

The Business

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CHARACTERS

- Peter Waldo, mid-40s, male, fairly successful mutual funds manager
- A.D. Vance, mid-40s, female, leader of the company's chapter of CARPE -- Catholic Association (Risen) of Professional Entrepreneurs; also head of the growth funds division where WALDO works
- Dominic Lucius, mid-40s, male, works for VANCE in one of the aggressive growth funds
- Aaron Labelial B mid-40s black male; not very high on the corporate rung
- Joanna Momus -- mid-40s female; about where LABELIAL is

TIME

- Present

SETTING

- One of the corporate conference rooms of a major investment house and mutual funds company B lunch-time prayer session
- Other locations

MISCELLANEOUS

- Small flashlight, in the coat pocket

NOTE

All quotes are from The New American Bible, not the King James.

Scene 1

Rising in volume, a voiceover of a half-dozen people intoning the Lord's Prayer. On the "Amen," lights up to reveal all the characters, Bibles in hand, heads bowed in a comfortable but blandly furnished corporate conference room. There should be some way to indicate the name and purpose of the company a poster or a plaque perhaps -- "Avantguard Investments: Building Your Future Today." They should all be dressed in standard issue business garb. One clothing requirement: whatever they wear, it should have a pocket where they can carry a small flashlight. They all look up except for WALDO. VANCE rises and walks around.

VANCE
We need to get more people to attend.

LUCIUS
I agree.

VANCE
This is important work.

LUCIUS
I agree.

LABELIAL
I've spoken to the people in my division --

VANCE
And?

LABELIAL
-- they say they'll come -- some say -- but --

VANCE
Aaron, Aaron, you need to be more assertive --

LABELIAL
They seem embarrassed --

VANCE
We all need to be more assertive --

LABELIAL
I do my best.

VANCE
We're fallen creatures --

LUCIUS
Hard-core.

VANCE
-- and people need to be --

LUCIUS
Forced.

VANCE
(just a beat behind "Forced")
"Persuaded," Dominic -- that their souls need
healing.

LUCIUS
Or they'll suffer forever.

VANCE

(to LABELIAL)

But then again, Aaron, you've never been one for strong leadership. You did do the best you could.

LABELIAL

I do the best I can.

VANCE

I'm sure -- your best.

LUCIUS

Need to awaken their spirit --

VANCE

Right.

LABELIAL

(to VANCE)

What's wrong with my best?

LUCIUS and VANCE overlap, as if they have spoken in tandem many times.

LUCIUS

Get them to see --

VANCE

-- the power --

(to LABELIAL)

You did your best.

LUCIUS

-- how they need Christ if they're going --

VANCE

"I have the strength for everything -- "

LUCIUS

-- to make it out alive.

VANCE

" -- everything through him who empowers me -- "¹

LUCIUS

Good Christians and good businessmen --

VANCE

Businesspeople.

LUCIUS

-- at the same time.

¹ Philippians 4:13

VANCE
That's what they need to know.

LABELIAL
Well, I tried.

VANCE
You did.

MOMUS
Maybe it's the name.

LUCIUS
The name.

MOMUS
Maybe.

VANCE
What's wrong with CARPE?

MOMUS
Doesn't it mean "seize"? --

VANCE
It means --

MOMUS
-- kinda grabby -- and Latin at that?

VANCE
It means "The Catholic Association (Risen) -- "

MOMUS
Not very invitational. Also sounds like a fish.

VANCE
(stronger)
"The Catholic Association (Risen) of Professional
Entrepreneurs." C-A-R-P-E.

MOMUS
People's ears don't catch onto long names.

VANCE
I think it says exactly what we're about.

MOMUS
It does?

VANCE
God and Caesar can dance together --

MOMUS
I didn't know God mambo'd --

LABELIAL

(to MOMUS, trying to sound consequential)
Profit is the life-blood of the holy body.

VANCE

(to LABELIAL)

Good.

LUCIUS

Discipling businessm[en] -- businesspeople --

VANCE

That, too.

LUCIUS

-- that's our business.

VANCE

Discipling, yes.

(to MOMUS)

See?

MOMUS tries to get a word in but LUCIUS cuts her off.

LUCIUS

"Bear your share of hardship" --

MOMUS

Dominic!

LUCIUS

-- "like a good soldier of Christ Jesus."

VANCE

(completing citation with him)

-- "like a good soldier of Christ Jesus."

LUCIUS

II Timothy, 2:3.

MOMUS

No, I don't see.

VANCE

Joanna?

MOMUS

God and Caesar?

VANCE

What's hard to understand?

MOMUS

Divinity with a salad?

VANCE
(to everyone)
We do need to get more people to come.

LUCIUS
(to MOMUS)
Expand our limited horizons.

VANCE
(to MOMUS)
You need to forge a finish-line mentality --

MOMUS
I have just as much "finish-line" as you do --
(to LABELIAL)
Did you sign on to run a race?

(to VANCE)
I thought we were about, you know, saving souls,
making people better. Ourselves better. Getting
out of the race.

Through the next lines, VANCE begins to notice that WALDO has not spoken, and her attention draws to him even as she speaks to the others.

VANCE
If we're good businesspeople, then we'll be good
people as well.

LUCIUS
Our real boss --

VANCE
Jesus, the greatest salesman of all time.

LABELIAL
Salesperson.

LUCIUS
Our real work --

VANCE
Getting people to have -
(emphasizing each word)
-- godly ambition.

MOMUS
(to LABELIAL)
Watch out for low-flying high fives!

LABELIAL
They're right, though.

MOMUS

I don't come here to make myself --

VANCE

Business is God's work on earth, Joanna.

MOMUS

-- a better businessperson.

VANCE

(picking up a Bible)

Read, Joanna. You need to read.

MOMUS

I do read.

VANCE

See I Corinthians, 3:14-15.

MOMUS

Not everything can be solved with a quote.

VANCE

Joanna, business is God's work.

MOMUS

I show up to make myself a better person --

LUCIUS

We all need to be strong.

MOMUS

I just want to be good. Do some good.

LABELIAL

You can buy and sell and still be good --

VANCE holds up his hand to shush LABELIAL and speaks directly to WALDO.

VANCE

Peter? Peter, what do you think? You've been pretty quiet over there.

WALDO does not respond. Everyone looks at WALDO, then VANCE. Lights out.

* * * * *

Scene 2

A single pool of light. Everyone remains still. VANCE steps into the light, speaks as if speaking to a group.

VANCE

In the Epistle of Paul to the Phillipians, Paul says (chapter 2, verse 13) that it is God which works in you both to will and to do his good pleasure. This echoes all the way back to Psalm 37, verse 4, where David goes, "Take delight in the Lord, and he will grant you your heart's requests." When we're out there building up the portfolios of the widows and workers and struggling middle-class families -- people who play by the rules -- when we're buying and selling to find the best profit margin, the solid investment, we're doing the work of God because we're giving delight to the hearts of others and increasing the wealth of the earth, just as God told Noah after the flood. Compound interest -- a glorious invention, really. Compound interest is God's handiwork -- we're honored to be in his vanguard here at Avantguard.

Light out; another single light up on LUCIUS, as if speaking to a group.

LUCIUS

Humans -- interesting creation, aren't we? Brains capable of genius, and hands ready to kill. A mix of a volcano and a cool breeze. An imperfect nature -- that's why we all need a discipline, to keep us on the narrow when we threaten to erupt, yet something that juices us when we become too soft, too weak. And business is just that. Taste that word for a moment business. Not "bidness," though I welcome all our friends from Texas -- but bus-i-ness. Busy-ness. In the world doing. Engaged in the world doing. That is our best discipline, my friends. Yet that imperfect nature -- always there. Always threatening. So I bring to you a bright anchor for all that doing so that you don't drift off down the road of your worst intentions -- your greeds, your hungers, your minimal expectations of yourself. Business with soul, doing with the sense of doing good, is our salvation as a species. Yea, truly. And only the businessperson, producing the stuff of life, can make our survival possible. Titus, 2, verses 7 and 8. Show yourself as a model of good deeds in every respect. Do what's right for your customers, and you'll be doing what's right for God's dominion on this earth!

Lights up on conference room.

* * * * *

Scene 3

VANCE

Peter?

No response.

VANCE

Peter?

Still no response.

LABELIAL
(to everyone)

Is he all right?

VANCE

Peter, why so silent?

LUCIUS

Lunch hour's almost up.

VANCE holds her hand up to quiet him.

VANCE

Peter, what are you doing? Why won't you talk?

WALDO finally raises his eyes and speaks to them.

WALDO

I've been reading.

VANCE

Yes?

WALDO

And thinking.

VANCE

Yes? Yes?

WALDO

And we've been wrong.

LUCIUS

Wrong.

WALDO

Wrong.

VANCE

(looking at the others)

Mr. Peter Waldo says we've been wrong.

WALDO

No, actually hearing you say that -- let me correct myself. Let me be fully disclosed. I have been wrong. You -- you all will have to decide that issue for yourselves. I can speak only of my own tongue.

MOMUS

Decide what?

WALDO

(holds up his Bible)

Like I said. I've been reading.

(to VANCE)

Do you read this?

VANCE

I consult it daily --

WALDO

(interrupting)

Not consult. Read. Consult? No, not really. You rummage. If you read it, really --

VANCE

What do you mean --

WALDO

If you read it -- If you read it, you would be heartsick. Like me.

MOMUS

Heartsick.

MOMUS starts thumbing through her Bible.

MOMUS

(to herself)

Heartsick.

LABELIAL

We've got to get back --

VANCE

I head the division, damn it!

(regaining her control)

We can leave when we want to.

MOMUS

"AFor the love of money -- "

She has their attention. She looks at WALDO. WALDO nods yes.

MOMUS

"For the love of money is the root of all evils,
and some people in their desire for it have
strayed from the faith and have pierced
themselves with many pains."²

(closes the book, to WALDO)

Heartsick, right?

LUCIUS begins pacing.

LUCIUS

(to MOMUS, slow viciousness)

What, exactly, is your point?

MOMUS

(indicating WALDO)

Ask him.

LABELIAL

The market is moving --

WALDO

I have been thinking.

(indicating all around him)

All this -- excuse me for saying it this way --
shit. "Temptation and the snare."

LABELIAL

(nervously)

The market -- expanding --

LUCIUS

What's next -- give it all up?

WALDO looks at MOMUS.

MOMUS

Yes, he is.

LUCIUS

(derisively)

Give it up?

(to MOMUS)

You his herald?

WALDO

It can't be done.

LUCIUS

Stupid!

² I Timothy, 6:10

VANCE gestures to LUCIUS to stop.

VANCE
(to WALDO)

What?

WALDO
God and Caesar.

VANCE
We do it every day.

WALDO
We fool ourselves.

(smiling slightly)
We give ourselves "the business" every day.

LABELIAL
I'm going back --

WALDO
(to LABELIAL)
"Though wealth abound, set not your heart upon
it."

LUCIUS
His dulcet tones!

LABELIAL
I'm not good at all the quoting -- I can't
remember --

WALDO
Psalms 62, 11. Take a peek.

MOMUS
"It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye
of a needle -- "

VANCE
(to MOMUS)
Wait, wait.

MOMUS
" -- than for one who is rich -- "

VANCE
(to WALDO)
You can't be serious.

MOMUS
" -- to enter into the kingdom of God."³

VANCE
(to MOMUS)
I said wait.

LABELIAL
You better stop.

VANCE
You can't be serious.

WALDO
Nothing but.

VANCE
Throw it all away?

WALDO
What "it"?

VANCE
Your career.

LUCIUS
Your family.

LABELIAL
You've done really well, Peter --

WALDO
I have, have I?

LABELIAL
It'd be a shame --

WALDO
Well -- but not much good.

VANCE
We do good every day!

MOMUS
You're going to, aren't you?

WALDO nods yes.

VANCE
What?

³ Matthew, 19:24

MOMUS

Give "it" up.

WALDO

Without a doubt.

(smiling genially)

Which chapter and verse would you like?

Lights bump to black. Each individual speaks. Each turns on a flashlight under the chin as each speaks. When each finishes, the flashlight is turned off. WALDO moves upstage. He does not have a flashlight, so that when he speaks, his voice comes out of the darkness.

VANCE

He's too fucking literal.

MOMUS

He's taking the word literally.

LUCIUS

He's going to lose everything.

LABELIAL

He has everything to lose.

MOMUS

And gain.

VANCE

It's stupidity. The way of the world --

LUCIUS

-- is making money --

VANCE

Not for itself, of course.

MOMUS

But didn't Christ love the beggars?

LUCIUS

Christ was selling insurance.

MOMUS

But didn't he love the beggars?

LABELIAL

And tax collectors -- he liked them, too.
Niggers of their day.

MOMUS

And the money changers in the Temple?

VANCE

We're stewards. Of the earth's abundance.

MOMUS

What about the money changers?

LABELIAL

Jesus never had any money to change.

WALDO

"Though wealth abound, set not your heart upon it."⁴

ALL

What was that?

VANCE

Stewards. Increase and multiply. Abound on the earth and subdue it.⁵

MOMUS

We make nothing out of nothing. Compound interest.

LABELIAL

That is strange, come to think of it.

LUCIUS

Not you!

MOMUS

What do we do? We make nothing --

LABELIAL

Build nothing --

MOMUS

Just speculate.

VANCE

Dangerously close to --

MOMUS

Usury.

WALDO

"Lord, who shall sojourn in your tent? He who lends not his money at usury..."⁶

⁴ Psalm 62:11

⁵ Genesis, 9:1,7

⁶ Psalm 15:1,5

ALL

What was that?

WALDO

"He that lends at interest...shall surely die;
his death shall be his own fault."⁷

ALL

What was that?

WALDO

It's all right there.

MOMUS

If we really believed it --

LUCIUS

You can't take it literally --

LABELIAL

How else?

LUCIUS

It's meant to change with the times.

MOMUS

That's shaving it close.

VANCE

All this has to stop.

With that, they put their flashlights away. Lights bump up to full.
Sound effect: the sound of a whip.

VANCE

(to WALDO)

Perhaps CARPE is not the right place for you.

WALDO

I am not right for it.

LUCIUS

Perhaps you should leave. Now.

WALDO

I'm only doing what you say you believe.

WALDO leaves.

VANCE

(to LABELIAL)

Now can we go back to work?

⁷ Ezekiel, 19:13

Lights to black. Sound the crash and five seconds of the last chord in the last song off Sergeant Pepper's.

* * * * *

Scene 4

A single pool of light. WALDO is talking with others, as if around a water cooler. He holds a cup of water in his hand, one of those cups with a pointed bottom. He sips from it occasionally. The rest of the cast faces upstage in the darkness. VANCE is Voice 1; MOMUS, Voice 2; LABELIAL, Voice 3; LUCIUS, Voice 4.

WALDO
Business ethics -- contradiction in terms.

VOICE 1
You're nuts! I'm a good person.

WALDO
Maybe. But even good people turn savage -- look at war.

VOICE 2
This isn't war!

WALDO
"Competition" isn't war by another name?

VOICE 1
So that makes us all savages?

WALDO
Accomplices.

VOICE 3
In what?

WALDO
Robbery. Taking it from there, giving it here.

VOICE 4
Eff-ing Marxist!

WALDO
Profit comes from -- ?

VOICE 4
From the Golden Rule -- "He who has the gold -- "

WALDO
My point.

VOICE 1
Not savages.

WALDO
Because of your suit and tie?

VOICE 4
It's always been this way -- rich get richer.

VOICE 1
Not savages.

VOICE 2
And I'm not a baby-killer!

WALDO
You are if you buy into interest on investments.
That's the crux, the cross. Someone has to pay
for money to be made. If we really believe in
ethics, we have to believe --

VOICE 3
With that prayer group, aren't you?

WALDO
No longer.

VOICE 3
A Christer! The Bible's just a buncha stories!

WALDO
So is Fortune and Forbes and the "free" market.
All depends on what you want to believe.

VOICE 1
I like how my money makes money for me without me
working too hard.

WALDO
And again -- where does it come from? The pound
of flesh has to come from somewhere. No interest
in butchery any more.

VOICE 2
So what are you going to do?

WALDO
Give it all up. Keep enough for my family to
live on, comfortably. Give the rest away. And
talk to people.

VOICE 4
Your own TV show.

WALDO
I am sure a big media corporation will give me
air-time to tell people what "whited sepulchres"
their owners are. No, the streets will do fine.

VOICE 3

You won't get away with it.

WALDO

Get away -- I'm only telling people to think about their souls.

VOICE 1

Most people think "soul" is bottom of their shoes.

VOICE 2

Or a fish. Or a black "thang."

WALDO

I just don't see any other choice. When the truth is in your mouth, you spit.

VOICE 4

You have the truth?

WALDO

I just think the man from Galilee would not have cared for mutual fund investment managers.

VOICE 3

They won't let you get away with it.

WALDO

What harm could I possibly do?

He drinks the water and crushes the cup.

* * * * *

Scene 5

Radio talk show music intro. WALDO in light, VOICEOVER of a radio host.

VOICEOVER

"God and Mammon -- You Decide." No, "mammon" is not a new cheese spread. It's the name the medieval scholars gave to the "devil of covetousness," and out there, wandering in the wilds, is Peter Waldo, reformed mutual fund executive, saying that profit is bad, compound interest is putrid, and that we've all sold our souls for the price of a blue chip stock. Is he a dangerous man? You decide. Caller number 1 -- you're up.

* * * * *

Scene 6

Another meeting of CARPE. The members are now dressed in monk's robes.

VANCE

You've heard how it is spreading.

LUCIUS

Like the stain of blood on a white cloth.

LABELIAL

I am amazed by how his ideas have caught on.

LUCIUS

The herd will believe anything the Devil feeds them.

MOMUS

What has he done wrong? And why are we wearing these ridiculous outfits?

VANCE and LUCIUS ignore her.

MOMUS

What has he done wrong? All he's said is --

VANCE

All he's said is that our lives are meaningless -
- no, worse than "meaningless" -- evil, mindless,
greedy --

LUCIUS

That we do not know the true meaning of The Word.

LABELIAL

He shouldn't do that. He's wrong.

MOMUS

Sheesh, you guys are too uptight!

LUCIUS

(to VANCE)

It sound like we have a little heresy right here
among us, doesn't it?

MOMUS

Me?

VANCE

Heresy? No, just a young misguided girl --

MOMUS

Girl!

VANCE

-- who needs a little re-education to make her mind right again.

MOMUS

My mind is all right!

LABELIAL
(to VANCE)

What do you mean?

All this time LUCIUS has snuck up behind MOMUS, and as LABELIAL speaks, he pins MOMUS' arms to her side, in a bear hug. MOMUS struggles but can't break loose.

VANCE

Your mind is -- infected. It has lost the light. How do you know the Devil hasn't taken up residence there --

(touching her head)

and there --

(her heart)

-- fooling you --

MOMUS

Don't touch me!

VANCE

-- into thinking that you know the truth when what you see is an illusion --

MOMUS

Let me go!

VANCE

-- this illusion of the pious man, self-povertied, clean-breasted, telling the world that money -- money! -- our money! -- kneecaps the word of Christ, betrays The Man. And you --

MOMUS

I'm warning you --

VANCE

Let her go.

LUCIUS does.

VANCE

Just a taste.

MOMUS

A taste?

(to LABELIAL)
You staying with them? Well, I'm not. You guys
are too hard-core.

She takes off the monk's robe.

VANCE
I wouldn't do that if I were you.

MOMUS
It's done -- so what? You going to put me on the
rack?

VANCE and LUCIUS look at each other. MOMUS doesn't notice it.

MOMUS
All Peter is doing is repeating the words as he
reads them -- It's all right there -- what's
the big deal?

LABELIAL
The interpretation, Joanna -- it's all in the --

MOMUS
What interpretation? "It's harder for a camel to
get through the eye of a needle" -- what's so
hard about --

LABELIAL
It's not just that.

LUCIUS
He calls us "usurers."

MOMUS
Not just "us" -- well, you -- I don't make enough
-- he calls everyone "usurers" who lives off
skimming the interest.

LUCIUS
All of us -- indicted. And some of the best.

MOMUS
Some of the "best" should be. They should be --
there's a lot of scum out there masquerading as -
- In fact, I've never understood --

VANCE
That's true, you haven't.

MOMUS

-- how anyone -- well, I look at me, coming to these meetings. Why? What was I thinking? I'm employed by a cut-throat mutual funds company, and you're telling me that Jesus gives that a thumbs-up? I'm sure he'd look good in a corporate uniform -- he'd feel real at home.

LUCIUS

You mock.

MOMUS

The whole thing is -- Christ, right down to the roots!

LUCIUS

So easy to say -- you've gotten the benefits.

LABELIAL

If we fall -- if we fail --

MOMUS

(to VANCE)

Look, you have bloviated on about "Christian business principles" for months, but I've been doing my reading, too, and thinking, and it's just all --

LABELIAL

Business is our foundation.

MOMUS

"Bidness" is all about cannibalism -- our "duty" to provide good service -- Jesus' "leadership principles" -- "Jesus, C.E.O."

LABELIAL

How will people get the goods and services if --

MOMUS

If we made something, something hard and useful, maybe -- but we don't! We shove numbers, roll dice -- that's our theology! Your theology now!

LUCIUS

Not yours.

MOMUS

I've never been convinced -- just needed a job -- to pay the rent. Just look at you! Peter is right -- white on the outside, empty and smelly on the inside.

The three face her, stony-faced, silent.

MOMUS

What are you looking at?

VANCE

You have one more chance to take back everything you've said.

LUCIUS

One last chance.

LABELIAL

You have stepped beyond the bounds.

MOMUS

Why are you looking at me like that?

VANCE

Recant.

LUCIUS

Confess.

LABELIAL

Return.

MOMUS

(suddenly frightened)

This is the twenty-first century, the twenty-first century, in a high-rise office building full of fluorescent lights and a cafeteria that sells bad coffee and full of major modern appliances. I am standing in a room with three business associates, wearing synthetic fabrics that were not around during the thirteenth century and talking peacefully and rationally about ideas and perceptions. Does anyone contradict me?

VANCE

One last chance.

MOMUS

One last chance to be out of here. You guys have turned!

LUCIUS

You're going to him, aren't you?

MOMUS

Right now, I just want to --

VANCE

It's not as if we haven't gone over the very same thoughts that you have.

LUCIUS

Picking through the Devil's chaff to find the seeds of truth.

LABELIAL

But the truth is here, not there. Stay here.

MOMUS

About that Devil thing --

LABELIAL

Stay here. With us. With the truth.

MOMUS

Everything feels cold. I'm leaving.

She moves toward the door. They do not move.

MOMUS

(more to herself than anything)

I am standing in the twenty-first century, I have the right to leave, this is nothing but a personal disagreement, I want to get my hair cut later --

She stops. They move aside.

VANCE

Let him know what is going to happen.

LUCIUS

There are always consequences to actions.

MOMUS

What is going to happen?

LABELIAL

The will of God. What needs to be done. Necessity provides.

MOMUS

When did you start talking like that?

VANCE

Let him know what is going to happen.

LUCIUS

The path is set.

LABELIAL

Leave.

MOMUS leaves. The three look at each other as the lights come down.

* * * * *

Scene 7

In the darkness there is the sound of struggle. Lights bump up.
WALDO is seated in a chair in a single light. The three circle him.

VANCE

The time has come --

LUCIUS

For you to face --

LABELIAL

The coming judgment.

VANCE

Heretic.

LUCIUS

Peter Waldo --

LABELIAL

Should die.

WALDO

I can't be stomached, so I have to be pumped.

VANCE

You know what your sin is?

WALDO

Believing.

LUCIUS

In lies. Ego.

LABELIAL

Yourself "greater than."

VANCE

And you're cutting into profits. Too many
following your ideas.

LUCIUS

No room for error. For liabilities.

WALDO

What do you intend --

VANCE

Do you recant?

WALDO

No.

LUCIUS

We have no choice, then.

They take out what look like bills and start stuffing them into WALDO's mouth. WALDO gags.

VANCE

Do you repent?

WALDO shakes his head no.

LUCIUS

Then die.

WALDO begins to gag, then dies.

VANCE

Error is gone.

LABELIAL

The danger is over.

The lights fade down.

* * * * *

Scene 8

Three pools of light. Three letters appear -- dropped from the fly space, lowered on string, or however it can be done mysteriously. In synch, they open the letters, read them, look up.

VANCE

Merger.

LUCIUS

Cost-maximizing.

LABELIAL

Downsizing.

ALL

Superfluous.

As the lights come down, in synch they shred their letters and slowly eat them.

BLACKOUT