be defined by the story of Jesus, it may be difficult to acknowledge the influence of this free-market narrative precisely because we are not aware of it. It is the air we breathe, culturally speaking. When we do become aware of its affect on our values, goals and even theology, the tendency is to identify materialism as a cultural problem while at the same time rationalizing one’s own consumption. In the early 1990s Robert Wuthnow, then director of a national survey on religious and economic beliefs and values, found that many survey respondents were “religiously committed” and equated materialism as a societal evil. Not surprisingly, however, these same respondents indicated that they too were materialistically oriented. “In short,” Wuthnow writes, “most people have to do some negotiating with themselves to explain why their lifestyle isn’t really in conflict with their values.”³ Some socially conscious Christians have identified the conflict and sought to address this conflict, and have begun to ask themselves what they buy, why they buy it, and from whom. As Roman Catholic theologian Tom Beaudoin found out, the answers are difficult to find. It was nearly

² Susan White, ‘A New Story to Live By?’ *TransMission* (Spring 1998): 2, cited in Craig Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz, eds., *Christ and Consumerism: Critical Reflections on the Spirit of the Age* (Carlisle, PA: Paternoster Press, 2000), 3-4.

³ Robert Wuthnow, *God and Mammon in America* (New York: Free Press, 1994), 180.

impossible for him to determine where his favorite jeans were manufactured or how the company treated its workers.⁴ Despite our best efforts, the most we seem able to accomplish are small gestures that justify our consuming behavior, assuage our guilt, or both.

We might be tempted to believe that consumerism is a modern problem, but Thorsten Mortiz suggests that while “Consumerism may be a phenomenon of the ‘new world’, rooted early modernity . . . the issue of one’s attitude towards the acquisition and use of commodities as such was by no means unknown in the New Testament world.”⁵ Indeed, the Church has struggled to respond appropriately to wealth and to the wealthy throughout the development of Christianity. The response has been, on the whole, ambivalent. Wealthy patronesses like Prisca and Aquila supported the Christian community generally and the Apostle Paul’s ministry specifically, yet the Corinthian church meeting in their homes (1 Cor 16:19) was chastised by Paul because wealthy members were eating to excess while poorer members left the common meal hungry (1 Cor 11:20-22). Cyprian of Carthage initially believed that their wealth had a redemptive value, but later resented those who recanted in the face of persecution because they feared the loss of riches more than the loss of Christ.⁶ Lamenting the prosperity that was an unintended consequence of his ministry to drunkards and derelicts, John Wesley noted that Christianity leads to diligence and frugality, which in turn leads to riches, which in turn leads to “pride, love of the world, and every temper that is destructive to

⁴ See Tom Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2003), ix-xiii.

⁵ Thorsten Mortiz, “New Testament Voices for an Addicted Society,” in Bartholomew and Mortiz, *Christ and Consumerism*.

⁶ Rebecca H. Weaver, “Wealth and Poverty in the Early Church,” *Interpretation* 41, no. 4 (1987): 373.

Christianity.”⁷ Pastors today may celebrate their parishoners’ financial success while secretly harboring concern that greed and exploitation may be its source. The words of Jesus echo in our ears: “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” (Mk 10:23). Are we to hear this as a prophetic warning that calls the wealthy to be mindful, or as a prescriptive response that calls us to reject affluence *a priori*?

Our answer depends a great deal on how we interpret Jesus’ interaction with the so-called Rich Young Ruler that was the occasion for the hard teaching in Mark 10. All three synoptic gospels record Jesus’ encounter with a man who comes to him seeking the secret to eternal life. All three describe the exchange between Jesus and the young man about the requirements of the law. When Jesus tells the man to sell all he has and give it to the poor, they all explain that he walked away in a state of grief. What was the reason? Matthew and Mark explain that it was because the man had many possessions, while Luke tells us it was because he was rich. His grief comes at the moment of choice. Will he keep his many fine possessions, or gain the eternal inheritance for which he yearns? We too grieve as we see him walk away. We assume he has chosen mammon over God, greed over love, isolation over generosity. The point seems obvious enough: riches (and the materialism they make possible) are such a hindrance to following Jesus that the only wise course is to avoid them. If we do not, we too may be guilty of the Rich Young Ruler’s hard-heartedness and idolatry. The majority of commentators seem to agree with

⁷ John Wesley, *Sermons on Several Occasions, Vol. 2* (New York: Waugh and Mason, 1836), 441.

Bruce Malina who asserts that this story is not about a rich young ruler but about a Greedy Young Man.⁸

Yet, Mark includes a bit of commentary that puts this conclusion into doubt. Mark notes that after the Rich Young Ruler has declared himself faithful in observance to the Law, Jesus “looking at him, loved him” (Mk 10:21 NRSV). If Jesus can perceive this man’s true intentions, as we presume he can, then why would Jesus respond to a greedy and idolatrous heart with such love? Why would Mark make a point of telling his readers that love was the motivation for the hard word that comes next, as opposed to judgment? Surely if this man had come to justify himself (as so many commentators suggest) then Jesus would have been as quick to confront the Rich Young Ruler as he was the self-righteous Pharisees. Instead Jesus suggests that there is one thing that the young man lacks, and then instructs him saying, “Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (v 21). Jesus extends an invitation to this young man to become part of the new community he is creating. When the man walks away, Jesus does not run after him or modify the instruction. For this man, the instruction is intended to address the “one thing.” It is precisely because Jesus loves the Rich Young Ruler that he refuses to retract his difficult teaching—a teaching so difficult even the disciples will ask, “Who then can be saved?”

What then is the one thing that the Rich Young Ruler lacks, despite his best efforts? To illuminate this question, perhaps it is helpful to consider the young, affluent, and successful among us. By the standards of this world, they lack for nothing. Yet, in her book, *The Price of Privilege*, psychologist Madeline Levine recounts her work with

⁸ Bruce J. Malina, “Wealth and Poverty in the New Testament and Its World,” *Interpretation* 41, no. 4 (1987): 355.

affluent clients who struggle with the negative effects of materialism within their families. She notes that wealth and happiness have very little correlation to one another. Instead, materialism “keeps us wedded to external measures of accomplishment for a sense of self—prestige, power, money for adults; grades, clothes, electronics for kids” at the expense of internal measures—belonging, acceptance, and purpose.⁹ Citing research studies that demonstrate how materialism leads to unhappiness, Levine concludes that materialism “is both a cause and a symptom of impaired self-development. Materialism is not only about having shallow values; it is also about how easy it can be to choose the simple seduction of objects over the complex substance of relationships.”¹⁰ To illustrate how closely self-development and possessions can be bound up with one another, Levine describes the experience of a woman in grief over an impending divorce:

The wife would spend hours in my office lamenting the loss of her lifestyle. She wept most about her sheets. She had spent years sleeping on the finest Egyptian cotton, carefully ironed and scented by the laundress. As a twenty-eight-year-old financially struggling intern, I was at a total loss to understand her sorrow about her sheets. Now I understand that those sheets were a stand-in for the many things she was losing: her marriage, home, family, friends, and status . . . My patient was losing a lifetime of connection, and yet her grief centered on the things, not the people, she was losing.¹¹

In losing the Egyptian sheets (and all the other externals this luxury item represented) Levine’s client experienced the loss of a significant part of herself. We might even go so far as to believe that, apart from her fine possessions, this woman despaired of having any identity at all. Research Psychologist Helga Dittmar has conducted numerous studies

⁹ Madeline Levine, *The Price of Privilege* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 46.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

on the relationship between materialism and identity formation. These studies reveal that material possessions are intimately bound up with our sense of identity, such that they are “experienced as parts of individuals’ extended selves, reaching beyond the boundary of the physical body.”¹² In a consumer culture awash with material goods and saturated with advertisements promoting those goods, the propensity toward identity formation through materialism has never been greater, or more devastating to our collective psychological and spiritual health. Dittmar describes the problem this way:

[There is a strong] psychological role of consumer culture and consumer goods in people’s lives. One reason for this greater psychological significance is that traditionally stable forms of identity construction—such as community, class, religion, family or nationality—have become eroded, particularly in urban environments. Who somebody is and his or her social position are not necessarily fixed and inherited any longer. Instead of being ascribed, identity is increasingly achieved by the individual her- or himself. An important element of such achieved identity is the acquisition and consumption of material goods and wealth. Although this change in identity construction may entail greater freedom in some ways, it also means a loss of “ontological security.”¹³

Perhaps “ontological security” is the most succinct way to describe what was lacking for the young man at Jesus’ feet, the woman in Levine’s office, and American culture in general. Indeed, if the Rich Young Ruler were among us today he would surely be among those voted “Most Likely to Be Envied.” He might be among the ranks of teen celebrities, junior executives, and heirs to vast fortunes. Or he might simply be a person who has done all the right things in order to succeed—graduating from the best schools, competing for the best jobs, and striving to provide the best opportunities for himself and for his family. This person who has done all the right things and gained (or been given)

¹² Helga Dittmar, *Consumer Culture, Identity, and Well-Being* (New York: Psychology Press, 2007), 25.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 12.

all the right opportunities for happiness is instead restless and anxious. For all of his youthful stamina, social status, and abundant stuff, Mark's Rich Young Ruler falls before Jesus in desperation, living in deep ontological insecurity. He is an analogue to the modern American materialist. As a result, Mark 10:17-31 is perhaps the most instructive text available to a "wrestling" church as it strives to hold obedience to its Lord in tension with relevance to its culture.

My interest in this story began in 2004 when I began a pastorate in Orange County, California. As the new (and notably young) pastor, I understood that the members of my aging congregation intended for me to make our faith community more attractive to the affluent parents who enrolled their children in our preschool Monday through Friday, but are conspicuously absent Sunday morning. In a conversation with the former pastor, I expressed my belief that there was no "silver bullet" that would solve the outreach-to-young-families problem. "Oh, there is a silver bullet, but you don't want to use it," he replied. "The pastors who attract these young families do something we must not do. *They pander to them.*" I was so taken aback by this remark that I did not press him for further explanation. Jesus dealt with this situation firsthand. Jesus extends an invitation; the young man rejects it. Even though Jesus desires to see this young man become part of the new community he is creating, Jesus gives a hard teaching and then lets the man walk away. He does not run after him. He does not modify the instruction. He does not pander.

As I gather with other parents outside the door of my son's preschool class and overhear their conversations about soccer practices, birthday parties and carpools, I wonder what message they have received from our church when it comes to becoming

part of our worshipping community. Would being part of our church be just another add-on to an already impossible social calendar? Are we just another group that desires them for their time, talent and treasure? Do we want them to be built up or used up? It is likely that the way we communicate betrays our ambivalence about young professionals and their priorities. Unlike Jesus, we have a difficult time focusing on the simple act of loving them with no strings attached. It is my hope that as we reflect deeply upon this encounter between Jesus and the Rich Young Ruler, we will see these young families with new eyes, hear Jesus' teaching with new ears, and respond to both with new hearts.

I am convinced that Jesus' invitation was not to a life of "living without" as it might seem on the surface, but instead an invitation to "live with" the abundance offered in the Kingdom of God. The instruction to give everything away has less to do with issues of social justice towards the poor (though Jesus' kingdom clearly intends to address injustice in every form), and more to do with discovering how God's valuation of our lives differs from that of our society. As a metaphor, the young man's decision to turn Jesus' offer down illustrates just how deeply the values of our materialistic culture are ingrained into us, such that we cannot see the ultimate fulfillment of all our hopes and desires even when He is standing right in front of us. Even we who, like the disciples, declare that we have left everything to follow Jesus find that there is still much of the Rich Young Ruler about us. We continue to misunderstand the call to discipleship, and fail to live in the abundance Christ offers us.

What follows, then, is a discussion of the hermeneutical implications of Mark 10:17ff for our current context. In Chapter 1, contemporary work in sociology, psychology, and theology will be reviewed to demonstrate how materialism has become

“the religion of the age.” It will be shown that branding—an integral part of our materialistic society—has essentially become the spiritual discipline pursued by most Americans for the purpose of locating themselves within culturally preferred values and meanings. This will be followed by a survey of Helga Dittmar’s research in consumerism and identity formation, which demonstrates how materialism is as psychologically detrimental as it is pervasive. Those under the influence of materialism—including the Rich Young Ruler as a materialist archetype—therefore deserve a more sympathetic treatment than is often found in Christian thought.

Chapter 2 will provide a brief historical survey of Christian responses to affluence and materialism. It is not possible to describe exhaustively the development of affluence in Christian thought here. However, by considering a few leading voices in the early Church, early Protestantism, and contemporary Christian scholarship, we can illustrate how Christianity has been ambivalent at best toward wealth both inside and outside the Church. Among contemporary scholars, John Schneider seems most eager to challenge the notion that the Bible is inherently anti-materialistic. He argues that the Bible celebrates “delight” as an appropriate response to material blessings, and demonstrates how geographic “proximity” is the appropriate limitation to social responsibility. These will be discussed as they point the way toward a more balanced treatment of wealth in Christian theology and practice.

Chapter 3 will include a close reading of Mark 10:17-31 in order to demonstrate that: (a) Mark presents an essentially sympathetic portrayal of the Rich Young Ruler; (b) Jesus’ hard word to the materialistic Rich Young Ruler is also a hard word to the materialistic disciples; and (c) Jesus’ teaching on the kingdom points the way to faithful

discipleship in a materialistic culture. If the Rich Young Ruler is not a greedy person guilty of exploitation and idolatry but is instead a materialistic person who cannot separate who he is from what he has, then we have a markedly more sympathetic reading of the Rich Young Ruler available to us than is often portrayed in biblical scholarship. As long as the Rich Young Ruler clings to the identity he has in his possessions, he will never hear Jesus' invitation to discipleship as a call to receive unconditional acceptance. Jesus' invitation is not to a life of "living without" as it might seem on the surface, but instead an invitation to "live with" the abundance offered in the Kingdom of God. The Rich Young Ruler's decision to walk away illustrates how deeply the values of our materialistic culture are ingrained into us, such that we cannot see the ultimate fulfillment of all our hopes and desires even when he is standing right in front of us. The interaction between Jesus and Peter indicates that the disciples are equally challenging, since they believed that their decision to follow Jesus would result in the kind of material blessings that Jesus just commanded the Rich Young Ruler to relinquish. Even we who, like the disciples, declare that we have left everything to follow Jesus find that there is still much of the Rich Young Ruler about us. We continue to misunderstand the call to discipleship, and fail to live in the abundance Christ offers us. Jesus offers a new way to understand the material blessings his disciples will experience in this age and in the coming Kingdom. This chapter will contend that Jesus' command is specific to the Rich Young Ruler in light of the invitation that follows it, namely, to join the new community Jesus is creating with his disciples. It is not intended to stand as judgment or rejection, though the young man may well have taken it as such. Rather, it is Jesus' way saying, "I want you for you, not for your wealth or your status." In a similar way, Jesus challenges us to

confront the truth about how we create our identities and save our souls with material possessions. His earnest desire is for us to find authentic identity and unconditional acceptance in him.

If affluence supports a materialistic identity that makes kingdom living virtually impossible, then how does God make it possible? Grace is given in the form of spiritual disciplines that enable us to discover our intrinsic value as God's children. Chapter 4 describes how particular spiritual disciplines—namely pilgrimage, solitude, community, and stewardship—are essential to authentic discipleship in our affluent, materialistic culture. Pilgrimage will be explored as a metaphor for walking lightly through life and holding loosely to material goods. Doing so enables us to live less encumbered and frees us to use our possessions to aid others in their journeys. In solitude we remove what Henri Nouwen calls the “scaffolding” of our lives—the activities and relationships with people and possessions we use to define ourselves—and in so doing come to discover our identity as children of God who are inherently valuable, significant, and loved.¹⁴ As part of a Christian community we belong to the household of God, a contrast society able to practice the responsible enjoyment of possessions and the courageous exercise of power for Kingdom purposes. In this way Christians may model a way of living that is of an altogether higher quality and order. Finally, we will consider stewardship not only in terms of giving of our time, talent, and treasure, but also in terms of using the fullness of God's gifting in entrepreneurial ways that create wealth and well-being for others. Taken together, these disciplines have significant implications for spiritual formation and for gospel mission. Not only do they enable Christians to enjoy the material blessings God

¹⁴ Henri Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart* (New York: Ballantine, 1981), 15.

provides, but they empower the Church to live out an alternative story in full view of the wider culture.

CHAPTER 1

THE EFFECTS OF MATERIALISM IN CULTURE

The Pervasive Nature of Consumer Society

In order to understand the challenges posed by materialism in our society today, it is important to understand the origins of the consumer culture in which we now live. In *The Century of Self*, a four-part film first broadcast on the BBC in 2002, Adam Curtis describes the birth and evolution of modern marketing. He begins his story just before the United States entered World War I. At that time, a young American named Edward Bernays was working as the press agent for the legendary opera tenor Enrico Caruso. He had immigrated to the United States from Austria, and was enlisted by the U.S. government to go back to Europe as part of the Committee of Public Information, a propaganda arm of the US Government. Understanding that Americans would never support entry into the war for the sake of propping up weak monarchies, Bernays was part of the effort to gain support for the war under the slogan, “Making the World Safe for Democracy.” The effects of his propaganda campaign were impressive: Bernays watched in amazement as American president Woodrow Wilson traveled from one European capital to another to be received as a hero. Bernays was successful in large part because he applied knowledge and techniques associated with psychoanalysis, a new

form of inquiry that sought to uncover people's unconscious fears and desires. Once the war was over, Bernays returned to New York to put his ideas into practice and opened the first firm dedicated to work he called "public relations." Bernays's interest in psychoanalysis was not by chance. Not only was he a gifted marketer, but he was also the nephew of Sigmund Freud.¹

Large business interests in the United States were fascinated by Bernays's work because the mass production efforts established during the war created the real possibility of over-production. To avoid this, big corporations realized that they would have to change the way the majority of Americans viewed products. As one leading Wall Street banker, Paul Mazer of Lehman Brothers, wrote, "We must shift America from a 'needs' to a 'desires' culture. People must be trained to desire, to want new things even before the old have been entirely consumed. We must shape a new mentality in America. Man's desires must overshadow his needs."² In order to create a desire within Americans for his client's goods, Bernays pioneered product placement in motion pictures, the use of celebrities as spokespeople, and other marketing techniques that are commonplace today.

While such techniques were effective at persuasion, Bernays believed that the principles of psychoanalysis could be used to do more than persuade. Used properly, they could transform culture. In one of his earliest and most successful experiments, Bernays worked on behalf of cigarette companies to apply principles of psychoanalysis to increase cigarette use among women. There was a taboo at the time against women smoking in public, so the vast majority of smokers were men. Bernays contacted American

¹ Adam Curtis, "Part 1: Happiness Machines," *The Century of Self*, DVD (Rockford, IL: BN Publishing, 2006).

² Ibid.

psychoanalyst A. A. Brill, who explained that cigarettes were connected to male sexual power in the subconscious minds of women. Bernays set out to link smoking with a direct challenge to male power. He recruited a group of rich debutantes to walk in the annual Easter Day parade in New York City. Bernays then contacted the press and informed them that he heard about a group of suffragettes who were going to stage a protest by lighting “torches of freedom.” When he gave the signal, the debutantes took out cigarettes they had hidden in their clothes and lit them in dramatic fashion. The event made headlines throughout the United States and around the world. Through the use of the deceptively simple phrase, “torches of freedom,” Bernays successfully connected cigarette smoking with equality and freedom, such that anyone who held these values would be obliged to support the idea of women smoking in public. With this single act, cigarette sales began to climb steadily and cigarette smoking became a symbol for women’s power and independence.³ Through it all, Bernays was firm in the conviction that the masses could be manipulated to do or buy anything, so long as one knew how to tap into their unspoken desires for glamour, luxury, and individuality. The demand for luxury goods, once reserved only for the very rich, became such a powerful force in the American economy that it prompted Herbert Hoover to celebrate Americans as “happiness machines” who would fuel economic progress through “consumptionism.”⁴

Psychoanalysis would continue to play a prominent role in the consumer economy up through the 1950s, a time when Americans were as fearful of communism as they were desirous of modern conveniences. By that time, psychoanalysis had become very influential in the United States, especially in urban cultural centers like Los Angeles and

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

New York. Early on Bernays began to bring people together for group psychoanalysis sessions. Instead of talking about their parents, their jobs, or their marriages, participants were asked to get in touch with their feelings about products. Women would gather to talk about how a certain laundry detergent made them feel refreshed or how cake mix gave them a sense of empowerment. These living room conversations evolved into the focus group, an indispensable tool of marketers seeking to understand how to advertize products in a way that taps into consumers' deepest desires.⁵

Such techniques faced a significant challenge in the sixties as left-leaning students began a movement against materialism and what they saw as the near total control of American culture by big corporations. This movement was inspired by the slogan, "There is a policeman inside our heads, and he must be destroyed."⁶ This new generation of Americans rejected their parents' values and the corporations who fostered them. Because this group rejected shared identity, manufacturers now needed to appeal to new individuals interested in products that would help them express themselves. Corporations got help from the Stanford Research Institute (SRI), which had come upon a powerful new way to categorize people based on Abraham Maslow's Motivation Theory. SRI determined that rather than focusing on market segments based on gender, age, race, or income level, advertisers could target consumers based on where they found themselves on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. Through exhaustive surveys, SRI found that the range of ways in which people chose to express themselves was limited. The categories

⁵ Adam Curtis, "Part 2: The Engineering of Consent," *The Century of Self*, DVD (Rockford, IL: BN Publishing, 2006).

⁶ Adam Curtis, "Part 3: There is a Policeman Inside All Our Heads: He Must Be Destroyed," *The Century of Self*, DVD (Rockford, IL: BN Publishing, 2006).

developed from this research became known as lifestyles, and lifestyle marketing focused on values, not behaviors. If advertisers could portray products in a way that represented the values of a given lifestyle, those products would be bought. Soon, political parties began to employ lifestyle marketing in the development of campaigns. Focus groups were revived, but instead of tapping into consumer's unconscious feelings about products, they were used to explore the desires of lifestyle groups.⁷

The need to connect with these lifestyle groups has led to an advertising arms race, in which marketers saturate our public space in order to emotionally engage consumers. At the beginning of the *Frontline* episode, "The Persuaders" (originally airing on November 9, 2004), correspondent Douglas Rushkoff describes his hometown of New York as having "a second skin, a twinkling membrane of commercial messages."⁸ Rushkoff interviews Kevin Roberts, CEO of advertising firm Saatchi & Saatchi Worldwide, who notes that once products were marketed using "-er" words: whiter, "brighter," "cleaner," and so on. Today products must connect at an emotional level, explains Rushkoff, because "the consumer is now in total control . . . [S]he can go home and decide when she buys, what she buys, where she buys, how she buys. Oh boy, [consumers] get it. They are so empowered at every age. All the fear is gone and all the control is passed over to the consumer. It's a good thing."⁹

⁷ Ibid. Ronald Reagan won the presidential election in large part because he appealed to the values of so-called Inner-Directeds, a lifestyle group defined by individuality, self-expression, and personal development. The Inner-Directeds became the engine of an economic recovery, helping to overcome the inflation of the seventies.

⁸ Barak Goodman, Rachel Dretzin Goodman, Muriel Soenens, and Douglas Rushkoff, "The Persuaders," *Frontline*, DVD (Alexandria, VA: PBS Home Video, 2004).

⁹ Ibid.

Materialism and the Redefinition of Need

Herein lies the greatest paradox in our modern consumer society. Consumers today have unfettered access to an unprecedented variety of products in unprecedented amounts. If choice is power, then we are the most powerful and empowered culture in human history. The only option unavailable to us, however, is the choice to abstain from consuming altogether. The grand experiment undertaken by Bernays and his colleagues to make American (and by extension the world) into a desires-based economy has succeeded beyond imagining. We are a culture consumed with the idea of consuming. As such, we are addicts totally out of control, locked in a dysfunctional and destructive relationship with the products we buy and the producers who make them. Sociologist Jeff Ferrell discovered this when he left his tenured position to explore “the urban underground of dumpster diving, trash picking, and street scavenging” (so reads the subtitle of his book *The Empire of Scrounge*). After sustaining himself for years on what he found in the dumpsters and on the curbs of Ft. Worth, Texas, Ferrell concludes:

This pace of contemporary status acquisition is a fraud. An addiction to immediate gratification guarantees no lasting gratification at all, only an itch for the next quicker fix, an insatiable desire for the faster and the more efficient. Sold like so much crack cocaine, the corporate promise of greater convenience persuades the consumer to perceive today as an unbearable inconvenience, and to pay for tomorrow’s imagined resolutions. As the pace of this cycle accelerates and feeds off existing patterns of hyperconsumerism, a sort of binge-and-purge panic emerges, a consumptive bulimia; consumers purchase products mostly for the immediate pleasure of doing so, then return them for a refund and repeat the cycle—or, as I regularly discovered while scrounging their Dumpsters, choose a more convenient and efficient solution, tossing them into the trash, unopened and unneeded.¹⁰

Ferrell’s description of “consumptive bulimia” demonstrates that (with due respect to Kevin Roberts) we are clearly not in control. Our addiction to the “fraud” of

¹⁰ Jeff Ferrell, *Empire of Scrounge* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 190.

status acquisition means that we no longer buy products for what they do, but purchase them for the emotional power they hold over us in the moment—power invested in the product through the kind of marketing now commonly referred to as “branding.” Through branding, marketers create a story around a product that invests that product with meaning far beyond (and often wholly unrelated to) the product’s designed purpose. Ferrell oversimplifies when he asserts that our addiction is to immediate gratification and to convenience. We crave products because we crave story. In his book, *Branded Nation*, professor of advertising James Twitchell describes the importance of the products-as-stories that now dominate our shared consciousness.

Storytelling is the core of culture. When the world was made up primarily of needs (food, shelter, sex), there was little sophistication in narrative. We told most of our communal stories about such things as ancestry, nationalism, social class, politics, and the like. But after the Industrial Revolution, when there was massive surpluses, needs were effectively met and wants and desires became central. Stories attached themselves to fast-moving consumer goods (FMCGs) such as soap, thread, patent medicine, canned meats, and a host of other quick consumables.¹¹

The power that these stories have in our lives cannot be understated. As implied above, humans crave meaning, meaning comes from stories, and we share stories in order to create community. We learn and live out these stories from the very beginning of life: Twitchell refers to a study conducted in England estimating that one out of four babies speaks a brand name as his or her first word.¹² Through story we have a shared identity, and that identity is now found in brands. Or, as Twitchell puts it, “Hard to believe, but knowing what’s in a Big Mac (two all-beef patties, special sauce...) has much of the

¹¹ James Twitchell, *Branded Nation* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2004), 5.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2.

same kind of unifying force as knowing who played third base of the Yankees, which, in a way, has the same force as knowing what's in Deuteronomy 2:18.”¹³

To the extent that brands create meaning through stories, they fill a legitimate need in our lives. In her book, *No Logo*, journalist Naomi Klein critiques the effect of marketing on culture and citizenship. In an interview with *Frontline*, Klein was asked, “Did brands come to the rescue, filling a need for community or meaning in society?” She responded,

I think brands definitely are filling a very real need. The question is, are they filling it well? I believe that they tend to fill it in a fairly unsatisfying way. You can go to these brand temples like Niketown, and you can get a piece of the story, the narrative, the dream behind that brand. But when you get home, it is just a pair of sneakers, right? . . . They might be great, but they're not actually going to fulfill those needs, which serves them very well because, of course, that means that you have to go shopping again to try to fill them.¹⁴

Klein's description of Niketown as a “brand temple” where “you can get a piece of the story, the narrative, the dream behind that brand” provides a vivid picture of just how powerful branding—the product-as-story—has become. Twitchell notes that advertisers started telling stories as a way to differentiate their products from their competitors: “Tell a story—that there is a hammer pounding an anvil in your brain as a way to sell Anacin, that Wonder Bread helps build bodies twelve ways, or that M&Ms melt in your mouth, not in your hand—and you have separated your product from other aspirin, bread, and chocolate.”¹⁵ But Nike has moved past telling stories about shoes. With the help of brand consultants, Nike has become “the very embodiment of sports,

¹³ Ibid., 275.

¹⁴ PBS *Frontline*, “The Persuaders: Interview with Naomi Klein” conducted on Jan. 22, 2004, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/persuaders/interviews/> (accessed May 5, 2009).

¹⁵ Twitchell, *Branded Nation*, 5.

and more than that, being the very embodiment of the spirit of sports, which Nike said was the spirit of transcendence itself.”¹⁶ One might be tempted to chalk such a statement up to the kind of hyperbole that is typically found in advertizing. However, to simply dismiss it as such would be to ignore the spectacular success of such companies since branding came into its own.

According to Klein, everything in advertising changed on April 2, 1993, a day that came to be known as Marlboro Friday. To the shock of Wall Street and Madison Avenue, Phillip Morris decided to lower the price of Marlboro cigarettes. Up to that point, conventional wisdom dictated that Marlboro was a “prestige brand.” Being a prestige brand like Marlboro, Tide, or Coca-Cola should have meant that consumer loyalty had been earned (or more accurately bought) through massive spending on advertising. But when Marlboros began to cost less, it seemed to signal that prestige brands had lost their cache. Companies who thought they would never again have to compete on price became deeply concerned, fearing that the brand was dead. This turned out to be untrue, because although certain brands were indeed getting beat out on price, other brands were experiencing record success even during a recession. These brands, like Nike, Starbucks and The Body Shop, were engaged in “pseudo-spiritual marketing” in which they told “quasi-religious stories” which somehow made them exempt from the “brand crash.”¹⁷ Klein explains how, in the mid-90s, corporations were in a panic to come up with the “big idea” behind the brand, the “epiphany” about how the brand was in some sense transcendent:

¹⁶ PBS *Frontline*, “Interview with Naomi Klein.”

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

They would hire high-priced consultants, have these kind of corporate sweat lodges and gather around the campfire and try to channel their inner-brand meaning. And they would emerge from these processes sort of flushed and saying, "Polaroid isn't a camera; it's a social lubricant," and things like that.¹⁸

In the same way that Nike came to understand itself—and seek to be understood by consumers—as the essence of sports, so too did Starbucks become community, the idea of the “third place” that is not home and not work. “Disney is family. Virgin is the sort of rebel working stiff, the rebel inside their suit. Benetton, of course, was marketing racial diversity and multiculturalism. The Body Shop was marketing environmentalism.” As a result, Klein says, “Nobody was actually selling what they were selling. I mean, I interviewed [The Body Shop founder] Anita Roddick when I was writing *No Logo*, and she told me that she sees her stores only, as she put it, a ‘green box’ on which to stand on and shout out on the issues that she cares about; that basically the whole thing was sort of a prop.”¹⁹ While Roddick may exaggerate the point, it is clear that these epiphanies have changed the way corporations see themselves, their purpose, and their competition. According to Klein, Nike CEO Phil Knight no longer acknowledges Reebok as a legitimate competitor, but instead focuses his attention on Disney and any other “megastar” brands whose transcendent narrative rivaled Nike’s own.²⁰ In a marketplace where products are merely symbols of different preferred identities, this makes perfect sense.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

Materialism as the “Religion of the Age”

It is impossible to miss the indictment against traditional religious practice implied in Klein’s comments above. When she describes how branding fills a felt need in our society for meaning, how marketing campaigns employ “quasi-religious” and “pseudo-spiritual” language, Klein is surely implying that the Starbucks community is prepared to meet the needs formerly filled by worship communities.²¹ What traditional churches, mosques, and synagogues lack in the way of a clear calling and a guiding narrative, Niketown will provide. What Klein implies, *Frontline* correspondent Douglas Rushkoff makes explicit. Rushkoff describes how the Saturn “family”—a vibrant community of loyal Saturn owners—would gather by the thousands at the Saturn plant in Spring Hill, Tennessee for a family reunion complete with games, barbeques, and a tour of the assembly line. Herein lies the power of emotional branding, argues Rushkoff. Its object is to “fill the empty places that non-commercial institutions like schools and churches might have once done the job. Brands become more than just a mark of quality. They become an invitation to a longed-for lifestyle, a ready-made identity.”²² Consumerism has taken place of religion as the primary form of identity formation.

If consumerism is the Religion of the Age, then brands are the denominational expressions or, more precisely, the cults to which the faithful belong. So says Douglas Atkin, partner and chief strategy officer at advertising agency Merkle + Partners and author of *The Culting of Brands: When Customers Become True Believers*. Atkin recalls

²¹ Indeed, the church has now turned to Starbucks as a model for effective evangelism and community formation. See Leonard Sweet, *The Gospel According to Starbucks: Living with a Grande Passion* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook, 2007).

²² Goodman, *Frontline*: “The Persuaders.”

his work as a brand manager for Proctor & Gamble: “My job was basically to make sure the product was good, develop new advertising copy, design the pack. Now a brand manager has an entirely different kind of responsibility. . . . Their job now is to create and maintain a whole meaning system for people, through which they get identity and understanding of the world.”²³ Atkin describes how “cult branding” is analogous to religious cults:

I believe that there is a very, very close relationship between cults and the best cult brands in the sense that people join and stay with cults for the exact same reasons as people join and stay with brands. The reason why is pretty obvious if you think about it: The desire to belong to something, to make meaning out of something, is universal. What's changed nowadays is, as we've become a more consumerist society, the institutions that become vessels for making meaning or venues for creating community have in turn become more consumerist, so the kind of functions that cults and religions used to perform years and years ago are increasingly being taken over by brands. I've interviewed people who are brand loyalists of Saturn, and they will use the same vocabulary as someone who is a cult member of Hare Krishna. They will say that other car users need to be saved, or that they are part of the Saturn family. Whether they're a retailer or a car driver, they will say, "We are the Saturn family," with no hint of irony. They absolutely and completely believe it.²⁴

From Atkin's perspective, brand managers are akin to priests who serve as intermediaries between the brand and the public. By maintaining “a whole system of meaning for people,” they ensure that the brand is a symbol for a particular set of values with which brand adherents identify. Thus they seek to reinforce the association between Apple and non-conformity, or between Harley-Davidson and independence. While comparing brand loyalists to cult followers might seem pejorative, Atkin does not intend it to be. “I unreservedly say that cults are a good thing; that the people who join them are

²³ PBS *Frontline*, “The Persuaders: Interview with Douglas Atkin” conducted on Feb. 2, 2004. <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/persuaders/interviews/> (accessed May 5, 2009).

²⁴ Ibid.

normal, and they do so for very good reasons. . . . Every major religion in the world was a cult at one time. . . . Cults are part of the renewal of culture in society.”²⁵ Understood this way, brands become a force for good in our culture, and we can promote good by buying them, wearing their logos, and sharing our enthusiasm for those brands.

We must then ask: How is the culture being renewed by these brand cults? Does our culture become more free as people buy motorcycles, or more free-thinking with the purchase of iPhones? Brand managers would no doubt say yes, and do so with same sincerity with which Saturn owners once declared themselves part of a family. To do otherwise would be to find oneself out of a job; no one believes the sermons of an atheist priest. The rest of us, however, should have our doubts. To suggest that brand cults are engines of social change in the same way that world religions once were is to be naïve about branding, cynical about organized religion, or both. We are beginning to recognize that while brands symbolize particular values, the one value they all share is greater consumption. Harley-Davidson wants you to be free—free of everything but monthly payments. Apple wants you to express your individuality by owning an iPod—just like everyone else.

Even if we, like Dorothy, have looked behind the curtain and found the wizard wanting, we still need a way home. Theologian Tom Beaudoin is a student of Generation X who recognizes that, for many young adults, branding is still a key component in identity formation even though consumption is antithetical to some of their values. “Many young adults live with the feeling that someone somewhere may be suffering because of the way that their coffee, shoes, clothes, or computers are produced, but many in the middle class are too busy, tired, or already have enough of their own ‘issues,’ as

²⁵ Ibid.

they say, to even begin to do anything about it.”²⁶ While they feel relatively powerless to affect meaningful change on global capitalism and its labyrinthine network of production and distribution, they do find power in brands. “For those of us who live deeply immersed in the branding economy, we make an identity for ourselves . . . by our relationships to consumer goods: what and how we own, when and why we wear. Clothes and other branded products do ‘identity work’ for us, transmitting messages about ourselves to ourselves and others.”²⁷ Of course, doing “identity work” through possessions is by no means new in human cultures, but the sheer volume and variety of products available to us means that we are obliged to invest significant time and energy in understanding “what and how we own, when and why we buy” in order to take sufficient care in messages we transmit. This is made all the more challenging insofar as it is normal and expected that members of our culture will form, and then re-form, their identities as they grow older. This creates something of a symbiotic relationship between brands and consumers:

Branding is a particularly powerful force for adolescents and young adults, who are in critical stages of their lives, piecing together adult identities, trying on different ways of being, different self-images. From one’s early teens into one’s thirties, discovering and creating a coherent identity with which one can really live is a major project. More than ever, we use corporate brands to experiment with these identities—and corporate brands use us. Business literature shows that corporations know this, and it influences their branding strategies. They know that if they can enter into people’s identity work before adolescence, then once those awkward teenage years start, teens will be more likely to look to brands for an acceptable identity. And corporations know that if young adults get settled into certain brands through which they declare their self-identity, then those brands will be more likely a part of that person’s identity ensemble as they move into adulthood and middle age.²⁸

²⁶ Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, x.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

We can see how this symbiotic relationship works. Brands need to provide preferable and distinct identity choices to consumers if they hope to stay in business. Consumers need brands to reliably provide those choices in ways that are consistent with the initial identity choice while at the same time being relevant over time. With very little in the way of conscious thought, each of us is daily about the work of creating “identity ensembles” through our consumption in order to tell the world how we see ourselves, what we value, and to what or whom we belong. Beaudoin suggests that it is in this way that each of us “perform” our identities, such that we “creatively put together who we are, as much as who we are is ‘given’ to us naturally.”²⁹

As a way of understanding the power of branding, Beaudoin describes it as a spiritual discipline comparable to the spiritual exercises developed by Ignatius of Loyola (d. 1556). The Ignatian discipline and the branding economy are both “schools for the imagination” which invite students to continually engage in imaginative exercises for the work of identity formation. “To reorient persons spiritually, Ignatius knew, one had to reshape them imaginatively.”³⁰ This project is no less important to Madison Avenue as it was to the Ignatius:

Formation of imagination is . . . the most important “strategy” of the branding economy. On this strategy all of its other successes depends. Without being able to influence our imaginations, the economy cannot shape our perceptions of our true self, our relation to a community, our investments of trust, and our hope of a new life. I am not suggesting that the economy (or the Ignatian discipline) controls imagination, only that the imagination is inclined or encouraged by these disciplines in specific directions.³¹

²⁹ Ibid., 5.

³⁰ Ibid., 50.

³¹ Ibid., 50-51.

It is no wonder, then, that so much time, money, and energy is invested in creating thirty-second television commercials which are then broadcasted hundreds of times per day. The advertisement may be funny, sexy, or entertaining the first few times, but then we lose interest. After that, it continues to appear in the background of our domestic life, reshaping our imaginations such that we can “see” ourselves drinking a particular soft drink long before we ever get thirsty. The image in our minds does not simply lead us to believe that the drink will quench thirst. Our imaginations have been shaped to believe that it will also somehow make us funny, sexy, or entertaining. In this, the difference between the Ignatian disciplines and the branding economy are plain. Ignatius was committed to facilitating an “initiation into true self” as a whole, complete person united in body and soul. “He imagined that each person has a role to play in God’s plan for the redemption of the world, and the glorification of creatures—an eternal destiny of happiness, in unending intimacy with God, to which all humans are called.”³²

This is summed up in the “first principle and foundation” of the disciplines:

Man is created to praise, reverence, and serve God our Lord, and by means of this to save his soul. The other things on the face of the earth are created for man, to help him in attaining the end for which he was created. Hence, man is to make use of them in as far as they help him in the attainment of his end, and he must rid himself of them in as far as they prove a hindrance to him. . . . Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created.³³

Ignatius sought to initiate people into their true selves through an encounter with the Creator. Branding initiates people into a fantasy about idealized selves made possible by consuming more of creation. While Ignatius sought to help us uncouple ourselves from

³² Ibid., 53.

³³ Ignatius of Loyola, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. Louis J. Puhl, S.J. (New York: Random House, 2000), 12.

anything that would diminish the *imago dei* in us, branding seeks to encumber us with more stuff, placing brand images upon us:

In the branding economy, the true self is a many faceted economic being: a consumer of a favored brand; a producer of meaning, status, or identity through your interaction with brands; an advertiser for corporations when you willingly billboard yourself by displaying logos on your body, in your house, through your speech. What is most important about your relation to yourself, then, is the way that relation passes through the screen of the brand. You cannot inhabit your full self without passing through brands, just as you cannot fully inhabit a house without passing through doorways.³⁴

If it is true to say that, in a branded economy, one cannot inhabit one's full self without passing through brands, then it is a short step onward to conclude that apart from brands one does not exist—at least, one does not exist in a way that can be easily apprehended by those around us. Brands become the way we come know to one another. There may be more ontological significance to the quip, “iPod therefore I am” than we might first suppose.

Consumer Society and Its Effects on Our Identities

If consumerism so defines the culture that it is impossible to talk about culture apart from it, and if consumerism has become the primary (if not only) means by which people in our culture determine values, purpose, and identity, then we must determine the net effect of consumerism on culture and identity formation. Research psychologist Helga Dittmar has made this the focus of her career. In *Consumer Culture, Identity and Well Being*, Dittmar and her colleagues effectively argue that consumer culture and the materialistic values that drive it are a “cage within” which leaves people feeling less fulfilled in their pursuits, less satisfied with their circumstances, and with lower self-

³⁴ Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, 53-54.

esteem. The text begins with a quote from Catalano & Sonnenberg that describes what happens when who-we-are is determined solely on the basis what-we-have:

[In] our culture . . . it takes less time for people to judge you for what they see you have than it takes for them to stop and ask you what you do. Much less than for them to ask you who you *are*. . . . The danger, however, is that you yourself come to believe in these material signs of identity. You begin to confuse image (how other people see you) with self-image (how you see yourself). You begin to confuse self-image with self worth. Ultimately, you may think you are only as good as the car you drive or your newest pair of shoes (emphasis in the original).³⁵

To understand the psychological processes involved, Dittmar draws upon Self-discrepancy Theory, which postulates that “negative emotions result when individuals experience discrepancies, or gaps in their self-concept.” These gaps, she argues, are created when people are bombarded with “idealized images of people and lifestyles.”³⁶ Consumers feel discontent because they never measure up to the images of the “Good Life” and the “Body Perfect” portrayed to them during most of their waking hours. This discontent drives more and more consumption in order to close the gap between the current, inadequate self and the idealized self presented in advertisements. To understand why consumers pursue this course, we need to understand the psychological functions of material possessions at a more basic level, apart from the experience of branding described above.

³⁵ E. Catalano and S. Sonnenberg, *Consuming Passions: Help for Compulsive Shoppers* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 1998), 37-38, as cited in Helga Dittmar, *Consumer Culture, Identity and Well-Being* (New York: Psychology Press, 2007), 3.

³⁶ Dittmar, *Consumer Culture*, 22.

Psychological Functions of Material Possessions

While it is known that possessions have always played an important role in helping people establish identity and place themselves within society, Dittmar goes a step further to assert that “an absolute dividing line between an extended self through possessions on the one hand and a core self on the other cannot be drawn.”³⁷ In other words, it is virtually impossible define the self apart of from the material world with which the self interacts. To illustrate this, Dittmar cites the findings of a 1987 study on the psychological effects of theft:

If we use possessions for defining, extending, and evaluating the self, it would follow that their unintended loss should be experienced as a lessening of self. This would suggest that being a victim of a property crime might involve rather more psychological trauma than is often credited with the loss of “mere things.” Among property crimes, residential burglary is most likely to have a strong impact because . . . home functions as an “identity shell”. . . The psychological distress and sense of violation experienced by burglary victims is comparable in kind with the traumas of rape or serious domestic violence.³⁸

Dittmar concludes that “individuals perceive and experience material possessions as integral parts of their self, which shows that identity has boundaries that extend beyond the physical body.”³⁹ Therefore, to lose cherished possessions is to lose power over one’s sense of self and one’s circumstances. This was further demonstrated in studies of people in U.S. nursing homes. The research found that “those who kept cherished possessions felt more in control, less helpless, more supported by staff, and were judged to be better

³⁷ Ibid., 30

³⁸ Ibid., 30-31. See P. W. Wirtz and A. V. Harrell, “Assaultive Versus Nonassaultive Victimization: A Profile Analysis of Psychological Response,” *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* 2 (1987): 264-277.

³⁹ Ibid., 31.

able to resolve conflicts.”⁴⁰ We might be tempted to believe that this experience is reserved for the elderly or those who feel physically vulnerable, but vulnerability is a relative experience. We all feel vulnerable in certain areas of our life, and possessions are tools we use to compensate for this:

Because of their communicative power, material symbols have identity-creating and identity-enhancing features. . . . Business students who had a weak symbolic basis for a business career, in the sense that they lacked good qualifications, tended to display more relevant material symbols, such as an expensive watch, briefcase, or business suit, than students with better career prospects.⁴¹

The business student example highlights one of the most important psychological functions of possessions, namely, making first impressions. Anyone who has gone on a job interview or a first date understands how a new set of clothes, a new fragrance, or a newly detailed car can build self-confidence in a vulnerable situation. What impression do such efforts actually make on others? More importantly for this discussion, what is the relationship between first impressions, possessions, and wealth (or at least the perception of wealth)? Dittmar and her colleagues found that first impressions differ depending on whether a person is surrounded with material objects that denote a relatively higher, compared to lower, level of wealth. They conducted a study in which respondents were shown a short video and then asked to describe the person in the scene. The four- to five-minute video showed either a young man or a young woman coming home from work, making tea in the kitchen, browsing a newspaper, putting music on in the living room, and then taking a sports bag to the car. The same actors went through the same routine in

⁴⁰ Ibid., 35. See S. Wapner, J. Demick, and J. P. Redondo, “Cherished Possessions and Adaption of Older People to Nursing Homes,” *International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 31 (1990): 219-235.

⁴¹ Ibid. See R. A. Wicklund and P. M. Gollwitzer, *Symbolic Self-Completion* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1982).

two different spaces: one intended to convey an affluent middle-class home and the other a working-class living space. The seventeen- to eighteen-year-old adolescents who participated in the study were either from an affluent middle-class or a predominantly middle-class background. The study supported the theory that there are widely shared wealth stereotypes, because both middle-class and working-class respondents perceived the person in the video as more intelligent, more assertive and forceful, and more in control when the possessions were expensive than when they were not.⁴² Given these stereotypes, it is no wonder that we go to great lengths to surround ourselves with possessions and live in fear of losing them. Further, the less secure we are in our identities apart from possessions, the more urgently we seek them out as a way of shoring our identities up.

Consumption and the Establishment of the Ideal Identity

What is the net result of using possessions to create an ideal identity? Even though there is a widely held belief that more money and material possessions improve one's quality of life, Dittmar has found that those with a strong materialistic value orientation—that is, someone who pursues “money and possessions in order to gain psychological benefits, such as compensating for insecurities”⁴³—actually end up less satisfied, less happy, and with more psychological problems.⁴⁴ This was demonstrated in two specific ways. First, Dittmar notes that when materialistic values were in conflict

⁴² Ibid., 38-39.

⁴³ Ibid., 93. See T. Kasser, R. M. Ryan, C. E. Couchman, and K. M. Sheldon, “Materialistic Values: Their Causes and Consequences” in *Psychology and Consumer Culture: The Struggle for a Good Life in a Materialistic World*, eds. T. Kasser and A. D. Kanner (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association, 2004), 11-28.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 71.

other held values, there was a decreased sense of well being.⁴⁵ She cites the work of Burroughs and Rindfleisch who sought to demonstrate that if the same person simultaneously and strongly endorses conflicting values, then she or he is likely to experience internal conflict and psychological stress leading to a negative impact on his/her well-being. Burroughs and Rindfleisch's research found that "materialistic values had negative links with U.S. respondents' well-being when they endorsed strong family values at the same time."⁴⁶

Second, Dittmar and her colleagues concluded that a desire for wealth and goods is detrimental to psychological well-being when it is driven by unrealistic money-making motives.⁴⁷ They sought to understand the relationship between money-making motives, materialism, and peoples' subjective well-being (hereafter, SWB) by identifying six money-making motives—overcoming self-doubt, financial security, worth and pride, happiness, success, and identity—and conducted a study to assess the importance of financial as compared to other life goals.⁴⁸ While it is difficult to determine with precision to what extent some of these goals were more realistic than others, they judged that financial security, success, worth and pride could be achieved to a reasonable extent with money and were therefore realistic goals. They expected that these motives would have positive associations with SWB. In contrast, they judged that when respondents sought wealth in the pursuit of happiness, identity, and overcoming self-doubt, they would have negative associations with well-being since "the goal and the motives are

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 80. See J. E. Burroughs and A. Rindfleisch, "Materialism and Well-Being: A Conflicting Values Perspective," *Journal of Consumer Research* 29 (2002): 348-370.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 71.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 86.

incongruent.”⁴⁹ They found that the more emphasis a person places on feeling successful as a result of earning money, the higher the person’s SWB is likely to be. On the other hand, “The more a person wants happiness and self-assurance via money, the lower that person’s SWB is likely to be.”⁵⁰

Consequences of Consumer Culture

Dittmar’s research supports what most people understand intuitively: pursuing the ideals of consumption—what Dittmar summarily describes as “the good life” and “the body perfect”—has a negative impact on identity formation. This is true for children and adolescents as well as adults.⁵¹ Dittmar rejects the notion that we are “liberated through greater spending power, greater choice of consumer goods, and greater uniqueness and self-expression through consumption.” While consumer culture may mean more choice, it has a dark side which Dittmar describes as “the cage within”:⁵²

Once people have internalized [consumer culture’s] material “good life” and “body perfect” ideals as their own personal goals, they end up with a negative identity and negative emotions (because they almost invariably fall far short of these ideals), and with behaviors that damage their well-being, such as overspending, overshopping, or extreme body-shaping (because these ideals are unattainable or unhealthy). In this way, these ideals then function like bars in an internal cage, constantly reinforced by consumer culture, which prevent people from considering and pursuing alternative goals more likely to lead to happiness, fulfilling relationships, and a meaningful life.⁵³

⁴⁹ Ibid., 86-87.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 88.

⁵¹ Ibid., 199.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., 215.

While Dittmar describes the cage within with extreme examples (overspending, overshopping, and extreme body-shaping), there can be little doubt that to live in our culture is to be internalize its values to some degree. For this reason, the “cage within” is a real possibility for anyone and everyone within our culture. Possession and consumption of material things have always been, after all, very normal and very human activities. The challenge comes when we not only buy things, but “buy in” to the idea that these things can address our need for purpose, identity and belonging. Materialism, at its heart, asserts that there is an ideal way of living and that this way can be bought. Drawing upon G. McCracken’s concept of the “displaced ideal,”⁵⁴ Dittmar explains why we do not simply abandon our consumer culture myths and disconnect ourselves from the cycle of continuous consumption:

Personal ideals, such as happiness or attractiveness, are often removed from daily reality to a different place and time, or . . . to “ideal” people such as celebrities or models. Material goods can serve as bridges to these displaced ideals. Before a person buys new consumer goods, there is the anticipation that they will provide access to certain ideal circumstances that, at the time, still exist in the dim distance. . . . Once we actually buy such a coveted good, we only acquire a small, anticipatory part of the bridge, a tiny concretized piece of the identity and way of life we really aspire to. Thus, the larger configuration of the ideal identity and lifestyle remains intact, even if buying the item turns out to be a disappointment. The ideal is not abandoned or judged unrealistic because of our disappointment. Instead, what follows is a successive series of transfers of ideals and hopes to other, increasingly more expensive, sets of goods and objects. Designer sunglasses give way to a super-expensive new outfit, which, in turn, gives way to multiple sets of new clothes, and so consumption goes on.⁵⁵

Material goods are not the problem. Neither is the desire to have good things or the effort invested to afford them. The problem lies in the division between one’s “real”

⁵⁴ See G. McCracken, *Culture and Consumption* (Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990).

⁵⁵ Dittmar, *Consumer Culture*, 214.

life and an “ideal” life and the misplaced trust in material things to bridge the two. The project Bernays began nearly a century ago has succeeded in making us generally dissatisfied with real life. Brand managers like Atkin may well have convinced us that more, better, and different products will empower us to act out our identities in ever more satisfying ways. But believing that consumption has the power to bridge the real and the ideal is a choice each person makes. Each of us lives in a tension the two modes of being described by Erich Fromm in his 1976 work, *To Have or To Be?*:

In the having mode, there is no alive relationship between me and what I have. It and I have become things, and I have *it*, because I have the force to make it mine. But there is also a reverse relationship: *it has me*, because my sense of identity, i.e., of sanity, rests upon my having *it* (and as many things as possible). The having mode of existence is not established by an alive, productive process between subject and object: it makes *things* of both object and subject. The relationship is one of deadness, not aliveness (emphasis in the original).⁵⁶

Perhaps this is the most succinct way to describe the detrimental effects of materialism. When we live out materialism, we objectify ourselves and others. Contrary to what the ads say, we become less human, not more. The more compulsively we possess things, the more completely things possess us. Materialism is not merely one facet of our culture that threatens our emotional, psychological, and spiritual well-being, it *is* our culture. Considering the way we are saturated by pro-consumption messages, it is hardly an overstatement to say that materialism is in the air we breathe.

The Rich Young Ruler as Archetypal Materialist

In light of the pervasive influence of materialism within our consumer culture, it difficult—if not impossible—for American Christians to view it with complete

⁵⁶ Erich Fromm, *To Have or To Be?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 72-73.

objectivity. Indeed, to the extent that free-market capitalism is effective in fostering consumptive desires in developing countries, it will become increasingly difficult to find Christian brothers and sisters outside our culture to offer a critique. From this survey it should be clear that the effects of materialism are both pervasive and, on the whole, detrimental. If the Church would speak into this place of urgent need, it must first acknowledge its contribution to the hyper-consumerism of our culture. Understanding that contribution will be the subject of the next chapter. With this in mind, the Church can respond to the culture—and those most firmly in the grip of materialistic influence—with empathy and compassion. Empathy comes from the recognition that the temptation of materialism is powerful, that we have all succumb to it in one way or another, and that we are all in equal need of deliverance. Compassion is the mixture of love and grief evoked when we see how the other suffers. Empathy and compassion were at the heart of Jesus’ encounter and the Rich Young Ruler.

The Rich Young Ruler is an archetypal materialist, comparable to anyone in our contemporary culture who has developed a sense of self around his possessions and has become restless and dismayed with his life. Like so many today, he may have become aware that his possessions did not, in fact, open the way toward a life of transcendence, meaning, and a secure identity. Yet, when Jesus calls him to give away his possessions in order to “gain treasure in heaven” (Mk 10:21), he is unable to do so. The facile answer to why this is so is that he had a greedy and selfish heart. Given what is now known about the relationship between “many possessions” and identity, however, we can see that Jesus’ invitation may well have sounded like a call not merely to poverty, but to nihilism in the most literal sense. The Rich Young Ruler walked away grieving because he could

not imagine an identity for himself apart from his possessions. Without them, the person he knew himself to be would no longer exist. In this too, he may have much in common with those who define themselves by the brands they wear, the zip code of their homes, and whether their credit cards are gold, platinum, or black.

Projecting twenty-first century psychology from a consumer culture backward onto a first-century figure from a peasant culture is not without its problems. This proposition may seem too great a reach, and too soft an interpretation. What allowance should be made for the fact that the Rich Young Ruler lived in a culture formed by the Hebrew Scriptures, not by mass media? Can we ignore the likelihood that the Rich Young Ruler was rich because he or his ancestors exploited others? Is materialism as “a cage within” not merely a gentler term for old-fashioned idolatry? Can we talk about materialism and identity issues without engaging in psychological eisegesis? Issues of interpretation will necessarily be addressed in later chapters. But with respect to offering a psychological reading, we stand with those who hold fast to the timeless relevance of the Scriptures and therefore, by implication, hold to the constancy of human nature. If human beings are tempted to define who-they-are by what-they-have today, then it has always been so. So the sagacious words of Ecclesiastes: “There is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl 1:9). The only difference is the sheer volume of material goods currently at our disposal. As the concept of limited goods has diminished to a near vanishing point in the developed world, so the pathology of materialism has grown exponentially. Describing the Rich Young Ruler as an archetypal materialist in the grip of an existential crisis may seem like over-intellectualizing until we acknowledge that our society is populated with such people. If the Rich Young Ruler is such a person, then he is uniquely one of us. If

this is so, then we have a rare treasure in Mark 10:17ff. In it, Jesus speaks directly to the culture (the Rich Young Ruler) and to the Church (Peter and the rest of the disciples) on the urgent questions faced by Americans today: Who are we if our possessions go away? Knowing our identity apart from our things is indeed the “one thing” we lack, according to Jesus. Knowing our value as beloved children of the Father is truly treasure from heaven. Rediscovering this treasure for ourselves as Christians and then living it out for the benefit of our culture is the opportunity now before us.

CHAPTER 2

AMBIVALENCE IN CHRISTIAN THOUGHT TO WEALTH AND MATERIALISM

The Early Church Fathers

In her survey of the early Church fathers, church historian Rebecca Weaver notes two recurrent themes in the literature: “First, a persistent call to almsgiving was coupled with the promise of divine reward. Second, the very persons to whom this exhortation and promise were most explicitly directed, rich Christians, were treated with considerable ambivalence. An undertone of misgiving pervades references to the wealthy.”¹ As we shall see, this ambivalence carries through to the modern day.

Clement of Alexandria (c150-c215)

Clement was the head of Alexandria’s catechetical school. Around the beginning of the third century, many in this cosmopolitan and sophisticated city embraced a harshly literal interpretation of Christ’s declaration that “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” Because many in Clement’s school came from wealthy families, this popular view was cause for despair, and Clement sought to provide a pastoral response in his treatise on the Mark 10:17-31

¹ Rebecca H. Weaver, "Wealth and Poverty in the Early Church," *Interpretation* 41 (1987): 368.

entitled, *Who Is the Rich Man that Shall Be Saved?*² The sermon begins with a harsh critique on the wealthy and those who would flatter them, but goes on to argue that salvation is dependent not on externals but upon the internal condition of the soul. Explaining Jesus' command to the young man to sell all his possessions, Clement writes: "He does not, as some conceive off-hand, bid him throw away the substance he possessed, and abandon his property; but bids him banish from his soul his notions about wealth, his excitement and morbid feeling about it, the anxieties, which are the thorns of existence, which choke the seed of life."³ He follows this up by asserting, "For it is no great thing or desirable to be destitute of wealth, if without a special object—not except on account of life."⁴ It is significant that Clement refutes the idea that poverty is somehow a more holy or blessed state of life than wealth. There is no intrinsic value to being without material things unless those things hinder us from living in faith and allegiance to Christ. So Weaver concludes, "As externals, [riches] are a matter of indifference. Thus Christ's injunction to the young man could not have been a literal command for him to renounce his possessions, for such a renunciation would have been merely an outward act. What Christ required, instead, was the internal renunciation of his attachment to them."⁵

² Ibid., 369-370.

³ Clement, "Who is the Rich Man?" 11 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. II: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 594.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Weaver, "Wealth and Poverty in the Early Church," 370.

Weaver points out that detachment from possessions was not original with Clement or with the Christian community, but was prevalent among the popular philosophical movements, most notably among the Stoics. Clement adopts this view in order to promote the value of wealth as a means toward loving one's neighbor through almsgiving.⁶ By using their assets to care for the friends of Christ, the rich care for Christ himself. Clement openly extols the benefits of almsgiving as a transactional relationship, such that caring for Christ's friends buys salvation: "O excellent trading! O divine merchandise! One purchases immortality for money; and, by giving the perishing things of the world, receives in exchange for these an eternal mansion in the heavens!"⁷ Since the beloved of Christ have his ear, they can be expected to pray efficaciously for the salvation of their earthly benefactors. "For very practiced reasons, therefore, it would be unwise to renounce one's fortune. Instead, the wealth should be used to obtain beatitude."⁸ Clement frames the debate on riches for his community in such a way as to: a) make the possession of wealth a morally neutral condition; b) challenge those with wealth to live in a state of emotional detachment from it; and c) call upon the wealthy to convert the benefits of riches from earthly to heavenly blessing through almsgiving.

Cyprian of Carthage (d. 258)

Some thirty years after Clement's death, Cyprian sought to find a positive, redemptive value in the possession of wealth that would serve his community in

⁶ Ibid., 370-371.

⁷ Clement, "Who is the Rich Man?" 32 in *Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. 2*, 600.

⁸ Weaver, "Wealth and Poverty in the Early Church," 371.

Carthage. In his treatise, *On the Dress of Virgins*, Cyprian exhorted those who had taken vows of chastity to reflect this interior reality in modesty of dress, even though they were wealthy enough to afford finer adornments. He chastised them for arguing that their dress was allowable since they were pure of mind, urging them instead to be mindful of the young men in whom they “inflamm[e] the fuel of sighs, so that, although you yourself perish not, yet you cause others to perish.”⁹ Cyprian understood that wealth celebrating one’s exterior could affect the condition of one’s interior. Like Clement, Cyprian called upon his audience to use their wealth not for gaining attention, but for gaining salvation: “A large estate is a temptation, unless the wealth minister to good uses; so that every man, in proportion to his wealth, ought by his patrimony rather to redeem his transgressions than to increase them.”¹⁰

Although Cyprian began his episcopate believing that there was potential for wealth to have redemptive value, his view underwent a marked hardening in the years which followed. This likely resulted from the “severe financial difficulties experienced by the church at the calamitous years of 250-252” caused by a “harsh and systemic persecution by the Roman government” which caused many wealthy Carthaginian Christians to apostatize.¹¹ After the persecutions these persons sought to be restored to communion with the Church, but Cyprian’s penitential discipline was so rigorous that

⁹ Cyprian, “On the Dress of Virgins” 9, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. V: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 432.

¹⁰ Ibid, 433.

¹¹ Weaver, “Wealth and Poverty in the Early Church,” 372.

many joined a schismatic group offering more leniencies.¹² Cyprian was not simply faced with a spiritual crisis, however. The persecutions undoubtedly had a significant financial impact on the Christian community:

Even without the defection of wealthy members, the persecution itself would have taken a toll on the resources of the church: Care for imprisoned Christians and their families was not without cost. Moreover, soon after the persecution ended, money had to be raised for the ransom of those Christians in neighboring Numidia who had been made hostages in a barbarian raid. A plague, which depleted the population and interrupted commerce, created even further financial strain. Thus during a period of multiple crises, when the demands upon the church's treasury would have been considerable, the resources of the wealthiest members simply were not available. The inconstancy of the rich was not lost on the bishop.¹³

At the conclusion of the persecution, Cyprian responded to the situation in a treatise entitled, *On the Lapsed*. In it, Cyprian characterized Roman oppression as God's judgment on wealthy, blaming their apostasy on the fact that they were more afraid of losing their property than in losing their salvation: "One's country was to be left, and loss of one's estate was to be suffered. Yet to whom that is born and dies is there not a necessity at some time to leave his country, and to suffer the loss of his estate? But let not Christ be forsaken, so that the loss of salvation and of an eternal home should be feared."¹⁴ Perhaps Cyprian would have taken a more moderate tone, had it not been for the fact that the wealthy responded to the end of the persecution not with repentance and contrition, but with self-indulgence. "If you had lost any dear one of your friends by the death incident to mortality, you would . . . show the signs of grief. Miserable creature,

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 373.

¹⁴ Cyprian, "On the Lapsed" 10 in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. V: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 439.

you have lost your soul; spiritually dead here, you are continuing to live to yourself.”¹⁵

Cyprian became convinced that wealth was a hazard and the wealthy could not be relied upon. “The enjoyment of possessions, with all the attendant pleasures, undermined allegiance to Christ and, derivatively, to the bishop.”¹⁶

In order to address the need for penance as well as the need to replenish the church’s treasury, Cyprian began to preach once again on the importance of almsgiving as a means of being confident of one’s salvation.¹⁷ In his treatise, *On Works and Alms*, Cyprian provides a series of Scripture passages intended to prove that prayer and fasting are only effective when they are accompanied by almsgiving and other good deeds: “For he shall not be able to deserve the mercy of the Lord, who himself shall not have been merciful; nor shall he obtain aught from the divine pity in his prayers, who shall not have been humane towards the poor man’s prayer.”¹⁸ Cyprian rejected the suggestion that putting his instruction into practice would result in wealthy families joining the ranks of the poor. Instead he asserts that the practice of charity is a means by which “the Christian accomplishes spiritual grace, deserves well of Christ the Judge, [and] accounts God his debtor.”¹⁹

¹⁵ Ibid., 445.

¹⁶ Weaver, "Wealth and Poverty in the Early Church," 373.

¹⁷ Weaver credits L. William Countryman for developing the idea that alms solved both the problem of fundraising and the problem of penance in *The Rich Christian in the Church of the Early Empire* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1980), 195.

¹⁸ Cyprian, “On Works and Alms” 5, in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers Vol. V: Translations of the Writings of the Fathers Down to A.D. 325*, Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 477.

¹⁹ Ibid., 483.

John Chrysostom (c. 347–407)

Roughly a century after Cyprian's death, the relationship between the Church and the state looked very different. Under Constantine persecutions had ended, and the Church began to receive the spectacular benefits of imperial resources. Numerous wealthy Romans sought to win favor by emulating imperial generosity. This made it possible for the Church to greatly expand its charitable work. It also made it possible for wealthy Christians to assume that their giving was not needed for such benevolence to continue.²⁰ For John Chrysostom, a priest educated in philosophy and trained in monastic asceticism, the bounty of the Church was no excuse for greed and self-indulgence among wealthy Christians. In a series of sermons concerning the parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man (Luke 16:19-31), Chrysostom attempts to provide an eternal perspective to the temporary conditions of wealth and poverty. In particular, he concludes that the Rich Man is corrupted by luxury: "Fill your belly so moderately that you may not become too heavy to bend your knees and call upon your God."²¹ Not only is over-indulgence a challenge, but Chrysostom imagines the Rich Man surrounded by "parasites" and "flatterers" who are "the wolves which seize many of the rich . . . which spoil wealth by excessive honor and flattery."²² He goes on to note that "when a change of circumstances overtakes him, his friends are put to flight, but we who censured him become sympathetic, while their faces are hidden. This happens even nowadays."²³ Can

²⁰ Weaver, "Wealth and Poverty in the Early Church," 375.

²¹ John Chrysostom, "First Sermon on Lazarus and the Rich Man," in *On Wealth and Poverty*, Catharine P. Roth, trans. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981), 27.

²² John Chrysostom, "Sixth Sermon on Lazarus and the Rich Man," in *On Wealth and Poverty*, Catharine P. Roth, trans. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1981), 106.

²³ *Ibid.*

Chrysostom's critique be very far from our celebrities, surrounded by their entourages and posse?

Like Clement and Cyprian before him, Chrysostom believed in almsgiving as a way for the wealthy to detach themselves from the power of riches to “overwhelm the reason, darken the mind, and incite a mad avariciousness.”²⁴ In her analysis, Weaver concludes that almsgiving as a means of detachment and atoning for previous sins was not new to Chrysostom. Yet, he took these ideas to new extremes, calling upon the wealthy to engage in self-imposed poverty. Though Chrysostom did not see wealth as inherently sinful nor poverty as inherently blessed, he concludes from the parable that as much as luxury has the power to corrupt, so hardship has the power to heal and to restore. The rich man is condemned for his selfishness while Lazarus is redeemed through his patient endurance of suffering. “Just as fire is often used to cauterize, to prevent the spread of infection, and as the steel removes decayed flesh, bringing pain but providing benefit, so hunger and disease, and other apparent evils, are used on the soul . . . to make it better.”²⁵ This perspective has resonance even today. Yet, after becoming the Patriarch of Constantinople in 398, the anger of empress Eudoxia at his “unsparing sermons” contributed to his exile in 404.²⁶

²⁴ Weaver, "Wealth and Poverty in the Early Church," 377.

²⁵ Chrysostom, "Sixth Sermon on Lazarus and the Rich Man," 103.

²⁶ Philip Schaff and David Schley Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), Section 170.

Augustine of Hippo (354-430)

In the West, Augustine of Hippo approached the controversy around wealth from a very different perspective. While he shared a passion for the ascetic life with Clement, Cyprian, and Chrysostom, Augustine did not share their belief that salvation could be earned through acts of charity and sacrifice. Instead, he was fervent in his conviction that salvation was only possible by God's grace. This is evident in a letter written in 414, in which he responds to the concerns of a Sicilian layman named Hilary who seeks guidance in responding to the followers of Pelagius. According to Hilary the Pelagians have asserted, among other things, that "a rich man who remains in his riches cannot enter the kingdom of God unless he has sold all his possessions, and that it does not profit him if he has perhaps observed all the commandments by the use of his riches."²⁷ Augustine begins his lengthy response by noting that, according to Scripture, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were all wealthy. The parable in Luke 16 thus describes poor Lazarus being received into the bosom of wealthy Abraham while Lazarus' rich neighbor was condemned. The parable is therefore not about the merits of poverty and wealth, but about righteousness and mercy: "In order to show us that God did not reward poverty itself in the poor man and did not condemn riches in that order, but that piety in this one and impiety in the other each met with their own recompense, the torment of fire received that impious man while the bosom of a rich man received the pious poor man."²⁸ Augustine goes on to point out Paul's instruction that Timothy, regarding the rich members of his church, should "command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes

²⁷ "Epistle" 156 in Saint Augustine, *Letters 156-210: Epistulae II*, ed. Boniface Ramsey and trans. Roland J. Teske (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2005), 15.

²⁸ "Epistle" 157.23 in Saint Augustine, *Epistulae II*, 30.

on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” (1 Tim 6:17). It is pride that is at the heart of Paul’s teaching and the parable’s warning, not the mere possession of nice things: “It was this pride and this hope in the uncertainty of riches . . . and not the riches themselves, that brought to the torments of hell.”²⁹

Insofar as the Pelagians base their severe teaching on Jesus’ encounter with the Rich Young Ruler, Augustine addresses it specifically. Citing Matthew’s version of the story, Augustine notes that Jesus’ instruction to go, sell everything, and give it to the poor is not a response to the Rich Young Ruler’s initial question, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” (Matt 19:16) but to his follow-up question, “What do I still lack?” (Matt 19:20). Jesus then says that if the man wishes to be perfect he should go, sell, and give away to the poor. Augustine therefore concludes that the Pelagians are laying a heavier yoke upon their listeners than Jesus does because they present this commandment as a condition for salvation, not perfection. “Why then, should we deny that rich people, though they lack that perfection, still attain life?”³⁰ In addition, he notes that if Jesus meant to make a relinquishment of personal possessions a precondition for the wealthy to be saved then, based on Paul’s instruction in 1 Timothy 6, Jesus and Paul contradict one another. Given the choice between believing this or concluding that the Pelagians are mistaken, Augustine urges Hilary to choose the latter. Further, Augustine reminds Hilary how Jesus taught grace even after the Rich Young Ruler walked away:

For he did not say, “What seems impossible for human beings is easy for human beings if they will it,” but *What is impossible for human beings is easy of God,*

²⁹ “Epistle” 157.26 in Saint Augustine, *Epistulae II*, 32.

³⁰ “Epistle” 157.25 in Saint Augustine, *Epistulae II*, 32.

showing that, when these things are done correctly, they are not done by the power of a human being but by the grace of God. Let these people, then pay attention to this, and if they find fault with those who boast of their riches, let themselves avoid placing their trust in their own strength (emphasis in original).³¹

God's grace is the prime mover for Augustine, not human resources or human action. Augustine goes on to remind those who are rich that they should avoid placing trust in their own strength, and further reminds those who have given or are in the process of giving everything away that they do so only because God's grace empowers them to do so. He praises such people as "rich Christians" who are genuine disciples because, "though they possess riches, they are not nonetheless, possessed by them so that they prefer them to Christ."³² He goes on to point out the hypocrisy of the Pelagians who are undoubtedly supported by such rich Christians: "For I suspect that some of those who spread about these ideas impudently and imprudently are supported by rich and pious Christians in their needs . . . [They are] judged and condemned by the more excellent members of Christ who, thanks to their greater virtue, which the apostle commends, support themselves by their own hands."³³

In his praise and in his critique, Augustine breaks with the past and helps frame the debate into the future. Unlike Clement, Cyprian and Chrysostom, Augustine does not see wealth as an inherent problem, a moral cancer requiring the chemotherapy of renunciation and self-denial. These are human efforts at bottom, and only the miracle of God's grace can bring needed salvation. By claiming that a person can be rich and pious and therefore be a "more excellent member" of Christ's body, Augustine contradicts the

³¹ "Epistle" 157.29 in Saint Augustine, *Epistulae II*, 33.

³² "Epistle" 157.35 in Saint Augustine, *Epistulae II*, 36.

³³ "Epistle" 157.37, 38 in Saint Augustine, *Epistulae II*, 37.

rhetoric of contemporary voices like John Perkins who assert that “the Scriptures have very few good things to say about the rich.”³⁴ For Augustine, wealth is neither a barrier to heaven nor a burden on earth, but rather part of all that God has created in order to show love and blessing to humanity. In this way, Augustine may be seen as one who views wealth as morally neutral so long as it does not take the place of Christ in our hearts.³⁵ Weaver concludes that for Augustine, “It is the allegiance of the heart bestowed by God and directed toward God which is all important.”³⁶

There can be no doubt that Augustine was at least as passionate about estheticism as his predecessors mentioned above. Indeed, at the end of his letter to Hilary, Augustine remarks that Jesus’ command to go, sell, and give has been a particular blessing to him and his companions in their pursuit of perfection. Yet he is quick to say, “We do not judge with vain pride those who live like us. . . . Otherwise, by arguing for these ideas we might be found not to be interpreters of the holy scriptures but attackers of them.”³⁷ However, by articulating a theology of wealth that is far more nuanced than his predecessors, Augustine extends the parameters of what Christians may consider wealth’s responsible use. These parameters would undergo a far more radical expansion during the

³⁴ John Perkins, “Wealth and Poverty,” in *Applying the Scriptures* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 453.

³⁵ In his second homily on 1 John 2:12-17, Augustine compares God and creation with a bridegroom and a ring. It is appropriate for the bride to love the ring given to her by her beloved, but not to love it so much that the bridegroom is forgotten. “God does not forbid thee to love (*amare*) these things, howbeit, not to set thine affections upon them (*diligere*) for blessedness, but to approve and praise them to this end, that thou mayest love thy Creator.” See Saint Augustine, *Homily 2.11*, “Homilies on the First Epistle of John” in Philip Schaff, *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers Vol. VII* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997), 473.

³⁶ Weaver, “Wealth and Poverty in the Early Church,” 380.

³⁷ “Epistle” 157.39 in Saint Augustine, *Epistulae II*, 38.

social transformations of Europe associated with modern capitalism and the Protestant Reformation.

The Reformers: Martin Luther and John Calvin

R. H. Tawney's 1926 *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* sought to explain how "the medieval conception of the social order, which had regarded it as a highly articulated organism of members contributing in different ways to a spiritual purpose, *was shattered*" (emphasis added).³⁸ This was replaced by a "creed of the individual" in which each member of society is understood to be "as master of his own, with no obligation to postpone his own profit to the well-being of his neighbors."³⁹

Students of the Reformation can identify traits within the movement that lend themselves well to this shift: a willingness to question the once-unquestionable authority of the Roman Church; a conviction that God's Word could be understood by the laity apart from clerical interpretative control; and a respect for the role of individual conscience directed by Scripture in the decisions of the community. Theological reform played a crucial role in the development Europe's increasingly egalitarian economy, so it is natural to wonder how Martin Luther and John Calvin viewed this transformation generally as well as its impact on wealth accumulation and materialism. While it is possible to draw some conclusions about Calvin's views on work, wealth, and personal responsibility from his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, finding source material from Luther's theological writings is very difficult, as is finding clear evidence about Calvin's

³⁸ R. H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, originally published 1926 by Harcourt, Brace & Company (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1998), 98.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 146.

views on choosing an occupation, investing, and entrepreneurship. While Tawney provides very little in the way of original source citation for the provocative portrait he paints of Luther, his description is presented here. Tawney himself seems to acknowledge the problem of determining Luther's views of matters beyond the strictly theological or ecclesial when he writes, "Luther's utterances on social morality are the occasional explosions of a capricious volcano, with only a rare flash of light amid the torrent of smoke and flame, and it is idle to scan them for a coherent and consistent doctrine."⁴⁰ He continues,

Confronted with the complexities of foreign trade and financial organization, or with the subtleties of economic analysis, [Luther] is like a savage introduced to a dynamo or a steam-engine. He is too frightened and angry even to feel curiosity. Attempts to explain the mechanism merely enrage him; he can only repeat that there is a devil in it, and that good Christians will not meddle with the mystery of iniquity. But there is a method in his fury. It sprang, not from ignorance, for he was versed in scholastic philosophy, but from a conception which made the learning of the schools appear trivial or mischievous.⁴¹

From this we might surmise that Luther was uninterested in the economic changes taking place. But that would be too simplistic a reading. While the complexities of finance may have eluded him, the dangerous effects of money and power on the individual had not. In the same way that he believes the Germany Church is "sucked dry by the tribute which flows to the new Babylon" (that is, Rome), so too does he believe Germany society is "ridden by a conscienceless money-power, which incidentally ministers, like the banking business of the Fuggers, to the avarice and corruption of Rome. The exploitation of the Church by the Papacy, and the exploitation of the peasant and the craftsman by the capitalist, are thus two horns of the beast which sits on the seven

⁴⁰ Ibid., 88.

⁴¹ Ibid., 89.

hills.”⁴² Tawney concludes that Luther desired a society in which members renounce “the prizes and struggles which make the heart sick” and instead “be converted into a band of brothers, performing in patient cheerfulness the round of simple toil which is the common lot of the descendants of Adam.”⁴³ For Luther, the most admirable and appropriate life for the Christian was the simple life, for in such a life is complete reliance on God. As Tawney puts it, “For the arts by which men amass wealth and power, as for the anxious provision which accumulates for the future, Luther had all the distrust of a peasant and a monk. Christians should earn their living in the sweat of their brow, take no thought for the morrow, marry young and trust Heaven to provide for its own.”⁴⁴ Unfortunately, Luther could not have known that the ecclesial reform he sought would contribute to the near-extinction of the peasant life he affirmed.

While Luther may have done little more than look upon economic development with suspicion and disdain, John Calvin embraced it and made it a central part of his theology and ecclesiology. He first sees God as one who exercises his power with purpose, “not the vain, indolent, slumbering omnipotence which sophists feign, but vigilant, efficacious, energetic, and ever active . . . intent on individual and special movements.”⁴⁵ In our industry we reflect the *imago dei*. Calvin believed that work was the will of God, and that wealth was the reward for hard work. Unlike Luther, Calvin considered it appropriate to seek an occupation which would provide the greatest

⁴² Ibid., 89-90.

⁴³ Ibid., 90.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 92.

⁴⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I, xvi, 3, translation of: *Institutio Christianae Religionis*; Reprint, with new Introduction, originally published: Edinburgh : Calvin Translation Society, 1845-1846 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Research Systems, 1997).

earnings possible. However, rather than seeking self-aggrandizement, wealth should be reinvested ad infinitum for sake of the common good.⁴⁶ As Tawney describes it,

Early Calvinism . . . has its own rule, and a rigorous rule, for the conduct of economic affairs. But it no longer suspects the whole world of economic motives as alien to the life of the spirit, or distrusts the capitalist as one who has necessarily grown rich on the misfortunes of his neighbor, or regards poverty as in itself meritorious, and it is perhaps the first systematic body of religious teaching which can be said to recognize and applaud the economic virtues. Its enemy is not the accumulation of riches, but their misuse for purposes of self-indulgence or ostentation. Its ideal is a society which seeks wealth with the sober gravity of men who are conscious at once of disciplining their own characters by patient labour, and of devoting themselves to a service acceptable to God.⁴⁷

While it is clear that Calvin did not invent capitalism, his theology formed the bedrock upon which capitalistic values have been established. He would no doubt be chagrined to see the predominant role that luxury and opulence play in the societies which he and the other Reformers played such a prominent role in shaping. Indeed, materialism was of great concern to him even as he wrote his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. As he affirms the goodness of God's creation and confronts its abuse, Calvin's words are as much or more pertinent to us than to his original audience:

For there is scarcely any one whose means allow him to live sumptuously, who does not delight in feasting, and dress, and the luxurious grandeur of his house, who wishes not to surpass his neighbor in every kind of delicacy . . . Certainly ivory and gold, and riches, are the good creatures of God, permitted, nay destined, by divine providence for the use of man . . . but when the means are supplied to roll and wallow in luxury, to intoxicate the mind and soul with present and be always hunting after new pleasures, is very far from a legitimate use of the gifts of God. . . . Let all remember that the nourishment which God gives is for life, not luxury, and let them regard it as the law of Christian liberty.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Roger, B. Hill, "Protestantism and the Protestant Ethic," University of Georgia, 1992, 1996, <http://www.coe.uga.edu/workethic/hpro.html> (accessed Dec 12, 2009).

⁴⁷ Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, 105.

⁴⁸ Calvin, *Institutes* III, xix, 9.

Contemporary Voices

This brief survey of early Church and Reformation theologians gives a context, if not a clear explanation, as to why contemporary theologies of wealth and materialism tend to move toward one of two views. One view affirms wealth and the good things it provides as marks of God's good provision and blessing. The other view sees our culture's materialism as the clearest evidence that we are guilty of greed, selfishness, and exploitation. We have seen that Christian tradition contains healthy doses of both views, and that each theologian sought to hold them in tension with one another in a way that was pastorally appropriate to his cultural and economic context.

The discussion that follows is not intended to describe the full breadth of contemporary views. Such an effort would require inclusion of so-called prosperity gospel theology which does not warrant elucidation here. Instead, it is important to note the key concerns of ardent activists like John Perkins and Ron Sider, because theirs have been two of the most influential Christian voices on issues of wealth and poverty in the last thirty years. John Schneider intends his book, *The Good of Affluence*, to be, in part, a critique to Sider's *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*. In it he argues that God intends humans to live in a blessed state of delight in his creation, that affluence can be a legitimate experience of delight, and that this delight was at the heart of the community Jesus' ministry created.

John Perkins and Ron Sider

John Perkins is a noted Christian civil rights activist best known for his work in racial reconciliation and community development. He makes his view on wealth plain:

“The Scriptures have very few good things to say about the rich. As I research I find that the best thing Jesus says to the rich is that they should help the poor.”⁴⁹ He goes on, asserting that “any ardent reader of Scriptures would come to the conclusion that God is very concerned about the poor and that he has a very positive attitude toward the poor. It can also be seen that God has a very loving attitude toward the rich; however, he is constantly saying to them that they should help the poor.”⁵⁰ While Perkins’ statements are undoubtedly intended to provoke a strong response, the implication of his statement is nevertheless startling. He is arguing, in essence, that only the poor matter to God. If one is not poor, then one’s station can only be deemed righteous insofar as one’s resources are used in service to the poor. As if anticipating this objection, Perkins goes on:

Another question often asked is whether or not God calls us to be poor or whether he calls us to be rich. It seems that God’s call upon us is to be obedient. [Abraham] understood God’s will through him, which was to build his nation. . . . So through Abraham, all the families of the earth would be blessed. As Abraham moved out with an attempt to live in obedience to God, the by-product of that obedience was wealth and success.⁵¹

For Perkins, one can only be legitimately blessed if the blessing is used for the sake of others in need. He thus presents a great reversal. In a culture that defines poverty as “have-nots” in relation to everyone else, Perkins defines all “haves” in relation to how they serve the poor. From this premise, Perkins can advocate for service to the poor under his “three Rs of development,” namely relocation, reconciliation, and redistribution. By relocation, Perkins believes that Christians need to become neighbors with the poor such that the needs of the neighborhood become one’s own needs. Perkins then calls upon the

⁴⁹ Perkins, “Wealth and Poverty,” 453.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 455.

⁵¹ Ibid., 456.

local church to be “a force and a forum for reconciliation across all racial, cultural, social, and economic barriers.” Finally, Perkins asserts that redistribution means that we not only share our material goods with those in need, but also share “skills, technology, and educational resources in a way that empowers people to break out of the cycle of poverty and become able to meet their own needs.”⁵² It is hard not to conclude that to Perkins’s way of thinking, the only way one can be an authentic follower of Jesus is to be poor-centric.

Ron Sider may not believe that total identification with the poor is the only option for obedient Christians, but he remains convinced that Christians must work toward an economic structure that has the needs of the poor at its heart. His views are seen as radical to many, in large part because he asserts that it is sinful for Christians in America to have more than enough while people elsewhere do not have enough. In his very influential book, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger*, Sider contends that this sin reveals hypocrisy in the very heart of the Church:

Are we not guilty of greed when we demand an ever-higher standard of living while neglecting millions of children who are starving to death each year? Is it not time for the church to begin applying church discipline to those guilty of this sin? Would it not be more biblical to apply church discipline to people whose greedy acquisitiveness has led to “financial success” than to elect them to the board of elders?⁵³

Although Sider seems to have softened his views since the original publication of *Rich Christians*, he continues to be strident on two points. First, rich Christians should be permanently uneasy about their wealth. “The Bible is clear. If we get rich by oppressing the poor or if we have wealth and do not reach out generously to the needy, the Lord of

⁵² Ibid., 459.

⁵³ Ron Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (Dallas: Word, 1997), 99.

history moves against us. God judges societies by what they do to the people at the bottom.”⁵⁴ In a global economy, how can one be confident that their wealth is not in some way connected to the exploitation of someone on the other side of the world? Second, Christians should be permanently uneasy about their culture. Sider points to Old Testament directives like jubilee and the sabbatical remission of debts as examples of what the Bible considers to be just economic models. “God wants all people to have access to the productive resources to be able to earn a living. Justice for everyone, particularly the disadvantaged, takes precedence over the rights of the person able to pay the market price for land.”⁵⁵ How can a Christian in a free market economy buy and sell without fear that their activity denies someone else access?

Neither Sider nor Perkins seems concerned with the inherent contradictions in their poverty-centric models of economic development. Nor do they seem willing to acknowledge that, if we agree with them, then we must also conclude that to belong to our culture is to be trapped in guilt by association. To be comfortable materially means one must also be ashamed. Sider offers a conciliatory word, suggesting that biblical Christians will “reject materialism without falling into asceticism. They will delight in the splendor of the material world but not forget that things cannot ultimately satisfy. They will enjoy the good earth and celebrate its abundance without neglecting sacrificial sharing with the needy.”⁵⁶ But if Sider is right and we live in a corrupt system, what delight can there be? This is too little too late. In their zeal to promote a radical new

⁵⁴ Ron Sider, *Just Generosity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1999), 58.

⁵⁵ Sider, *Rich Christians*, 94.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

economic ethic, they marginalize and disempower the very middle-class Christians they seek to enroll.

John Schneider

In *Rich Christians*, Ron Sider considers Luke's parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). The rich man sits in luxury while Lazarus suffers outside his door, and upon their deaths Lazarus is received into Abraham's embrace while the rich man is condemned to torment in Hades. Sider compares the rich man to affluent Westerners who do not relieve the poverty of those in the two-thirds world. "The rich man merely neglected to help. His sin was one of omission. And it sent him to hell."⁵⁷ In his book, *The Good of Affluence*, John Schneider describes the impossible situation into which Sider's rhetoric places affluent Christians:

Is that comparison valid? . . . If so, one fairly clear implication would be that no affluent person in our day would ever have clear enough grounds for eating and drinking with assurance of divine approval. For there would always be one more Lazarus somewhere within reach to help, and so that golf game, or fishing trip, or dinner and movie would almost certainly fall under the headings of purple clothing and sumptuous living – the mortal sins of the rich man.⁵⁸

Schneider, a professor of religion and theology at Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Michigan, is intent on taking Sider and other "Christian intellectuals" to task for failing to offer "systematic and moral guidance for living *within* capitalism" (emphasis his) as has been done for "the modern orders of democracy and science."⁵⁹ Schneider goes on to declare,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 138.

⁵⁸ John R. Schneider, *The Good of Affluence* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 176.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 16.

It will not do anymore to tolerate that sad spectacle of the scholar who goes around decrying things like “materialism,” “consumerism,” and “individualism” in ways that shamelessly expose her own behavior, too, as ludicrously immoral. It is time for Christian intellectuals to understand that we are all in this boat together, and that the church needs our help in knowing how to go about navigating it the right way through new waters.⁶⁰

In the true spirit of Calvinism, Schneider argues that “capitalism (for all its problems) is not just the greatest liberating power in human history, but also that its cultural workings provide an unusually good opportunity for the expression of true Christian faith and virtue.”⁶¹ To make his case, Schneider first undertakes a biblical survey intended to demonstrate how the Scriptures describe the life that God has always intended human beings to have. This life of blessedness could be described as one of “delight,” and affluence is one way in which such delight can be experienced.⁶² If the culture of capitalism is one of *acquisition* and *enjoyment* of material affluence” (emphasis his),⁶³ then we must have a “distinctly Christian way to affirm the economic habits of acquisition and enjoyment of affluence as they necessarily exist within the culture of modern capitalism.”⁶⁴ Schneider believes that, unlike ancient social economies like those portrayed in the Old and New Testaments, modern capitalism provides opportunities for producing wealth by some in a way that creates wealth for others. “The inequality that exists under successful modern capitalism is not at all clearly immoral in the way

⁶⁰ Ibid., 17.

⁶¹ Ibid., 2-3.

⁶² Ibid., 3.

⁶³ Ibid., 23.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 26.

inequality was under ancient economies.”⁶⁵ The newness of capitalism, he argues, requires new thinking about what it means to live righteously with wealth.

A large part of this newness involves rethinking Jesus’ background and teaching, as well as taking a fresh look at the kind of community Jesus sought to create and the kind of people who joined him. Schneider argues that while Jesus did indeed identify with the poor in his earthly incarnation, he did not identify with them exclusively. Indeed, if we understand that the circumstances of Jesus’ incarnation were intentional, i.e., “the form it did take implies a very strong identification on God’s part with the sort of human personhood that it was,” then we can see how God identifies with the importance of growing up in a healthy and financially stable family, with honorable work, amongst people of every economic and ethnic background.⁶⁶ “If God had used the moral reasoning of some theologians today, Jesus would have been born in the inner city of Jerusalem . . . among the hordes of beggars, prostitutes, street children, criminals, and worse. . . . Jesus grew up in circumstances that were, to a notable extent, those of some little affluence.”⁶⁷ It makes sense, then, that the people drawn into the first Christian communities were artisans, traders, and some wealthy individuals who could have served as patrons.⁶⁸ Schneider provides an insightful description of those who were connected to Jesus’ ministry:

When we think of them, we should think of three distinct groups. First were the disciples, who left their homes, work, and families to travel with Jesus. They included the Twelve, the Seventy, and select others including Mary Magdalene and other

⁶⁵ Ibid., 34.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 128.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 73.

women. The second was a network of sympathizers who “followed” Jesus by staying where they were. Among this group were Mary, Martha, and their brother Lazarus, who lived in Bethany. Third were the multitudes who flocked to Jesus everywhere he went. As we have suggested, this group comprised a wide range of people who were miserable for various reasons. For the most part, there were the literal economic poor but also some wealthy people – tax collectors and prostitutes – whose poverty was spiritual, moral, and social. All were outcasts.⁶⁹

The wide variety of backgrounds—and expressions of discipleship—illustrated here should give us pause before asserting that Jesus identified with one economic group over and against another. On the contrary, it was his intention to create an altogether different kind of community, unlike the stratified ones he saw in Palestine or the quasi-socialist ones promoted by many Christians today. Schneider describes Jesus’ life and economic identity this way:

Jesus led relatively privileged people into new lives of economic redemption and redemptiveness. As he pulled them out of their safe worlds of social and economic stability, he placed them in contact with the very soul of the suffering world – the poor in economic, social, and spiritual senses. By bringing them together, the rich (in all relevant senses) and the poor (likewise in all relevant senses), he created a new community that was electrified by grace and liberation for everyone in different ways. In a strange way the rich became poor and the poor became rich. At bottom, this was the expression of poverty or lowering of spirit by one group in order to free and empower the spirits of the other one. And the economic expression of this was not some form of leveling or egalitarianism but something very like the order of the exodus people of Israel under the laws of Moses. The rich did not so much enter into economic poverty for the sake of the poor as they did into a new life of economic dynamism, of power born of renewed compassion, and they went on a way that they could never have imagined before Jesus called them to follow him.⁷⁰

This is a very different image than the ones presented by Sider and Perkins, such that the rich should lay aside the benefits of wealth in order to fully identify with the poor. This description speaks to the reality that there are indeed different ways of understanding wealth and poverty, and that the community Jesus intended to create

⁶⁹ Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*, 134-135.

⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 138.

would attend to all of them in such a way as to point every person toward a life of delight. Such a life was described simply and profoundly as that which was available only in the Kingdom of God.

This life came at a price. The description above does not take away from the reality that Jesus (especially as he described in the Luke's gospel), had pointed teaching directed at the "rich" who were "full now" and had already received "their reward." To such of these, Schneider points out that Jesus takes on the role of a prophet in much the same way that Amos confronted the rich of his day. "Their way of being materially affluent was in fact a denial of true delight in the kingdom of God. Jesus' condemnation of these rich – most often the religious and political rulers of Israel – was thus similar in its patterns to the judgments of the prophets in the Old Testament."⁷¹ As a result of the distinction made in the gospels between those whom Jesus confronts as "the rich" and those affluent people who become part of Jesus community, Schneider concludes that it is a complicated matter to determine "what sort of demand Jesus made upon people as the essential condition of discipleship and true faith."⁷² Hence we see Luke's Jesus interact with Zacchaeus the tax collector in one manner and the Rich Young Ruler in another. Jesus makes no demand upon Zacchaeus, who nevertheless promises to take extreme measures in order to make restitution for his corrupt practices. The Rich Young Ruler, on the other hand, is called upon to give away everything, even though he has presumably lived righteously.

How can we make sense of such a difference? "If Jesus' reasoning is akin to that of the prophets," Schneider argues, "it does not follow that in these passages he calls

⁷¹ Ibid., 140.

⁷² Ibid.

people away from the cosmic good of affluence, which is delight. Rather, he requires them to stand conspicuously apart from a cultural system ruled by people of great corruption.”⁷³ Schneider contends that, for Luke, Zacchaeus and the Rich Young Ruler are intended to show the difference between the right way to respond to Jesus’ invitation and the wrong way. The Rich Young Ruler should therefore be seen not as a representation for all people with affluence, but instead as an adversary who is “the paragon of worldly success, of the system of values that held sway in Israel. He is thus also the epitome of the rich upon whom Jesus pronounces unexpected prophetic curses [in Luke 6].”⁷⁴

Schneider’s theology of affluence and delight are a breath of fresh air to the stifling, guilt-ridden discussion American Christians have been having around materialism for the past three decades. In addition, while it creates difficulties for the thesis presented here, Schneider makes a compelling case for Luke’s Rich Young Ruler as a negative example that illustrates how dangerous material riches can be to the soul. For this thesis is important to consider: Does Mark also paint the rich ruler as altogether bad, or does he have an alternative view? This will be addressed in the next chapter. For now, let us note how Jesus called all would-be followers to costly discipleship and yet framed that call differently for each person. Some were called to leave everything and follow while others stayed home. Some would relinquish their material wealth, while others would retain and use it in the service of Jesus’ new community. Each would be called to pay a price. “For some, that price was direct involvement in and with the narrative of the prophet, who would be rejected, and their destiny would conform to his.

⁷³ Ibid., 153.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 145.

For others, the price was radical redirection of religious and moral life toward the goals of the kingdom as envisioned by Jesus.”⁷⁵ None of them were called to poverty or prosperity *per se*, and neither condition is preferable in the context of kingdom living.

Schneider’s theology of delight offers an important corrective to the cultural legacy of Protestantism that views materialism with deep ambivalence, moving toward despair.⁷⁶ This ambivalence has been revealed in the work of Princeton social scientist Robert Wuthnow. Drawing his conclusions from surveys and qualitative interviews, Wuthnow notes that Americans “do not simply deplore materialism at one moment and then go nonchalantly to the shopping mall. Instead, we debate with ourselves. We feel torn.”⁷⁷ Could it be that the Rich Young Ruler of Mark 10 falls before Jesus’ feet because he feels torn in the same way? If so, then the clarity we seek may be closer at hand than we once imagined.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 160-161.

⁷⁶ Robert Wuthnow, “A Good Life and a Good Society: The Debate Over Materialism,” in *Rethinking Materialism*, Robert Wuthnow, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1995), 8-15; Joel A. Carpenter, “Contemporary Evangelicalism and Mammon: Some Thoughts,” in *More Money, More Ministry*, Larry Eskridge and Mark Noll, ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 399-405.

⁷⁷ Wuthnow, *Rethinking Materialism*, 5.

CHAPTER 3

JESUS, THE RICH YOUNG RULER, AND THE DISCIPLES

A Case for Mark's Rich Young Ruler as a Sympathetic Character

In the previous chapter, it was noted that according to Schneider, Luke's gospel depicts the Rich Young Ruler as an adversary who represents "the rich" in the most pejorative sense of the word. It will be argued here that even though Mark's narrative was source material for Luke and Matthew, Mark has a markedly more sympathetic view than the other gospel writers, as evidenced by the fact that he includes the remarkable comment that Jesus loved the man (Mark 10:21). The key question with which this chapter will wrestle is, Can a case be made for seeing the Rich Young Ruler not as a greedy exploiter, but as a well-intentioned materialist as one might find in our culture today? Before we can attempt an answer, a careful consideration of text-critical interpretations is needed.

Text-critical Interpretations: The Rich Young Ruler as Greedy Exploiter

From a text-critical perspective, the consensus view is that the Rich Young Ruler is a wealthy estate holder who, undoubtedly, has become wealthy through the exploitation of his workers. More sympathetic readings suggest this injustice is not

intentional on his part, but is nevertheless the only possible explanation for how this man has become wealthy in a peasant society. Mark has a strongly apocalyptic worldview,¹ so the Rich Young Ruler asks a question that would have been typical of the apocalyptically-minded: Knowing the sharp distinction between this corrupt age and the longed-for Age to Come, how can I be sure I will be one of those who inherits the latter?²

The fact that the Rich Young Ruler opens his question by referring to Jesus as “good teacher” leads Jesus to challenge this title, perhaps because the custom of the day would be to respond to such a compliment with a compliment in return. Mark’s Jesus is one “who must cast the truth like a stone through a plate glass window”³ so he challenges the Rich Young Ruler instead of engaging in flattery. He reminds the Rich Young Ruler of the some of the commandments, focusing on those that relate to righteous action toward other people and with the command to honor one’s father and mother. Jesus modifies the tenth commandment from “Do not covet” to “Do not defraud,” perhaps because of the rendering in the Septuagint. More importantly, while the Rich Young Ruler has no need to covet his neighbor’s property, his claim that he has kept all the commandments since his youth reveals how he has deceived himself.

Then Jesus looks at the man and loves him (Mark 10:21). This is the only moment in Mark that Jesus is said to love (*ἀγαπάω*) someone. Different explanations are given for this. Perhaps this indicates a shift from the tense mood at the beginning of the encounter,

¹ Ben Witherington III, *The Gospel of Mark: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 59-62.

² N. T. Wright, *Mark for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 135.

³ Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 60.

such that he now looks upon this sincerity with admiration.⁴ Conversely, “that look of love was not a look of approval . . . Rather we understand the Lord’s love here as a divine love for sinners, the agape that is not caused by any worth in its object but is ever seeking to redeem the unworthy.”⁵ He may look upon the man with paternal love, in light of the fact that Jesus intends to invite this man into the new family Jesus is creating.⁶ It is with this feeling of love that Jesus looks at the man in such a way as to demonstrate that he has been given spiritual perception by the Holy Spirit to discern the true nature of a person’s condition.⁷

To the man’s assertion that he has kept the commandments perfectly, Jesus therefore responds, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” Why does Jesus give this hard word? Again, several possibilities are offered. One commentator suggests it is because the man has become so preoccupied with his own piety that he has “lost his delight in God” and lacks “the self-sacrificing devotion which characterizes every true follower of Jesus.”⁸ Another believes that as a wealthy person, he may enjoy the reputation and status given to a benefactor and Jesus is calling upon him to give that up.⁹ Alternatively, a third commentator contends that the poor to whom Jesus refers are his

⁴ John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2002), 303.

⁵ Charles E. B. Cranfield, "Riches and the Kingdom of God: St Mark 10:17-31" in *Scottish Journal of Theology* 4, no. 3 (1951): 308.

⁶ Joel Marcus, *Mark 8-16* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 722; 727.

⁷ Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 57.

⁸ William L. Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 367.

⁹ Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 303.

disciples such that he is calling the man to cash in his wealth and become a benefactor to Jesus' new community.¹⁰ Another scholar asserts that Jesus may have been intended to correct both a spiritual distortion the man has about his own righteousness, as well as to demonstrate repentance by giving to the poor he has exploited.¹¹ Still another believes the young man's confidence is in his upright living which has led "to a false sense of security, a sense that God owes one something" and that Mark wishes to make it clear that true obedience can only be seen in "the willingness to assume the yoke of discipleship to Jesus."¹² Finally, N.T. Wright suggests, "Jesus' basic demand is not for some logic-chopping extra observance, some tightening of definition here, some sharpening of exact meaning there. It is for idols and covetousness to be thrown to the winds: sell up and give to the poor!"¹³

The eagerness with which the Rich Young Ruler falls on his knees before Jesus at the beginning of the encounter is framed in stark contrast with the deep discouragement with which he leaves. The verb *στυγνάζω* means (1) "to be appalled or shocked"; (2) "to be or become gloomy or dark"; and as a facial expression, "to be downcast."¹⁴ Thus Mark's "quickly sketched portrait of the ups and downs" of this man are similar to his description of the "manic-depressive Herod in confrontation with John the Baptist (6:14-29) and anticipates Shakespearean characters such as Claudius in Hamlet, who careen

¹⁰ Joseph H. Hellerman, "Wealth and Sacrifice in Early Christianity: Revisiting Mark's Presentation of Jesus' Encounter with the Rich Young Ruler," *Trinity Journal* 21, no. 2 (2000): 159.

¹¹ Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 729.

¹² Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 283.

¹³ Wright, *Mark for Everyone*, 136.

¹⁴ Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament Vol. 4* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 358.

between aspirations of new life and the downward pull of their passions and addiction to power.”¹⁵ At the end of the narrative Mark reveals that the man “had many possessions” or, alternatively translated, “had great estates.”¹⁶ Thus the man can either be seen as unwilling to relinquish his possessions in exchange for an itinerate life of a disciple¹⁷ or is indignant because Jesus has asked him to stop exploiting his workers.¹⁸

As the man walks away, Jesus turns to his disciples and seeks to redeem the man’s tragic choice by using it as an object lesson about wealth. Jesus’ teachable moment with the disciples will be explored in the next chapter. For now let us acknowledge that there is very little room to argue that Mark (nor Matthew or Luke, for that matter) intends to illicit sympathy for the Rich Young Ruler by his portrayal. All historical and critical frameworks point to the Rich Young Ruler as the embodiment of “how not to respond to the dominion of God.” His is a cautionary tale of the most startling kind. It is as though he leaves the story more lost, and more worthy of our derision, than when he entered it.

No one makes this case with greater zeal than theologian Bruce Malina, whose contribution to understanding the cultural context of first century Palestine is significant.¹⁹ Malina contributed an article for a collection of essays related to wealth and poverty in the journal, *Interpretation*. There he argues that in the culture portrayed in the New Testament, “rich” or “wealthy” as a rule meant “avaricious, greedy,” while “poor”

¹⁵ Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 729.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 723.

¹⁷ Donahue and Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 304.

¹⁸ Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 723.

¹⁹ Detailed discussion of Malina’s anthropological and sociological perspective of early Christian society is shown in *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1981).

referred to persons scarcely able to maintain their honor and dignity.”²⁰ He goes on to assert that the gospels represent the wealthy as wicked because they chose to serve Greed rather than God.²¹ He therefore refers to the biblical text under discussion as the story of the Greedy Young Man. Malina argues that an important first step to interpreting the meaning of “poor” and “rich” is to consider linguistic collocation, that is, “the lexical company that words keep. On this basis, Malina concludes,

The “poor” rank among those who cannot maintain their inherited status due to circumstances that befall them and their family, such as debt, being in a foreign land, sickness, death (widow), or some personal physical accident. Consequently, from the viewpoint of the vast majority of people, the poor would not be a permanent social class but a sort of revolving class of people who unfortunately cannot maintain their inherited status.²²

By contrast, the linguistic collocation of “rich” places it opposite “hungry” and synonymous with “mighty” and “proud.” After citing multiple references along this line, Malina concludes,

If we take all these adjacent descriptions of the rich and group them in terms of what they have in common, it would seem that they became rich as the result of their own covetousness, or greed, or that of their ancestors. . . . Significantly, one was presumed to have become rich by depriving others, defrauding and eliminating others, prospering by having others become wretched, pitiable, ill, blind, and naked.²³

Malina continues by comparing four basic social institutions (kinship, economics, politics and religion) and gives examples of different cultures that are organized around each one. This is done in order to demonstrate how “societal arrangement determines the meaning of specific concepts” and how different a conception of “the rich” would be in a kinship

²⁰ Bruce J. Malina, “Wealth and Poverty in the New Testament World,” *Interpretation* 41, no. 4 (1987): 355.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 356.

²³ *Ibid.*, 357.

system of first century Palestine as compared to an economic system as we find in Western Europe and the United States. He therefore offers the following conclusion:

If we turn to the relevant truisms of the Mediterranean world, I suggest that three cultural norms can shed light on the discussion: (1) that all goods are limited; (2) that no one goes without necessities; and (3) that the wealthy are inherently evil. . . . Thus the generally agreed upon perceptions of the first-century Mediterranean world do not fit our contemporary values and experience, and neither do the economics and social structures of antiquity.²⁴

Malina's perspective is more or less consistent with that of the commentators cited above, and his insight is extremely important for careful interpretative work. But if we take Malina's comments seriously, the only responsible way to begin a treatment of Mark 10:17-31 among twenty-first century Americans would be to declare that a "plain reading" of this text is not possible and, once explained, the meaning of this text will have little relevance. In his essay "What Then Shall We Do," Max Stackhouse appears to be responding to this problem in general, and to Malina's comment in particular, when he writes,

Modern Christians have no choice but to attempt to show that at least some theological claims, ethical principles, or social themes found in Scripture may well be of more than contextual import. In one sense, that is what every missionary since Paul, every preacher since Peter, and every theologian since, perhaps, Appollos has believed. Anyone who has ever tried to understand the pertinence of the message of the text in relationship to another context where it is explicated has done the same. Pastors have always presumed that the text had trans-contextual content which only needed to be teased out and recontextualized in a way that could become indigenized in a secondary context, transforming it in the process. Today we call this "contextualization," a process that stands in contrast to current forms of "contextualism," although the two are frequently confused. Is it possible that the pastors are wiser than the scholars in this matter?²⁵

²⁴ Ibid., 360-361.

²⁵ Max L. Stackhouse, "What Then Shall We Do: On Using Scripture in Economic Ethics," *Interpretation* 41, no. 4 (1987): 389.

While this pastor makes no claim to be wiser than the scholars, I do wonder if there may be a responsible way to understand Mark 10:17-31 that does not require us to write the Rich Young Ruler as greedy, exploitive and evil. If we agree that those who struggle under the weight of materialism as it is described in Chapter 1 deserve pity and compassion, then we must ask: Is it possible for someone in the first century to conflate who-I-am with what-I-have just as so many do in the twenty-first century? Could this text be a vivid depiction of how Jesus would seek to engage, invite, and redeem the Rich Young Rulers among us, and the Rich Young Ruler inside each of us?

The balance of this chapter will be, to borrow from Stackhouse, an attempt to recontextualize the story of the Rich Young Ruler in a way that can be indigenized for our context. Doing so will, no doubt, create the hermeneutical dilemma J. G. McConville describes in his article on narrative theology. He begins by stating that narrative theology is in part a response to “the over-exclusive concern for historicity and a tendency to view [biblical narrative] as a quarry for doctrinal statements,” but then asks, “How can one be open to Scripture, while remaining true to ‘the faith once delivered’?”²⁶ With this challenge clearly in mind, the following is offered.

A Narrative Theology Interpretation: The Rich Young Ruler as Earnest Life-Seeker

In Thomas Merton’s *Wisdom of the Desert*, we hear these sage words from the Desert Mothers and Fathers: “Abbot Pastor said, ‘There are two things which a monk ought to hate above all, for by hating them he can become free in this world.’ And a brother asked: ‘What are these things?’ The elder replied, ‘An easy

²⁶ J. G. McConville, “Narrative Theology,” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packers, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 451-452.

life and vain glory.”²⁷ With this in mind, we consider the Rich Young Ruler. What we know of him comes in the form of something like a composite sketch. We will focus on Mark’s version of the story because Mark says that “as [Jesus] was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, ‘Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?’ (Mark 10:17).” Thus Mark portrays a man who, like young professionals today, knows what he wants and is not shy about going after it. Luke refers to him as “a certain ruler,” while Matthew points out that he is “young.” Of course, all three accounts note that he was rich and “had many possessions.” This man has it all: Youthful stamina, social status and an abundance of material stuff. Thus this composite sketch turns out to be the person voted “Most Likely to Be Envied” in our culture. He might be among the ranks of teen celebrities, junior executives, and heirs to vast fortunes. Or he might simply be a person who has done all the right things in order to succeed – graduating from the best schools, competing for the best jobs, and striving to provide the best opportunities for himself and for his family. However he came to his place in life, we could be forgiven for assuming that he is a happy and contented man. Yet, he is clearly not happy and is far from contented. This person, who has done all the right things and gained (or been given) all the right opportunities for happiness, is instead restless and anxious.

Malina’s analysis above notwithstanding, it was a commonly held understanding within the Jewish worldview that this man’s wealth could be considered a sign of God’s

²⁷ *The Wisdom of the Desert*, trans. Thomas Merton (New York: New Directions Books, 1960), 26.

blessing.²⁸ In *The Divine Conspiracy*, Dallas Willard writes, “The common assumption of the time, as in many times since, was that the prosperity of the rich indicated God’s special favor. How else could they be rich, since it is, supposedly, God himself who controls the wealth of the earth?”²⁹ Confronting this assumption is particularly important in our culture of conspicuous consumption, because it is easy for us to conclude that our neighbors are happier than we are because they drive larger vehicles and live in larger houses than we do. Thus they deserve to be envied. It is even possible that we could use Jesus’ encounter with this wealthy young man to justify doing so. But to read Jesus’ teaching as a judgment against wealth would be to totally miss the point. When Jesus opens the Sermon on the Mount with the declaration that the “poor in spirit” are blessed because they shall inherit the kingdom of God (Matthew 5:3), he is seeking to dispel the myth once and for all that one’s position in this life is either indicative or decisive with respect to one’s eternal destiny. As Willard explains, “Under the rule of God, the rich and the poor have no necessary advantage over each other with regard to well-being or well-doing in this life or the next.”³⁰ Perhaps this young man has already discovered this in his own life because he is willing to interrupt Jesus’ travel plans by running up to him and falling to his knees, as if in desperation.

The sense that this young man is under a great amount of stress is also revealed in his question. Mark has him asking, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” In Matthew’s

²⁸ Donald Hagner emphasizes this point in *Matthew 14-28*, vol. 33B, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, 2002), 561 by noting that “[The disciples] shared the common view of the time that riches were a sign of God’s blessing (together with the righteousness of the blessed; cf. Deut 28:1–14) and provided the possibility of both deeds of charity (almsgiving) and leisure for the study of Torah and the pursuit of righteousness.”

²⁹ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), 108.

³⁰ Dallas Willard, *The Spirit of the Disciplines* (San Francisco: Harper, 1988), 208.

version, the young man asks what “good deed” he must do in order to have eternal life, as if eternal life is a possession that can be bought if one uses the appropriate currency.³¹ But Mark takes a different view of the young man’s motivations. Here, speaking of eternal life as an “inheritance” suggests that the young man understands it is not something he can buy, but rather that which must be given or entrusted to him. We might even imagine that, being both young and rich, his status and material wealth are things he has inherited, and that he feels the burden of demonstrating that he is worthy to receive it. If this is so, then the man may well be running to Jesus and kneeling before him because he feels an enormous burden of responsibility and eagerly desires guidance and perhaps even relief from the weight of wealth. This seems to be the burden Abbot Pastor speaks of when he talks about the “easy life” and “vain glory” quoted above. Willard notes that “when we prosper, we need guidance and grace more than ever,” and that the apostle Paul understood this when he says that both prosperity and poverty reveal our need for God’s enabling power (Philippians 2:16).”³²

When the young man asks for guidance toward inheriting eternal life, we understand his question as encompassing more than the possibility of going to heaven when we die as many Christians would describe it today. Jesus taught that the dominion of God was available as a present-tense reality, and that the Age to Come was breaking into the present age. Thus, the eternal life sought as dimensions are defined by quality over quantity. In other words, the young man may not only want an everlasting life in

³¹ F. Dale Bruner, *Matthew Vol. 2: The Churchbook* (Dallas: Word, 1990), 669.

³² Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines*, 216.

God's kingdom, but may also want a life that counts. Willard reflects on God's intentionality in creating us this way when he writes,

Everyone, from the smallest child to the oldest adult, naturally wants in some way to be *extraordinary, outstanding*, making a unique contribution or, if all else fails, want to be thought so – if only for a brief time. The fifteen minutes of fame that Andy Warhol said everyone would someday have, in the modern media-saturated world, may give desperate souls an assurance of uniqueness that could protect them from being “nobody,” at least in their own eyes. . . . Our hunger for significance is a signal of who we are and why we are here, and it also is the basis for humanity's enduring response to Jesus. For he always takes individual human beings as seriously as their shredded dignity demands, and he has the resources to carry through with his high estimate of them (*italics his*).³³

It is precisely this God-given desire to make a unique contribution that drives the Rich Young Ruler to his knees before Jesus, and it is Jesus' intent to provide precisely those resources that will enable the young man to live into Jesus' high estimate of him. Perhaps the young man has heard about Jesus and believes that he has genuine wisdom to offer. Perhaps he is one of those rare souls who not only recognizes the incredible opportunity his wealth affords him, but also recognizes his lack of wisdom in making the most of it. Like many of the young professionals of our day, he hungers for a life of significance, knows that the world has no wisdom to offer in that regard, and is looking for a mentor or “life coach.” It is therefore not surprising that, in Mark and Luke's versions, the young man begins his question by addressing Jesus as “Good Teacher.” He has perceived the goodness of God in Jesus. Since Peter has just recently come to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah (Mark 8:29), it may even be possible for the young ruler to have done likewise. The nature of his question and the fact that he is directing it

³³ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 15.

toward Jesus suggest that he is standing in the doorway of the Kingdom and is at risk of stumbling right through it.

Whether the title is used out of courtesy or keen perception, Jesus does not let the compliment pass without taking the opportunity to question the standard by which goodness is measured. “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone” (Mark 10:18). Jesus is almost certainly anticipating the fact that this young man will seek to justify himself on the basis of good works. In fact, it is as if Jesus wants to give him the opportunity to do so when he says, “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’ (Mark 10:19).” Jesus has intentionally focused on those commandments which deal with human relationships and not mentioned the ones relating to relationship with God. While it might have been impossible for the man to claim perfect faithfulness as a Jewish worshipper, he could argue that he has been an upright Jewish citizen.³⁴ As if on cue, the young man replies, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth (vs. 20).”

It is not uncommon for us to try and present ourselves as good people who do good things (more or less). Each of us has an unwritten moral résumé that might well include kindnesses done to strangers, monies given to charity and acts of self-restraint. But this is not the kind of exercise the young man is undertaking. Rather, it is as if he is saying, “Yes, Jesus. I do those things. Everybody does them. Clearly they do not get to the heart of the issue, because if they did then I would not be on my knees before you, feeling as lost as I feel right now.” We can draw this conclusion because of the editorial

³⁴ C. S. Keener, “Mark 10:17-32,” *The IVP Bible background Commentary: New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1997, c1993).

comment Mark makes next. Mark says that Jesus looked at the man and loved him. There is something genuine going on inside of this man and Jesus responds to it from his heart. The young man has not run up and knelt before Jesus just so that he can convince himself that he is righteous. He falls to his knees because he has done all he knows to do, and it has not worked.³⁵

There is at least one other time that Mark tells us what Jesus is feeling as he ministers to others. In the sixth chapter Jesus is met at the shoreline by a great throng of people. Seeing them, Jesus “had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things (6:34).” He then performs his first feeding miracle by providing lunch for all five thousand listeners from only five loaves of bread and two fish. Mark seems to be providing a pattern here: Jesus encounters those who demonstrate a genuine desire for the Kingdom he offers. He has a deep emotional response to such people, feeling love and compassion toward them. He then provides them with spiritual instruction followed by physical provision. On the basis of what Jesus will say to the disciples after the Rich Young Ruler walks away, we can see that Jesus intends to do the same thing here. The call to give everything away would be followed by Jesus’ ample provision. He will tell the disciples that no one has left anything behind in this life that they will not receive one hundred fold now and into eternity (Mark 10:28-30). If the young man could have accepted the teaching, he would have received the blessing.

³⁵ While Matthew is suspicious of the young man’s motives, F. Dale Bruner in *Matthew Vol. 2: The Churchbook* (699), notes that “in Mark the man’s question and person are attractive to Jesus” and that Mark’s account is more likely to be historically accurate. Bruner further notes that this leads John Chrysostom to resist the tendency to find fault with the young man, concluding instead, “a dissembler I would by no means call him, both because it is not safe to venture on things uncertain, and especially in blame, and because Mark hath taken away this suspicion.” Chrysostom thus directs us toward a practice of Christian charity toward wealthy people that is worthy of imitation.

We can see the apparently selfish and materialistic professionals of our day and find the same motivations as the Rich Young Ruler. They are striving to “do good” and “be good” for their families, their friends, and their communities in the only way they know how. Many, like the Rich Young Ruler, have played by culture’s rules, oriented their lives around culture’s priorities, and are deeply disturbed when they fail to achieve the happiness that the culture promises. While we might be tempted to believe that they, like the Rich Young Ruler, will be unable to accept this hard teaching of Jesus, we must first acknowledge that it is truly gospel for them and for us. It is good and life-giving news to those who receive it. We must then acknowledge that the Rich Young Rulers among us have not heard this part of the gospel because we have failed to understand it and accept it, much less proclaim it.

Jesus’ Command as a Call to a New Identity

Accepting the young man’s assertion that he has been a good person who has done his best, Jesus says to him, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Mark 10:21). The dramatic encounter ends as abruptly as it began. “When he heard this, [the man] was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions” (v. 22). We the observers are left with difficult questions. What is the one thing that the young man lacks? Why does Jesus instruct the man to give the money to the poor instead of contributing it to the new community Jesus is creating? How can the man gain heavenly treasure *before* beginning a new life as Jesus’ disciple? What does the young man hear in

Jesus' instruction that is so discouraging that it causes him turn on his heel and walk away without another word?

To begin to answer these questions, we must once again pay special attention to the fact that Jesus loves this man. His heart goes out to the Rich Young Ruler just as it went out to the crowd who were like sheep without a shepherd (Mark 6:34). When Jesus loves someone, that love is always expressed as the intent to see that person set free. If we accept the notion that this man has come to Jesus because the responsibility of great wealth weighs heavily upon him, then we can see that Jesus' instruction to sell everything off makes sense. We must not be facetious about the burden of wealth. What does the world tell rich people to do with their money? Spend it on a lavish lifestyle and fill up your life with things you don't need, says Madison Avenue. Invest it in the free market and make rich people richer, says Wall Street. Buy influence with it so you can know the "right" people and feel powerful, say the political elite. Feel guilty about it and assuage that guilt by giving some of it away, say the socially conscientious. The one thing you are not allowed to do, however, is to turn your back on it. To reject wealth, to be done with it and be divorced from the structures it props up and to be free of its demands is to do the unthinkable and the unforgivable.

In the eyes of the world, a wealthy person *is* his or her wealth. And perhaps the reason the Rich Young Ruler is "shocked" by Jesus' teaching is that Jesus does not see him this way. Jesus does not see the status or the stuff. He sees a suffering soul, weighed down with capricious and oppressive expectations of the world. We remember what Jesus says: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in

heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Matt 11:28-30). Before this man can take on the easy burden of following Jesus, Jesus knows he must lay down the heavy burden of wealth.

Is it possible to unburden ourselves of the world’s expectations without giving everything away? Yes, Jesus will say to Peter, it is possible – with God’s help. But for a person who has the “you are your stuff” lesson drilled into him, wealth has become so enmeshed with identity that Jesus knows it is impossible for this man to separate who-he-is from what-he-has. The fact that this young man walks away so abruptly confirms that Jesus is right. The young man is like a patient who is told that unless his leg is amputated, he will die from gangrene. Doctors would not recommend such a procedure lightly, but do so only when it is clear that a patient will die with the infected limb or live without it. Jesus understands that this man will eventually die a spiritual death if he cannot separate his sense of self from his possessions. If we see that Jesus’ instruction to the young man is really an invitation to find a new identity – a new way of looking at himself as intrinsically valuable as a beloved child of God – then we can see that what Jesus is saying here is one of the most beautiful and life-giving expressions of God’s love to be found in the Bible. This “hard teaching” is in fact a “great teaching.” Perhaps Jesus’ command could be amplified this way: “Friend, you have certainly done your best to be a good person, but there is still one thing missing. You have not experienced the unconditional love and acceptance of God. It has nothing to do with what you possess or what you’ve accomplished. But until you have separated yourself from these things, you will never be able to trust that there are no strings attached to what I want to offer you. So here’s what I want you to do: Sell everything and give the money to people who don’t

have anything. Don't give it to me, because I neither want it nor need it. I want you for you, and I never want you to believe otherwise. After you've given everything away, I promise you that you will be free of the world's phony-ness and will start living in the Kingdom's truthfulness. Then I want you follow me so I can show you how to get the most out of this new life."

If this amplification seems far-fetched, consider the story that Richard Foster recounts about Clarence Jordan, the founder and spiritual leader of Koinonia Farm in Georgia, when a wealthy woman came to him and expressed her desire to join the experimental Christian community:

Clarence Jordan . . . told her to first dispose of her money. "How?" she asked. Jordan replied, "Give it to the poor, give it to your relatives, throw it over a bridge—but you must enter the fellowship without it." She asked if she could give the money to Koinonia Farm. Perceptively, Jordan saw the danger in that act. He accurately discerned her to be a lonely person—lonely because every friend she had was after her money. "If you put that money here," said Jordan, "you would think we courted you for your money and that we loved you for your money." The wealth would become a further barrier to fellowship, Jordan noted, because she would begin to view herself as the great benefactor of the group and feel that they should forever feel indebted to her. Jordan concluded, "For your sake and our sake, you get rid of that money and come walk this way with us."³⁶

How many wealthy people would admit, even if only in the privacy of their own hearts, that the wealth they enjoy is indeed a barrier to authentic acceptance and love? Do the young professionals of our day—modern Rich Young Rulers—believe that a life defined by authenticity and unconditional acceptance is an option? Perhaps a better question is: Do we find an invitation to such a life plausible? Could we really be loved and accepted if we did not make the money and have the nice things and live in the right neighborhood? Would we still be loved and appreciated, or would we be pitied and

³⁶ Richard Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, revised and updated (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 186; Dallas Lee, *The Cotton Patch Evidence* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1971), 86-87.

ultimately ignored? Any person whose values are shaped by our materialistic culture cannot see such an offer as credible. To open oneself to Jesus' offer of friendship is indeed to open oneself to a different reality. It is to open oneself to the possibility Jesus describes simply as "The Kingdom of God."

From this reading, the "one thing" that the young man lacks is complete confidence in God's goodness. Everything this man knows and everything the world has taught him says that if he gives up his identity as a wealthy ruler then he will have no identity at all. Not only will he become nothing, but he will stay that way forever. Jesus knows firsthand that this is not true. Because of his experience in the wilderness, Jesus can offer us "the assurance that our universe is a perfectly safe place for us to be."³⁷ In order to receive this assurance, we must begin by trusting that Jesus knows what he is talking about. The form this trust takes looks different for every person. For a paralyzed man it was to obey Jesus' instruction to "stand up, take your mat and walk" (John 5:2-9). For Peter the fisherman, it meant leaving the only life he had ever known to follow Jesus around the countryside. For a person today, it may mean sitting in a parking lot, placing her head on the steering wheel of the car and asking Jesus to take charge of her life. In the case of this young man, it meant relinquishing the wealth of his life and all that went with it. Regardless of how it looks to another, for each of us it is a moment of complete surrender to Jesus' command. Regardless of how another might view it, for each of us it feels like the biggest gamble of our lives.

³⁷ Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy*, 66.

Peter's Concern: "Look, We Have Left Everything and Followed You"

As the Rich Young Ruler walks away, Jesus turns to his disciples who have been watching this exchange and says, "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" The disciples were so flummoxed that Jesus repeats himself, adding that "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" (Mark 10:23-25). The fact that Jesus addresses the disciples as children in verse 24 may indicate that Jesus is framing his comment in terms of the familial relationships he is creating within his community,³⁸ or is intended to indicate their level of spiritual knowledge.³⁹ Many attempts have been made to smooth out the apparent awkwardness of Jesus' metaphor, including the suggestion that a transcription error made "rope" (κάμιλος) into "camel" (κάμηλος), but there is precedent in earlier Judaism for an aphorism about an elephant going through the eye of a needle.⁴⁰ It is reasonable enough to conclude that "Jesus is contrasting the largest animal and the smallest hole that an early Jew in Israel would think of."⁴¹ On a more basic level, the image tells the story: The reason a camel cannot fit through the eye of a needle is because there is too much camel. We cannot place our trust in God and enter into the abundant living of the Kingdom if we have, in this sense, too much ego. Jesus means a very similar thing when he says, "Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able" (Luke 13:24).

³⁸ Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 732; Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 371-372.

³⁹ Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 283-284.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 284.

⁴¹ Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 284; Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 731.

“Then who can be saved?” the disciples ask. If they have understood wealth as a sign of God’s favor, then Jesus’ observation would rightly leave the disciples perplexed. Jesus wants to emphasize that “salvation is not obtainable through even strenuous human effort, trying to squeeze into God’s dominion.”⁴² Mark says that Jesus looked them square in the eye and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible (vs. 26-27).” Jesus wants to make it clear that the situation is not hopeless. If we continue along the line of thinking offered in the previous chapter, namely, that the Rich Young Ruler’s identity is so bound up with his possessions that he literally cannot imagine himself existing apart from them, then Jesus is essentially making the same point here. While we may live in a material world, we are not defined by material things. God, who is Spirit (John 4:24), is alone able to bring us into His spiritual kingdom. “The ability and power to effect deliverance reside in God alone (cf. Rom 8:7). ‘Eternal life,’ ‘salvation,’ or ‘entrance into the Kingdom’ describe a single reality which must be bestowed as his gift to men.”⁴³

In the introduction to his commentary, Witherington notes that there are two schools of thought on Mark’s portrayal of the disciples. One school says that the disciples are portrayed positively at the beginning of the gospel but later presented as not comprehending and finally as deserters. The other school says the portrayal is negative throughout.⁴⁴ Witherington suggests that Mark’s intention was to provide a biography of Jesus that would have been consistent with other ancient biographies of its time.

⁴² Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 284.

⁴³ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 370.

⁴⁴ Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 54.

Therefore the spotlight rarely strays from Jesus. The disciples are thus intended to serve as a foil to Jesus and to his faithfulness to the end. Mark wants to encourage his persecuted community to remain faithful, and to “make the strong point that Jesus, and not the early disciples as they behaved at the end of Jesus’ life, is the model of the way of the cross, the way of faithfulness to the end.”⁴⁵

This is important to keep in mind when deciding how to view Peter’s declaration that he and others have “left everything” to follow Jesus. In his exclamation, Peter includes *ἡμεῖς*, “we,” which is not grammatically necessary and perhaps present for emphasis: “But *we* have left everything.”⁴⁶ This may be a moment of self-congratulation or pride.⁴⁷ Because Jesus does not chastise Peter, but instead patiently reassures him and the others of the hundredfold blessings they will receive, we might be inclined to believe that Jesus agrees with Peter that the sacrifices he and other disciples have made are indeed significant. In attempting to bring clarity to Jesus’ remark in Mark 10:31, “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first,” Marcus writes,

The flow of thought in the passage suggests that many of those such as the rich man, who have tried to make themselves “first” by holding onto their property and stable familial relations “in this time,” will find themselves last at the eschaton. Conversely, those such as the disciples, who have given up everything and thus have made themselves “last,” will be first—a position of privilege anticipated by the bountiful “family life” already experienced in the Christian community. But it is also possible to interpret 10:31 as a warning against apostolic arrogance that qualifies the promise directed to the disciples in 10:30: in spite of the privileges you now enjoy, you could still find yourselves coming up short.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁶ Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 732, 740.

⁴⁷ Lane, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 371.

⁴⁸ Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 740.

With this in mind and based on Witherington's analysis above, it seems unlikely that we should in any way take Peter's comment positively. On the contrary, what Peter says here goes to a pattern. Peter and the other disciples have demonstrated repeatedly that their focus is on the material benefits they imagine to be the reasonable reward for Kingdom service. When Jesus teaches that his mission will not end in messianic glory but rejection and execution, he attributes Peter's rebuke to demonic influence: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (Mark 8:33). A few verses later, when Peter is given the privilege of witnessing the Jesus' transfiguration, his only response is to talk of a construction project. It is God's own voice that interrupts his plans: "This is my Son, the Beloved: listen to him!" (Mark 9:7). (All things considered, it seems a rather polite way for God to tell Peter to shut up.) Chapter nine continues to show how the disciples focus on ministry technique over prayerful reliance on God's power (9:28-29), and how they remain fixated on competition first with one another (9:33-37) and with outsiders (38-40). Chapter nine is a sobering view of what happens when Jesus' followers become preoccupied with the professionalization of ministry.

The fact that Peter has a difficult time with this teaching indicates that disciples can struggle with false perceptions just as much as the Rich Young Ruler does. We disciples can become preoccupied with material success just as non-disciples do. Hearing Jesus talk of selling everything in order to gain treasure in heaven may have left the disciples with the impression that Jesus is calling all of his followers to a life of poverty. In verse twenty-eight, Mark says that "Peter began to say to him, 'Look, we have left everything and followed you.'" Mark's use of the word "began" suggests that Peter was

about to launch into a big speech as he did at the Transfiguration, and intends to give an itemized list of all the things each of the disciples left behind in order to invest themselves in full-time discipleship. It is as if Peter is saying, “Wait a minute, Jesus! We left our old lives behind because we thought you had something better for us. Aren’t we going to enjoy the good things in life—the good things you just told that man to give away? We thought there would be blessing for us in your new government *in this life*, not just in the Age to Come!”⁴⁹

Jesus makes it clear that the blessings of Kingdom living are both real and present-tense. “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*” (Mark 10:29-30, italics mine). The emphatic “amen” with which Jesus begins tells us that he is much in earnest, and that Mark’s persecuted community can take the promise that follows to heart. Marcus notes a symmetry between the list of what is given up and the list of what is gained, and concludes that this symmetry “highlights the claim that nothing of consequence will be lost through discipleship; indeed, the abandoned elements will be replaced a hundredfold.”⁵⁰ Whatever we lay aside for Jesus’ sake will be replaced with his provision, making the former pale by comparison. Jesus promises that if we relinquish our claim to “the good life” on our terms, we will receive the “the great life” on his terms. If we are willing to entrust our identities into his care instead of our own, we will find the

⁴⁹ This perspective would help explain why, a few verses later in chapter ten, the sons of Zebedee see fit to petition Jesus for positions at his right and his left when he comes into his glory. Even after this teachable moment, the disciples’ confusion and misunderstanding remains. See Mark 10:35-45.

⁵⁰ Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 737.

self-esteem and life's purpose we would have searched for all our lives and never found on our own. He promises to provide a home and a family for us. It will be a place in which we know we belong and know we are valued. It will be a place that will provide us with the resources we need to grow as mature, capable people. It will be a place in which we are able to do meaningful work the results of which will last forever. In a word, Jesus is promising us the Church. Had the Rich Young Ruler been able to obey Jesus' command, he would have discovered the great heavenly treasure of freedom and would have been able to do what Jesus called for next: following him into a new life. Peter will discover what the Rich Young Ruler would have discovered if he had joined the fellowship. There is nothing you can give up for the kingdom that will not be replaced with that which is more satisfying, more fulfilling, and more true.

Jesus' Promise of Material Wealth "Now and in the Age to Come"

We must note, however, that the life Jesus offers his disciples is more real, but not painless. The life of discipleship is not an easy life. He says that, in addition to houses and siblings and fields, we will also gain persecutions. What Jesus means by this is difficult to surmise, especially in light of the fact that it concludes a list of blessings as if to suggest that persecution is a good thing. It is true that Christians came to believe that being made to suffer for one's allegiance to Jesus was the greatest honor. St. Frances of Assisi undertook perilous journeys in order to preach to hostile groups with the explicit hope that he might be martyred in the effort.⁵¹ But it is difficult to imagine that Peter and the other disciples had this understanding at this point in Jesus' ministry. It is indeed

⁵¹ Saint Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey Into God, The Tree of Life and the Life of St. Frances* (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 266-271.

possible that Mark has added the phrase “with persecutions” to the original word of Jesus in order to contemporize text for his community in Rome who would know both the blessing of being part of the family of faith and the challenges of persecution.⁵² It is also possible that the word for persecution, *διωγμὸν* could be reinterpreted as “other things that people strive for.”⁵³ While this is unlikely, it offers an interesting slant, such that Jesus would include it as a way of explaining something about the nature of families, houses, fields, and all good material possessions. Lest we begin to believe that life in the Kingdom is a life of ease, we remember that all good things come at a cost. If we would follow Jesus, he promises that we will have all the good things that come with this life, as well as the headaches that go with them. Relationships will still require great effort to nurture and maintain. Fields will still need to be plowed and planted, their crops brought in through difficult labor. Houses will still have to be built and their roofs repaired after hard rains. The difference comes in the fact that now this work has eternal purpose and quality to it. We come to understand that the difficulties of life are not to be fearfully avoided, but gratefully embraced as the means by which God makes us spiritually mature and capable people. Whether the “persecutions” of life come in the form of great violence or small struggles, as followers of Jesus we know that he has the power to form us and transform us into His likeness through them.

Christ’s Likeness and the Spiritual Disciplines

Earlier in this chapter it was suggested that, in its most simplistic terms, the reason a camel cannot fit through the eye of a needle is because there is too much camel

⁵² Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark*, 285.

⁵³ Marcus, *Mark 8-16*, 733.

and that a rich person cannot enter the Kingdom because there is too much ego. If Jesus' metaphor is extended, then what is required is that we put "the camel" on a "diet." We must submit to the work of God such that our egos inevitably decrease and the character of Jesus increases within us. This occurs through the process of discipleship, and is practiced in through spiritual disciplines. This work begins with Jesus' invitation to follow him. The Rich Young Ruler has heard the invitation and rejected it. The disciples have accepted it, yet struggle to understand the fullness of what it means in terms their expectations for material success. The reason this work is so difficult for all of us—disciples and nondisciples alike—is because the desire for wealth and reputation are not merely earthly matters, but are best understood as "treasurings" which "deal with the fundamental structure of our soul."⁵⁴ Spiritual disciplines—what Willard would describe as a "curriculum for Christlikeness"⁵⁵—are means by which God's Spirit attends to the fundamental structures of our souls, releasing us from the conforming forces of this world and transforming us into the likeness of Christ (Rom 12:2). The next chapter will consider how four spiritual disciplines in particular work to put the camel on a diet and in so doing, accomplish that which would be impossible for us but is indeed possible for God.

⁵⁴ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 204.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 311.

CHAPTER 4

SPIRITUAL DISCIPLINES FOR A MATERIALISTIC AGE

If affluence supports a materialistic identity that makes kingdom living seemingly impossible then God's grace, given in the form of spiritual disciplines, makes it possible. A spiritual discipline is "an activity within our power that enables us to accomplish what we cannot do by direct effort."¹ The argument being made here is that the spiritual disciplines described in this chapter will change how we see ourselves, how we see our material possessions, and how we use material blessings for kingdom purposes. These disciplines help us put the camel on a diet by unburdening our egos from the weight of materialism, pretentious society and fearful hoarding.

We can anticipate two results from the practice of these disciplines. First, we will come to the point where we dearly love and constantly delight in the heavenly Father, being confident in our relationship with him, being content in his provision and being certain of his goodness and his power to bring his good intentions to fruition.² Second, we will be released from the automatic responses against the kingdom of God and be

¹ Keith Matthews, "Searching for a Gospel that Really Transforms" (lecture for the DMin course, "Spirituality and Ministry," Mater Dolorosa Retreat Center, Sierra Madre, CA, June 17, 2004).

² Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 321.

freed from the old habits, thoughts, feelings and actions bound up in our materialistic identities that were in opposition to God's love and rule in our lives.³ In these ways, the spiritual disciplines discussed below enable us to become Jesus' apprentices such that we do the things that he teaches us to do and become the kind of people he teaches us to be.⁴

Every spiritual discipline is valuable to this effort, and today we enjoy a wealth of resources intended to aid the Christian in the practice of the disciplines. The intent of this chapter is not to gloss over these resources. Rather, what follows is an attempt to reflect on four disciplines in particular and to reframe our understanding of them in such a way as to enable us to think differently, yet positively, about material wealth. If Willard is right and we are indeed servants to our ideas,⁵ then we need new ways of thinking about the material blessings available to us and how we are to live with them, in the world, for the sake of others, to the glory of God. For this reason, we will consider how to think about life on earth as a pilgrimage, a pilgrimage in which we hold firmly to the experience of living and hold loosely to the things that aid us along our journey of life. As we do, we will be able to bless others on their journeys as well. We will reflect on solitude as the means by which we are able to remove the materialistic scaffolding of our lives in order be completely vulnerable before God and experience God's unconditional acceptance of us. By practicing seasons of solitude, we are able to enter into Christian community and participate in healthy ways. If Christians see themselves as part of a new kind of family created by Jesus with him as head of the family, then we can live in

³ Ibid., 322.

⁴ Ibid., 275.

⁵ Ibid., 5-6.

mutual love and support of one another in ways that stand in stark contrast to the culture at large. Finally, we reflect on how whole-life stewardship is powerfully expressed through entrepreneurship, such that we are called individually and collectively to apply our resources to empower and resource others.

Pilgrimage: Traveling Light and Aiding Others on the Journey

The word pilgrimage evokes powerful images of faithful folk taking long journeys by foot, intent on a destination that promises spiritual transformation. While the destination may be the goal, it is the journey itself that truly forms the soul of the pilgrim. It is the experience of travelling light, holding things lightly, providing aid and depending upon the aid of others on the journey, being mindful of the sacred and maintaining holiness of one's mind, that makes pilgrimage a soul-forming experience. Pilgrimage, in the most literal sense of leaving one's home to visit a holy sight, is a spiritual discipline in its own right. In this context, however, the term is intended to serve as a metaphor for our lives as we seek to discern how material possessions can be a help or hindrance to the journey. If we see life in this way, we will travel lightly, recognizing that material blessings are to be enjoyed but held loosely with an openness toward sharing them with others along the way. Simplicity is the order, such that we learn to be comfortable with "just enough" rather than seeking solace in comfort, ease, and the constant gratification of desires. Indeed, it is in "The Hedonic Paradox" that the true nature of desire is understood: desires can never be satisfied, for the more one seeks to satisfy them, the more they grow.⁶

⁶ Dallas Willard, "Spiritual Disciplines of Abstinence" (lecture for the DMin course, "Spirituality and Ministry," Mater Dolorosa Retreat Center, Sierra Madre, CA, June 17, 2004).

In this way, the “pilgrim” who sees possessions as a means to an end—namely, completing the journey well and ensuring that others do likewise—stands in stark contrast to the “tourist” who sees life as a continuous process of acquisition and consumption. In his book, *Postmodernism and the Other*, Ziauddin Sardar describes this contrast and helps fill out the pilgrimage metaphor further. Sardar observes the way in which global tourism has had a destructive effect on non-Western cultures and once pristine environments. He argues that “tourism is consumerism writ large, naked and unashamed, and to feed the insatiable need of tourists whole nations are converting themselves to vast emporia, havens of everything under the sun that can be bought.”⁷ This stands in stark contrast to pilgrimage, which is as important a process of identity formation in non-Western cultures as consumption has become for us in the West. “While one journey involves a flight away from the profane towards the sacred, the other involves escape from the homogeneity of ‘home’ to the (often imagined) heterogeneity of the destination. . . . The pilgrim brings back blessings; the tourist takes home souvenirs.”⁸

What is being argued here is that the influence of our consumer culture has made us tourists in our own communities, our own homes, and our own lives. We fail to see the space and time we occupy as rich in sacred possibility. Instead we fill our hours with trips to the mall and online shopping. Rather than moving through our lives with hearts open to blessings, we fill our lives with things that ultimately do little more than prove we were here once we have gone. In the same way that consumer-driven tourism devalues indigenous cultures and damages God’s creation, we devalue one another and do harm to

⁷ Ziauddin Sardar, *Postmodernism and the Other: The New Imperialism of Western Culture* (London: Pluto, 1998), 136.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

the *imago dei* in each of us when we hurry through overloaded social calendars and keep relationships superficial. Tourism is not just an attitude we Westerners take on vacation. Tourism is our way of life. It is time to become pilgrims.

A Theology of Pilgrimage and “The Pilgrim Option”

Scripture lifts up pilgrimage as both a literal experience and as a theological frame for our living. The Exodus can be seen as a pilgrimage in which the Israelites are transformed from Pharaoh’s slaves to God’s covenant people. Once established in the Promised Land, the people were encouraged to make regular pilgrimage to Jerusalem for the holy festivals, singing the Psalms of Ascent together as a way of forming and reforming their identities as those who have been rescued by God (Ps 120, 121), who belong to the household of God (Ps 122), and are called to live in unity with one another (Ps 133). Even on such a strenuous journey, there is peace and contentment available that is otherwise elusive (Ps 131).

Jesus’ call to discipleship is a pilgrimage call. When we are told that any person who would be a follower of Jesus must take up her cross and follow (Mark 8:34), we understand that this call will last our entire lives. However, it does not mean we are called to be aloof or disconnected from “real life.” On the contrary, Jesus’ invitation to go, sell, and follow (and these should all be seen as part of one continuous action) is intended to reconnect that man with others and with God. In his book, *The Good Life: Genuine Christianity for the Middle Class*, David Matzko McCarthy writes,

The rich man is asked to sell all he has and to follow Jesus. However, Jesus’ call for dispossession is hardly a lesson in detachment from the world. On the contrary, if the rich young man is asked to follow, then he is being sent out into the world. He is being called to discipleship, and like the disciples, he will be sent out into the

countryside, cities, and towns (Matt 10:5-15). The rich young man is asked to risk a greater bond, to walk with others, to put on the clothes of discipleship and to carry the tools of peace, to depend upon the hospitality and grace of his hosts, to remain with others as their guests and to call their homes his own. The disciple's journey is one of stopping and staying, resting and eating, and bringing peace.⁹

This is a compelling image of discipleship as pilgrimage. If the Rich Young Ruler had been willing to embrace Jesus' hard word, he would have joined the disciples in a "greater bond" of relationship, making himself available to receive hospitality and extend peace in return. The influence he enjoyed because of his wealth would have paled in comparison to the Kingdom influence he would have had in being received in the various towns and villages to which he would have been sent. Jesus intends to move the young man from being rooted in place (physically and spiritually) to being on the move, caught up in dynamic and transforming Kingdom activity. While this description of discipleship is beautiful, it seems to imply that true discipleship requires itinerancy. For pilgrimage to be a viable option for us, we need to understand how our lives can be "on the move" while still living into our responsibilities many feel toward families, businesses, and communities. We must be able to live as pilgrims even with kids in school and mortgage obligations.

This possibility is described by anthropologist and theologian Sherwood Lingenfelter as "the pilgrim option" such that disciples hold on to their possessions lightly, and are prepared to give them away sacrificially for others or, as he puts it, "giving at risk." Lingenfelter is primarily interested in how cultural views about identity formation and possessions (e.g., how possessions are legitimately obtained, who controls them, how an individual is held in esteem by the community because of them, and so on)

⁹ David Matzko McCarthy, *The Good Life: Genuine Christianity for the Middle Class* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004), 27.

impacts cross-cultural evangelism. He works from the premise that “people are prisoners of their cultural bias, which is both a cultural and spiritual state” and that “we are helpless in this regard, in that we cannot live and work apart from the economic systems and social games that surround us.”¹⁰ While we may be helpless, Lingenfelter argues that we are not hopeless: “The Scriptures give us hope that on the cross Christ broke sin’s stranglehold on the human race and set us free from the bondage of sin and death. Peter testifies that in Christ we are now a people of God, which enables us to live in the world as ‘strangers and pilgrims’ (1 Pet 2:11 KJV).”¹¹ Drawing upon the work of noted symbolic anthropologist Mary Douglas, Lingenfelter argues that every person lives within one or more “social games” of which there are four prototypical types. These structures can be represented graphically along two axes called grid and group. Grid relates to how strongly or weakly roles are defined in the group. Group relates to how strongly or weakly a person’s identity is tied to group membership (see Figure 1).¹² In each of the four quadrants there is a name given to the social game (Authoritarian, Hierarchist, and so on) followed by descriptors that explain how that game views material possessions. For instance, the Egalitarian social game is characterized by a view that all resources are shared by the group for the sake of accomplishing the group’s objectives. Resources (including possessions) are therefore valued for utility over status. To have

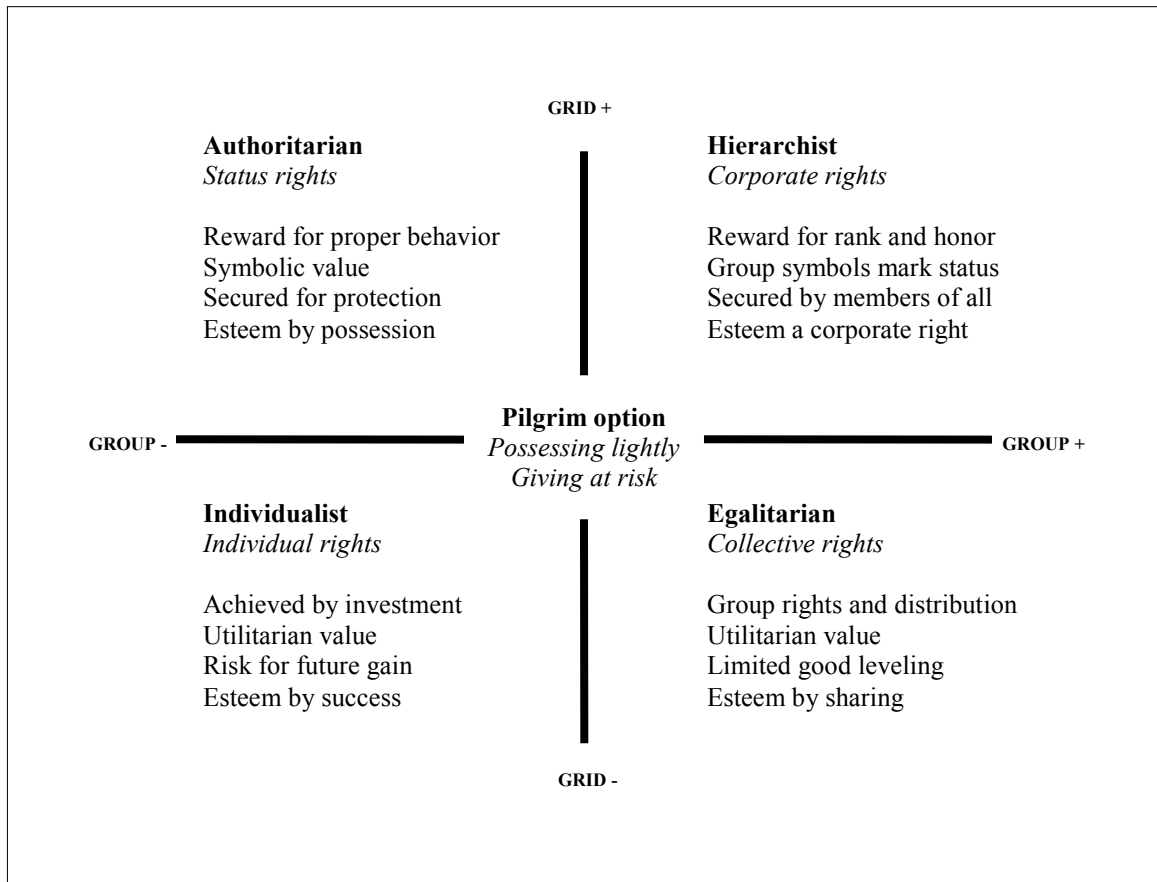
¹⁰ Sherwood Lingenfelter, "Possessions, Wealth, and the Cultural Identities of Persons: Anthropological Reflections," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 31, no. 4 (2007): 179.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid., 177.

more than someone else in the group is to gain at their expense, so sharing is a practice held in high esteem.¹³

Figure 1. Social Games, Possessions, and Identity



What is important to this discussion is that, into the center of Douglas’s grid, Lingenfelter has added the “pilgrim option” which he describes as “possessing lightly, giving at risk.” He wishes to demonstrate that, while these social games lead to a cultural biases that leads participants to reject the values of others, Christians can choose the “pilgrim option” as a way of overcoming bias and bridging cultural difference. He

¹³ Ibid., 179.

explains, “The players, through the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, live in the game yet hold its values and preferences lightly and act out . . . love and obedience to God and love for our neighbors as ourselves.”¹⁴

The work of Lingenfelter and Douglas work is important to this discussion for three reasons. First, it acknowledges that all human beings find themselves “stuck” in the social games played by their respective cultures. From this perspective, even the most materialistic consumers among us deserve compassion insofar as they (and we) are simply playing by the rules of the culture. Second, it provides individuals with a way of thinking about possessions that helps them to get un-stuck from their own culture’s social game, regardless of whichever game (authoritarian, egalitarian, and so on) it is. By placing the pilgrim option in the middle of the figure, Lingenfelter demonstrates that it is an option available in every social game, including our own. It directs us to be *in* our materialistic culture but not *of* it. It embodies a posture of loose attachment, such that we resist the seduction of entitlement that lies at the heart of our brand-influenced culture, we avoid the extremes of overvaluing material possessions on the one hand or having contempt for them on the other, and we are able to regularly reassess our relationship to our material goods.¹⁵

Third, it has important implications for cross-cultural evangelism and global Christian fellowship. If we understand that the pilgrim option involves seeing life as a journey taken with others, then it is a powerful way for world Christians to find common ground with brothers and sisters from every culture. The pilgrim option creates a space in

¹⁴ Ibid., 179.

¹⁵ Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, 104-105.

which players from any social game may stand in fellowship with Christians from any other. It is but a part (and yet a crucial part) of how we may truly be the Christian community described later in this chapter.

The Practice of “The Pilgrim Option”

So how shall we commit ourselves to the pilgrim option, possessing lightly and giving at risk while at the same time living appropriately in our materialistic culture? That is, how can we live effectively in a materialistic, consumptive culture without becoming fully of it? Richard Foster, perhaps the mostly highly regarded voice in the area of spiritual disciplines, notes that when considering how and what we buy, we should make a distinction between accommodation and compromise. Foster writes,

Accommodation is part and parcel of what it means to be *in* the world. And there are many practical, economic ways in which we accommodate ourselves to our society; swimming lessons for the children, some new books for Mom, a power saw for Dad. But we can come to a place where right and necessary accommodation crosses over into wrong and unnecessary compromise. We are not to be *of* the world. And the main problem in the Church today is our failure to see where proper accommodation leaves off and where compromise begins. . . . We understand the need for a certain adaptation or accommodation to be in the society in which we live, but we want to grow in our perception of when that turns into conformity or compromise (*italics his*).¹⁶

What is being suggested here is that an attitude of accommodation (as Foster illustrates the term above) is what is needed to practice the pilgrim option well. Accommodation gives space for us to be consumers, to enjoy the good things others in our culture enjoy, and to connect with our communities around the myriad material blessings available to us. Yet, we need regular actions which will aid us in avoiding compromise such that we are defined by the things we own.

¹⁶ Richard Foster, *Freedom of Simplicity*, revised and updated (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 135, 137.

The first thing, then, that must be done is for us to engage in regular and rigorous expressions of gratitude. Materialism is sustained by two phenomena common to the human condition: Dissatisfaction with what we have, and forgetfulness about how we came to have it. In the practice of gratitude, both are held in check. We take time to reflect on the abundance our blessings and direct our thanks to Him from whom all blessings flow. Prayers of thanksgiving should be given not just at meals or in Sunday services, but whenever we find ourselves in a particularly joyful moment of material blessing. Let us pause to tell our friends how happy we are to taste good coffee, to be able to afford it, and to have the leisure time to enjoy it. Indeed, if we were to take time to thank God for each material blessing we enjoy we would be in a constant state of prayer. We may even go so far as to regularly take a mental inventory of all our possessions for no other purpose than to marvel at how greatly we have been blessed and humbly acknowledge that, apart from God's loving provision, we would have nothing. It is impossible to feel grateful and entitled at the same time.

Next, even as we are grateful for a material blessing, we must test the assumption that we are to enjoy the blessing indefinitely. We must be open to the possibility that God has given us something for a season and that it is now time to release the thing in order to bless others and/or to follow God into a new season. Foster writes of a couple in Colorado who sold their house and gave everything away for a time. In selling everything, they demonstrated that they could imagine a life in which possessions were not held indefinitely. Later, they purchased a large home near a university and rented out most of the rooms in to students in order to facilitate a ministry among them.¹⁷ We can imagine that the couple's decision to give everything away in one season made them

¹⁷ Ibid., 139.

available for the blessings of the next. Jesus' may have called the Rich Young Ruler to sell everything with a similar intent in mind.¹⁸ He did not intend for the Rich Young Ruler to live *without*, but to live *within* a new context of being blessed in order to be a blessing to others.

Finally, let us pay attention to see how our possessions may aid others in their journeys. It is usually the case that we notice what others have for the purpose of comparison, and that we tend to compare ourselves with those who (from our perspective) have more or better things than we do. The pilgrim option requires that we abandon this once and for all. Instead, we pay attention to what others lack and ask, How can my blessings bless them? It is often the case that, in hearing other people's stories, we discover that the resource they desperately need is one that we have long taken for granted. We then realize that the cost of helping them is a small sacrifice—if a sacrifice at all—compared to the positive impact it would make in their lives. If my insurance provides vision care for my children and I learn that my friend cannot afford glasses for her daughter, then I need only glance at my bespectacled son and reflect on his success in school to know what I must do.

Of course, it is impossible to undertake this third action unless we have undertaken the first two. Apart from gratitude, we cannot appreciate how our possessions have truly blessed us and how they could bless someone else. Apart from testing the assumption that we should enjoy a material blessing indefinitely, we will never be open to considering the needs of another and how we have been uniquely provisioned to help them. As we provide aid and see our treasures make such a tangible difference in the lives of others, we will rejoice in the experience and crave the opportunity to do it as

¹⁸ Ibid.,

often as possible. We live the pilgrim option through gratitude and holding loosely to our possessions, which leads to giving out of a sense of abundance. The joy we find in doing so leads us, inevitably, to giving at risk. Thus we may see in a new light that great spiritual truth expressed by missionary Jim Elliott: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”¹⁹

It could be argued that “the pilgrim option,” as the term has been appropriated and expanded here, is simply several spiritual disciplines put together (e.g., worship, simplicity, and sacrifice), and that the discipline which is noticeably absent (in its literal sense) is pilgrimage. Yet, pilgrimage has been used in Scripture and in spiritual writings to describe not only how Christians should view their earthly lives, but also how they should view the “stuff of earth.” It is as Calvin describes in his *Institutes*:

We must find a happy medium, so that we use everything in the right way, with a clear conscience. The Lord makes this clear in his Word, when he tells us, his people, that this life is a kind of pilgrimage through which we press on to the heavenly kingdom. If we are only passing through we must, of course, use temporal blessings only as long as they assist our progress and do not hinder us. So Paul, with good reason, urges us to use this world without abusing it, and to buy possessions as if we were selling them (1 Cor. 7:30-31).²⁰

Solitude: Removing the Materialistic Scaffolding of Our Lives

If the pilgrim option is how we keep our possessions from possessing us, then solitude is how we come to know that the pilgrim option is even possible. Most treatments of the spiritual disciplines begin with solitude. Indeed, Willard describes it as

¹⁹ Elisabeth Elliot and James Elliot, *Shadow of the Almighty* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1958), 108.

²⁰ *Institutes* III.ix.2. For the translation presented see John Calvin, *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, Tony Lane and Hilary Osborne, eds. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 173.

the primary discipline, in which we elect to step free of human relationships for a lengthy period of time, in isolation or anonymity, to make room for the occupation of our lives by God.²¹ It is the way that we prepare our souls so that we may be able to effectively practice the other disciplines of prayer, study, and the like. It is through our intimate encounters with God during solitude and silence that we come to know ourselves as beloved by God, to rest in the knowledge that our identity as God's children is secure, and to be released from the compulsive need to define ourselves on the basis of our status or possessions.

A Theology of Solitude

Let us return to the moment in which Jesus offers our Rich Young Ruler an answer—*the* answer—to the question which brought him to his knees in desperation before Jesus. Jesus tells him how to gain the eternal life he seeks. While this should be the happiest moment in this young man's life, it becomes the saddest. Mark tells us that this is because the man's "many possessions" are too many and too integral to his sense of himself. He does not have the capacity to imagine a life without them. For this man, it might be like a doctor saying, "Your leg has gangrene. When we amputate it you will go on to make a full recovery and live a long, healthy life." But all the patient hears is, "You will spend the rest of your life without your leg." Seen this way, the most awful part of the story is not that the young man is shocked and grieving. This would be appropriate given such news. The terrible moment comes when he walks away. He has come to the Great Physician, received the best prognosis possible (if he will submit to the

²¹ Willard, "Spiritual Disciplines of Abstinence."

treatment), and decides against it. Perhaps he leaves to get a second opinion. He may keep seeking second opinions until he hears the one he wants. But Jesus, knowing his diagnosis is correct, does not get up and chase after the patient. Jesus so desires that we live as whole, free, and (according to Matthew's Jesus) "perfect" lives that the one thing he will not do is sugar-coat the truth for us or withhold it because it might be too much for us to take. His love for us requires that he tell us the truth. His respect for the *imago dei* within us requires that he allow us to freely walk away if we choose to reject it.

Jesus has confidence in his diagnosis because he has firsthand knowledge of the condition. After being baptized by his cousin John, Jesus entered into an extended period of solitude. Being led by the Spirit, Jesus "was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him" (Mark 1:12-14). This would be the same as saying that Jesus went to medical school and graduated at the top of his class. Matthew and Luke go into greater detail, describing how Satan came to Jesus and tempted him with the three compulsions of the world: to be relevant ("turn stones into loaves"), to be spectacular ("throw yourself down"), and to be powerful ("I will give you all these kingdoms").²² We now know why Jesus is so certain of his diagnosis. It is because he has confronted and overcome the very temptations which we face every day in our consumer culture. We think of Jesus as a working-class carpenter and spiritual teacher, but he is also the incarnate Word, the true Son of God. Even though he lived in the world in relative poverty, he had all the riches of God's resources, power, and glory at his disposal. In his time of solitude, Jesus confronted the desire to be relevant, spectacular and powerful—the very things that young man's many possessions (and ours) promise to provide.

²² Nouwen, *The Way of the Heart*, 13.

Reflecting on the spiritual disciplines of solitude, silence and prayer, Henri Nouwen observes that they are the means by which we learn to disconnect ourselves from the empty values and crushing expectations of human society. He writes, “Our society is not a community radiant with the love of Christ, but a dangerous network of domination and manipulation in which we can easily get entangled and lose our soul.”²³ It is in just this sort of entanglement that the Rich Young Ruler and all materialists find themselves. Solitude is the first step toward getting untangled, says Nouwen, and he calls it “the furnace of transformation” in which the “illusions of the false self” are burned away.²⁴ In his wilderness experience, Jesus was able to affirm God as the only source of his identity: “Worship the Lord your God and serve only him” (Matt 4:10). Nouwen continues, “Solitude is the place of the great struggle and the great encounter – the struggle against the compulsions of the false self, and the encounter with the loving God who offers himself as the substance of the new self.”²⁵ Nouwen likens solitude to removing the scaffolding of one’s life until there is “just me – naked, vulnerable, weak, sinful, deprived, broken – nothing.”²⁶ In a very real sense, Jesus is calling the young man remove the scaffolding of his status and self-image in order to become utterly vulnerable before God and people. Given that Jesus invites the young man to join the community of disciples, perhaps his call to sell everything would constitute a wilderness experience for the Rich Young Ruler. Jesus has

²³ Ibid., 9.

²⁴ Ibid., 13.

²⁵ Ibid., 14.

²⁶ Ibid., 15.

gone through the furnace of transformation he challenges the young man to enter, and has come out on the other side assured of his relationship with God (“angels attended him”) and certain about his life’s purpose (“Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God”) (Mark 1:12-15).

If we are to have any certainty in God’s unconditional acceptance or clarity about God’s call on our lives, we must experience regular times of solitude. There, we are alone with God and separated from the scaffolding of relationships and possessions which would otherwise define us. To go a step further, we must acknowledge that it is impossible to be effective in our calling as servants of God’s dominion and agents of God’s grace in the world apart from the practice of solitude. Tom Beaudoin, borrowing from our technology vernacular, observes that “toggling” is the ability to move easily between different screens and tasks on a computer. “Those who can toggle successfully are able to allow many different tasks to be ‘in process’ at the same time, though they are giving their attention to only one task at a time.”²⁷ He suggests that it was Jesus’ ability to “toggle” between active and contemplative life that enabled him to minister effectively. “Jesus is constantly being called out of prayer to take on the world, a rhythm of solitude and solicitude, retreat and return, reflection and reengagement.”²⁸ If we understand solitude as a retreat from the front lines of life, then it is a strategic retreat. In solitude we ground ourselves again in the purpose for which we have been created. In solitude we

²⁷ Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, 101.

²⁸ Ibid.

rediscover that our ultimate purpose—our “chief end,” as the Westminster Catechism so beautifully puts it—is “to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever.”²⁹

The Practice of Solitude

While solitude can involve prayer, study, reflection, and meditation, it is essentially an experiment in “being,” as disconnected from “doing.” It is therefore both impractical and unmarketable, and therefore an offense to our consumer-driven culture. Indeed, the most common forms of technology today are designed and sold with explicit purpose of helping us avoid solitude, as if being alone is the same as being lonely. Every personal electronic device on the market is intended to somehow keep us in touch with our social network, the popular culture, the global marketplace or, preferably, all three at the same time. We are addicted to this kind of connectedness, such that cell phones and PDAs are the only objects we keep within reach at all times. “We take calls. We make calls. We talk to friends. We talk to friends of friends. We’re just friends. We’re hooked. We’re addicted. We love it. We need it. We found it!” says the sexy celebrity as she searches for her phone in the back of a limousine. She is both like us and unlike us, exuding glamour while engaging in a mundane ritual many of us repeat on a daily basis. She finds it and clutches it with an expression of relief. At the end of the commercial she looks directly into the camera and reminds us, “We can’t live without it. It’s not just a phone. It’s who you are.”³⁰ With each passing day, this becomes less slogan and more

²⁹ *The Shorter Catechism*, Question 1 in *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly - Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)), 2002, 175.

³⁰ See the commercial for the Nokia 7610 Supernova TVC featuring Priyanka Chopra, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qzNx0tE9rrw> (viewed February 3, 2010).

existential truth. In tethering us to our friends, our jobs, and our social networking websites, these devices become the source of our belonging. We are convinced that going “off the grid” means that we vanish, are lost, and risk being utterly forgotten.

From this perspective, it takes great courage to begin the practice of solitude. Foster encourages us to start with the “little solitudes” that fill our day, such as the time before the family awakens or our daily commutes.³¹ From these modest beginnings we can begin to identify the spaces in our lives—empty church sanctuaries, quiet corners of the local park, and so on—in which we may be simply quiet with God. Beginning this way, we begin to divide our space and our time such that we can establish the rhythms of solitude and solitude, retreat and return, reflection and reengagement described above.

Of course, such a division of space and time is well known to the people of God in the form of the Sabbath. In our culture, Sabbath-keeping is seen as quaint and old-fashioned at best, legalistic and rigid at worst. But in a culture in which the lines between work and play, job and home have been blurred to such an extent that they are virtually indistinguishable from one another, Sabbath is a gift from God we desperately need to rediscover. Sabbath is not simply about stopping work. It is about interrupting our state of constant activity. When solitude is part of our Sabbath observance, we are able to take a break from shopping, competitive sports, entertainment, and all the other efforts to maintain our extended social networks. Only in solitude can we rest from relationships and words. Foster sagely observes that we often use words in a frantic attempt to explain

³¹ Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*, 105-106.

or justify our actions, so even experimenting with the use of as few words as possible can be a helpful movement toward solitude.³²

Because of the pervasive influence of media and technology, solitude necessarily needs to include media fasts. By giving up television and the internet, by turning off our phones and our PDAs, by abstaining from “screen time” for extended periods, we are able to create distance between us and the branding messages with which we are saturated during the normal course of our days. This distance is critical if we are to have our imaginations formed by the Holy Spirit instead of Madison Avenue.

Anyone who has attempted a media fast for any length of time has undoubtedly experienced symptoms of withdrawal. I recall a two-week seminar at a retreat center with no television and poor cell reception. The first four days were marked by restlessness, feeling ill at ease, and difficulty falling asleep (it was too quiet!). By the end of the time, the thought of going back into the noisy and cluttered world—even to be reunited with my wife and very young children—was cause for grief. One of the challenges in practicing solitude is allowing sufficient time to have its right effect, so it is vital that we give and receive permission from our loved ones to practice it.³³

Most of us would argue that we do not have the luxury to set relationships and responsibilities aside long periods of solitude, but this “luxury” is something Christians can extend to one another, measured first in terms of hours and then in terms of days. For instance, The Walk to Emmaus, a ministry begun within the Methodist Church, invites husbands and wives to attend separate retreats a few weeks apart. Each couple is

³² Ibid., 107.

³³ Willard, “Spiritual Disciplines of Abstinence.”

sponsored by another couple that has gone on the retreat previously. They commit to stay home and be ready to support the retreat participant's family in case of need or emergency. In a similar way church communities could "sponsor" those going on retreat and reduce the anxiety for their families. No one needs opportunities for solitude more than the parents of young children!

Community: Becoming a Member of the *οἶκος θεοῦ*

One might suppose that solitude and community are opposites, but they are in fact complementary. Together they enable us to see ourselves—and our resources—rightly in relationship to God and others. In his seminal work, *Jesus and Community*, Gerhard Lohfink points out that while Jesus did indeed call his closest disciples to leave everything behind, "he did not call them to solitude and isolation. That is not the point of discipleship. He called them into a new family of brothers and sisters, itself a sign of the arriving kingdom."³⁴ To belong to the community of Christ is to become a member of what Mark calls the *οἶκος θεοῦ*, "the household of God." Here believers belong both to Christ as head of the family and to one other. To be a part of Christian community is to have a vested interest in the welfare of everyone else. The individual sees herself as blessed by God with personal property in order that she may be a blessing to her brothers and sisters. There are ways to practice this kind of community that do not require Christians to live communally or relinquish their rights to personal property.

³⁴ Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), 42.

A Theology of Community

In our culture today, it may be difficult for us to appreciate how the Scriptures point to Christian community as *the* showcase for the Kingdom of God and *the* answer to the social and relational problems we face in the world. Joop Smit argues that in chapters eight through ten, Mark intends to use the *οἶκος θεοῦ* as a unifying response to a series of issues Jesus addresses with his disciples on the way from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem. In order to commend this new kind of community to his readers, Mark points out that the distinctive characteristics of the *οἶκος θεοῦ* that will undoubtedly set it apart from the larger culture:

This community should not be ashamed of Jesus and his words, even when this brings suffering with it (8:31-9:1). They are able to cast out unclean spirits by prayer (9:14-29). Their leaders should be servants and should accept the “little ones” and not exclude them (9:30-50). Divorce is not allowed within this community (10:1-12). The “little ones” should be welcome there (10:13-16). The community forms as it were one extended family, where the members should treat each other as brothers and sisters and property should be owned in common (10:17-31). The leaders shall not lord over the members but be servants of them all (10:32-45).³⁵

The Scriptures testify to how the community initiated by Christ, described by Mark, modeled in Acts, and promoted in the writings of Peter and Paul was viewed by the outside culture as radical, provocative, and even a threat to social stability. Mark calls it the *οἶκος θεοῦ*, but Lohfink describes it as a “contrast society” in which believers would dedicate themselves so thoroughly to the work of loving one another that sinners would be amazed, curious, and ultimately desirous of what would clearly be seen as a sign of God’s miraculous power.³⁶ Citing original sources from the day, Lohfink notes

³⁵ Joop F. M. Smit, “Propagating a New Oikos: A Rhetorical Reading of Mark 10:17-31” in *Persuasion and Dissuasion in Early Christianity, Ancient Judaism, and Hellenism*, Pieter W. van der Host, Maarten JJ Menken, Joop FM Smit, Geert Van Oyen, eds. (Dudley, MA: Peeters, 2003), 121-122.

³⁶ Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 49-50; 56; 122-132; 157-163.

that the authorities of the day were suspicious of Christians for refusing to attend the shows, eat food sacrificed to the gods, or adorn their bodies with flowers and perfumes. Yet Christians were also admired for showing uncommon care for one another, putting their own lives at risk during epidemics in order to care for the diseased among them, while “the heathen” would leave his or her sick relatives along the side of the road to die.³⁷ The theologians of the day “sought ever new terms to find an exact expression of the social dimension of the church” including a “people,” a “race,” and a “city.”³⁸ This effort continues today. In his book *The New Conspirators*, Tom Sine notes how Christians are seeking to revive this notion of the Church as a contrast society by speaking of a “Third Tribe,” a “new kind of culture,” an “island of one culture in the middle of another,” and “those who are living into a very different story.”³⁹

The defining feature of such a community is certainly love. Lohfink, however, takes pains to demonstrate that how loving Christian activity in the New Testament is almost exclusively connected to the reciprocal pronoun “one another” (*ἀλλήλων*).⁴⁰ Lohfink believes the notion of Christian community as defined by love for one another is something of a scandal in the contemporary Church:

In view of contemporary Christian consciousness it comes as something of a shock to realize as an exegete that in the New Testament—if we abstract from Jesus’ sayings about love of enemy—interpersonal love almost without exception means *love for one’s brother in faith, love of Christians for one another*. There seems to be hardly anything else about the New Testament which is as intensively suppressed as this fact (italics his).⁴¹

³⁷ Ibid., 160-164.

³⁸ Ibid., 165-166.

³⁹ Tom Sine, *The New Conspirators* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 226-227.

⁴⁰ Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 99-115.

⁴¹ Ibid., 110.

If we hypothesize about why this fact is so “intensively suppressed,” it must surely be because such love necessarily requires tangible, sacrificial acts toward people standing right in front of us. Love toward one another cannot be sentimental, or expressed as a vague sense of goodwill toward humanity. Christian love must have clear focus and be made manifest within Christian community. Does this mean we have no concern for the rest of the world? It is as Jesus said: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). If we practice the self-giving love of Christ with one another, then the rest of the world apprehend its source and will seek to be included. This ethic had its right effect among Christians in local communities by not merely creating bonds of affiliation, but of genuine affection. Monastic John Cassian (ca. 360-435), reflecting on Mark 10:29-31, observed,

For he who for the sake of Christ’s name distances himself from his particular beloved father or mother . . . will receive a hundred times the measure of brothers and kinsfolk. Instead of but one he will begin to have so many fathers and brothers bound to him by a still more fervent and admirable affection. That this is so you can prove by your own experience, since you have each left but one father and mother and home, and as you have done so you have gained without any effort or care countless fathers and mothers and brothers, as well as houses and lands and most faithful servants, in any part of the world to which you go, who receive you as their own family, and welcome, and respect, and take care of you with utmost attention.⁴²

Cassian’s global observations notwithstanding, the emphasis on local action deserves further reflection. Lohfink notes that when Paul urges the members of the Galatian church to fulfill the law by loving one’s neighbor as oneself (Gal 5:13-15), he is referring to the love command in Leviticus 19:18, and is framing this command in a context “which considers only the conduct of members of the community among

⁴² “Conferences” 3.24.26 in *Mark Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Thomas C. Oden and Christopher A. Hall, eds. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1998), 147.

themselves. Here, as elsewhere in Paul, the ‘neighbor’ is one’s fellow believer.”⁴³ This gives theological weight to a concept which Schneider refers to as “moral proximity.” In response to those who, like Sider, argue that Christians in the West bear a responsibility to relieve the suffering of the poor everywhere else, Schneider argues that knowledge of suffering and technical ability to direct resources toward it does not create a moral obligation to do so.⁴⁴ He contends that moral proximity—that is, the scope within which a person does have a moral responsibility and may not engage in such rhetorical evasions as, “Who is my neighbor?” (Luke 10:29)—normally exists within the proximity of immediate community of faith.⁴⁵

The Practice of Community

If we are to practice the discipline of community well, we must first acknowledge that we belong to Christian community only as Jesus calls us into it. Our participation is defined not in terms of personal choice or preference, but by vocation. We come to trust that the church to which we belong is the one God has ordained for us, and we commit ourselves to staying within it and practicing sacrificial love toward its members indefinitely. We leave it only under the clear prompting of the Holy Spirit, and only then for the purpose of being called to serve in a different community. In other words, we are being challenged to reject the common practice of “church hopping”—changing churches every few years out of dissatisfaction for the old or the sparkle of the new—because

⁴³ Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, 112.

⁴⁴ Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*, 11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 180.

doing so has become just another way for us hold our Christian community at arm's length. Church hopping is the modern expression of the "Who is my neighbor?" evasion. Once we accept that Christian community is not a preference but a calling, we can begin to practice moral proximity such that we move outward in concentric spheres of influence, starting with the family and moving outward. Our responsibilities are greatest in our families and then to our families of faith, but extend out into our neighborhoods, or schools, our city, and so on. McCarthy provides a sensible frame for thinking about this when he writes,

As a matter of justice, I have a duty to love, to nurture, and to educate my children. They have a claim upon me that is more intense and immediate than the claim of my neighbors and my neighbor's children. However, my neighbors and even my enemies also have a claim to live well. They are entitled to share in the bounty of creation and to share good standing in common life. My specific responsibility to my children is not opposed to the needs of my neighbors. On the contrary, we have a responsibility to cultivate a modest life so that we will have enough resources left to contribute to the lives of our neighbors. This is the great privilege of having what we need. We can live with dignity among our neighbors, and use our assets to contribute to common life. There is shame in absolute ownership and isolation.⁴⁶

This means at least three things for our practice of sharing possessions for the good of others. First, this understanding does not prevent us from responding to the needs of those who live far beyond our immediate sphere of influence. It simply asserts that we are not necessarily sinning if we do not do so, or if we fail to do so to the degree that social justice purists believe we should. Second, it sets a very high bar for us in relation to the needs of those within our Christian community. When those closest to us are in need, our assistance is not optional, and we are called to exercise the pilgrim option described above by holding loosely and giving at risk. Third, when we do have choices available to us—when our resources enable us to decide which community to join, into

⁴⁶ McCarthy, *The Good Life*, 113.

which neighborhood we should move, and with whom we should associate—those choices should take into consideration others’ needs as much as our own. It was noted earlier that Perkins advocates for the three “R”s of development including “relocation” by Christians into poor communities: “By living as neighbors with the poor, the needs of the neighborhood become one’s own needs. Shared needs and friendships become a bridge for communicating the good news of Jesus Christ and working together for better conditions in the community.”⁴⁷

While moral proximity does not necessarily require that all Christians live among the poor, this is surely the call of many Christians. It is also the call of all Christians to take moral proximity seriously, writes Schneider, even if its practice will mean “one thing to an unmarried teacher, another to a banker with a large family, and quite another to a professional politician, stay-at-home mother, truck driver, garbage collector, or lonely artist.”⁴⁸ Members of a Christian community should be encouraged to live near one another and work in concert for the needs of the larger community. Sine notes that today churches are paying more attention to the importance of time and space in the ways member live together and love one another. He describes the practice of Zoe Livable Church in Tacoma, Washington:

Community leaders invited this emerging congregation to move into a twenty-square block area in downtown Tacoma. Zoe leaders reported that as their members have moved into the same neighborhood, they are not only more involved in each other’s lives, but they are also finding more time to reach out to the homeless and vulnerable in their community.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Perkins, “Wealth and Poverty,” 459.

⁴⁸ Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*, 181.

⁴⁹ Sine, *The New Conspirators*, 262-263.

This is a good and viable vision for those of us who become squeamish at the notion of a Christian commune with its utopian overtones. McCarthy frames the notion well for Christians who would be part of the *οἶκος θεοῦ* in the suburbs:

The church is our first family. Such a claim does not mean that we leave our homes and take up a common residence. It does mean, however, that our separate homes are not independent units or autonomous domains. They are dependent and fulfilled in sharing common life with the church. We do not solve problems by striving to make our private families self-sufficient. We have a responsibility, for instance, for providing the financial resources, our time, and our hard work to sustain the church building and sanctuary. This common place is our home, and how we maintain our home ought to reflect our faith in God's hospitality.⁵⁰

Older believers among us will no doubt smile at this talk of Christians living closer to one another, of sharing life more intentionally, and of seeing the church as their shared home. They will remember that once Christians lived, worked, and worshipped together as a "parish," and they will be glad to know that that the parish is having a new day in a new form.

Stewardship: The Dominion of God Exhibited through Entrepreneurship

Stewardship is typically discussed in terms of being good caretakers of God's resources—the "time, talent and treasure" providentially entrusted to us. From this perspective, we should give careful consideration to how much time we spend in meaningless consumption, to what extent entertainment comes at a cost to our self-development, and to what degree our treasure is squandered in things that will not last. There is another side to stewardship, however. John Schneider argues that "the workings of modern capitalism (in contrast to older forms) are unusually well suited to the expression of an integrated Christian faith and life. . . . Christians ought to have a view of

⁵⁰ McCarthy, *The Good Life*, 52.

modern capitalism that is ‘world affirmative’ and ‘world formative’ rather than mainly negative and prone to strategies of separation and withdrawal.”⁵¹ As part of a capitalist society, each of us has access to the means of wealth creation. We must therefore consider how Christians are called to be good stewards of capitalism, and how we may use it to the glory of God and the service of the global community.

A Theology of Stewardship

To find a theological basis for this kind of stewardship, one need look no further than the Parable of the Talents in Matthew 25:14-30. In it, the master prepares to leave on his journey, and distributes his resources to three servants, giving five talents to the first, two talents to the second, and one talent to the third. It is not clear if the master wishes to communicate his relative esteem for the servants by this distribution. What is clear, however, is that sum given to each is substantial. According to the *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, “Although the exact value of a talent varied from period to period and place to place, we may estimate the values of these investments at roughly fifty thousand, twenty thousand and ten thousand denarii. Since one denarius was a day’s wage, this would be a ‘small sum’ (25:21, 23) only to a very rich master.”⁵² In other words, even the third servant was entrusted with more than the average worker might earn in a lifetime. Jesus is inviting his hearers to see their whole lives—their innate gifts, their intellect, their families, their community, and everything else that makes up the totality of their life on earth—as having been entrusted to them by the Master. While we

⁵¹ Schneider, *The Good of Affluence*, 9.

⁵² Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*, electronic ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Mt 25:15.

may not know if our portion equals five or two or one, we know it adds up to a life, and one day the Master will demand a reckoning for how that life was used in His service.

When the master returns, he finds that the one who has received the least has in fact done the least with it. What is striking, however, is that the efforts of the first two servants are rewarded with precisely the same affirmation: “Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.” While we may fixate on competition and comparison with one another, the Master does not. Both are equal in his eyes. These two servants took what was given to them and worked it, even risked it. They got out into the world and hustled, and were rewarded with even greater responsibility when their master returned. In this parable Jesus gives a resounding endorsement for the entrepreneurial spirit.

The lesson is not complete, however. There is much we can learn from the third servant. “Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours” (vv. 24-25). Surprisingly, the master does not disagree with how the servant characterizes him. He declares that if the servant knew he was a harsh man then he must surely have known how the master would react. Even a modest interest rate from the bank would have would have been preferable, he says. What are we to make of the servant’s behavior? The key to understanding lies in his final statement, “Here you have what is yours.” He may be unrepentant, but he is not dumb. He rightly understood that any profit gained by his efforts would not be his to keep. The fruit of his efforts would go to the enlargement of the master’s estate, enhancing the

master's reputation and contributing the master's glory. The man resented the idea that his efforts would build up the master's kingdom instead of his own.

With this in mind, let us return to Mark 10:17ff, and note that Jesus' instruction to the disciples ends with the enigmatic observation, "But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first" (vs. 31). If we see this as a continuation of the theme he laid out in 9:34, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all," then we can also see how the call to sell, leave, and follow is a call to servanthood. If the Rich Young Ruler truly wishes to have a life that counts, then he must be willing to commit himself to the building up of God's kingdom at the expense of his own. Jesus models the way of the servant when he washes the disciples feet (John 13:14-15). As Foster points out, "The ministry of power functions through the ministry of the towel."⁵³ By committing ourselves to a vow of service, we reject the power games of modern society in which status and wealth are seen as the measures of power. The call to stewardship service requires that we live not for our own glory, but the glory of the Master. And how is the Master glorified? The Master is glorified when we use follow in the way of Christ and use our resources for the empowerment of others.

A Practice of Stewardship

Before we consider examples of how we may become Christian entrepreneurs, we should confront the reality that for many this is a contradiction in terms. This is important because unless Christians begin to see themselves as servants charged with the responsibility of using physical resources to build God's spiritual Kingdom, then we

⁵³ Richard Foster, *Money, Sex & Power: The Challenge of the Disciplined Life* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), 228.

leave the world's wealth to those who will use it to build their own. Dinesh D'Souza would argue that this is not a bad thing, and illustrates it well in his profile of T. J. Rodgers, the CEO of Cypress Semiconductor in the Silicon Valley. Rodgers sees himself as an amoral capitalist, yet takes great offense at those (especially those who profess Christ) who regard him and the success of his business with disdain and fail to see the positive contribution he makes to the cause of economic empowerment:

I keep hearing feed the poor, clothe the hungry, give shelter to those who don't have it. The bozos who say this don't recognize that capitalism and technology have done more to feed and clothe and shelter and heal people than all the charity and church programs in history. So they preach about it, and we are the ones doing it. They want to rob Peter to pay Paul, but they always forget that Peter is the one that is creating wealth in the first place.⁵⁴

D'Souza notes that Rodgers runs his business effectively and ethically, and that his commitment to the success of his company places limits on his desire for personal wealth. Rodgers "likes to sound like a bad boy, but for all his Randian revelry in greed and selfishness, his everyday actions are the actions of a decent, productive person who is also a valuable member of American society."⁵⁵ He concludes that "whatever their motives, entrepreneurs are doing more than anyone else to fulfill the Bible's practical mandate to improve the living standards, and the dignity, of the disadvantaged."⁵⁶ He goes on to ask if whether it is Bill Gates or Mother Teresa who has done more to eradicate poverty and suffering in the developing world, and with this question the dilemma posed by entrepreneurship for Christians becomes clear.

⁵⁴ Dinesh D'Souza, *The Virtue of Prosperity* (New York: Free Press, 2000), 124.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 126-127.

Christians ignore this critique to the detriment of our witness and God's kingdom. The appropriate response to the power of money is not to demonize those who have it or build wealth from it, but to accept the responsibility of money and its right use as God-given. Beyond this, however, we must see that the economic and spiritual realities of poverty are equally important to Kingdom mission. While it is probably true that The Gates Foundation has done more to provide aid to the world's poor, Mother Teresa has done more to ensure that people like Bill Gates know the poor exist. The people of God are called to provide vision and action, and there is no excuse for whatever inferiority complex or false piety that leads us to believe we cannot do both.

It is not necessary for a Christian to be a CEO to participate in the empowering forms of capitalism. With the advent of micro-loans, fair trade goods sold over the Internet, and technological advances in transportation and communication, individual Christians and local congregations can be as invested in the creation of wealth and resources as they are in the distribution of them. Sine describes a small but powerful entrepreneurial project that serves the Kingdom and the people of Malawi. Ted Webb came up with an idea and got it off the ground thanks to Launch, a program created by Carl Nash for Youth Unlimited (Toronto Youth for Christ):

Ted Webb was a nineteen-year-old "bike-aholic." He brought a dream to Launch that traced back to his trip to Malawi during the summer of 2004. Ted met pastors there who had to walk two-to-three hours to visit church members because they didn't have access to any other form of transportation. This was the beginning of Africycle.

Ted returned to Toronto and got Canadians to donate 180 bicycles, which he repaired, restored and took back to the pastors in Malawi. He returned recently to Malawi with another four hundred refurbished bikes. The containers used to ship the bikes have also been designed to function as small bike-repair shops. He brought spare parts with him and showed locals how to maintain the bikes, so that now the income from the bicycle repair shops provides support for disabled and orphaned children. Their mission statement reads: Africycle will mobilize Canadians to exploit

the potential of the bicycle as a catalyst to create economic development to empower Africans to improve their quality of life.⁵⁷

Of course, our churches are full of people who are indeed successful entrepreneurs, who can share their resources and expertise to train and equip others. Sine also tells the story of Kim Tan, the son of a Malaysian businessman who immigrated to the U.K. and describes his vocation as “making wealth to distribute wealth.”

Shortly after his arrival [to the U.K., Kim] came to vital faith in Christ. Kim immediately plunged himself into a university education, through which he became convinced that God cares for every part of life on this planet.

He and his wife, Sally, residents of Surrey, England, developed the policy of giving away 50 percent of their income, plus any surplus at the end of the year. Kim and Sally collaborated with two Christian leaders in the U.K., Roger Forster and Alan Kreider, to create a new form of Christian venturing, the Transformational Business Network, to encourage entrepreneurs to start small businesses in poorer countries where there is high unemployment.⁵⁸

Even Foster, for all his understandable concern about the power that money has to make “pseudo-saviors,” advocates investing for the sake of the kingdom based on Christian principles.⁵⁹ He writes, “The total earnings are either reinvested or given away. At all times hold firm to the policy that the money, including all earnings, belong entirely to God.”⁶⁰ Foster continues, “The theology of wealth says, ‘I give so that I can get.’ Christian simplicity says, ‘I get so I can give.’ The difference is profound.”⁶¹ What can be said of Christian simplicity could just as easily be said of Christian entrepreneurship. When shall the American Church take a fresh look at the Parable of the Talents, celebrate

⁵⁷ Sine, *The New Conspirators*, 297.

⁵⁸ Sine, *The New Conspirators*, 152.

⁵⁹ Foster, *Simplicity*, 154.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 157.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

the embarrassment of riches with which the Master has endowed us, and decide it is time to give the Gates Foundation a run for its money?

Conclusion

There are two reasons why people seek life change or transformation. First, they experience a degree of dissatisfaction or discomfort with their current condition. Second, they come to discover a new, compelling vision for a different reality of life. If either or both of these occur, we find ourselves propelled to seek change.⁶² The bulk of this dissertation has been provided to attend to the first reason. Americans, especially American Christians, intuitively know something is wrong with the role materialism plays in our lives. This work is an exercise in attempting to describe what that something is and how Jesus himself has responded to it. The spiritual disciplines described in this chapter are intended to address the second reason. Without a vision for a different kind of life, without new concepts and frameworks for defining our relationship with our possessions, there is little hope we can live into the richness and fullness God intends for us to experience through his material blessings.

Once we find ourselves seeking change, we immediately encounter resistance within ourselves. This resistance to personal transformation takes several forms, but the spiritual disciplines discussed in this chapter are intended to address three in particular: our inability to manage distractions, our radical addiction to comfort and ease, and our expectation for instant change.⁶³ Solitude attends to the distractions by separating us from them for a time. The pilgrim option, community life, and stewardship each challenge the

⁶² Matthews, "Searching for a Gospel That Really Transforms."

⁶³ Ibid.

world's message that our possessions are just for us, that we are entitled to them, and that we must have them to enjoy life in comfort and ease. Each in their own way frees us from the unreasonable expectation of instant change because each is an agent of God's gracious empowering in our lives. Each calls us to recognize that we do not change ourselves by practicing these disciplines but that God, through the disciplines, is changing us. It is as Jesus said: "For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible" (Mark 10:27).

CONCLUSION

The aim of this work has been to speak a word of grace, directly from Jesus himself, to the materialists inside and outside the American Church. When referring to materialists, of course we mean everyone. It is time to lay aside any pretense about how, or to what degree, our materialistic culture has shaped our imaginations and buoyed up our fragile self-images. We now know that if we fall before the feet of Jesus as earnest life seekers, he will not dismiss us as vain or vapid or frivolous or even as idolatrous. He will look at us and look into us. He will deal seriously with us and he will love us. He will be compassionate enough to tell us the truth, and will respect us enough to let us walk away if we wish to reject it. In a world that will indulge, flatter, and flat out lie to us, we can know that what Jesus offers us is genuine and real.

Because we can receive this directly from Jesus, we do not need to take our cues from others. We neither need them to help us justify our consumption on the one hand or shame us on the other. As Foster remarks near the end of his work on Christian simplicity, “The cost of simplicity is great, but the cost of duplicity is greater.”¹ We need to take Jesus at least as seriously as he takes us, and live in choice. Beaudoin came to realize that for many of us, we would rather wallow in our love/hate relationship with our things than start making choices:

At several conferences, I delivered sober jeremiads about the economic passivity of my generation and our implication in the exploitation of poor workers overseas. The nadir of my thundering happened after I had just spoken to several thousand Christians at an evangelical conference in Hawaii. On my way out of the arena afterward, a woman rushed up to me and grasped my hand and arm, gushing “Thank you! Thank you for that spiritual spanking you gave me!”

In that moment, I realized that being shamed into guilt was one way for Christians to avoid taking responsibility. There can actually be a spiritual *frisson* in scolding and being scolded, being reduced to a feeling of utter dependence on God—

¹ Foster, *Simplicity*, 231.

but on a God present most intensively in self-flagellation. Although I had many laughs about it later, I never wanted to give another talk that someone would experience as a “spiritual spanking.”²

Indeed, what is needed now is not a spiritual spanking but genuine spiritual maturity. As mature Christians, we embrace our call to personal action. We accept that we, like the servants entrusted with the talents, are entrusted with the resources of this abundant earth in order to prepare us for the eternal responsibilities Christ intends to bestow upon us as stewards of God’s eternal kingdom. Willard makes this clear as he explains how each of us has a “kingdom” or “queendom,” with its boundaries determined by the range of our effective will.³ Foster points out,

The goal is not to “expand our borders.” The goal is to align our own little queendoms and kingdoms with the great kingdom, the range of God’s effective will, so that we can say continually, “Not my will, but thine be done.” Whether the range of our effective will is small or large, what we must do is tune our will with the harmony of God.⁴

While our branded economy wants us to believe we are expanding our borders by surrounding ourselves with things that help us define ourselves, tuning our wills to the harmony of God is the means by which we live in true authenticity. Considered this way, choosing not to be conformed to the image of this world but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Rom 12:2) is a radical act of individuation. Beaudoin proposes that we identify “that undomesticatable region of ourselves that cannot be bought, cannot be branded . . . traded away, drugged up, or dieted off.” He asks, “What about ourselves cannot be sold, sweated away, or co-opted by an advertiser? How would you describe that dimension of yourself, and what might it mean to live from that ‘place’ in your

² Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, 40-41.

³ Willard, *Divine Conspiracy*, 22-23.

⁴ Foster, *Simplicity*, 213.

economic life?”⁵ That dimension of oneself is best described by Paul when he reminds us that we have been raised with Christ, and are therefore called to “seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God” (Col 3:1-2). To live from that place is to live in the confidence that the false self of your own making has died, and your life—your true identity—“is hidden with Christ in God” such that “when Christ who is your life is revealed, then you also will be revealed with him in glory” (vv. 3-5).

If we do not lay claim to that dimension of ourselves, if we do not live from that place, then we are the will of the most capricious and manipulative forces within our culture. These forces teach us is that if we give up the identities we have built around our titles, our academic degrees, our zip codes and our social/political affiliations, then we will have no identity at all. Not only will we believe that we will become nothing, but we will stay that way forever. This is our greatest fear – the fear that drives us to work as hard as we can, earn as much as we can, control whatever we can, and impress as many people as we can. The fear of being nothing drives nearly everything we do unless we can trust God’s love, acceptance, and provision over our own efforts.

Jesus promises that being nothing is not an option. You cannot be nothing to God. What you can be is unconditionally loved and accepted as God’s beloved child. The abundant, generous, eternal life Jesus promises is a present-tense life. This is not “pie in the sky by-and-by.” If we would relinquish our claim to “the good life” on our terms, we will receive the “the great life” on his terms. He promises to provide a home and a family for us where we know we belong and know we are valued. It will be a place that will provide us with the resources to grow as mature, capable people. It will be a place in which we can do meaningful work, the results of which will last forever. In a word, Jesus

⁵ Beaudoin, *Consuming Faith*, 98.

is promising us the Church. Had the Rich Young Ruler been able to obey Jesus' command, he would have learned that there is nothing you can give up for the kingdom that will not be replaced with that which is more satisfying, more fulfilling, and more true.

We who currently make up and lead the Church must live as the contrast-society Jesus intends. We must acknowledge that the Christian community Jesus intends is material, but it is not materialistic. It has possessions as an important part of life, but not the defining part. At its best, it sees the blessings of God's provision not as ends unto themselves but as a means of building up each member of Christ's new family. In such a community, material things have purpose beyond personal enjoyment. We begin to enter into life of an eternal quality when we stop viewing our material wealth as a means of creating personal identity, but corporate ability. Wealth is a valuable tool for the creation of community because, with it, we have the potential to provide hospitality, comfort, aid and enjoyment to those who need it. Wealth, properly utilized, creates relationships where eternal life can come forth. Luke notes this when, as a mark of the authentic relationships being formed in the early Church, he describes the believers as "having all things in common" and sharing meals together. In Luke's opinion, these events were nothing less than miraculous (Acts 2:42ff). That is, they could not have happened apart from the alchemy of God's Spirit, such that physical possessions became the stuff of heaven.

What Luke describes is, of course, revival. So perhaps we should conclude with two disparate perspectives on the possibility of revival in our materialistic time and culture. Theologian and public policy critic Colin Greene puts it this way:

One overhears much talk in some sections of the church about the need for and impending probability of revival. A brief study of church history and an honest appraisal of one's own spiritual journey reveals that revivals are usually preceded by a wilderness experience. It is in the desert that we face our own vulnerability, isolation and despair. It is the transforming reality of this dislocation of ourselves and our churches from the prevailing models of success and triumphalism of easy-believism that will give us the courage and prophetic insight to face the future with hope and integrity.⁶

Greene seems to be suggesting that the cost of revival—a painful journey that wrests from us the ease, comfort, and vanities we have enjoyed while colluding with the materialistic values of our culture—may be higher than we wish to pay. Here is another vision of revival as offered in an interview with social theologian Michael Novak:

We are going to see a see a spiritual revival in this country, and it's going to be led by rich people. I realize that sounds odd, but it really isn't. The Bible tells us that man cannot live by bread alone. But you have to have bread to realize that. Rich people are finding wealth by itself does not bring meaning and fulfillment, and they are starting to search for answers. In the past people came to God because they were suffering, because they were broken. But increasingly, in the West, it's going to be affluence that leads people to God.⁷

At first blush these visions of revival may seem contradictory, but perhaps they complement each other in a significant way. If Greene is right, then for revival to happen the Church must abandon its hope in the current models of success. If Novak is right, those who have embodied those models of success are already discovering that there is no hope to found in it. It is the same vision, viewed from opposite sides. Once again, Peter and the Rich Young Ruler stand juxtaposed to one another, more alike than they realize, struggling to understand what it means when Jesus says “go,” “sell,” “give,” “have,” “come,” and “follow.”

⁶ Colin Greene, “Consumerism and the Spirit of the Age” in *Christ and Consumerism: Critical Reflections on the Spirit of Our Age*, Craig G. Bartholomew and Thorsten Moritz, eds. (Carlisle, PA: Paternoster Press, 2000), 30-31.

⁷ Michael Novak, social theologian, as quoted in D'Souza, *The Virtue of Prosperity*, 143-144.

One day, after a conversation about the Rich Young Ruler over coffee, a friend and I walked out to the parking lot. Parked near my car was a luxury sedan with the vanity plate DEECYPL. I admit that this seemed ironic to me at the time. It still does. Yet, is it not possible to be rich and be an authentic disciple of Jesus? Can we enjoy the material goodness of this world without being materialistic? Jesus would say, emphatically, “yes.” But only with the help of God’s transforming Spirit.

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