

# CHECK YOUR BOX & BAGS

## When Jesus Asks Too Much | Matthew 19:16-30

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### Taste or Tradition?

In his best-selling book, *Halftime*, Bob Buford tells a story that is reminiscent of the encounter we read about in our text from Matthew's gospel today. At age 44, Buford found himself at the apex of what the world defines as "success." He had parlayed a modest cable television business into a fabulously profitable empire. He was driving a Jaguar, splitting his time between several luxurious homes, and able to travel anywhere he wanted, whenever he wanted. Like some who've climbed Mount Everest, however, Bob Buford found himself at the top of the world, wondering why he felt more aware of the wind and the cold than he was of the view.

All my life I had been great at developing strategic plans for business, says Buford. Now, I realized, *"I needed a plan for ME. I spread out my jumbled dreams and desires, lists of perceived strengths and weakness... things to do and things to abandon. It was a quagmire of both complementary and conflicting ambitions... What should I do now?"* I wondered. *"Where should I invest my talents, time, and treasure? What are the values that give purpose to my life? What is the overarching vision that shapes me? Who am I? Where am I going?"*<sup>1</sup> Ever asked questions like that?

Amidst this confusion, God brought into Buford's life a revered management consultant named, Mike Kami. Kami had directed the central planning of a stunning list of corporate giants and God now used him to sow into Bob Buford's soul an explosively creative question: **"What's in the BOX?"** Kami asked. "What are you talking about?" said Buford. Mike went on to relate how he'd asked the senior leaders at Coca-Cola the same question: **"What's in the box for you?"** What is the mainspring of your business... the driving force... the ruling consideration for you? The executives deliberated and then answered: "Great taste." That's what's in the box for us.

From there, the executives at Coke went on to conduct a vast array of taste tests. They came up with a new formula that tasted even better than the original one. They introduced "New Coke" a short while later, and promptly blundered into one of the most famous product marketing gaffs in business history. Desperate now, the company called Mike Kami back in for another planning session. "You must have put the wrong word in the box," Mike told them. "Let's try again." For several hours, the executives talked among themselves. They realized that "pulling Coca-Cola from the market was akin to tampering with an American institution like motherhood or apple pie." They emerged from their discussion with something different to put in the box. It was the phrase: "American Tradition." They retooled the formula... "Classic Coke" went back on the shelves... and Coca-Cola marched into a brighter future.

## What's In the Box?

Mike Kami let the story sink in. Then he said to Buford: *"Bob, I've been listening to you for a couple of hours."* You've told me a lot about your interests and passions. *"I'm going to tell you what's in the BOX for you. For you, it is either money OR Jesus Christ. If you can tell me which it is, I can tell you the strategic implications of that choice. If you can't tell me, you're going to oscillate between those two values and be confused."* Kami was articulating the first two instructions in this series. He was saying: **"Get off the fence... Be a servant of your ultimate object."** Buford said: *"No one had ever put such a significant question to me so directly. After a few minutes (which seemed like hours), I said, 'Well, if it has to be one or the other, I'll put Jesus in the box.'"*

Years later, Buford observed: *"To put Christ in the box, I found, is actually a paradox. It is to break down the walls of the box and allow the power and grace of HIS life to invade every aspect of your own life. It follows the same wonderfully inverted logic as [Christ's] ancient assertion that it is in giving that one receives, in our weakness we are made strong, and in dying we are born to richer life. I chose to make Christ my primary loyalty,"* says Buford, and found that he did not insist upon exclusive attention. I still had loyalties to my wife, to work, to friends, and projects. Now Christ became the CENTER of all that, but in a way that gave my life "balance and wholeness."

Another young man once stood atop the Mount Everest of success with a yearning much like Bob Buford had. **"What good thing must I do to get eternal life?"** he asked the compelling Teacher from Galilee. Jesus replied, by saying, in effect: Love God and follow his plan for human life. **"Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother, and love your neighbor as yourself."** **"All these [commandments] I have kept,"** the young man said. **"What do I still lack?" (Matt 19:16-20)**

In other words, I'm doing the right things. I'm managing about as well as I know how. So why don't I feel like my life is significant? Why don't I feel like my life is integrated? How do I get that **"eternal"** quality of life – that health and wholeness, that grace and goodness, that peace and power that I see in you, Jesus, and you keep talking about? **"What do I still lack?"** Have you ever felt that way -- like you had so much but what you needed most was still missing?

Jesus answered: "What you lack is the *right thing* in the box." **If you want to be perfect,** you're going to have to take out what's in there and put in something else. In your case, I recommend that you **go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.** But the text says that, **When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. (Matt 19:21-22)** Or, more accurately, IT had him.

## Checking Our Bags

What has you? What is the mainspring, the driving force, the ruling consideration in your life? **WHAT'S IN THE BOX?** Is it money and possessions? Is it this belief that if I just have some more, life will be better? Is it approval? Do you think that if I can just please everybody or gain more admirers, I'm going to feel a lot better? Is it order and control? Are you one of those people who feel that if I can just get my life organized, if I can just get through the to-do list, empty out my inbox, review all the posts, things will be good? Is it knowledge you have in the box? You think, one of these days I'm going to know enough that it will all come together. Is it power? Are you someone who feels, if I can just get the upper hand, if I can just get from out under, then all will be well? What's in the box for you?

On some level, and on different days, I think I've got all of those things in my box. I think I actually carry BAGS of boxes. I don't often CHECK those bags. Usually, I am moving so fast that all I do is drag them along with me, struggle to get them through the door with me. But in rare moments of quiet, sometimes at a worship service like this, and especially during the season of Lent, I open them up, and look inside. It is humbling to realize how much my life is ruled by what is in there.

The ancient Desert Fathers of the Christian tradition believed that at the bottom of every one's box or bag is one of three things. For some people it is ANXIETY – a roiling worry that I'm not loved enough, or competent enough, or special enough. For other people it is FEAR at the bottom – a sense that everything's going to fall apart, my life is threatened, if I don't get more knowledge or keep people happy or protect myself in some other way. Still others have ANGER at the bottom of their box, a sense that the world is out to get me or a resentment that things are not as they should be, or that I'm not being treated as I ought to be. When you check it carefully, what's at the bottom of your bag or box? How is it shaping your life?<sup>2</sup>

Jesus once said: **Wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it" (Matt 7:13-14).** A lot of you, says Jesus, want an eternal quality of life. But you are like camels laden with bags and boxes, filled with stuff that won't fit through the gate – especially the gate to the kingdom of God, which is as small and narrow as **"the eye of a needle."** The Bible says: **When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible" (Matt 19:23-26)**

## Christ In The Box

Jesus comes to you and me this Lent to do what only God makes possible. He comes to change the formula in our box and, in doing so, to change the shape of our lives.

Only this transformation can enable us to walk through the gate and into the life we want. If, like Bob Buford and so many others before and since him, we want a better life, then we must allow Jesus himself to replace what is in our box.

Maybe it is ANXIETY for you. Imagine Jesus lifting it up and taking it out, and setting it aside, as he steps in and takes its place: **Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. Let not your hearts be troubled... trust in God and also in me (John 14:1,27)**. Perhaps it is FEAR that runs your life. Picture Jesus scooping it all out today, and replacing it with his presence. As he says some seventeen times in the New Testament, Jesus says to you now: **Do not be afraid... Have no fear,<sup>3</sup> for I am with you always” (Matt 28:20).**<sup>4</sup> Or maybe it is ANGER in your bag. Imagine the nail-pierced hands of Jesus taking out that feeling and looking in your eyes and saying: **I am filling your heart right now and giving you the power to Love your enemies; [to] forgive those who know not what they do; [to] forgive as you have been forgiven (Luke 6:35; 23:34; Matt 18:21-35; Col 3:13).**

Jesus can take the place of all the destructive anguish that lives inside the container of our heart. He can replace anxiety with **faith**, and fear with **hope**, and anger with **love** (1 Cor 13:13). As he becomes the primary reality in our box it will alter the way we use our money. It will change the level to which we seek human approval versus God's. It will transform the manner in which we react when we can't have order and control. It will convert the purposes to which we put our knowledge and the way we use our power. We will not only check inside our bags more regularly, we will check some of those bags altogether. We'll leave them at the gate and travel lighter and freer than ever before.

Bob Buford discovered the wonder of that eternal quality of life – that classic life for which every one of us has been made. Jesus enabled him to survive the tragic loss of his child. Christ guided him in building an organization called Leadership Network that taught thousands of churches and pastors how to use their gifts more effectively. God used Bob to shape my life and the vision of Christ Church's founder, Arthur DeKruyter. How about you? Will you let Jesus take the place of what haunts and harries you? Will you practice the spiritual disciplines that enable him to keep that replacement process going? Will you invest further in a relationship with Him that can lift your life higher?

Or will you and I do what the Pharisees did? Jesus looked at them and said: I know you believe that you've reached the summit of success. I know you feel that it is mostly others who need changing. But, **Woe to you... you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of... everything unclean (Matt 23:27)**. I have seen inside your box. I tell you, check your bags. Change your formula. Repent! And, presented with that invitation to a greater life, they just sealed their box even tighter, held their bags even closer, and said -- as you and I are free to say to the call of Christ to change: **"No, I think we'd rather just CRUCIFY you."**

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<sup>1</sup> Bob Buford, *Halftime: Changing Your Game Plan from Success to Significance*, p.49-53.

<sup>2</sup> For more on this, I strongly commend reading Don Richard Riso & Russ Hudson's book, *Discovering Your Personality Type*.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 1:20; Matthew 10:26; Matthew 10:28; Matthew 28:5; Matthew 28:10; Luke 1:13; Luke 1:30; Luke 2:10; Luke 12:4; Luke 12:32; John 12:15; John 14:27; Acts 18:9; Acts 27:24; Hebrews 13:6; Rev. 1:17; Rev. 2:10

<sup>4</sup> Hebrews 13:5b