

Check Your Bags

Leader's Guide

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What are you dragging around with you?

All of us carry loads that are often of our own making. Lent is a great time to look at those loads and see what needs to be repacked and what needs to be tossed.



Scripture: Matthew 19:16–30

Based On: "No Wonder They Crucified Him," sermon series by Daniel Meyer, PreachingToday.com.



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Part 1 Identify the Issue

Note to leader: *At the beginning of the class, provide each person with the Participant's Guide included at the end of this study.*

In his best-selling book *Halftime*, Bob Buford tells a story that is reminiscent of the encounter we read about in Matthew 19:16–30. 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 have climbed the summit of 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?”

Amidst this blizzard of confusion, God brought into Buford's life a revered management consultant named Mike Kami, a guy who'd directed the central planning of a stunning list of corporate giants. Kami was a self-proclaimed atheist, but God used him to sow into Bob Buford's soul an explosively creative question: “What's in the box?”

“What are you talking about?” Buford asked.

Kami went on to relate an experience he had consulting with a group of Coca-Cola executives. He'd asked those people 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 for awhile and then gave their answer: “Great taste. That's what's in the box for us.”

From there, the Coca-Cola executives 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

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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 much brighter future.

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. I can tell that 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.” 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 Christ in the box.’”

Years later, Buford said: “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, 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.”

Discussion Questions:

- [Q] What is in your box? How do you know?
- [Q] Why can’t Christ share the box with anything or anyone else?
- [Q] What did Buford mean when he said that to “put Christ in the box ... is actually a paradox”?
- [Q] How does putting Christ in the box give us balance and wholeness that we cannot find in any other way?

Part 2 Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching Point One: We all need to ask: What’s in the box?

Read Matthew 19:16–30.

Another young man once stood atop the Mount Everest of success with a yearning much like Bob Buford’s. “What good thing must I do to get eternal life?” he asked the compelling Teacher from Galilee. Jesus replied by saying, in effect, to love God and follow his plan: “Do not murder,

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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?"

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 what I see in you, Jesus—that wholeness, grace, and goodness, that peace and power you teach about? What do I still lack?

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. 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"—or it had him.

[Q] Why do you think Jesus started this conversation with keeping the commandments?

[Q] Do you feel as the young man did, that you are following all the rules and it's still not working for you? Explain.

[Q] Why do you think Jesus asked the young man to sell everything and give to the poor?

- Would it have been enough to give everything he had to the poor if he hadn't then followed Jesus? Why or why not?

[Q] Does this story make you uncomfortable in any way? If so, how? What does it mean for us?

Teaching Point Two: Check your 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 the belief that if you just have some more, life will be better? Is it approval? Do you think that if you could please everybody, you'd feel a lot better? Is it order and control? Are you one of those people who feel that if you can just get your life organized, if you can just get through the to-do list, empty out your inbox, 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 that if you can just get the upper hand, if you can just get out from under, then all will be well? What's in the box for you? On some level, and on different days, we may think we have all those things in the box. Many



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of us actually carry bags of boxes. We don't often check those bags. Usually, we are moving so fast that all we do is drag them along, struggling to get them through the door with us. But in rare moments of quiet, especially during the season of Lent, we need to open them up and look inside. How humbling it is to realize how much our lives are ruled by what is in there.

The ancient desert fathers of the Christian tradition believed that at the bottom of everyone's box or bag is one of three things. For some people it is anxiety: a roiling worry that I'm not perfect enough, not loved enough, or not competent enough. For other people it is fear: a sense that everything's going to fall apart; my whole life is threatened if I don't protect myself in some way. Still others have anger at the bottom of their box: a simmering resentment that things are not as they should be and 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?

Read Matthew 7:13–14.

A lot of people want an eternal quality of life. But they 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 that “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.’”

[Q] How can the loads we carry keep us from fitting through the gate?

[Q] Which of the following three things may be driving your choice of what is in your box?

- Anxiety (I'm not perfect, loved, or competent enough)
- Fear (Everything is going to fall apart if I don't protect myself)
- Anger (I'm not treated as I ought to be)

[Q] If you had trouble answering earlier what was in your box, do these suggestions help? Discuss your answer.

- Family
- Finances
- Career
- Success
- Home
- Self-preservation
- Ministry
- Approval
- Order & control
- Knowledge



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Optional Activity:

Purpose: *To help us recognize what may be keeping Christ out of the box.*

Activity: *Explain what may be keeping Christ out of the box for each of the following people. Then identify whether anxiety, fear, or anger might be driving that.*

- *Steven wants to be president of the company before he reaches 30.*
- *Claire will not let her children play with other children.*
- *Clyde spends 90 hours a week in his role as pastor of his church.*
- *Paula completely redecorates her house every three years.*
- *Ben is now working on his fifth degree. He has yet to hold a full-time job.*
- *Joan lives in isolation. She goes to church once a week, but that is the only contact she has with anyone.*

Teaching Point Three: Put 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 actually walk through the gate and into the life we want. If, like Bob Buford and so many others before and since him, we want Christ, then we must allow Jesus himself to replace what is in our box.

Maybe it is anxiety for you. Imagine Jesus lifting it up, taking it out, and setting it aside. Then 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."

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 17 times in the New Testament, Jesus says to you now: "Do not be afraid ... Have no fear," for "I am with you always."

Or maybe anger is in your bag. Imagine the nail-pierced hands of Jesus taking out that feeling, 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, and to forgive as you have been forgiven.

Jesus can take the place of all the destructive anguish that lives inside our hearts. He can replace anxiety with faith, fear with hope, and anger with love. 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

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approval instead of 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. We'll long to travel lighter and freer. Read Hebrews 12:1–2.

- [Q] What race are these verses talking about?
- [Q] What do you need to “throw off” that is hindering your race?
- [Q] What does it mean to “fix our eyes on Jesus”? How do we do that in our everyday lives?
- [Q] How does he become the “author and perfecter” of our faith?
- [Q] What joy is set before him (and us) that makes us want to run this race?

Part 3 Apply Your Findings

Bob Buford discovered the wonder of that eternal quality of life—that classic life for which every one of us has been made. 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 and growing?

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. I have seen inside your box. I tell you, check your bags. Change your formula. Repent!

And, presented with that chance for new life, they just sealed their boxes even tighter, held their bags even closer, and said—as we also are free to say to the invitation of Jesus: No, I think we'd rather just crucify you.

Action Point: Set aside time this week to examine what is in your box and ask Christ to give you the courage to empty it out and start over if you need to.

—Study by Daniel Meyer, with JoHannah Reardon

