

# Jesus' Rules of Acquisition

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BUMC

Luke 12:13-34

I am sure many of you know by now, that I am *fan of the various Star Trek shows.*

For those who do not know, what Star Trek is

It is a **long running Science fiction series** that has spun off  
a dozen movies or so.

I'm **not one to dress up** and go to a convention, like Lynn Lahr  
*but I really like Star Trek.*

I want to familiarize you with

one of the alien races in the Star Trek universe: *the Ferengi.*

The Ferengi are the consummate capitalists;

*Their whole society is driven by the accumulation of wealth.*

They have developed, over the years, a system

*to guide them in accumulating that wealth.*

*They call it the Rules of Acquisition.*

I went on the Internet and got some of their rules of acquisition.

I'll share a few of them: The Tenth Rule of Acquisition says, "*Greed is eternal.*"

Another says, "*Anything worth selling is worth selling twice.*"

How about,

*"A deal is a deal, until a better one comes along?"*

The one that seems to best characterize

the cultural implications of this striving after money is,

*"A Ferengi without profit is no Ferengi at all."*

Try this one:

*"There's nothing more dangerous than an honest businessman."*

The Rule that our country might be following states,

*"War is good for business,"*

is perfectly balanced with,

*"Peace is good for business."*

**"Free advice is seldom cheap."**

**"The flimsier the product, the higher the price."**

**"Enough... is never enough."**

**"There's nothing wrong with charity...**

**as long as it winds up in your pocket."**

**"Sometimes what you get free costs entirely too much."**

**"Possession is eleven-tenths of the law."**

**"More is good... all is better."**

**"A wealthy man can afford anything except a conscience."**

**I can see from your responses that you've done business with the Ferengi.**

**Maybe there's even a tiny bit of Ferengi in you.**

**After all, one of their Rules of Acquisition states,**

**"Deep down, everyone's a Ferengi."**

**And why not?**

**Many of the alien races found in the Star Trek universe  
are caricatures of ourselves.**

**We don't have 200 rules of acquisition.**

**But we do have a never ending parade of Wealth Gurus.**

**Like Stephen Covey, or Anthony Robbins, or Suze Orman.**

**All giving us advice on how to get wealthy and to maintain that wealth.**

**Suze Orman wrote a book entitled 9 Steps to Financial Freedom**

**Unlike the Ferengi, who need over two hundred rules,**

**she boils it down to nine steps:**

- 1. Your past holds the key to your financial future.**
- 2. Facing your fears and creating new truths**
- 3. Being honest with yourself.**
- 4. Be responsible to those you love**
- 5. Respect yourself and your money**
- 6. Trust yourself more than others**
- 7. Be open to receive all that you are meant to have**
- 8. understand the ebb and flow of money.**
- 9. Recognize true wealth.**

**Seems pretty sound.**

She doesn't advise cheating people like the Ferengi.

In fact, there are a lot of well-respected people  
who have high praise for her books.

*She is on CNN all the time, (especially in the last few weeks)*

She gives solid financial advice for respectable American citizens to follow.

*Everybody needs to build up a nest egg and invest it. ... Right? ?*

*We are afraid*, like we haven't been afraid as a country since 1929.

Banks are closing down, Investment groups are being swallowed up.

One gentleman said to me that

*his retirement account went down by 35% in three weeks time.*

*Neighboring Churches are cutting back on staff.*

*Call Primrose is facing a budget crisis as well.*

We bail out the Giant insurance group AIG, and the next thing we see is them  
*giving expensive bonuses to their executives.*

*It feels as though the Ferengi have been running the economy.*

That is not necessarily bad. In fact one executive said,

*Without greed, you might as well turn Wall Street into a parking lot.*

He is right,

*Our free enterprise system is based on greed and profit.*

That is what drives innovation, and the development of business.

They don't do it for charity or the common good.

They work for a profit.

However, the illusion of the free enterprise system *is that it is self regulating.*

*That the laws of supply and demand*

*somehow over time balance each other out.*

*The trouble is that Greed can run amok.*

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century we witnessed the growth of the "Robber Barons"  
*people who took greed to the extreme*

Such as Jay Gould, John D. Rockefeller,

Andrew Carnegie, J.P. Morgan,

Leland Stanford and James J. Hill.

There were so few restrictions of the practices of industry,  
whether it was steel, railroads, petroleum  
that wealth was accumulated in the hands of a few.

Or witness the rampant greed  
that led us into the Great Depression of the 1930's.

Or remember the unrestrained Greed  
that destroyed the savings and loan system in the 1980's.

Or the Greed of Enron  
that practically bankrupted the State of California.

And now the greed of the lending industry  
has brought down the world economy.

Now, I am not against profit, nor am I against having things.

In the real world, *acquiring things is important.*

But I am against unchecked greed and obsessive materialism.

No less a Methodist than John Wesley the founder of our movement  
said about money, "*Earn all you can. Save all you can. Give all you can.*"

Wesley reduced the rules to just three.

His life was a model of both the entrepreneurial  
and the philanthropic spirits.

Through various endeavors, he made more money  
than this average-paid Methodist pastor will see in his lifetime,  
but he gave almost every bit of it away.

He kept enough to live modestly, and gave the vast majority of it  
to people who needed it.

There are several Wesleyan denominations that remind their members  
*That Wesley would not allow members of his societies to wear gold.*  
And that the rule had nothing to do with adornment.

Wesley said that *no Methodist could wear a band of gold around a finger  
while neighbors had nothing to eat.*

His advice to Christians was..

*"earn all you can" and "save all you can"*

Was not the same as advising  
the maintenance and protection of your wealth,  
because they were tempered with *"give all you can."*

All this leads us to *Jesus' Rules of Acquisition*.

Did you hear them during the reading of the Scripture?

*"Be on your guard against all kinds of greed;  
for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."*

Not too bad. Not too threatening.

We can make a good life for our families  
and save up for a rainy day without being greedy, *can't we? can't we?*

*"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat,  
or about your body, what you will wear.  
For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing."*

That's not very practical advice,  
and I've heard many interpretations  
that soften what Jesus was saying.

*"Worrying and being concerned are two different things,"* or so I've heard.

Another man said

*Jesus' advice really isn't very practical.  
We've all got to feed and clothe our families.*

Not very practical, but not really very threatening.

*"Do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink,  
and do not keep worrying. . . .*

*Instead, strive for his kingdom,  
and these things will be given to you as well."*

A nice little saying out of which we've spiritualized the meaning.

But the last Rule, though, is the scary one!

*"Sell your possessions, and give alms. . . .*

*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."*

He couldn't have meant that, could he?

*"Sell your possessions, and give to the poor?"*

*If I sold all my possessions, then I'd be the poor!*

Jesus said to the rich man who wanted to follow him,

**"Sell all you have and give to the poor."**

I've heard many times,

**"But Jesus doesn't call everyone (only Priests, monks, and nuns)  
to sell their possessions and give to the poor."**

But I think, though, that was precisely what Jesus was doing.

He was calling all who would follow him

**to sell what they had, give to the poor, and follow him.**

It was a radical call then, and it is a radical call now.

If the book of Acts tells us anything

about how the early church really existed, it tells us that

**early Christians sold what they had and gave the proceeds  
to the apostles, who then distributed to all according to need.**

But that church no longer exists! ... I think I can safely say that.

If you as an individual sold everything you owned

and gave the proceeds to the poor,

that the majority in this church would look at you and say,

**"You crazy fool! It was a nice thing**

**But what are you going to do now?**

**How are you going to live? Don't expect us to feed you now.**

It's awfully hard to live a faithful life as a disciple

when the church itself lives according to capitalistic principles

rather than **Jesus' Rules of Acquisition.**

When I served in the San Joaquin Valley Selma UMC, a neighboring church

Was left 4 million dollars in the will of a wealthy rancher.

I asked the pastor what *it was like to have that kind of windfall*

He said

**"It is like living in Hell.... All they can do now is talk about money, fight  
over money, fight over where to invest it and how to use it..**

He said

**in one year giving dropped by 40%.**

**After all we have money now why should I be generous?**

He said

*They forgot they are servants of Jesus Christ.....  
I should never have agreed to receive it."*

I told him that

*there are churches with wealthy endowments  
That do very good work and have lively missions.*

He said,

*But these people have not learned to be disciples with their money.  
This bequest may kill this church.*

It doesn't always have to be about money.

Another colleague told me of his church

*that was so in love with its building  
that the mission of the church became caring for  
and repairing their building.*

They even led a campaign

*to have the church declared a Historical landmark in town.*

God wanted them to love their neighbor and proclaim the gospel

*And they wanted to turn the church into a museum.*

The church's building

*had become more important than the church's mission.*

The things those congregations owned

*called out to them and kept them captive,  
robbing them of being all that God wanted them to be.*

The story Jesus told in the first part of today's Scripture  
ends with God saying to the man,

*"Tonight your soul is required of you."*

I've always thought that meant that

*God was requiring the man's soul,  
but the Greek puts it a little differently.*

The Greek actually says,

*"Tonight they shall require your soul."*

Who is the "they?"

The only plural in the story is *the man's possessions.*

He didn't acquire his possessions dishonestly.  
He didn't cheat anyone. ... He didn't steal them.  
He acquired them in a way  
that most of his neighbors would have thought  
*God had blessed him,*  
*but because he wanted to store them up for himself,*  
*they called out for his soul.*  
*He lost his life to his possessions.*

Now all this may sound like bad news to you.

But there is also good news here.

Jesus didn't tell this story to depress us  
*But because he knew there is deep in us*  
*Something that longs for something so good*  
*So true and important that it demands all that we have.*

I think you are looking for something worth giving your life to.

Maybe that is the reason why you have come here this morning.

You are willing, even eager for something so large,  
so true and demanding, that there is a cost.

Bishop Richard Wilkie, and a team of talented writers and editors  
developed an interactive, committed Bible study program  
called Disciple. It is 34 weeks long

And requires 1 hour of reading a day.

And mandatory attendance at each weekly session.

Disciple is based, in large part, on the assumption  
*that there are people who want to engage in serious,*  
*long-term, committed in-depth Bible study.*

Many people told Bishop Wilkie

*that he was crazy to think that there were people like that*  
*in the Methodist Church.*

At latest count, well over 4 million people  
have gone through the Disciple program,  
with many others still waiting.

Thousands of people have spent many hours  
in learning to become Disciple leaders.  
Disciple proved to be one of the greatest successes our church has had.

I have come to the conclusion,  
that we in the church have made a grave mistake.

Too often we pitch everything to the lowest common denominator.  
We put everything on the bottom shelf.  
Perhaps that suits the majority of people, the crowds.  
But not everybody.

There are some people, and maybe some of those people are you,  
for whom life is so confusing, so perplexing,  
the questions so unanswerable,  
that you know in your heart of hearts  
*if there is anything that can speak to you,  
anything that can make a difference in your life, it will not come simply.*

It will not be *three easy steps offered without cost.*  
It will not be *some simple slogan* that you can put on a *bumper sticker.*  
It will not come cheap.

It will be something that *will demand something of you.*  
You *will have to give something.*  
You will have to change in order to get better.  
There is a cost to everything important.

Christian discipleship is not something trivial, unimportant, and easy.  
Your life is not that way.  
The cross of Jesus is not that way either.

The thing I have learned  
is that many are actually eager to pay the price.

Will Willimon chaplain at Duke University tells of the time  
a recruiter from the *Teach For America Program* came to the campus.  
Teach for America is an organization  
that recruits this nation's best college and university students  
to go to teach in the most impossible teaching situations in our country.

**This recruiter from Teach America**

**looked out on a crowd of Duke students. She began by saying,**

**"I don't really know why I am here tonight.**

**I can tell just by looking at you**

**that you are probably uninterested in what I have to say.**

**This is one of the best universities in America.**

**You are all successful. ...That is why you are here,**

**to become an even greater success on Madison Avenue,**

**or Wall Street, or in law school.**

**And here I stand, trying to recruit some people**

**for the most difficult job you will ever have in your life.**

**I'm out looking for people**

**who want to go into a burned-out classroom**

**in Watts and teach biology.**

**I'm looking for somebody to go into**

**a little one-room schoolhouse in West Virginia**

**and teach kids from six years to thirteen years old how to read.**

**We had three teachers killed last year in their classrooms.**

**And I can tell, just by looking at you,**

**that none of you want to throw away your lives**

**on anything like that.**

**On the other hand,**

**if by chance there is somebody here who may be interested,**

**I've got these brochures and I am going to leave them down here**

**and will be glad to speak to anybody who is interested.**

**The meeting is over."**

**With that, all of the students jumped up, rushed into the aisles,**

**rushed down to the front,**

**and started fighting over her pamphlets,**

**just dying to apply for Teach America.**

**People are hungry to give their lives**

**to something more important than themselves.**

**It is a fact of life, not only that everything costs us something,  
but that, in our better moments, we are even eager to pay the price.**

**I think of the Hundreds of thousands of United Methodist Christians  
Who are giving up their vacations  
To go work in short term mission projects  
*Last year over 500,000 of us did it.***

**Everything costs something.**

**The most valuable things in life will cost everything you have.**

**But perhaps, in your life and mine, these tough words are good news.**

**Jesus comes asking us to pay the price.**

**In our better moments,**

***we are just dying to pay the price, just dying.***

**Amen.**