

Mark 10:23-32

The debate has been going on for decades, maybe centuries. What does Jesus mean by the "camel and the eye of a needle?" Is it an actual eye of a sewing needle? Is the eye of the needle the name of a tiny gate in Jerusalem through which a camel could enter only if all its burdens were first removed and it got down on its knees? Is the word camel here a misspelling in which if you change one letter in the Greek it means a rope or cable, and not a camel, being pulled through the eye of a needle?

People may debate Jesus' words today, but back when they were first spoken His disciples clearly understood them, and their reaction was one of pure astonishment. "Who, then, can be saved?" was their response. The thing Jesus spoke of was an impossibility. It could not be done--a camel through the eye of a needle. And so for the rich, the wealthy to enter heaven, there was no chance whatsoever.

And so maybe our country's recession isn't that bad after all. The rich aren't as rich as they used to be and the poor are going to stay poor and unemployed for a while. Perhaps churches like ours can even help out. If we really care about our members we should pass the offering plates not once, but two, three, or four times a Sunday. It would give us all the opportunity to get rid of our wealth. If it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom of God, then who in their right mind would want to be wealthy?

But let's define "wealthy." In comparison to Bill Gates and Donald Trump we are dirt poor. But in some places in this world anyone who can sleep in a warm bed with a roof over their head and put a hot meal in their belly is someone who is extremely wealthy. So which is it, are we rich or poor? The Federal Government has its way of determining the rich, the middle class, and the poor, but they weren't around when Jesus spoke these words. So what does He mean by them? Are you and I wealthy or poor not in the eyes of the government, not compared to others, but in the eyes of God?

Some people have been scared to death by these words of our text. Back in history some have sold all their possessions, given away the money, and gone off to live as poor hermits. They were terrified that their wealth would keep them out of heaven. I don't see that happening here. We're all trying to get ahead in life. We're out for more money, not less. We're sad, not glad, when the market drops. We complain when gas costs more at the pump. Is anyone here trying their best to become poor? No, we're all trying to make money. So what do we do with Jesus' words? For the rich to enter heaven, He is saying in our text, it is a flat impossibility. A camel, simply put, cannot ever go through the eye of a needle. And because that would be easier than for a wealthy person to enter the Kingdom of God, it should concern us very much that we have any wealth at all.

But, dear Christian, who really are you? Are you the rich, the wealthy of which Jesus speaks, or are you something else? If a man owns a hammer does that make him a carpenter? If a Christian committed adultery in his past but he is repentant, is he still considered to be an adulterer? Was St. Paul a missionary or a murderer? Murder was in his past, but that's not who he was. He was an Apostle who proclaimed Christ. Who are you dear Christian? Having wealth does not make you "the wealthy" anymore than having a hammer makes you a carpenter. What you have or don't have for possessions is not who you are. You came into this world with nothing and you will leave with nothing, but God knew you within your mother's womb. To Him you were not someone who would be rich or poor in life; to Him you were a sinner for whom Christ died. God does not look at what you have; He looks at who you are in His Son. For someone whose life is their wealth, they are rich, they are "the wealthy." But for you whose life is shaped not by what possessions you have, but by

Jesus Christ and His blood shed for you, you are not the wealthy no matter how rich you are. You are Christians, God's forgiven saints.

Friend you are, before anything else, a child of God in Christ. Now there are many days, maybe every day, when we do not act as though this is who we are. Too often we live like people of this world. Too often our lives are shaped not by the cross, but by our sinful desires. Too often we put the love of money ahead of our faith in Christ. And Jesus' warning is clear--when a person's life consists of what he has, how difficult it will be to enter the Kingdom. The question asked by the disciples is important for us today: "Who, then, can be saved?" Judging by how we live, none of us. Judging by our past sinfulness, none of us can be saved. Judging by our wealth, or whether we just act like we are wealthy putting our things ahead of our God, the fact remains that it is impossible for us to enter God's Kingdom.

But the impossible has already taken place! You are already now part of God's Kingdom. Heaven is not just something in your future; heaven is in your present--it is yours now in Christ Jesus. The wealthy will find it impossible to enter heaven, but for you who trust in Jesus, wealthy or poor, heaven is not only possible for you--it is your possession now given to you for the sake of Christ.

When you were baptized that camel made it right through the center of the eye of the needle. You and I didn't do it. It's impossible for man. But baptism is God's work. It is His saving action in Christ Jesus. He did for you what we are unable to do. He brought you into His Kingdom. The camel couldn't do it. The eye is too small, too tiny. But by grace God did the impossible.

And so now what? I had a Baptist friend tell me something the other day. "You Lutherans," he said, "You're so stuck on baptism. You think once you're baptized you're in; you're saved." I told him about the Red Sea. Back in Moses' day, crossing the Red Sea would have been as difficult as a camel going through the eye of a needle. It could not be done. You would drown in the process. When the Israelites were camped by the Sea, they thought they were about to perish. The Egyptian soldiers were nearly upon them. But then the impossible happened. The Sea parted and God pulled the camel through the eye of the needle. He pulled His people out of certain death to the safety of the other side of the Red Sea. Once they were there, the Promised Land was theirs. God was leading them there. They did not have to wish for it or hope for it. The Promised Land was their possession--it was promised to them. And yet most of them did not make it. They perished along the way. They grew weary, they rebelled, they were unrepentant, they stopped following.

You and I dare not do that. Baptism does give you the Promised Land of heaven. God pulled you through the eye of the needle in those sacred waters. He did the impossible. Let us not reject our baptism. Let us not fall from grace. We sin, but let us repent. We lust for wealth, but let us desire the true riches in God's Word. We fall again and again, but let us keep returning to the place of forgiveness--here where His pardon is for you; here where His Sacrament is given.

Friend and fellow camel, you are forgiven. Everything in your past is forgiven. And nothing in your future need frighten you. You are God's treasure. He pulled you through the eye of the needle to Himself, and He will not let go of you; not until you are safe in His Promised Land. Amen.