

Mark 10:23-27

Over time there have been some who have tried to explain how a camel actually is able to go through the eye of a needle. Well, there was this gate in Jerusalem, is one such explanation. It was called the needle gate; quite narrow; and for a camel to pass through, everything it was carrying - all of its wealth, in other words - first had to be removed; then it could pass through. Now we do know that such a gate did exist at the time of the Crusades, but there is no evidence whatsoever that the gate was there one thousand years earlier at the time when Jesus spoke the words of our text.

Others try to explain that the Greek word for camel was a mistake, and that the word for mote, or rope - very much like camel in the Greek - is what should have been written. And so it's not actually a camel, but a heavy string that passes through the eye of the needle. But where's the evidence for that?

No, it's best to let the words of our Lord stand, apart from our feeble attempts to explain them away. The largest animal in the Holy Land is the camel, and the smallest opening is the eye of a sewing needle. This is the picture Jesus paints. It would be easier for that camel to go through that eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

And what else would "*exceedingly astonish*" the disciples? They get it even if others do not. "*Then who can be saved?*" they exclaim. They are not calculating in their heads how that camel could do it. They understand it the way Jesus meant it. It's impossible. There's no flippin' way that a rich person can be saved.

But they do not limit it to that. How can anyone be saved? That's what they want to know. And here's why. They thought, as it was commonly thought, that rich people have the best chance of getting into heaven, because they can help more people with their wealth than the poor can. A rich person can do more good works with his riches that a poor person can do with his poverty. And it was understood in those days that the rich were blessed more by God than were the poor. Their wealth was proof that God's favor rested on them and not upon the poor.

Do you see why the people of that day, and also Jesus' disciples, needed Jesus? They were all out in left field in their thinking. And really they weren't even in the ball park. But are we so much better than they? Do we have everything figured out so that we do not need to be taught anymore? Hardly. We need Jesus to teach us as well...regularly. When sin came to our world, it didn't just corrupt people's hearts; it corrupted also our minds, and so our thinking is way off base.

Here is how Jesus teaches it. With man it is impossible to be saved. We don't have one chance in a billion of making it into God's kingdom; we have no chance at all. We would have a much better chance of winning that billion plus dollar mega lottery than getting into heaven.

What chance did the Israelites have in making it across the Red Sea? None. Had they attempted to cross over on their own, every last one of them would have drowned. But what is impossible for man, Jesus teaches, is possible for God. He parted the waters of the Red Sea, and every last one of the Israelites passed through that eye of the needle and was saved.

So why does Jesus seem to pick on the rich here? Hey, Abraham was rich and he is in heaven. Nicodemus was rich. So were many others who were faithful followers of Jesus. Well, just before our

text we're told of a rich ruler who could not accept Jesus' invitation to follow Him because he was rich. And the rich man in Jesus' parable built bigger barns to enjoy his wealth, but that night he died and perished forever...as did the rich man in the Lazarus parable.

What about you? Are you rich? Compared to billionaires you and I are dirt poor. But compared to a homeless person we're filthy rich. Let's compare ourselves to the man who would not part with his riches to follow Jesus. Do we resemble him, even a little?

What does it say about me if I refuse to follow Jesus into His house and up to His table because I'm out there on Sunday mornings busy making money? Am I not like that rich ruler unwilling to follow Jesus, but following instead after stuff? What does it say about me if I put my riches ahead of Jesus giving only a measly offering to Him? Am I not like that rich ruler not willing to part with my riches for Jesus' sake and for the sake of the Gospel? And what does it say about me if I have little or no time to study the Scriptures, Jesus' own words to me, but I have plenty of time to increase my wealth?

When Jesus says it is impossible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God, He knows full well what He is saying, and He speaks to all of us. The truth is that unless God acts; unless He intervenes in your life and heart and in mine, we will not make it; we will not be saved. No one can pass through the eye of the needle.

But what is impossible for us is possible for God. He drew His people through the waters of the Red Sea. He saved them. And so also He draws you through the waters of Holy Baptism. We cannot baptize ourselves. We cannot save ourselves. We cannot cause ourselves to be born again. But God can. When you look at your baptism into Christ, picture that camel going through the eye of the needle. Every baptism is a miracle; a mighty and gracious work of God; impossible for us but not for Him.

Are you a rich person? The man who refused to follow Jesus was defined by what he had. He is called a rich ruler. The man in the parable is called a rich man because his riches defined who he was. And the one at whose gate Lazarus died was called by Jesus a rich man and he, too, perished.

What defines you? Your wealth or lack of it? Your health or sickness? The Israelites were defined by God's love and deliverance for them. They were His people and nothing could ever change that. So yes, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to be saved. But you're not a rich person no matter how much wealth you have. You are God's baptized child in Christ. He defines who you are, not by what you possess, but by what He has done for you.

And God defines you not by your sinfulness but by His grace. He calls you His forgiven one, for He does forgive you. You are one for whom Christ died. You are one whose sin is washed away. God defines you by what He sees, and He sees Christ when He looks at you. He sees you covered completely with Jesus' innocence.

So because you are not defined by your wealth and possessions, but by Christ, you can live for Him. You don't need to set your heart on riches. You can set your heart on Jesus, and He will bless you for this life and for the life to come. If He can pull you through the eye of the needle and save you, can't He also take care of everything else in your life? Yes He can, and yes He will. Amen.