

SEQUOYAH HILLS
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

“More: Of Camels and Needles”

Dr. Jay Howell

Mark 10:17-31

January 28, 2024

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The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Almighty God, you are the source of all the blessings in our lives. We praise you in your grace and abundance. We thank you. And we pray that we would never twist what you have given us into reasons we hold ourselves back from you and the life you are drawing us into. May your Word challenge us and assure of your love and faithfulness to us, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

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So in Jesus' follow up with his disciples afterward, they're perplexed by this, so Jesus clarifies: "Children, how hard it is 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." And that statement has caused much concern and consternation. I mean, depending on how you read it, the stakes are pretty high. Understood a certain way, Jesus could be saying that if one is a certain level of wealth, if you're over some kind of total asset valuation, then entering the kingdom of heaven is just not something that's going to happen for you.

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This isn't to start pointing fingers indirectly that if you have assets valued at this or that amount that you're automatically a Scrooge or something. There have been and are faithful disciples who have been blessed with resources. There were in the early church, for that matter—see how Paul talks about them in 1 Timothy 6, with a challenge to be generous, to be rich in good works. But there's a reason Jesus talks about money, about wealth more than anything else in his ministry. It has the singular ability to twist a heart into thinking oneself greater, thinking oneself better, thinking oneself more, but then tragically, not bringing about peace either, because in this quest for more, more, more, is there a point at which that quest finds satisfaction? What was that quote from John Rockefeller, that great railroad tycoon of the 19th century? Someone asked him how much money was enough money, to which he replied, "Just a little bit more."

There is something about money that can make the camel so loaded down, that can put a knot in the rope, that it's just not passing through the eye of the needle without a lot getting stripped away. And right now, as our seats start to feel a bit uneasy, there are any number of us asking ourselves, "So, am I who Jesus was talking about? Do I cling to money, do I cling to stuff more than I should? Do I cling to it so much that it holds me back from entering the rule, the reality, the kingdom of God?" If you sense that right now, if you're asking yourself that question, then the answer, more than likely is, "Yes, you probably do." And I probably do too. And we have to recognize the danger, the spiritual danger involved, because it's like trying to pull an oversized rope through a hole, and the rope's got a big ole knot in it.

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We continue this journey of discipleship, of challenging discipleship through a part of the Gospel of Mark in this series called “More.” Jesus is putting his disciples through the ringer, it seems, because it seems that each exchange features another way that they—and by extension, we—are prone to lift ourselves up, puff ourselves up, make ourselves more that Christ deconstructs. He’s talked about the exclusion of others—could be based on ability, affiliation, age, you name it. He’s talked about love, romantic love, marriage, implicating that as a means by which we use even love—or the appearance of love to be more precise—to elevate ourselves in status or influence. He’s talked about the guidance and the faith of those who the world would be quick to rule out: that of children.

And this week as we pick up where we left off, Jesus comes to a topic that he talks about more than any other in his teachings, and certainly our favorite one to hear about: money. Let’s go to God’s Word together, Mark 10:17-31:

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness. You shall not defraud. Honor your father and mother.’ ” He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is 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.” They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for my sake and for the sake of the good news who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and

children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.** Will you pray with me? Almighty God, you are the source of all the blessings in our lives. We praise you in your grace and abundance. We thank you. And we pray that we would never twist what you have given us into reasons we hold ourselves back from you and the life you are drawing us into. May your Word challenge us and assure of your love and faithfulness to us, and for the Word spoken and heard today, may it not be mine but yours. Amen.

There was this game show I used to watch when I lived out of the country years ago. Basic premise of one of my favorite segments in it: contestants were on a platform suspended over a pool of water. But then on that platform, a wall would move toward them, meaning if they stayed where they were, the wall would pretty quickly knock them off the platform into the water. I honestly wonder what it says about me that that was one of my favorites to watch. That is, unless they were able to get through the opening in the wall as it rushed toward them. When the game starts out it's easy. A door shaped opening would be in the wall, so all a contestant would have to do is step or jump through the doorway through the wall, and they'd stay on the platform. But each round, the opening in the wall would change. It might get smaller, sure. Maybe the contestant would have to lift up a leg and crouch down and shift over just to get through. But it might also change to a shape so that the only way a contestant could get through would be to contort their body in precisely the way the opening called for it. It got so silly that I think at one point the opening would have called for a contestant to do some kind of airborne splits at just the right moment to get through. So, naturally, everyone got knocked into the water when that one came through.

A lot has been said about Jesus' imagery here of a camel going through the eye of a needle. It's part of a follow up he had with his disciples after an exchange with a rich man. The rich man comes to him, curious what he must do to inherit eternal life. They go back and forth, with the man revealing his adherence to the law and seeking to live a righteous life. But then Jesus hits him with the big guns. He says you lack one thing. Sell what you own, give the money to the poor, and then follow me. The man then goes away, shocked and grieving, it says, because Mark tells us, he had many possessions.

So in Jesus' follow up with his disciples afterward, they're perplexed by this, so Jesus clarifies: "Children, how hard it is 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." And that statement has caused much concern and consternation. I mean, depending on how you read it, the stakes are pretty high. Understood a certain way, Jesus could be saying that if one is a certain level of wealth, if you're over some kind of total asset valuation, then entering the kingdom of heaven is just not something that's going to happen for you.

There's one story out there. I honestly don't think it's a true story, but it got started a long time ago apparently. There was a gate in Jerusalem, so the story goes, called the "Eye of the Needle," presumably because of its shape and size. And for a camel to pass through, beast of

burden that it was, loaded up with goods and what not, it would have to be unloaded of all its other trappings. Now there's no evidence that there was ever a gate by such a name, so consider that more of a parable that emerged over the years than actual archaeology. But you get the point.

Yet more interesting, at least to me, is a theory that the camel here isn't really a camel at all, but an error in transcription, because just one letter off in Greek from the word for camel is another word meaning a thick rope, like a rope used to tether a ship to a dock. Easier for a thick rope to go through the eye of a needle. Same premise though as the camel through that gate. There's too much stuff, too much fluff, too much added on and loaded on in order to pass through.

It'd be like in that game show, as the openings in the wall got smaller and smaller and more and more challenging, the contestants started putting on puffy clothing and wearing backpacks all while they were trying to get through. In the end, they'd just get knocked over into the water.

I suspect that a reason this passage has been cause for so much concern has been because there has been fear that if one had this or that amount of wealth, then they wouldn't get into heaven, or some variation of that. Not sure that's what Jesus is saying, perhaps first and foremost because that's not what "entering the kingdom of God" means. It's not talking about eternal destination of a soul. It's talking about coming into God's rule, God's reign, unfolding on earth as it is in heaven. We come into that reality within our own lives. And when you start thinking about all the things Jesus has been teaching, as we've been looking at them these past few weeks, it starts to be a bit clearer. This whole time, he's been saying, "You want to be greater? You want to be more? Become last of all, servant of all." Does that mindset typically mix well with the accumulation of wealth and possessions? Usually not.

This isn't to start pointing fingers indirectly that if you have assets valued at this or that amount that you're automatically a Scrooge or something. There have been and are faithful disciples who have been blessed with resources. There were in the early church, for that matter—see how Paul talks about them in 1 Timothy 6, with a challenge to be generous, to be rich in good works. But there's a reason Jesus talks about money, about wealth more than anything else in his ministry. It has the singular ability to twist a heart into thinking oneself greater, thinking oneself better, thinking oneself more, but then tragically, not bringing about peace either, because in this quest for more, more, more, is there a point at which that quest finds satisfaction? What was that quote from John Rockefeller, that great railroad tycoon of the 19th century? Someone asked him how much money was enough money, to which he replied, "Just a little bit more."

There is something about money that can make the camel so loaded down, that can put a knot in the rope, that it's just not passing through the eye of the needle without a lot getting stripped away. And right now, as our seats start to feel a bit uneasy, there are any number of us asking ourselves, "So, am I who Jesus was talking about? Do I cling to money, do I cling to stuff more than I should? Do I cling to it so much that it holds me back from entering the rule, the reality, the kingdom of God?" If you sense that right now, if you're asking yourself that question, then the answer, more than likely is, "Yes, you probably do." And I probably do too. And we have to recognize the danger, the spiritual danger involved, because it's like trying to pull an oversized rope through a hole, and the rope's got a big ole knot in it.

But a few things that may bring encouragement as well. First, this passage doesn't show us a Lord with resentment toward the wealthy, but rather heartfelt concern. What did it say about Jesus? Before even giving the challenge to the rich man, it says, "Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, 'You lack one thing; go sell what you own and give the money to the poor.'" He loved him, and it was out of that love that he put this challenge in front of him.

Right now in the life of our church, and incidentally on the same day we talk about church budgets and salaries and all that sort of thing, we are, as many already know, making preparations for a building project and large missional effort, and a campaign to fund them both, which I've shared with you before, and we'll be talking about it much more later this Spring.

But right now we're in some of the early phases of it, and one challenge, one opportunity that comes along with something like this isn't so much the stuff of fundraising goals or will we hit this number or will we hit that number. It's, will we as a church give of ourselves to the point that God transforms something about us? If we only give out of what's easy to give, or only out of what's left over, then what exactly is there to work with? It's what we're not using, and we won't miss it. But imagine the kind of life, the kind of life-giving reign God could have if we untie that knot, if we unload all that stuff we carry with us, and be brought into the kingdom of God.

Sadly, when this man walked away from Jesus, he knew it wasn't the right thing, which makes it all the more tragic. He went away grieving, it says, because he had many possessions. But I wonder just what kind of transformation might have happened for him if it had gone differently, if instead of thinking of everything he would lose, he'd be thinking of the life he would be liberated into. How different would his life look?

And I wonder just what kind of transformation could happen for each one of us. I wonder how different things could look for you, in following a Lord who loves you.

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