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Saint Bernard Church
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COMPLACENCY IN OUR SPIRITUAL LIFE

So who is this guy in the Gospel, the rich young man?

And what is motivating him to ask Jesus the question, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

The question seems almost desperate, like the young man is pleading, begging, to know all that he must know and do to get to heaven.

But then Jesus answers the question by listing the commandments, and then telling the young man that he needs to give away all his stuff. And so at that point we find out that the young man is not desperate at all. He's actually complacent, as if he assumed that Jesus' answer to his question would affirm everything about his way of life.

Today's Gospel is one of the most troubling passages in the Bible. It raises some very challenging questions. When it comes to our spiritual life, do we really want to know what is missing? And if we did want to know what is missing, how would we find out?

The truth is that none of us, on our own, will ever know all that is missing in our spiritual life. We have to turn to the Bible, the teachings of the Church and prayers to the Holy Spirit to help us see about ourselves that we don't see on our own.

Today's Gospel tells us we should never be complacent about where we are in our relationship with God. We should always be growing in our spiritual life, with the goal of being as much like Jesus as we can be, with the assistance of God's grace.

For most of us, in whatever we do for our employment, we have spent many years in formal education followed by specialized training. We have been very focused on getting better in whatever we do at work in order to live what we call the good life here on earth.

The question is, "Do we bring this same desire, this same intentionality, to our faith?" Or are we complacent, are we content, are we satisfied, to just stay where we are? Have we studied the Bible, the teachings of the Church and the lives of the saints? Have we prayed for the grace and direction to have an increasingly deeper relationship with Jesus?

One of the issues that can be very difficult for all of us, just like the young man in the Gospel, is our attitude and behavior about material possessions. We live in a country and a culture where we are constantly encouraged to have more, to buy more. There is this tendency to measure our success by the material things we have accumulated.

I read a book a few years ago called "Amazon Beaming." It's about a writer and photographer for National Geographic who wanted to find the headwaters of the Amazon River. Airdropped next to a tributary of the Amazon, he gets lost and ends up living with the Mayoruna tribe in the jungle.

He develops a close relationship with the chief of the Mayoruna, who spends a great deal of time fasting and praying. The goal of the chief is to lead his people back to the beginning, back to the way of life that existed when time began.

One of the rituals followed by the tribe, which knows nothing about Jesus and Christianity, is that every so often, at a time determined by the chief, the tribe assembles all of their material possessions in the middle of their village. Then they burn everything, everything they have.

For the Mayoruna, the burning of all their possessions was a way of detaching from material things as a spiritual purification, a way of eliminating the things that could so easily distract them from their relationship with the Creator. It was a way of trying to recreate life the way it was at the beginning, when life was holier and safer.

The example of the Mayoruna seems so extreme and crazy to us, but it highlights the message of Jesus in today's Gospel that we need to be very careful about our attachment to attitudes and behaviors that keep us from fully living the life Jesus calls us to.

Mother Teresa used to say that the United States was spiritually the poorest country in the world. She saw the wealth of our country, which is so great but never seems enough for us, as a major obstacle to our spiritual growth.

Mother Teresa said that we in the U. S. suffer from a worse poverty than the people in Calcutta who were starving for a piece of bread. She said America is starving for love.

All of the problems we are experiencing in the United States come down to one simple issue: As a nation, do we define ourselves more by the things we have than by our commitment to Jesus?

What Jesus tells the rich young man is what He tells us too. "I want you to get rid of everything that interferes with your love for Me, with your love for your family and with your love for your fellow human beings."