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# **Little Christian Lies: Buzzer Beaters**

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Buzzer Beaters**

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Scripture contains some obtuse and jarring teachings. The ancient words composed over centuries into sixty-six books challenge even the most faithful among us to understand how to live according to the Word of God.

So, we'd rather talk about faith. We talk about what we think our sacred text teaches. In the process of merely talking about scripture and not reading it, we tend to sidestep the hard parts, such as give 10% of the first fruits of your labor.

Or, we explain away the miraculous to fit within the bounds of our limited imaginations – like feeding the 5,000 with an abundance when all we humans see is scarcity.

Or, we argue about the clear and consistent: care for the widow and the orphan and welcome the immigrant.

Our teachings, laws, or stories never come with an asterisk to limit the scope of who or how God intends us to love. But that doesn't stop basic human nature. Common culture starts to massage the message to make them easier. In place of what is true, we might end up saying things that have no grounding in faith.

Duke Divinity scholar Kate Bowler wrote what became a best-seller *Everything happens for a reason, and other lies I've loved*.

As a scholar and humble human, she unpack “everything happens for a reason, and other lies such as “God helps those who help themselves.” These little lies slip out at times when we don’t know what to say and we’ve heard it said before, so it must be okay. Or they enter our conversation when we simply cannot come to grips with the tragedies that occur, so we grasp at anything to fill the silence.

Someone who says: “God doesn’t give you more than you can handle” doesn’t intend to lie or hurt another. But they do. That little lie absolves the other person from the responsibility to care and at the same time makes whatever burdens seem heavier.

God never brings tragedies. Just the opposite. God gives humanity a church so we help someone when one calamity after another rains down. We are to help those who cannot help themselves.

Then there is the little lie said in the presence of someone grieving a death that inflicts searing damage: “It was God’s will.” Surely in the cause-and-effect logic someone needs to be blamed when bad things happen to good people and that someone might even be God.

These little lies and the idolatry they mask will distort our lives. “Idolatry” sounds like an old-fashioned word but still pervades humanity.

During the month of August our sermons will address these “Little Christian Lies.” Each week we will turn to the lectionary since each week one if not all of the readings address how we sweep aside the holy work of faith.

Our gospel reading for today finds Jesus on the road with his disciples in tow while he teaches the gathering crowd.

Before I read, please pray with me:

*Dear God, we come before your holy word with humble hearts. Silence the nagging voices that lure us away from you. Send your*

*spirit among us so we are both startled by your truth and strengthened to follow as your son teaches. Amen.*

### **Luke 12:13-21**

Someone in the crowd said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

But Jesus said, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?"

And then Jesus said to the crowd, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed, for one's *life* does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Then he told a parable: "The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And the man thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store *my* crops?' Then he said, 'I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all *my* grain and *my* goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'

But God said to the rich man, 'You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?'"

Jesus concludes, "so it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

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What Little Christian Lie that swirls around in 21<sup>st</sup> century America might Jesus have addressed? Think of the televangelists who persuade listeners that God wants them to be rich. In rolling crescendos, these performers shed convincing tears and promise you too will be blessed with riches...if you just give money.

The lie they preach doesn't roll off the tongue as neatly the aphorisms I described earlier but infects our faith. The Little Christian lie is wealth equals worth.

This lie upholds a cultural notion that the rich received some wonderful blessing because they deserve it. They must be smarter, more loved, closer to God, and therefore command

our respect. Whereas the poor lack initiative, intellect, or simply do not work hard enough.

This lie condones caste systems of racism and any other 'ism that props up those who hoard an abundance. It encompasses more than just wealth.

It includes any human-defined measure of the worth of one's life that becomes an idol.

Some would call this a form of the prosperity gospel.

Jesus calls it nonsense.

In the Gospel of Luke Jesus speaks more about money than in any other gospel, but never consistently. He understands the fundamental nature of money. Regardless of the nation that mints the coin or whose face is printed on the bill, money is fungible. It is fungible, meaning the value of money does not change regardless of how it is acquired, spent, saved, or given away.

The only value it holds is what we ascribe to it. Whenever Jesus speaks of money, he addresses our *relationship* with money.

By the world's standards, all of us are rich. Don't start squirming. If you recall in the parable, Jesus does not call the rich man evil or sinful. Being rich in and of itself is not bad. The wealthy father of the Prodigal Son is not condemned for wealth – he uses it to celebrate. Zacchaeus and all the other tax collectors who repent of their ways to follow Jesus are not required to take a vow of poverty. They contribute to the growth of the church.

A simple request from some member of the crowd prompts the entire story: “Teacher, tell my brother to share the inheritance with me.” This man is keeping score of what he believes is rightfully his and the clock is ticking ...he wants what he believes he deserves, and he wants it now. He's racing against some buzzer.

The title of this sermon was inspired by an essay from a surfing instructor. While floating along with his young students, the instructor distracts their impatience while they

wait for the right wave. He asks them about their *buzzer-beater* moments. The phrase “buzzer-beater” implies game-saving toss or heroic play sufficient to garner an MVP or at least the dinnertime story theatre for the family.

For a surfer the buzzer-beater comes waiting offshore. You navigate the tides, read the currents, and sense the wind to find that very moment you can mount the board and ride the waves, one after another, longer and more gracefully than any other.<sup>1</sup>

Buzzer-beaters are not bad. You work and train. You focus. They are the alchemy of timing, skill, and luck. They punctuate the mundane and at the same time implant a memory of being truly alive. You saved the game. You mattered.

Buzzer-beaters matter in any finite event played for the purpose of winning. We all know the game will end and the waves will die at the beach. Even though our mortal lives will end, this life is far more than just a game.

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<sup>1</sup> Nathan Lowdermilk, “Past the Break,” from Suleika Jaouad’s *The Book of Alchemy*, (New York: Random House, 2025), 57.

However much we live in this finite realm, the life God gives is for an infinite realm. As the incarnate God, Jesus teaches us that how we live, now, matters deeply in the eternal scope of salvation.<sup>2</sup>

So a young man wants to claim his inheritance. His question implies it is measured as wealth.

Jesus first calls him “friend.” This reminds us that Jesus does not seek to shame or blame before he harkens back to Hebrew scriptures to correct some little lies. Jesus says quite simply that life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

The word Jesus uses for *life* means the deep life, more than measurable heartbeats but the abundance of life in relationship with one another and God.

Jesus tells this parable to turn a focus on the finite towards the infinite by telling the most obvious story that transcends time and culture.

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<sup>2</sup> One of the characters in Richard Powers newest novel *Playground* enjoys reading philosophy and goes on to develop internet-based games. *Playground* relies upon James Carson’s book *Finite and Infinite Games*. (*Playground*, 247, 260).

A rich man becomes trapped in his success. His land “produces abundantly.” Rather than share, he’s consumed with how to preserve it for himself. Did you notice all the “I”, “me”, and “my” from the rich man’s self-talk? That’s the thing about wealth and greed. When we start to count, we narrow our vision and focus. Self-centeredness cultivates greed and greed cultivates self-centeredness because there is never enough when we start to count.

All too often, any scorekeeping of wealth or game-winning saves builds up our egos in ways that put whatever we’ve counted in the place of God. That is the simple definition of idolatry.

I don’t know how many times I’ve read this parable and missed conversation the rich man has with his own soul: “I say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’”

As if it is his own soul – created, sustained, and redeemed by none other than the rich man! But like his stuff, he does not belong to himself, he belongs to God. The parable ends as the

man's soul is demanded back. You don't store life. You share it.

Jesus summarizes the entire teaching with the charge to be rich towards God.

Let me close with a story of someone who has achieved success and been humbled by blowing it on the international stage.

The media hounded Scottie Scheffler following his performance at the US Open at Oakmont. He blew it. He missed easy putts. His drives landed him in the infamous *church pews*, thirteen grassy strips in a bunker that must feel as though it extends from the tee-box to heaven.

Was this glory-guy no longer worthy of our respect?

In subsequent tournaments, he'd recovered, winning with his fancy-footed drives. Scheffler has consistently articulated a paradox: While grateful for his extraordinary career, he derives surprisingly little satisfaction from winning.

Before the British Open, he was asked about the longest he's either savored a victory or suffered from defeat. The euphoria, he insists, dissolves almost instantly:

At the end of the day, it's like, I'm not out here to inspire the next generation of golfers...I'm not here to inspire somebody else to be the best player in the world, because what's the point? This is not a fulfilling life...It's fulfilling from a sense of accomplishment, but it's not fulfilling from a sense of the deepest places of your heart.

There's a lot of people that make it to what they thought was going to fulfill them in life. And then you get there, then all of a sudden you get to number one in the world, and they're, like, what's the point? If I win, it's going to be awesome for two minutes...

“You wake up the next morning and it’s like, now what?”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Articles abound of Scottie Scheffler’s interviews about his performance – the astounding wins that earned him top ranking and the miserable defeats. Here are just a few excerpts from his interviews. <https://www.golfdigest.com/story/british-open-2025-scottie-scheffler-rory-mcilroy-portrush>, <https://xplorerinsights.com/2025/07/16/scottie-schefflers-sermon-at-royal->

Maybe Scheffler arrived at this faith by spending his life not only on the course, but in the real church pews. Not golf, he lifts faith and family as his life.

Do we want to just play a finite game, or can we trust Jesus' offer to share the abundance of God's eternal realm right now?

At the end of these mortal days, the question asked of our souls will not be the size of our barns – our 401k's, golf handicap, or any other measure confined to this realm.

It is a lie to think our worth depends upon our wealth or any other score of what we do, have earned, or deserve. Our worth comes from Christ's grace, given in abundance. We can never earn this love that generously flows from God's own heart.

At the end of our days, the question asked of our souls will be: how did we receive and share this abundance? Thankfully, Jesus will teach us how to be rich towards God.





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