

ONE MORE THING...

A Sermon by Rev. John Weems
August 16, 2015



Mark 10:17-22

As he 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?' Jesus said to him, 'Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: "You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother."' He said to him, 'Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.' Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.' When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, 'How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!' And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus

said to them again, 'Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.' They were greatly astounded and said to one another, 'Then who can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.'

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

WHAT REALLY MATTERS MOST IN LIFE?

Sometimes when I'm seeking inspiration, I take a walk in the neighborhood around the church. One of the boutiques on Fillmore consistently delivers literal signs (on the street and on their Instagram page) seemingly drawn directly from the book of Proverbs in the Bible:

"Life is Short. Buy the Shoes."

"Mondays. Nothing a Little Shopping Spree Can't Fix."

And finally, "If you don't believe in love at first sight, you've been shopping at all the wrong places."

I credit the "Heidi Says" stores for being excellent marketers. In fact, founder the namesake Heidi Sabelhaus Myers used to do marketing work for Steve Jobs at Apple.

Some of you know Heidi personally or have at least seen the signs at her boutiques and wandered in. She is a very intelligent business person.

There is some scientific truth to Heidi's statements.

In *Satisfaction: The Science of Finding True Fulfillment*, neuroscientist Gregory Berns of Emory University explains what happens when we shop.

The excitement of shopping triggers the release of dopamine, a key neurotransmitter chemical linked to our brain's reward and pleasure centers. According to *Psychology Today*, people with low levels of dopamine are more likely to exhibit addictive behavior.

But what does any of this have to do with shoes?

"You see the shoes and get this burst of dopamine," said Dr. Berns. "Dopamine motivates you to seal the deal and buy them. It's like a fuel injector for action, but once they're bought it's almost a let down."¹

I do not claim to be above this phenomenon. I still fondly remember the day I received my new Air Jordan basketball shoes. Though I didn't realize it at the time, I floated around the halls of ninth grade on a dopamine fueled high, showing off my feet to anyone willing to look.

Whether or not you're into shoes or shopping, most of us have some outlet. Some collect experiences of travel or attendance at concerts or other cultural events. Even if we limit ourselves to media outlets with minimal advertising, we are influenced to believe that something—wine, truffles, two weeks in an exotic location—can bring us the happiness we seek. I'll admit that I'm pretty sure I would be a better person if I drove a Tesla Model S automobile with the ability to go from zero to 60 miles per hour in less than three seconds.

Isn't this perfectly acceptable? I mean *we* are at church. Imagine what other people are doing right now. Doesn't God give us some extra credit and a pass?

In today's Scripture, Jesus encounters a man on a journey.

He has a major question for Jesus: "*What must I do to inherit eternal life?*"

The man seems to think he already knows the answer, but just wants to be sure. As Jesus starts to go through the commandments, the man is feeling confident.

He hasn't murdered or defrauded anyone or committed adultery. He has honored his father and mother. And just as the man thinks he is about to receive his clean spiritual bill of health, he gets a J-bomb (the J is for Jesus).

"You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and given the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."

I wonder if this was the first time someone used the name of Jesus as a swear word?

The man had clearly lived as a solid citizen and person of faith. He had treated others well and likely gave money to the less fortunate. Wasn't it ok for him to have some nice things, perhaps even a Model S chariot with solid gold rims?

Jesus does not offer a ranking of commandments, but the first commandment provides not so subtle subtext: "You shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:3). For this man, possessions had become gods preventing him from loving God with all of his heart and mind and soul and strength.

Some people struggled with other commandments, but Jesus knew what was holding this man back. When he named it, the man was shocked and went away grieving. The Greek *stygnazein* can be interpreted as his "face fell."²

What is holding you back? What concerns of this world do we make into gods that prevent us from loving God with all of our heart and mind and soul and strength?

I cannot tell you what your detrimental gods are. Some among us earn and distribute wealth in ways that benefit the world. Others would be thrilled to simply have a place to live or the problem of figuring out what to do with too many possessions.

One of the challenges and blessings of serving at a church is getting to journey with people in their last days of life on Earth. While not necessarily the most uplifting subject, that is a journey we'll all be on at some point.

Most recently, I had the honor of being present and praying with Calvary member Kathy Hanson and her family as her father, Carl Mehlhop, was in his final days. Carl was a very successful insurance executive, and one of the most generous people you would ever meet. As we gathered and shared about Carl, there wasn't a single mention of anything he had purchased for himself or others. His family talked about how he made people feel so

¹ "This is Your Brain at the Mall: Why Shopping Makes You Feel So Good." Tara Parker-Pope, *Wall Street Journal*, Dec. 6 2005.

² John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2005), 304.

welcomed and loved. Having known Carl for nearly 10 years including time at Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church, I consider his smile to be one of the most electric and uplifting I have ever seen. Carl knew what really mattered.

There are several versions of “deathbed exercises” out there. As we prepare to enter a time of reflection and meditation, I invite you to consider a brief version shared by Marty Nemko, UC Berkeley Ph.D., author, radio host, and career coach.

Consider the following:

Imagine you're on your deathbed . . .

What are you glad and sad about your worklife?

Your relationships?

Your charitable efforts?

Your hobbies?

Does any of that make you want to make any changes now?

Imagine that the person who knows you best is by your bedside . . .

What might that person say to you if s/he were honest?

What would you say to that person?

What would you ask that person?

Does that make you want to change anything about how you're living your life?

What would your last wish be? Could you get that now or soon?

Jesus looked at the man and loved him. When the man walked away from Jesus, the Scripture does not say Jesus stopped loving him.

He looks at us and loves us with all of our faults and baggage.

Jesus did not say that eternal life begins later. It has already begun.

He says, come and follow me.

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