

The 1996 Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture "Christ and the Adolescent: A Theological Approach to Youth Ministry"

Introduction

I am honored to introduce the first volume of the Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture, presented in Daytona Beach, FL, and Princeton, NJ, in the spring of 1996 by James W. Fowler, Robin Maas, and Robert Wuthnow. The Princeton Lectures on Youth, Church, and Culture are designed to foster original research on youth and the church. As part of a new venture in ministry sponsored by Princeton Theological Seminary, the Institute for Youth Ministry they describe a shift occurring in the churches thinking about youth and ministry. Instead of ghettoizing youth into clubs apart from the congregation, the church's mission with youth views young people as integral to the total mission of the church, and youth ministry as a theological task which is not only about youth ministry, but about youth's ministry as well.

The 1996 lectures, titled "Christ and the Adolescent: A Theological Approach to Youth Ministry," address mainline churches who have suffered grievous losses in their attempts to address teens. These losses come at a time when public institutions are calling attention to the important role churches play in adolescent development. Churches agree: We believe we have something to contribute to youth in the person of Jesus Christ-and therefore Jesus Christ, not age-level education, pastoral counseling, or recreational programs, must be the starting point for youth ministry.

We asked each of our lecturers to approach this theme from the perspective of their own disciplines. James Fowler posits a new shape for youth ministry that recognizes nuances of human development; Robin Maas uses biblical exegesis to redefine the spiritual journey of youth and the adults who mentor them; and Robert Wuthnow analyzes the sociological significance of service learning trends for the church's ministry with teenagers. Together they point to a new direction for ministry with young people.

We approach this direction humbly and with hope. We know that the church's renewal depends not on the church of tomorrow, but the church of today-a church in which youth can be integral missionaries to their elders and world. May this volume challenge and nourish the ministry God has laid before you.

Godspeed,

Kenda Creasy Dean
Director, Institute for Youth Ministry

1996 Lectures

Robin Maas

“Christ and the Adolescent: Piper or Prophet?”

“Christ and the Adolescent: A Decision for Love”

“Christ and the Adolescent: Written in Stone”

James W. Fowler

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CHRIST AND THE ADOLESCENT: A DECISION FOR LOVE

Robin Maas



We are all familiar with the biblical texts that reveal the love of Christ for children, especially that wonderful invitation he issues: “Let the children come to me; do not prevent them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” (Matt. 19:14) These are the ones, he tells us, to whom the kingdom of heaven belongs. Notice he does not say, “They belong to it—to the kingdom.” Rather, “The kingdom belongs to *them*.” Bible scholars tell us that the term “kingdom of God” or “kingdom of heaven” is really a euphemism for the divine name—*Yahweh*—which a pious Jew was not allowed to write or pronounce aloud. If this is so, then this saying becomes all the more remarkable. Not “They belong to God,” but “*God belongs to them*.” What the rest of us are seeking high and low for, children apparently already have.

Now it is interesting that the synoptic Gospel writers—Matthew, Mark, and Luke—all place this very important saying immediately before another story about Jesus and the young: Jesus’ encounter with the rich young man. (Matt. 19:16-22) We don’t know how old he is, but since the life expectancy in those days was very short compared to what it is now, and if he was seen to be “young,” then we may safely conclude that he was probably no older than what we would call “young adult,” perhaps even late adolescence. In any case, he was at that wonderful place in life where everything was opening up before him. Life was full of possibilities. And this was a very good young man. So we see here, placed together, two teachings about Jesus and the young. But our expectation about the natural order of things is reversed. The littlest ones who have no social rights or claims have succeeded where the young man who has everything going for him is going to fail.

No one hinders this fellow from coming to the Lord. He comes rushing up to Jesus as he is about to leave on a journey, respectfully kneels

before him, and then says, "Teacher, what good must I do to gain eternal life?" Loosely translated: "I want to go for the gold! Tell me how!" Frankly, this fellow is the youth minister's dream. He is earnest, enthusiastic, respectful and, it turns out, knowledgeable about the teachings of the Scriptures. That he is also a typical youth can be seen in the way he responds to the advice he is at first given. Jesus tells him to keep the Ten Commandments—the Law of Moses—the simplest and most sacred text in the whole Torah. It would have been one of the most elementary of all the lessons he had ever learned—memorized for sure before he had lost all of his baby teeth. (While clearly referring to the entire Decalogue, it is perhaps significant that Jesus mentions specifically those commandments associated with the "Second Tablet," i.e., the ones that deal with love of neighbor: "You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and your mother;" and "you shall love your neighbor as yourself." (vv. 18-19)

And the youth's reply? "All of these I have observed. What do I still lack?" (v. 20) In so many words: "Is that *all*?! I already know all that stuff, and what is more, I've been meticulous in my observance of the law. I've been *good*. Isn't there something a little more daring, more *heroic* you want to ask of me? Something worthy of the kind of brave and able person I really am—or could become, if you'd just give me the opportunity?"

"I've been good"—we know these words! Or perhaps more accurately for most of us, "I've tried so hard to be good"—and for the most part have succeeded! In any case, we are inclined to weight our good intentions far more heavily than our actual implementation. This is another way of saying, isn't it, that "I already know all that stuff!"

What is most interesting here is what Jesus has to say about being "good." After the young man's queries about doing "good," Jesus gently rebukes him, saying, "Why do you ask me about the good? There is only one who is good." (v. 17) Wait a minute! Isn't that what religion is all about? Being good? Isn't that what we are working night and day for, to help form kids with clear and strong Christian consciences? Doesn't Jesus go right on to say that obedience to the commandments is necessary for eternal life?

"But I've done this already! I've *been* good—what else is there? *There must be something else!*" And, indeed, there is. There is something else, and when Jesus tells him what that something else is, the young man hangs his head in sorrow and walks away because that "something else" is more than he can stomach. It's about much more than following rules and being good. It's about being reckless. Reckless for love.

A capacity for reckless behavior is a perennial characteristic of youth. In every century of human history, this capacity is what gives mothers gray hair. In today's world, where guns and dope are readily available, this capacity for risk has taken on a lethal dimension that terrifies us all and holds our personal security hostage to the whims of young egos that know and accept no limits. This, of course, is not the kind of recklessness I mean.

This is a recklessness that thrives in the absence of love. But the capacity for risk and recklessness can work either way. What we all have, because we are human and because we once were or still are young, is the capacity—or even the urge—to say “yes” to what looks impossible.

And what we also know from Scripture is that simple obedience to the commandments is not, in fact, impossible. It is often desperately difficult, but not impossible. In Deuteronomy we read:

For this command which I enjoin on you today is not too mysterious and remote for you. It is not up in the sky, that you should say “Who will go up in the sky to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out?” Nor is it across the sea, that you should say, “Who will cross the sea to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out?” No, it is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts; you have only to carry it out. (Dt. 30:11-14)

The commandments are God’s gift to his people. They provide the guidance and the structure that we need to be who we were meant to be. The failure to observe the commandments will bring social chaos and personal unhappiness. We must cherish them by obeying them. It may seem like an act of counter-cultural daring and defiance or an expression of heroic virtue to obey these commandments in late twentieth-century America. But it is not. And this is not what Jesus is talking about. So what was he asking, and why did it turn out to be impossible?

Give it all up, says Jesus to the young man who has it made. Let go of all you’ve accomplished, all you’ve inherited, all your big plans—and especially, *let go of your willingness to measure your righteousness by means of your obedience. Because obedience and goodness are not enough.* “If you wish to be perfect [Read: “If you want to go for the gold . . .], go, sell what you have and give to [the] poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Matt. 19:21)

Now this text gets used a lot—and incorrectly, I believe—to make the case that if you really want to be good and obedient, you have to be completely dedicated to the task of alleviating poverty—as if, rich as he was, this young man’s gift of wealth would really solve the problem of poverty. It is certainly true that showing mercy and generosity to the poor is a very important part of Christian practice and devotion. Some persons receive a very direct call from the Lord to dedicate their lives to the poor, either through works of mercy or works of justice; and part of our own ministry with youth should be directed at sensitizing them to the need to be concerned for the well-being of all persons, especially the most economically vulnerable and socially wounded. But the problem Jesus is addressing here is not the problem of poverty; it’s the problem of riches.

In the Gospels, this story is linked with Jesus’ teachings about how hard it is for rich people to enter the kingdom of God—harder than for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle! (v. 24) This teaching astonished his disciples, because ordinarily riches were seen as a sign of divine favor.

If I have a lot, then that means somebody up there likes me! So if that tried-and-true indicator of virtue no longer applies, then what in the world does? If a superb specimen of virtue like this young man is apparently not going to make the grade, then who, ask the disciples, can possibly be "saved"? (v. 25) Suddenly the whole project of spiritual success has become *impossible*.

Our Lord's answer will not give them much consolation, I suspect. He says, "For human beings this is impossible, but for God all things are possible." (v. 26) I take this to mean that we, through our own well-intentioned efforts to be obedient, are not going to save ourselves. We will not get the gold ring because we've been "good." So were the Pharisees "good." No doubt many of them were actually much better at being good than we ourselves have been. We, like the Pharisees, are obliged to teach and obey the commandments; but here is the irreducible mystery: Unless our righteousness surpasses that of the scribes and Pharisees, says Christ, we will not enter into the kingdom of heaven. (Matt. 5:20)

So it is abundantly clear that although we cannot guarantee our own salvation through the effort to be obedient, we are not thereby given permission to be disobedient. Obedience is the least we can give God. But it will not, in and of itself, be enough. I think if we are honest we will admit that, at first, this is a pretty discouraging story.

But the story of the rich young man is a critically important one for anyone concerned with the moral and spiritual formation of the young, not because every young person to whom we minister is on the same quest as the rich young man, but because we are. The type of person called to serve youth is often still youthful in spirit, if not in years, and deeply in earnest about the faith; and although we may not see ourselves as wealthy, relatively speaking, most of us are. Whatever the material circumstances of our lives, we have a wealth of education, experience, commitment, and faith to share—and probably more possessions than we really need.

But even more important, youth ministers and catechists are almost always persons who have been driven by a desire to be "good." Obedience is a virtue we extol and promote and otherwise honor by trying, as far as we are able, to practice it. There may even be some among us who can say, like the young man in Mark's version of this story, "All of these I have observed from my youth!" (Mk. 10:20) So let us beware! Because what happened to him could happen to us. We, too, could walk away sorrowing.

Recently I made a marathon effort to watch the original television version of that by-now-famous Catholic soap opera called *The Thorn Birds*. Years ago—when I was a young adult—I read the book and found it enthralling. Then when the television movie was first released, I watched it avidly and was re-enthralled. This time, in my third encounter, I think I finally began to understand what it was really all about. There has been a lot more water over the dam, so to speak, so I saw things I didn't see before and felt things I didn't feel before. Believe it or not, this is not just your basic romantic, semi-scandalous story about a priest who falls in love with a

much younger woman and sins against chastity. We know that the world loves nothing better than to hear something scandalous about the Catholic clergy, precisely because in what they are meant to represent—the exemplification of a life entirely given over to God—they remind us of our own weakness and moral failures.

The story is a tragic one. Some people find it tragic because they see and grieve over the loss of virtue in a man of God. Others—far more, I suspect—find it tragic because the priest will not renounce his vocation for the sake of the woman he loves. This time around, I finally realized that the central and most tragic failure in this story is really the same tragedy of the rich young man who wants to go for the gold but, in the end, cannot.

The key to the story's significance comes at the very end of the very last segment when Fr. Ralph, now old and debilitated, is dying. He has just buried his beloved Meggie's son—the young, newly-ordained Fr. Dane—not knowing as he buried him that he was his own son as well. When he finally learns who this young man really was, he is shattered. Not only because Dane, whom he had long since learned to love dearly, was his own flesh and blood, but because he saw in both the life and the death of the young priest a virtue and a goodness that far exceeded his own.

As he is dying, he weeps and says to Meggie, Dane's mother, "In the end, I never made a decision for love."¹ He has lived his entire life with a divided heart, loving God *and* loving her, unable to sacrifice one love for the other, unable to choose God with a whole heart or Meggie either. Each choice he ended up making was a compromise that involved a minimum of loss for himself but a great deal of pain for others.

Fr. Ralph is the epitome of the rich young man: earnest, well-intentioned, wanting to be obedient and virtuous, longing, as he says, to be the "perfect priest." What he actually becomes is a very rich and powerful priest, more easily seduced by the promise of position and influence even than by the passionate love of a beautiful woman. He is personally ambitious; but he is also ambitious for the church he loves. Like so many of us, he wants to do well while doing good. And therein lies the spiritual danger of riches: They encumber and compromise us when we are offered a chance at the gold ring Christ called the "pearl of great price."

By contrast, young Fr. Dane, who also wanted to be a "perfect priest," was free to give his whole heart to God while, at the same time, he was able to make a choice to do the most generous and loving thing possible in relation to his mother. He became a priest (she didn't want that), but he also decided to forsake the sure-fire career moves that would have guaranteed the kind of success his father sought and achieved. Instead, he chose to go back to the Australian outback to minister in obscurity. Returning home following his ordination he takes a brief holiday in Greece, where he drowns as the result of a generous, impulsive gesture he makes to save the lives of others—an act of reckless love.

This brief but beautiful life flames up before the eyes of the old man

and shows him what he truly is and what he has lost because he could not “sell” what he had and follow his heart’s deepest desire. And so Fr. Dane’s death becomes a truly redemptive gift that the son gives to the father. The son shows the father what it means to make a *decision for love*. (Those of you who know the story know that this gift of love touches the lives of his sister and his mother as well, bringing reconciliation and ending a generational cycle of devastating mother-daughter neglect.)

Let’s return now to the question of today’s youth. You may be thinking that the problem is not that they expect to save themselves through being good and obedient. The problem is that the ideals of goodness and obedience no longer seem at all attractive to youth! Nowadays the simple but scrupulous obedience of the Pharisees itself looks “impossible.”

But just as the desolate and despairing Elijah was surprised, consoled, and strengthened in hope by the Lord’s telling him that he was not, as he had thought, alone in his faithfulness and that there were yet “seven thousand men in Israel” who had not apostasized (1 Kgs. 19:18), in the same way I believe that there are yet thousands of young people who are looking for a spiritual challenge that will glimmer with all the beauty of the pearl of great price. If we present that challenge to them simply as a matter of obedience, so that they come to see the faith as a long list of rules to which they must conform, we should be prepared for the response: “*Is that all? I already know all that stuff!*”

A student of mine reported that as an adolescent he saw no particular challenge in the Ten Commandments: he had no inclination to steal, he had plenty and didn’t need to envy what others had, he wasn’t married, so adultery was not an issue—and he certainly wasn’t about to murder anybody! Obedience? No big deal. As a teen, this person found more excitement and challenge in the spiritual quest embodied in the culture of American Indians than he did in the domesticated form of Christianity so many American churches practice. Now, as a fully grown adult in his mid-thirties, he knows better. He has come to see how desperately difficult fidelity and obedience can be.

But for our young people whose ideals far outpace their ability to embody them, and who think obedience to the commandments is no big deal because their experience of life is still too limited to have severely tested their capacity for obedience, we need to help them see that what they are being asked in their own encounter with Christ is, in a sense, *impossible*—as impossible as it would be for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. What they are being asked for is an *act of total self-abandonment, not to a set of rules, but to a person*. What they are being asked for is not merely the conformity of their behavior to a standard imposed by someone else, but an act of real recklessness, a decision—a *decision* made entirely for love.

So when the adolescent or young adult encounters Christ in a real and personal way, the real question is not: Are you going to obey these rules, but *do you love me enough to give up everything for my sake?*

When the demands of the Christian life are posed in these terms, the question of obedience assumes its proper place and proportion. This doesn't mean it will be easy to obey, only that it will be *possible*, because the *impossible* thing, *the decision for love*, has already been made.

The great danger every Christian faces is the temptation to believe that we can somehow control the process of our own salvation, that we can get to heaven without suffering deep wounds or taking a risk, without sacrifice or surrender. This temptation comes to different souls in different forms. But for many of us, it comes the way it came to the rich young man, to whom Jesus said: Will you give it all up for me? Will you risk everything you've worked for, earned, inherited for the possibility of loving with an undivided heart?

As the disciples are scratching their heads over this incredible teaching about riches and the kingdom of heaven, the enormity of this requirement begins to dawn on them. One of them, Peter, seems to see what must be coming and hopes that he has paid the price already. "We have given up everything and followed you. What will there be for us?" (Matt. 19:27) And this is true: they had given up what looked like everything, even though, in the end, there was more to renounce: things such as spiritual ambition, preconceived ideas about how God was going to carry out his plan, doubt, and fear. And what was there in it "for them"? Jesus replies:

Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man shall sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And every one who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life. But many that are first will be last, and the last will be first. (vv. 28-30)

Jesus' disciples are promised "a hundred times more" than what they surrendered. They are promised eternal life. Life with him who, in an act of reckless love, gave everything up *for them*. *For us*.

So we can show our young people that it has been done. There have been people of every age who have made the impossible decision for love. It is vitally important to explain to them that, as with Peter, the decision, once made, does not protect us from all possible infidelities or failures of nerve; but that the decision, once made, plants a desire in our hearts that attracts the grace of God like pollen attracts bees and honey attracts bears.

The surrendered heart, the heart capable of acts of reckless love, is always in some sense the heart of the child, the one to whom God belongs. The surrendered heart of the adolescent is a heart capable of passionate loyalty. When the young person says, I will love you forever, he makes up in intensity for what he lacks in the long haul.

What this wonderful but sobering story of Christ and his would-be follower, that first-century "golden boy," has to teach us is that the central spiritual requirement of adolescence is precisely what Jesus is offering the

rich young man—an opportunity to make the impossible, reckless decision for love.

There are changes occurring in the intellectual and emotional lives of adolescents that make a new kind of experience of Jesus possible for them. These changes are often described by psychologists in terms of a new and very high-minded idealism, a heightened awareness of what other people are thinking and feeling, an increased capacity for introspection and more intimate friendships, and a vulnerability to falling in love. Mix all these things together and we find all the necessary ingredients for an act of reckless love which, when directed toward Christ, we call conversion.

We know from the example of so many youthful saints that adolescent conversion is in fact a “life and death” issue. Those of us who work with youth need to think more carefully about what it means to teach for conversion, to pray for it, and to expect it. The unconverted heart may be satisfied merely to be obedient; or it may walk away sorrowing from all of our best efforts to offer a nourishing instruction in the Gospel. But the youth who has caught a glimpse of the beauty of truth and not just its power will be willing to risk something—maybe even everything—for a chance at the gold ring.

Fortunately adolescence is not the only time in our lives when a decisive encounter with Christ is possible. I believe these opportunities come in one shape or another at every stage of life. But each time the opportunity comes it will seem equally impossible, and the temptation to turn back in sorrow will be ever with us. The good news is that if we say “yes” to the invitation when we first hear it in our youthful hearts, it may be easier to say “yes” later on when the stakes are even higher—when the one who longs to belong to us in the heart of our youth calls us in our maturity to belong—heart and mind, body and soul—to him. ●

NOTES

1 I refer here to the television production and not to the novel.