

It's Hard to Follow Jesus if Your Stuff Holds You Back

In today's Gospel, we meet a man with whom many of us might sympathize. To put this encounter in context, Jesus is on the road to Jerusalem, surrounded by crowds. He has just ordered his disciples to let people bring their children to him, observing that "whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it." Then, up runs a rich man who kneels at our LORD's feet, asking the "Good Teacher" what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus gets a little testy at first. He rejects the man's (potentially) empty flattery and responds with a blunt summary of the commandments. Today, we can almost imagine Jesus saying something like, "Dude. You know perfectly well what you need to do. Let's not get cute, okay?"

But the man's response, and Jesus's reaction, tell us that he's sincere. This is a good guy who's just a little compulsive about making absolutely, positively sure that he's doing every last thing he should to "inherit" eternal life. As Bible scholar Lamar Williamson Jr. observes, the idea of "inheritance" would come naturally to this wealthy man. A would-be heir must meet certain conditions and fulfill certain obligations to claim his inheritance. Our hyper-conscientious rich man wants to make sure he doesn't miss a single step on the way to heaven.

Then, Jesus hits him with a series of five instructions: Go. Sell. Give. Come. Follow. Mark tells us that Jesus looked at the man and loved him, so we know these directions aren't intended to punish. Rather, Jesus is inviting this man to join him and the disciples on the road. Could there be a more exclusive invitation? It was an incredible honor, and it came with Jesus's assurance that the man would have treasure in heaven. And yet, the man went away grieving, "because he had many possessions" and he valued those possessions more than he valued the opportunity to join Jesus's inner circle. That was a first. This is literally the only time in the entire Gospel of Mark where someone refused a call from Jesus after meeting him face to face.

But honestly, I can relate. In modern America, even those of us who don't have much still have more than poor people often did in Biblical times. And many of us have a whole lot of stuff, so much stuff, in fact, that it wastes our time and burdens our lives. The National Association of Professional Organizers – who, admittedly, may not be entirely unbiased – reports that, on average, Americans spend an entire year of our lives looking for lost items in our cluttered homes. Shocking as it is, that estimate sounds low to me. After three years of “I’ll take care of that after I finish my seminary schoolwork,” large areas of our house look like a tornado came through, and things go missing so often that I’d swear we have a black hole lurking somewhere at the back of one of our closets. When my time comes to face my Maker, it’s not going to be easy explaining why I wasted so much time hunting for missing stuff, or why I wasted so much money buying duplicates of stuff I needed but couldn’t find.

But having too much stuff isn’t just wasteful – it’s incredibly damaging to our world. Overproduction devours resources and sends temperatures soaring. And when we decide to get rid of our stuff, too much of it ends up crammed in landfills, polluting the air as it burns, or poisoning our seas with plastic and chemicals. When the General Convention of the Episcopal Church ended its 2022 meeting this month, the House of Bishops issued a statement affirming that “confronting climate change and environmental degradation has never been more urgent.” The bishops tied our tendency to pile up stuff to Adam and Eve’s unfortunate choice to grab at divine knowledge that was not theirs to take, idolizing the self over everything and everyone else. One consequence is that “we crave and hoard what we do not need” and ignore the impact of our hoarding, both on the poor and on the lovely nonhuman creatures with whom God has graced our shared world

So, faced with our growing calamity, what would Jesus tell us? I believe he might say exactly what he said to the rich man. Go, and see what you have but don't really need. Give it away or sell it, and give the money to the poor. Then, come back to me, and follow me into a life that will reward you, here and in heaven, with treasure worth far more than any of that stuff you insist on piling up around you.

In giving these instructions, Jesus turned the prevailing view of his culture upside down, just as he so often did. In his community, being wealthy was seen as proof of God's favor. If you were poor, popular wisdom said you must have offended God somehow. Jesus's invitation to the rich man reverses popular wisdom, suggesting that having too much stuff is, in fact, a burden, not a blessing, and a barrier to entering into the kind of life that God intends for us. The rich man couldn't hear Jesus's message, but it's imperative that we do now.

To be clear, I don't think Jesus wants to punish us for hanging onto our stuff – I believe he loves us just as he loved the rich man. But I also think he wants us to see what it cost that man to cling to the stuff that he had. Yes, he had what the world called riches, but he turned down the adventure of a lifetime. The road to Jerusalem was hard, and Jesus's Passion must have been torture for those who loved him, but his Resurrection was the greatest miracle the world has ever seen. The rich man could have been right there, participating in it all and getting one-on-one time with the only risen Son of God. But he turned it all down over stuff. How tragic.

Jesus has completed his sacred mission to rescue humanity from sin and death, but I believe he still calls each of us to divine adventure. He's certainly been very kind to me, calling me to a beautiful church twenty minutes from my home and allowing me to keep and slowly sort through all the stuff I've accumulated. I'm grateful – if he'd called me halfway across the country or halfway around the world, packing up and getting there would have been a nightmare.

But the rich man's story is still a cautionary tale for me, and it'll make me think long and hard about whether my stuff is holding me back in any way from joining Jesus in exciting adventures.

Your home may be a model of minimalism, perfectly organized and containing only and exactly what you need. More power to you, especially if that means you're ready to hit the road when Jesus calls you. But adventures can be scary, and the human response to fear is often to turn them down as the rich man did, and to numb ourselves with addictive comforts like hoarding too much stuff. Addiction can take many forms, some of which – like working ridiculous hours and piling up money – are very, very socially acceptable. But, to the extent they distract and distance us from the lives God intended us to live, they're neither healthy nor holy. And when they lead us to withhold the necessities of life from the less fortunate and poison God's Creation, they're downright sinful.

Fortunately, as our bishops affirm, we Episcopalians are a people of hope. "We find the hope that ... dispels fear, that gives us the courage to love and to persevere ... in the power and reality of the Resurrection," and "we are called to share the hope that will empower change." We can approach the environmental crisis with hope, allowing our faith to guide us as we make the changes that will help heal our world. There's a lot of good work for Creation going on in the Episcopal Church, and plenty of opportunity to join in. Jesus calls us, I believe, to share what we have, to take only what we need, and to put aside whatever stuff is holding us back from hitting the road with him on the quest to help humanity take better care of Creation. There's plenty to do and not a moment to lose, so let's get started. *Amen.*