

Material things: Mark 10:17-31

by [Andrew Warner](#) in the [October 3, 2006](#) issue

On the way out of my city I often pass a large self-storage center. Rows and rows of nondescript units are lined up like barracks at an army base. I often wonder what is inside those storage units: treasured heirlooms, vast collections of *National Geographic*, broken and tattered belongings that someone doesn't want to give up?

I note the sign saying Self-Storage and wonder: How many selves do we lock up inside with those possessions?

Whether or not we rent a storage unit, we do tend to define ourselves by our belongings. The colonists revolted against the Stamp Act of the British Empire by boycotting British goods. This first major, coordinated protest against imperial rule in America not only turned the colonists into Americans, but also defined Americans by what they did or did not buy. To be American was to wear homespun clothes. Material consumption and possession have continued to be the means by which we define ourselves.

This is why Jesus' words in Mark are like a "two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit." It's always tempting to look away when Jesus speaks to us of wealth, convincing ourselves that the rich young ruler is someone else who makes more money than we do. In subtle ways we say to Jesus, "Surely not I, Teacher."

Jesus' conversation with the rich young man presents two versions of the material life: the first is the young man's life of wealth and status. This is the kind of material life our culture trains us to long for, whether we are the immigrant hoping for a better life or the uber-wealthy person trying to "make do" with a 20,000-square-foot house.

Jesus called the young ruler to a new kind of material life, a life given to serving the poor with the "materials" of tears, blood and sweat. Clearly, this life is not marked by the kinds of happiness used to sell goods. But we do honor Jesus' call in our culture when we honor volunteers and all those who serve others.

Jesus was not calling the rich young man to an esoteric spiritualism, a gnostic abandonment of the physical world. Instead, he was calling him to move from one kind of materialism, the self-absorbed variety, to one that focuses on others' needs, including their material needs.

Which materialism defines us? I've heard that most of us Americans, at nearly every income level, long for a 20 percent increase in income. "With just 20 percent more, life would be easy," we tell ourselves. But for most of us this is an unquenchable hunger.

Our consumption of goods would seem to be in direct conflict with a materialism of good works. In *Bobos in Paradise*, David Brooks describes how Americans resolve this conflict. His theory is that our culture was once split between the bourgeois and the bohemians. The bourgeois spent their money on obvious luxuries like boats and furs; bohemians created an alternative culture that disdained overt displays of wealth and instead embraced a romantic view of the common life.

Brooks maintains that contemporary Americans have created a hybrid—they are bourgeois bohemians who spend extravagantly on everyday goods. The money once spent on boats and furs goes into granite countertops and professional gas ranges. People who would disdain furs as an immoral indulgence will spend thousands on a bathroom with a Zen-like quality or, as the *New York Times* recently reported, on garage makeovers.

In a previous house we redid our kitchen, following the Bobo wisdom that an expensive range would somehow transform my cooking. Now I am in another house, and back to cooking on a scratched and dented stove in a kitchen that the realtor described as "awaiting your personal touch" (code phrase for sledgehammer).

Though my current kitchen is a shadow of my former one, the food tastes the same or better, because now it's shared with a family and with longtime friends.

The kind of materialism Jesus calls us to requires not the accumulation of goods, but an engagement with people, particularly people in need. Perhaps the first lesson for us as "rich young men" is to realize the empty promise of our consumption. The second is to follow Jesus in the abundant life of engagement.

While the lectionary matches Hebrews 4 to this reading, I find a closer connection to Philippians 2, where Paul speaks of Jesus as one who was equal with God but

“emptied himself, taking the form of a slave.” Can we hear Jesus speaking to us as the one who gave up his possessions? Jesus is the one who has already done what he asks us to do.

Life in a congregation trains us to focus on Jesus’ kind of materialism. When we baptize a child or visit the sick or serve food in a shelter, we are living and practicing a materialism of tears and blood and sweat. Following Jesus means embracing this new life.

This past year I was promoted to head of staff in my congregation and received an increase in compensation. But this change was not the defining event of the year. What will stick with me is my relationship with a young man in my congregation who was in jail awaiting trial for murder. My visits spent praying with him, reading Romans and helping him understand who he is and what he had done matter more than the possessions I have accumulated.

Jesus’ words can pierce our hearts; they may also encourage us to engage the materials that really matter: bodies and souls.