

Mark 10:17-31  
October 10, 2021

## The Needle's Eye

It was the teaching style of Jesus to tell stories, often called parables, and then cap things off with a memorable saying, something brief and to the point. What we have read is not presented as a parable, but an encounter with a young man, but it reads like one. And it has more than one “short and to the point” saying to cap things off.

“No one is good, except God alone.”

“ . . . sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven, then come follow me.”

“Humanly speaking, salvation is impossible, but not for God, all things are possible for God.”

“But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

I have spoken before of how some texts are like fine jewels that must be examined from many different angles and in different kinds of light. And this one is even more multi-faceted than most. These sayings offer a variety of perspectives. The one that captivated me this week is this one;

“It is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle, than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God.”

Before considering the statements about how what is impossible for human beings is not impossible for God; or about the first being last and the last first, or about following Jesus, we do well to spend a little time with this “eye of a needle” saying.

The “eye of a needle,” is, of course, an exaggeration of difficulty, a metaphor of fine-tuned accuracy. It takes precise vision and a still hand. Fine-tuned accuracy in most endeavors is difficult and for some not a real possibility. Camels don't fit through needle's eyes. It left the followers of Jesus astounded.

It does not imply that everyone is evil, nor incapable of any kind of goodness worth considering; it only implies a greater goodness is required than is humanly achievable. For whatever reason, most people only achieve above a certain level in their moral development. If moral success is likened to threading a needle, then the kind of success worthy of merit is lacking. The needle remains unthreaded.

That may seem like a negative conclusion to draw about human beings, a desperate thing to say about human nature. We like to think that people are essentially good. The Word of the Lord for today is, “not good enough.”

The disciples understood this episode differently than I. To me it makes sense that it would be more difficult for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom of God. The rich tend to be more willing to bend the rules, disregard the well-being of others in order to attain their wealth.

The rich tend to be less able to empathize with their neighbors of lesser means. It makes sense that they might be more concerned about their possessions.

People of more modest resources are more dependent on their neighbors and their community and thus less prone to excessive self-preoccupation. It is easier to detach oneself from possessions the less one has. These thoughts may be generally true without necessarily being particularly true, anyway it makes sense that wealth is an obstacle to real maturity.

But that is not how they heard it. To them, wealth was a sign of God's favor and blessings, so if it was impossible for the rich, then it must be impossible for those of lesser means.

The point is not that it is easier or more difficult for the rich or the poor or those in-between to enter into heaven. Rather, it is that it is equally impossible for everyone. The followers of Jesus seem to have gotten the point, because when they started asking questions they hit the nail on the head with;

“Who then *can* be saved?” This question functions like a rhetorical question, and rhetorical questions have implied answers, the implied answer is, “apparently no one.” Jesus was saying that for everyone it was impossible. People are sinful and sin is universal and inescapable, that is what Jesus is saying.

Except that is not what he is saying. The saying is less a statement of uncomfortable fact doctrinal truth than it is a lament at the response of the young man. One ought to picture Jesus shaking his head as he says it. There is a sadness in this story because the young man walks away, and Jesus lets him. Perhaps the most astounding aspect of this story is that Jesus lets him go. Why didn't he try to stop him from leaving, or to pursue him in some way? The baptists who raised me in the faith would have tried a much more hard sell approach.

Yet this aspect of the encounter is also the most beautiful. There is only one way to be true, authentic as some call it, and that is to act voluntarily, in freedom. And that is what Jesus does. He does not control, he knows that if the man ever returns to follow, and if following will have some spiritual benefit, it will be because he wants to. And that, by the way, is the main strength in the way of being Christian we call baptist.

So in spite of the sadness, it is a *good news* story because it proclaims without reservation both human freedom and the transforming goodness of God. The answer for Jesus is that in the realm of God, the last do indeed become first; in the realm of God when confronted with impossibilities, one is confronted by the possibility of grace, to run away, or to follow. In the realm of God, camel's pass through needle's eyes . . .

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