

What Are You Clinging To?

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In the Carl Reiner directed movie *The Jerk*, Steve Martin stars in the title role. And, in the course of the film, the Jerk becomes rich through a glasses invention Called the Opti-Grab. This leads him to purchase a mansion, live a lavish lifestyle, and accumulate many possessions.

However, his invention has an unfortunate side effect and he loses a class-action lawsuit with a \$10m payout — this, to about 9 million complainants, so each complainant gets a little more than a dollar, but anyway: his wife becomes dissatisfied with their diminished financial situation, and they have an argument, and this leads to a breakup, and Steve Martin proceeds to storm out of their home, saying:

Well I'm gonna to go then! And I don't need any of this! I don't need this stuff, and I don't need you. I don't need anything except this ashtray and that's it and that's the only thing I need, is this. I don't need this or this. Just this ashtray. And this paddle game, the ashtray and the paddle game and that's all I need. And this remote control. The ashtray, the paddle game and the remote control, and that's all I need. And these matches. The ashtray, and these matches, and the remote control and the paddle ball. And this lamp. The ashtray, this paddle game and the remote control and the lamp and that's all I need. And that's all I need too. I don't need one other thing, not one - I need this! The paddle game, and the chair, and the remote control, and the matches, for sure. And this! And that's all I need. The ashtray, the remote control, the paddle game, this magazine and the chair.

And he's carrying all of these objects with him; he looks ridiculous. He's sort of an icon or image of the absurdity of our attachments in life. Because, like the Jerk carrying all this stuff around, weighing him down, our attachments weigh us down. They hinder us from the life we could be living.

So, what are you clinging to? What am I clinging to? What are we clinging to?

In the Gospel, Jesus encounters somebody who is clinging to wealth and possessions. This man approaches Jesus. He kneels before him. He is making an honest attempt to seek God. And he wants to know: what must he do to inherit eternal life?

Jesus says to him: *"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.'"*

And this man has done this, so surely this is enough.

Jesus says no: *'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.'*

On hearing this, the man who started out eagerly seeking Jesus turns away shocked. The Greek can also be translated "appalled."

Why would Jesus make it so difficult for this well-intentioned man to follow him? Shouldn't he welcome a wealthy disciple who is pious and keeps the commandments? It can, of course, be very useful for a spiritual leader to be bankrolled.

Well, Jesus offers some commentary here: *'How hard it will be for those who have wealth 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.'*

And, on hearing these words: *the disciples were perplexed; they were greatly astounded and said to one another, * 'Then who can be saved?'*

In the Old Testament, wealth and material goods are often considered to be signs of God's favor. And yet Jesus contradicts this. Why? Wealth and power tend to give rise to a sense self-sufficiency and complacency; a false security.

And so Jesus is challenging the idea that prosperity and observance of the law together equal a ticket to the kingdom of God.

Now, even as Jesus challenges attitudes about wealth that appear in the Old Testament, he's also in keeping with other perspectives found in the Hebrew Scriptures that deal with the ways in which wealth can compromise spiritual health.

So, am I here to tell you that you all should renounce you wealth and possessions?

No, not exactly. If I did, and if you listened to me, I would be out of a job! And, not to put too find a point on it, but next Sunday is stewardship Sunday.

But there are also good reasons for me not to presume that this gospel text suggests that everybody should give up *all* of their wealth and possessions, because Jesus didn't call everybody to do this.

There is the well-known story of Zacchaeus the tax collector who Jesus has dinner with, prompting Zacchaeus to tell Jesus that he will give *half* of his possessions to the poor, which Jesus finds satisfactory. Also, we find in the gospels that Jesus relied on the generosity of benefactors throughout his ministry.

Jesus did not have uniform or one-size-fits all expectations of all his followers regarding wealth and possessions. He had consistent principles, yes, but they applied differently to different people.

I think what Jesus is really seeing and responding to is not simply this man's wealth and possessions but his *attachment* to them. Now, in some ways, this might sound to you like a watering down or softening of Jesus' words.

But, heard this way and really taken to heart, they remain just as challenging, if not *more* so. Because, even if we are not all called to take a vow of poverty, we are not really let off the hook, because we are all attached or clinging to *something*. For most of us, like Steve Martin in the Jerk, probably a few things. It could be wealth and possessions, but also comfort, popularity, power, privilege, control, the respect or admiration of others.

We cling to these things because we depend on them to tell us that we are OK. And when we do this, we tend to forget God; we lose sight of our dependence on God. C.S. Lewis described this as trying to "*rest in a shadowy happiness as if it could last for ever.*" But this is not real happiness or joy, and none of it lasts; none of it is ultimately dependable. Only God is.

Jesus reminds us that it is not enough to follow the rules and, in that way, "be a good Christian."

This is not because God is harsh or exacting, but because God wills to give us nothing less than God. And, we can't receive this gift of life, love, and divinity when our hands are full of other things. Jesus describes this here as the hundredfold that is received by those who leave their comfort and security for him.

So: what are you clinging to? What am I? What are we?

Whatever it is: Jesus might be calling you to let it go.

This not a one time decision. It is a commitment that needs renewal daily; hourly; even moment-to-moment; offering ourselves again and again to God.

When Jesus told this man to give up his possessions, he looked at him and loved him. He looks at us with those same eyes of love. We can trust him. May we learn to let go and receive the hundredfold he promises.

Amen.