

Not Complicated, Just Hard

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“Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God!” -- Mark 10:24

I don't know if we have Charles Schulz and his cartoon character Linus to thank for introducing the term security blanket into our language, but the story of the rich young man in Mark's gospel tells me that the idea, if not the phrase, goes way back – at least as far back as New Testament times.

The story of the rich young man – Luke calls him a rich young ruler – is not, in the first instance, about money. That's the first thing you need to know about this story: it's not principally about money. We all think it is because Jesus tells this young man to part with it if he wants to inherit eternal life and the young man can't bring himself to do it. So we think the young man is addicted to his possessions, in much the same way that we are. We think of him as an early victim of that condition coined in a 2001 book entitled *Affluenza*, which the authors describe as "a painful, contagious, socially transmitted condition of overload, debt, anxiety, and waste resulting from the dogged pursuit of more".

Have you noticed that one of the growth industries in the last twenty years has been self-storage facilities? We ordinary Americans have accumulated so much stuff that our closets won't hold it, our attics won't hold it, our basements won't hold it, and our garages won't hold it. And yet, like *Oliver Twist*, we want more. But unlike Oliver, most of us aren't starving in a workhouse. Even those of us at the bottom of the middle class in America are already rich by the world's standards, but our self-perception has become so warped that we can't see our lives for what they really are.

And although most of us are quick to condemn things as the culprit for that distorted and destructive way of life, it's not the things that are to blame, for the things didn't buy themselves. We bought them. And kept buying them. And most of us didn't buy so many things because we're greedy; we bought them because we're insecure, and that is the real, spiritual malady that afflicts the young man in our gospel reading, just as it afflicts us. His story isn't so much about money as it is about the security that we all think money will buy.

I heard Suze Orman say the other night, “The goal of money is for you to feel secure,” and Suze knows whereof she speaks. She speaks for untold millions of us who live with the unrelenting fear of impoverishment, if not now then in our old age. Money may not buy happiness, but it can buy a great sense of security, and if we middle-class Americans spent a fraction of the time and energy we devote to making and preserving money to making the world a better place, the world would indeed be a better place.

But our insecurity doesn't express itself just in our obsession with money. The “dogged pursuit of more” that the authors of *Affluenza* describe manifests itself in dozens of ways. I have a Facebook friend who was once a face-to-face friend. We're still friends in that real as opposed to virtual way, but since he lives in Manhattan and I live in Ohio, our face-to-face opportunities aren't as real now as they once were. I'm among his 1,529 Facebook friends, and the number keeps growing. When we were face-to-face friends, I knew most of his other face-to-face friends and he knew most of mine, and so

our overlapping circles gave us both friends we wouldn't have had without the other. Most of his Facebook friends, on the other hand, I don't know and never will. But the ethos in our anxiously consumerist society is that you can never have too many Facebook friends. Friends have become another commodity – a piece of that great wall of stuff with which we hedge ourselves round about in our desperate search for security.

Some of you may have seen this past week the series on PBS about the making of the atomic bomb, and how the scientific research on nuclear fission languished until Albert Einstein persuaded President Roosevelt that the Nazis might develop an atomic weapon before we could, and suddenly the nuclear arms race was on. When the Nazi archives were opened in Berlin by the Allies at the war's end, it turned out that Germany had made almost no progress on developing their own atomic weapon, but by then we had twisted the dragon's tail and the horrifically destructive beast threatens to destroy us still today.

Our insecurity comes with a price, just as that young man unwilling to part with his riches paid a price, and it was a dear one.

“Good teacher,” he asked Jesus, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Those are the stakes when it comes to our sense of insecurity – nothing less than eternal life. We are so desperate to make ourselves feel secure in this life that we cannot see how we have forfeited our share of the life to come. We cannot, for the temporal or eternal life of us, see that our desire to secure this life is the very thing that keeps us from surrendering it. And you cannot inherit eternal life unless you surrender this one. That is perhaps the clearest, most unambiguous thing Jesus ever said. And since most of us are unwilling to make that sacrifice except in timid and half-hearted gestures, the gate that leads to eternal life is narrow and few of us will find it. Those damning words did not originate with me; they come from Jesus, and you can read them for yourself in Matthew 7:14.

[Christianity's not complicated, as I've said to you many times, it's just hard, and the story of the rich young man](#) is one of the reasons I repeat that unwelcome truth to all of you and believe it myself. I've been teaching the Bible for over forty years, and one of the things I've learned about the Bible is that people aren't confused about it as much as they're afraid of it. And the parts they're most afraid of aren't the stories of slaughter in the Old Testament or Paul's sometimes dense theology in the New; no, the words of the Bible most people are afraid of are the words of Jesus who asks us, quite simply and directly and unambiguously, to do things we desperately do not want to do.

“If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.”

Again, friends, I'm not making that up. I'm simply quoting Jesus as Mark preserves his words in the eighth chapter of his gospel, in verses thirty-four and thirty-five. What part of that instruction do we not understand? Taking up one's cross? We know perfectly well what that means. It means the end of your self as you've known and loved it. The cross means dying to your self so that you may live for God. The cross doesn't represent that burden or duty that morality tells us we have to live with, as we commonly speak of the crosses we have to bear in life – the infirm loved one, the bullying neighbor, the physical ailment. Those aren't the crosses that lead to eternal life; those crosses are simply part and parcel of this life, and shouldering them gracefully and consistently is a mark of good character, but don't mistake good character for eternal life.

“We know that our old self was crucified with him,” Paul wrote to the Romans, “so that the body of sin might be destroyed, and we might no longer be enslaved to sin.” That's the radical abandonment of the self and its desperate desire for security that constitutes genuine discipleship. The change to become a follower of Jesus the Christ –

the radical Jesus of the New Testament, not the user-friendly Jesus of popular Christianity – is profound and complete or it's something other than the change to discipleship. The people who change the world – and that's who Jesus calls his followers to be – they first allow God to change them, and that change is not partial. Commitment to the way of Christ is an all or nothing proposition.

You will be hard pressed to find a single saint in the Christian church whose biography does not include accounts of what a struggle it was to leave the life she or he had known and loved in order to follow Jesus. Augustine wrote eloquently and passionately about his resistance to becoming a Christian. Dorothy Day wrote movingly of her anguish in leaving her daughter in the care of others in order to take up the cause of direct social action on behalf of the poor. And Mother Teresa, to the end of her long life among the most wretched of the earth, struggled to free herself from her lingering old self.

The saints are heroic not because they were clever enough to figure out the secret of Christianity, but rather because they were spiritually strong enough to overcome their own insecurity, and thereby free themselves from themselves. They let God make them them.

There's nothing secret about Christianity, friends. We've been yammering on about it for over 2,000 years. It's out there in plain sight and it confronts you squarely when you enter this sacred space. The message of the cross, as Paul recognized so long ago, is foolishness to those who are perishing – that would be us – but to us who are being saved – would that be us as well? -- it is the power of God.

So what will the cross of Christ be for you? An unwelcome reminder of a kind of Christianity you left to become part of this church? A piece of jewelry you wear because of its emotional attachment to a loved one? Or will the cross be for you the power you need to free yourself from your self so that you can live for God?

The mystery writer and Catholic apologist G. K. Chesterton famously said, "The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult and left untried."

It takes far more courage, friends, to live in the shadow of the cross than it takes to live in the shadow of the bomb. Try it and see for yourself.