

Eye of the Needle

Mark 10:17-31

HMC, October 13, 2024

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The Rich and the Kingdom of God

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. “Good teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” “Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, you shall not defraud, honor your father and mother.’^[a]”

“Teacher,” he declared, “all these I have kept since I was a boy.” Jesus looked at him and loved him. “One thing you lack,” he said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth. Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!”

The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, “Children, how hard it is^[b] to enter the kingdom of God! It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.”

The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, “Who then can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God. Then Peter spoke up, “We have left everything to follow you!”

“Truly I tell you,” Jesus replied, “no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age: homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—along with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

INTRODUCTION

The Gospel of Mark is a fascinating book. Even though over 85% of Mark is found word for word in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, Mark offers a unique perspective on the life of Jesus. I took a course on the New Testament at the University of North Carolina when I twenty years old, and it was transformative for my faith and life. We read each of the gospels straight through in their entirety, and on the final exam we had to identify from which gospel specific statements came. Almost all the selected verses from the Gospel of Mark had the word “immediately.” Those were easy to identify.

Jesus is constantly on the move in Mark. He seems to be in a hurry to get from Capernaum to Jerusalem as if he was afraid of being late for his own arrest. Mark boils down the life of Jesus to a savory broth. Every story is challenging yet revelatory, including the story I just read. It is a story that makes most Christians, myself included, uncomfortable.

THE RICH YOUNG MAN

The story begins with a rich young man coming up to Jesus to ask him a question. We don't know much about the man other than he is rich and young, which means that his profile would be popular on a modern dating site. I think we can assume that in addition to being young and rich, he was rather handsome since he could afford oil for his hair and skin. His back wasn't bowed from heavy labor and the only callouses on his hands came from the quill he used to keep his accounts. He probably had on gold and jewelry, too. He was young, rich, and respected. That's what most of us wish we were!

But there is more to the man than that. He approached a wandering rabbi with an important question. He respectfully asked Jesus something that was bothering him. What must I do to inherit eternal life? The question is more interesting than you might think because many Jews, most notably the Sadducees, did not believe in eternal life. They believed that when you die, you die. There is almost nothing about an afterlife in the Old Testament. Some of the Pharisees believed in a resurrection of the dead and a judgment day. They taught that the righteous would be with Abraham in paradise. This young man had probably listened to rabbis' sermons and read books that raised the question of eternal life. It was all very confusing, and so he asked Jesus his opinion on how to get to heaven.

It is interesting that he asks how he can “inherit” eternal life. Since he is young and rich, we can assume that he had inherited his status in life. He was one of those people born on third base instead of having to hit a triple. Naturally he assumed that there was some way that he could inherit an even better life in eternity. From his position of privilege and power, this seemed like his birthright. And yet, he is still troubled. How can he make sure that he will have eternal life?

I think it is interesting that Jesus does not give him an evangelical sermon like the ones I grew up with. He didn't say, “you must repent of your sins and accept me as your personal lord and savior.” Jesus didn't say, “Don't worry, I'll take care of that for you on the cross.” Instead, he told him to follow the Jewish law, and even repeated some of the Ten Commandments.

The young man was ready for that advice. He insisted that he has always been righteous, and we have no reason to doubt his sincerity. He wasn't just a rich young man; he was a good, pious man. He was an Eagle Scout who was trustworthy, loyal, clean, brave, reverent and all the rest. I'm sure that he was a generous guy who gave money to his synagogue and alms to the poor. He was just like many of us. If following the Ten Commandments was enough to inherit eternal life, as some people believe, this guy was already there. He was so good even he asked Jesus how he could be better.

JESUS LOVED HIM

And Jesus loved him. Jesus had compassion on him. This is one of the few times that a gospel says that Jesus loved an individual. Jesus didn't engage him in an argument like he did Pharisees and Sadducees and scribes. He didn't condemn him or criticize him or make fun of him. He cared for this young man who had lived his whole life righteously, piously, and prosperously in a protected bubble, but who still was troubled about the next life. What more do I have to do, he asked?

Jesus invited him to join his disciples. He told the man he had to do to one thing beyond what he's done so far. It's not complicated. Just give up everything you've worked for; everything you are proud of. Leave everything behind, just like the sons of Zebedee had left their fishing nets.

This is the only time that Jesus told someone to sell everything and give the money to the poor. We don't know why he did this time. There was something about this young man that elicited this response from Jesus. Sell everything. Turn your back on the life you are living and rethink everything you thought you knew. Quit living off the sweat and labor of others and rely on God. Acknowledge that your possessions are not making you happy. You are troubled in your soul. You want a different life. It's time to make a change. Jesus told him he needed to do one thing: leave everything behind and follow me. But the man walked away.

The disciples were shocked that Jesus let him walk away without trying to recruit him. Surely this rich man would have been an ally in their cause. He could have paid for their meals and traveling expenses. They were poor; he could give his money to them. He could be a helpful advocate. But, no, he walked away, and Jesus let him. Jesus never compelled people to follow him, he invited them. And he didn't demand that everyone sell all their possessions, just this man.

EYE OF THE NEEDLE

Jesus then gave one of his most famous and challenging statements. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God. It's a very graphic and rather funny phrase if you picture it. One of the earliest commentators on this text, the church Father Clement of Alexandria, suggested that there was a scribal error in this verse. A scribe may have mistakenly put an "e" instead of an "l" in the middle of the Greek word for rope or cable making it into a camel. It's an easy mistake to make. The fishermen who followed Jesus knew how to sew and use ropes, so that metaphor would have made sense to them.

I like this theory, but the text that comes down to us says camel, not cable. It's ridiculous to imagine a camel being pushed through the eye of even the largest needle. Jesus, of course, knew about camels. Merchants in his day grew wealthy by using camels to transport their goods. Spices, cloths, and foods that were inexpensive in one place could be sold in other places for a big profit because of camels. The rich young man was probably wearing

clothes and eating spices that had been transported by camels. So, it's not surprising that Jesus used a camel in a metaphor about wealth.

Today, of course, we rely mostly on cargo ships and trains to transport precious commodities like oil, grain, cell phones, and even 12-ft tall plastic skeletons for Halloween. Today, Jesus might have said that it is easier for a container ship to pass through a narrow inlet than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. In other words, Jesus might be saying that the things we depend on for our lifestyle won't help us get into the Kingdom.

NOT A GATE IN JERUSALEM

There is a popular theory that has been used for a couple of hundred years that the eye of the needle referred to a tiny gate in the wall around Jerusalem called the Needle gate. Supposedly the gate was so low that a heavily laden camel could not enter it until the baggage was removed. Thousands of sermons have been preached on the theme of rich people having to be humble to enter the Kingdom of God. I bet you've heard sermons on this.

I'm sorry to say that there is no evidence that there was such a gate in ancient Jerusalem. The first time the story shows up was during the age of the crusades, and we can see how this idea of a small gate could become a popular way to interpreting this text, especially at a time when the Church was rich and powerful politically. Protestants, especially wealthy Calvinists in Geneva and Boston accepted this interpretation and put it in their Bible commentaries. And so, to this day, there are preachers tell rich people to just be humble give money to the church.

Some preachers even go so far as to preach a Gospel of Prosperity that says that if you are generous to the church, you will be rewarded with wealth. If that was all Jesus was asking, I doubt that the rich young man would have walked away. He was already following the law of Moses, which means that he was already generous and humble. But he could not imagine being poor.

We may not like it, but the literal meaning of what Jesus says is it is as impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God as it is for a camel to go through the eye of needle. Jesus used a ridiculous image to shock us into looking at faith and life differently. Perhaps eternal life is not something that

we inherit the way we inherit property, status, and wealth. Perhaps it is something different altogether. Perhaps eternal life means that we stop paying so much attention to the rich and famous and see that righteousness does not have a price tag. Perhaps the only way to enter the kingdom is through God's grace. Perhaps, contrary to an old song, we cannot buy a stairway enter to heaven but have to enter as beggars.

UNCOMFORTABLE METAPHOR

This metaphor about the camel makes us all uncomfortable, I bet. I'm certainly not in the 1% in income among Americans, but compared to the rest of the world, I am very rich. Simply being an American homeowner means that I am wealthy compared to billions of people. And I don't like the idea of giving up my wealth, privilege, and status. I like having a retirement account and an easy chair.

I bet that almost everyone who is hearing this sermon today, whether in this room or on the radio, is uncomfortable with this text. We don't want Jesus to say what he is saying. But that's the point. Jesus wanted people to be uncomfortable. Discomfort is a necessary part of learning and changing.

The funny thing in this story, is that it was the disciples, not the rich young man, who seemed angry at Jesus' metaphor. Jesus' entourage was filled with people who had callouses on their hands and only one pair of sandals. They seem offended baffled. You'd think they would be excited to hear Jesus telling rich people that they can't enter the kingdom of God unless they become as poor as they are.

The disciples boast about their sacrifices, but they were just as disturbed by Jesus' words as we are. They asked him who can be saved if not rich people. The rich are blessed by God, sure they will be blessed in the next life too. I suspect that some of the disciples were following Jesus because they expected him to reward them with wealth and power after he took the throne of Israel. They were poor and had left everything behind, but they still hoped they would be rich. Christians who pray for power, glory, wealth and fame don't understand the prayer that Jesus taught us pray. The Lord's Prayer says "Yours are the kingdom, the power, and the glory." Those things belong to God, not us.

WHAT'S NEXT ?

Jesus invited the rich young man into eternal life, but he walks away sadly. It is a poignant scene. Often in the gospels we read about people who responded in faith when Jesus called to them, but this man chose to stay behind, and we hear nothing else about him. Perhaps he went home and lived a happy life until the Roman armies invaded 30 years later and destroyed all that he loves. He may have learned the hard way that nothing is permanent in this life. Floods and storms and war can sweep away all that we own and love in this world. Perhaps Jesus was trying to save him from that fate by asking him to voluntarily give things away and learn to live like most of the people in the world - poor.

I like to imagine that the young man went home pondering what Jesus said. He was sad, but thoughtfully. Perhaps his life had been touched by this wandering teacher who offered living water to the thirsty. He may have done what Jesus asked only more slowly than the Gospel of Mark shows. Over time he may have divested himself of luxuries, became compassionate towards his workers, generous to his neighbors, and humble in his attitude. He may have learned to live simply and store up treasures in heaven and told others about his meeting with Jesus. We don't know what happened to him, just as we don't know how our worship and witness touches the lives of others. We only know that he met Jesus and turned away.

CONCLUSION

In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus didn't ask everyone to sell all their possessions, just this man. We don't know why. He asked different things of different people. What is Christ asking you to do? We have such abundance of possessions but do we have the one thing we need? Do we have Christ and the Kingdom of God?

Whether you are listening in your car or home or here in the sanctuary, I hope you will listen to your invitation from Jesus and let go of whatever is holding you back from following him. May we all choose to embrace eternal life, not as our inheritance, but as God's gift.

Amen.