

In our Gospel lesson from Mark, we have a rich young man who comes to Jesus. He has a lot. But apparently he doesn't have everything. v17 He comes to Jesus with a question, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Notice the thrust of his question. What must I DO?

v19 Jesus gives him the obvious answer. Obey God's Law.

v20 He says, ‘Been there done that.’ “I have kept all these (commandments) since my youth.”

But then Jesus gives him an answer he's not ready for. This is a spiritual punch in the gut. v21 You want eternal life? Well, there's just one thing you're missing: “Go, sell everything you own, and give the money to the poor. Then you'll have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

v22 The man goes away sad and in grief because he just can't do it. He just can't part with all the possessions he's accumulated. This is the only time in Mark where someone refuses Jesus' call to be his disciple. The man's attachment to his possessions blocks him from following Jesus.

And Jesus says, v23, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And in v25, “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.” It's one of the toughest things Jesus ever says. It strikes terror into my heart. “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.”

These are hard words to hear. Because we're rich. We're wealthy. Sure, we usually don't think of ourselves in those terms. But by the standards of the average person in the world today, middle class Americans are incredibly wealthy.

If you make \$40,000 a year, you're one of the top 3% of the richest people in the world. If you make \$80,000 a year, you're in the top 1%. The old TV show title, "Lifestyles of the Rich and FAMOUS" may not apply to you. But "Lifestyles of the Rich" certainly does. And even if you're at the American poverty line which is around \$11,000, you're still in the top 13% of the wealthiest people in the world. By the standards of the average person in the world today, we are incredibly wealthy.

The Haney's own many luxury items that most people in the world do not have. Yet I don't think of them as luxuries. I regard them as necessities for my daily life: 5 TVs, 3 DVD players, 4 computers, 2 cars, 4 cell phones and 3 regular telephones.

So when Jesus says, “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God,” he's talking about us. He's basically telling us, “It is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for you middle class Americans to enter the kingdom of God.” Youch. That's tough.

And that's the point. It's impossible to thread a needle with a camel. Doesn't matter if you coat the camel with Crisco or WD40. Doesn't matter what the angle is or what the velocity of the camel is. It just won't work. It's an impossibility. And that's a tough thing to hear.

And because it's SO tough, people have tried to soften the impact of what Jesus is saying. They've tried to explain it away two different ways.

The first false explanation is to say that one of the letters in Greek is wrong. Instead the word for camel, they say that it was supposed to be the word for rope or string. String and camel differ by only one consonant. They suggest Jesus intended to say, ‘It is easier to thread a needle with a string...’ Not easy, but perhaps doable.

The second false explanation has been around for about 1,000 years. It's an ancient urban legend, if you will. The second explanation is that there used to be a small gate in Jerusalem which was nicknamed ‘the eye of the needle.’ It was just big enough to squeeze one camel through, if you first unloaded all of baggage it was carrying. Not a bad image. The only problem is, there was certainly no such gate in Jesus' time, and probably no such gate at any time. It's totally fictitious.

Both the rope explanation and the needle gate explanation have something in common. They both deal with things that are difficult, but not impossible. We want getting into heaven to be possible for us.

It might take some pushing and pulling on our part to get a string through a needle or a camel through a small gate. But at least it would be theoretically possible. Because we have the same problem as the rich young man. Remember his original question: What do I DO? “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” And Jesus answer is, "Nothing. There's NOTHING YOU can do.” You have to leave it up to God. You have to trust God.

That's where our stuff gets us into trouble. There's nothing inherently wrong with money or stuff or possessions. The problem is, it's all too easy to trust our stuff. Americans love to try to accumulate sufficient resources to provide “financial security.” Nothing wrong with that in and of itself. The danger is looking to our portfolios to provide security, rather than looking to the Living God.

As one writer says, “Self-sufficiency and self-produced security cut us off from grace. Life becomes an achievement earned or a commodity purchased rather than a gift gratefully received and shared. God becomes unnecessary, or becomes simply another commodity to be used for personal ends. Resources become intertwined with identity. We become what we own, know or produce. Riches become gods, and the foundation of our identity and security.”¹

It comes down to a fundamental question: Who do you trust?

¹ “The Perils of Riches”, Kenneth L. Carder, *Christian Century*, Sept. 24, 1997 p.831

Trusting God rather versus trusting our stuff. That’s a very tough. That’s probably why Jesus said more about money and possessions than about any other topic. Our stuff can get in the way of our relationship with God. Believe me, I know.

Trusting our stuff is a tough pattern to break. And the way to break it is to give. The Biblical standard for giving is 10%. That’s a tough standard. Believe me, I know.

I want to share briefly my own story. I have nothing to brag about. My own personal history with stewardship has been very checkered, very chaotic.

(Share own stewardship history—from giving extra/tipping God moving to proportional giving moving to tithing moving toward automatic payment of tithe. Stress sense of thanksgiving, and that 10% is a helpful rule of thumb, but not a rigid law. And scripturally, 10% is minimum).

It all comes from God. Everything we have ultimately belongs to God. Jesus gave 100% for us. For me it’s all about growing in my sense of trust. God doesn’t want my money. God wants me to trust him.

My giving allows me to test that trust. I can’t buy my way into heaven by tithing. The rich young man couldn’t earn his salvation. It’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. But giving away a fairly sizable portion of my income helps me to place my trust in God, and not in myself. And God hasn’t failed me yet.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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