



the needle's eye, the rich man, and astonished disciples

Mark 10.²³⁻²⁷ (part 1)

²³And Jesus looked round about, and saith unto his disciples, "How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!"

²⁴And the disciples were astonished at his words. But Jesus answereth again, and saith unto them, "Children, how hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God! ²⁵It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."

²⁶And they were astonished out of measure, saying among themselves, "Who then can be saved?"

²⁷And Jesus looking upon them saith, "With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible."

Ever since Jesus uttered his jarring view of wealth and its relationship with God's kingdom, many interpreters have gone out of their way to tame the utterance and the challenge it represents to the false traditions concerning wealth—traditions inherited from the countless generations that have passed one after another. But it seems to me, the author of the narrative went out of his way to make sure that no such taming would be possible or accepted by any honest reader. The Gospel writer's reporting on the disciples' reaction to Jesus' world changing utterance is meant to head off any attempts to domesticate Jesus' radical pronouncement.

Twice. Twice in five short verses we are informed that Jesus' disciples were "astonished." "Astonished *out of measure*," even. The word used the first time, *thámbos*, indicates something more than intellectual surprise. It is indicative of something that is deeply psychological. It indicates something that is frightening, unnerving, disruptive. The second time we hear of the disciples' response to Jesus' doctrine about wealth, we are told that they were, "dumbstruck, flabbergasted, driven out of their senses, blown away" (*ekplēssō*). Their

initial astonishment, then, only grew with Jesus' second statement and analogy.

Here, then, is the first statement. "How difficult it is for those possessing wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" Now, some, seeking to domesticate Jesus and his assertion, want us to think that the verb we have translated, "possessing" should be translated something like, "cling to." With this suggestion, they wish us to believe that Jesus was referring only to wealthy people who were inordinate in their search for and maintenance of money. Jesus was speaking only of the lustful, greedy, and stingy.

But this reading makes the disciples' astonished, unnerved response nonsensical. Wouldn't they have wholeheartedly agreed with such a sentiment? Wouldn't they have sagely nodded their heads in agreement, as if to say, "Yes, yes, just as we thought. People fixated on wealth are unlikely to enter the kingdom."? Had not their scriptures, especially the writings of the Hebrew prophets, taught them this truth a thousand times over? So why would the disciples feel the earth move under them when they heard Jesus utter a truth that everyone already knew and took as axiomatic?

No. I am sorry, but this reading does not hold water.

These same apologists for wealth direct our attention to Jesus' follow up statement. "Children, how hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God!" In this restatement, the apologists claim, Jesus was clarifying his first statement. Presumably, seeing the disciples unnerved response, and feeling they misunderstood, he clarified. His clarification sought to reaffirm that he was only speaking of wealthy people who had an unhealthy relationship with their wealth.

I see at least two problems with this reading. The first is obvious. The disciples' reaction to Jesus' restatement shows that the restatement did not ameliorate the disciples' shock. In fact, it made their shock worse. "They were astonished out of measure." Again, we have to ask, "Why?" Again, we have to ask, "Wouldn't they have agreed with this common sense

assertion that people who possessed an inordinate attachment to wealth would find doing what needed to be done to enter the kingdom of God difficult rowing?” Of course they would. The disciples wouldn’t experience the slightest tremor in their soul at such an assertion.

Once more, Mark’s inclusion of the disciples’ response to Jesus’ statement forbids any domestication of that statement. “They were thunderstruck!”

The second problem is less obvious, and explains why I utilized the King James translation rather than my own as I did with Jesus’ first statement. In the texts deemed to be most reliable, Jesus’ second statement reads as follow: “Children, how difficult it is to enter the Kingdom of God.” The second statement says nothing about wealth or “trusting” wealth. (Is the very existence of and the translators’ choice of a less reliable text an example of the attempted sort of domestication of Jesus’ statements on wealth that we have been discussing?)

We might be tempted, then, to hear in Jesus’ restatement something like, “It isn’t just difficult for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God. It’s difficult for everyone.” And yet, with Jesus’ follow up analogy of the wealthy, the camel, and the needle’s eye, the discussion clearly remains focused on wealth and the challenge it represents to those seeking to enter the kingdom of God .

We will turn our attention to the analogy in our next meditation on this passage. For now, we wish to come back to Jesus’ two statements. For the sake of argument, let’s accept Jesus’ restatement as found in the less reliable texts. As we do so, let’s remember that the disciples were even more unnerved by it than they had been by his first statement.

Again, the first statement. “How difficult it is for those possessing wealth to enter the kingdom of God!”

Now the restatement as found in some texts. “Children, how difficult it is for those who trust in wealth to enter the Kingdom of God.”

The apologists for wealth read the second statement and hear this clarification: “I meant to say that wealthy people who trust in wealth will find entrance into the kingdom of God difficult. Of course, wealthy people who do not trust in their wealth will find no such difficulty.”

But we must ask, again, why would such a clarification increase the disciples’ astonishment? No, the disciples’ increased shock after the restatement precludes us from accepting the wealth apologists’ explanation.

So, what did the disciples hear in the second statement that caused them to be even more unnerved than they already were?

Put simply, this is what I hear, and what I think the disciples heard, if Jesus’ restatement is read, “Children, how difficult it is for those who trust in wealth to enter the Kingdom of God”:

“When I speak of ‘those who possess wealth’ and then of ‘those who trust in wealth,’ I am speaking of the same people, for all who possess wealth come to trust in wealth. So, when I say that those who possess wealth will be hard pressed to enter the kingdom, I am talking about every single wealthy individual.”

And why did the disciples find this assertion so shocking? For the same reason that so many interpreters have spent the past two thousand years trying to tame Jesus’ wild saying. For the same reason most readers today find Jesus’ statement shocking. We lust after wealth. Given half a chance, we intend to be wealthy. Many of us do possess great wealth. At the same time, we wish to enter the kingdom of God with as little effort as possible. Giving up wealth and even the desire for it is about as hard a work as there is. So, we create our false

prosperity gospel narratives. “God blesses the righteous with wealth.” “When someone is wealthy, it is because God has rewarded them for their righteousness.”

Clearly the disciples had sucked at this sour teat. They assumed wealth and righteousness were synonymous, or nearly so. But, not so says Jesus in total agreement with the Hebrew prophets that preceded him. Just as today, though, those who preached and taught in synagogue/ church skipped those prophetic challenges to the prosperity gospel delusion. So, after hearing all their lives a doctrine of wealth that was diametrically opposed to what they heard Jesus teach, they were shocked, unnerved. The world shifted under their feet as Jesus invited them to enter a new paradigm.

Lots of factors came together to cause Jesus’ death. I have little doubt that his challenge to the false prosperity gospels of his day was one of those factors. Interpreters have been trying to kill his challenge ever since. But the Gospel writers’ seemingly innocent inclusion of the disciples’ shocked response to Jesus’ challenge to the status quo makes it as hard to accept the wealth apologists’ reading as it is for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God. And how hard is it... for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of God? That’s the stuff of our next meditation.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!