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# GATSBY, SPRINGSTEEN, AND THE RICH YOUNG MAN<sup>†</sup>

JOHN M. FACCIOLA\*

I have come here tonight because of a concern about you. We are living in a period that has gone crazy about money. If I hear one more conversation about the absurd salaries law firms are paying associates, I think I will blow my brains out.<sup>1</sup> Those of you in banking and investments are dealing with people who consider a 30% return on an investment insufficient.

As you may know from my last speech, I am fascinated by how culture shapes our values and I wonder how people your age will be able to resist becoming what you hate. In my experience, the temptation of wealth is harder to resist than sex. Avarice is like heroin, with an endless craving for that next BMW. It is also legitimized by American culture, where no one is ever criticized for wanting to be wealthy. In a capitalist economy, the wealthy are the job creators and they are envied and lionized.

I wish I could tell you that I have risen above the culture and have been able to keep my striving for wealth out of my life, but I cannot. This brief talk is about my failures and is offered in the hope that it may be useful to you. Despite the uncanny physical resemblance, I am not exactly Mother Theresa. Some may be thinking that this guy talking about poverty is the same guy who

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<sup>†</sup> This article is based on a talk given by Judge Facciola to the Young Members Fellowship of the John Carroll Society in Washington, D.C.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., *Today's News Update*, NEW YORK LAW JOURNAL, July 31, 2001, at 1; Nathan Koppel, *The Next Pay Revolution*, THE AMERICAN LAWYER, Feb. 2000, at 17.

spends every weekend sailing an expensive J-Boat. I can only confess that I have never been able to figure out this money thing and I may be here only to share my sadness that I have not done better.

Let me begin with the modern search for the historical Jesus and the methodology of the scholars and theologians who engage in it. They often take the synoptic Gospels and divorce them from the Gospel of the Beloved Disciple because the Beloved Disciple has a different agenda—the articulation of a theology of the divinity of Christ.

If one focuses on the synoptics, the conflict between Christ and the acquisition of wealth is astonishing. Christ's teachings about wealth are the most severe because the rich cannot get into the kingdom.<sup>2</sup> Only a miracle will get them in, and the metaphor Christ uses is staggering: “[i]t is easier for a camel to pass through [the] eye of [a] needle than for one who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”<sup>3</sup>

For one to understand why what Christ was saying is so utterly subversive of the surrounding culture, one has to understand that culture. It was a theocracy where there was no division between church and state.

The Pharisees distinguished themselves from everyone who was not faithful to the law. Their name meant “separate” or “the holy ones.” God rewarded those who obeyed the law and punished those who did not. The Pharisees were inside; the sinners were outside and had no hope of getting inside.<sup>4</sup>

The Sadducees were the upper crust, the bureaucratic keepers of the theocracy. They were what we aging “flower children” would call “the establishment.”<sup>5</sup>

It was a culture of pre-destination. Poverty is pre-destined and cannot be remedied. The ill, the lame, and the blind are the product of sin, of either the sinner or his parents, and their condition cannot be remedied. The idea of achievement, and of

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<sup>2</sup> See *Luke* 12:15 (New American Bible) (emphasizing that one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions); *id.* at 12:20 (“But God said to him, ‘You fool, this night your life will be demanded of you; and the things you have prepared, to whom will they belong?’”).

<sup>3</sup> *Mark* 10:25 (New American Bible).

<sup>4</sup> See *Matthew* 5:20 (New American Bible) (“[U]nless your righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter into the kingdom of heaven”); see also *id.* at 15:1–9.

<sup>5</sup> See *Mark* 12:18-27 (New American Bible).

the mobility of the middle class of capitalism, has nothing to do with this. The thought that a grandson of illiterate Italian immigrants could become a judge would have been inconceivable.

Thus, once poor, always poor, and there was nothing anybody could do about it. This poor rabble was illiterate and knew nothing of the law. It received no one's attention in this world. It was outside the temple and it could not get in. Yet Christ associated with them; indeed he shows his preference for them when he says that the kingdom is theirs and the rich will not share in it. In every parable he gives which contrasts the rich and the poor, the poor are morally better and have a place in Abba's affection that the rich will never have.<sup>6</sup>

His most stunning achievement was the creation of a new table fellowship. In that society, whom you ate with was a public description of your status. You only ate with your equals, or if you were lucky, you ate with your superiors but never with your inferiors. Christ insisted on utter equality in table fellowship—he ate with public sinners like despised tax collectors and prostitutes. It is like trying to imagine Billy Graham eating dinner with a cross-dressing prostitute from a homeless shelter. He did this because he wanted to bear public witness to equality and to his compassion and to the compassion of Abba for his children, particularly for those who had sinned but sought forgiveness.

No wonder "the establishment" hated him. Indeed, if we understand how utterly subversive he was of the culture that surrounded him we understand why they killed him. Raymond Brown points out that if we truly understand how subversive he was of his culture, and that he would be equally subversive of our culture, we would kill him again if he came to us as he came to his own culture.<sup>7</sup>

It is in this context that his attack on the money-changers in the temple has to be understood. I use the word "attack" advisedly. Modern scholars reject the notion of an unprovoked burst of anger and see it as a planned event. It is a direct frontal attack on a culture that despises the poor and requires sinners to pay to be forgiven. It is an attack on the temple holiness culture and all it stood for. It is an act of insurrection, like walking into

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<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., *id.* at 12:41–44.

<sup>7</sup> RAYMOND E. BROWN, *THE DEATH OF THE MESSIAH* 393 (1994).

the Senate and burning the flag.

Look through this lens at the story of the rich young man—he keeps the commandments but there is a gaping hole in his heart, so he asks Christ how to fill it and Christ tells him: go give everything away and follow Christ.<sup>8</sup> The man cannot and the words ache with sadness down through the centuries: “at that statement his face fell, and he went away sad, for he had many possessions.”<sup>9</sup> There it is—the guy who is owned by his BMW.

This is a magnificent story and perfect example of the clash between the dominant and counter cultures. The dominant culture told this guy that he was “cool” and that God smiled on him because of his wealth, but there was a yawning hole in his heart and he blew the only chance he would ever have to join the counter culture and its personification, Christ.

I keep wondering about that rich young man. What happened to him ten years later? Did he ever realize what he had lost or that the longing he felt when he walked the other way would never end?

St. Francis of Assisi was the perfect converse to the rich young man. He was a silly, frivolous young man when one day he got hit by the thunderbolt of Abba’s love.<sup>10</sup> He literally gave away everything that he possessed, and when he dressed a leper in his own clothes he received in exchange, the ability to penetrate to a new consciousness. He actually witnessed Christ in the leper. Then, he became a spiritual person who literally bore on his body the signs of Christ’s suffering.<sup>11</sup>

The rich young man keeps showing up in my life. He shows up in the character of Daisy in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s “The Great Gatsby.”<sup>12</sup> The novel takes place in Long Island, and one must understand my strong connection with Long Island, and that I was sixteen when I first read “The Great Gatsby.” When I was sixteen, I was so hopelessly romantic and idealistic that my father referred to me as “hormones with feet.” I spent my summers at the end of Long Island, so now, unless I have a boat

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<sup>8</sup> See *Mark* 10:21 (New American Bible).

<sup>9</sup> *Id.* at 10:22.

<sup>10</sup> See HELEN CONSTANCE WHITE, *BIRD OF FIRE: A TALE OF ST. FRANCIS OF ASSISI* 19–20 (1958).

<sup>11</sup> See *id.* at 267–68.

<sup>12</sup> F. SCOTT FITZGERALD, *THE GREAT GATSBY* (Cambridge Univ. Press 1991) (1925).

and salt water nearby, I get neurotic. Gatsby could see a green light of hope across the Long Island Sound, and I was certain I could see that same light when I went for long walks at night.

The character of Daisy in "The Great Gatsby" is a rich young woman. You remember that she is torn between her love for Gatsby and her rich, bigoted husband. She ultimately chooses wealth and cries over Gatsby's silk shirts when she abandons Gatsby. Like the rich young man, her love of wealth leaves her with a sense of longing that lasts as long as she lives. Gatsby is another rich young man; he creates a romantic conception of himself and he cannot bridge the distance between what he really is and his romantic conception of himself. The corruption of love and reality by wealth is overwhelming.

Fitzgerald ends "The Great Gatsby" with the magnificent image of the Dutch sailors seeing Long Island for the first time and seeing something that is commensurate with their own sense of wonder. But then he says that the green light always beckons us, yet always retreats before us, and so we row on, borne ceaselessly into the past.

I think that is the longing of the rich young man—that longing for the golden moment of fulfillment which escaped him when he had the chance to seize it but failed because he refused to make the necessary commitment. I hear that same longing in so much of Bruce Springsteen's music. A longing for those "Glory Days" and for the people left behind in Youngstown, Atlantic City, and Asbury Park.<sup>13</sup>

This leaves us in an awfully dark place—Christ's teachings about wealth are his toughest. It is all or nothing. An utter commitment of everything we are and everything we have is the only way to escape the longing of the rich young man. I fear that Christianity has often soft-pedaled that principle. All too often in our history the rich have gotten away with the notion that God has blessed the rich and that is why they are rich. In nineteenth-century America, some thought that prohibiting children from working in coal mines was interfering with God's plans.

Maybe the longing the rich young man felt cannot be filled on earth. I have felt for most of my life the distance between what I want to be and what I am in how I view riches and

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<sup>13</sup> BRUCE SPRINGSTEEN, *Glory Days*, on BORN IN THE U.S.A. (Columbia Records 1984).

wealth. I am a lot closer to the rich young man than I am ever going to be to St. Francis.

Yet, I am not ready to give up. I feel tastes of that completion when I invoke that spirit of complete and utter giving, attempting to at least approach what I am trying to be. Let me leave you with Fatch's<sup>14</sup> rules for curing the longing of the rich young man and resisting the culture in which the pursuit of wealth seems at times the only game left.

Here are Fatch's [Professor Facciola's] rules:

1. Have children; they will immediately impoverish you. I have two sons, one 26 and one 25, and I have not had a buck since they were born. Bill Hundley, a Washington lawyer, and the father of seven, told his wife to put the wallet on the gravestone when he died; that way he would know that the kids would come. My sons and their wives invite me to dinner but the waiter always brings me the tab. Is there a sign on my back? There is nothing like staying up all night, however, with a sick kid to get your head on straight. There will come a night when your child gets ill and you will gladly give up everything you have to make that child get well. It will put wealth into immediate perspective.

2. Resist the culture openly. Remember Fatch's rule concerning malls—God will punish you when you go to the mall. He punishes me. When I go I can never find the car. There is nothing more pathetic than seeing an old man like me asking people if they have seen a green Honda.

3. Insist that your values prevail over the market's. Family is more important than billable hours. I have seen a distressing connection between the increase in the wealth of law firms and their unwillingness to have associates work part time. It is time for all of us to fight for part-time work for parents.

4. Put more water in the sauce. There is a honing instinct in every Italian—it is that moment when Grandma pours the macaroni out of the boiling water into the colander. This sacred moment is called "pouring the macaroni." Wherever an Italian is he has two minutes to get home because once the macaroni is poured grandma will cover it with the sauce. My grandma, the most generous woman I have ever met, always insisted that we bring anyone we wanted to dinner because she could always put

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<sup>14</sup> "Fatch" is Judge Facciola's nickname.

more water in the sauce. Opening yourself to others always yields results. The water in the sauce metaphor always comes back. Remember how I started Vaghi's voyagers?<sup>15</sup> I had this sailboat and I could not sail it by myself so I put some water in the sauce, asked you to join me, and we had a blast and became friends. That always happens when you put more water in the sauce.

5. Remember how much of the world's wealth and resources this country commands and uses and be humbled by it. I remember one day my grandmother was scraping the plates and she began to cry. She was remembering how desperately poor she had been when she was a child and how she had to beg on occasion for day-old bread for her family from the local baker. The abundance of what we had overwhelmed her. Remember Father John Coughlin who, during a Lenten reflection explained to us how he shared the simple beans and rice of his parishioners when he was in Central America. When he got home and went into one of those awful food courts in a mall, the abundance he saw sickened him and he had to run out. You could feed a country on what we throw away. That should humble us; in fact, it should make us ashamed when we ever dare complain.

6. Don't be in such a great rush to get where you are going that you forget where you have been. I keep a sign on my desk. On one side it says "John M. Facciola." On the other it says "Mrs. Prisco's grandson." It reminds me that I am the grandson of once desperately poor people and that I can never forget that and still remain true to who I am.

7. Don't lie to yourself; lies about your wealth-seeking are the easiest to believe. I used to lie to myself and say that I wanted to make a lot of money for my children. Baloney. I wanted to make the money for me.

I wish that I had a solution. I don't, but at least we are on the road together and if we keep talking to each other maybe we will understand a little better the difference between who we are and who we want to be.

Maybe we can remember another road in America, the one the desperately poor traveled. This road is exemplified by the poverty of the characters in John Steinbeck's novel, "The

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<sup>15</sup> "Vaghi Voyagers" is the name given to the members of the John Carroll Society who sail with Judge Facciola.

Grapes of Wrath.”<sup>16</sup> The book is about another group of outcasts, whom Christ loved, on a pitiable journey for work and a home. The book concludes with the giving of a total gift of love. Ultimately, Steinbeck concludes that the search for God *is* God. Maybe God is most visible when we search for his presence in the poor and the outcast. Dorothy Day, the founder of the Catholic Worker, reminds us that that smelly homeless guy at the back of St. Patrick’s Church is not a symbol of Christ or like Christ. He *is* Christ and he is beckoning us just as he once beckoned the rich young man.

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<sup>16</sup> JOHN STEINBECK, *THE GRAPES OF WRATH* (Viking Penguin 1986) (1939).