



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

Mark 10.²³⁻²⁷ (part 2)

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."

Scholars and laymen alike have often found unity in their efforts to soften and tame Jesus and his uncompromising doctrines. One often feels that the modern Jesus is little more than a caricature of the real. Today's reading is a case in point. In our previous meditation on this passage, we examined how some have sought to domesticate Jesus' assertion concerning the relationship between God's kingdom and those who possess wealth: "How difficult it is for those possessing wealth to enter the kingdom of God!" We suggested that any attempt to soften or tame this radical view must deal with the disciple's astonished, gob smacked, shocked, unnerved, and disrupted reaction to Jesus' assertion.

In this meditation, we want to have a look at the analogy Jesus used to drive home his uncompromising message. Once more, we must keep our eye on the disciples even as we give ear to Jesus' words. Their reaction to Jesus' view of wealth is as pertinent to understanding his view as the words he uttered. Here, then, is the analogy.

“It 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.”

There have been, essentially, three views concerning the analogy. We will take them from what seems to me to be least likely to the most likely. In the first view, Jesus had in mind a real camel and a small city gate through which a camel, unburdened, could pass when the main city gates were closed for security reasons. In this view, just as the camel must be unburdened of its load to enter the city, a wealthy man must unburden himself of his wealth to enter the kingdom. Some find this view effective in taming and blunting Jesus’ perspective on wealth, as if, in this view a wealthy man can enter the kingdom. But, it does no such thing.

It does not accomplish what many are looking for in it: to allow the wealthy entrance into the kingdom. If, as a camel must be unburdened of its load to enter a city, a wealthy man must be unburdened of his wealth to enter the kingdom, then the man is no longer wealthy when he enters the kingdom. Do you see? This view actually doesn’t allow for a wealthy man to enter, but only a formerly wealthy man. Wealth must be shed for entrance into the kingdom.

In addition, there is nothing in this attempted domestication of the analogy that should astonish or unnerve the disciples. The suggestion that the wealthy is in need of unburdening himself of his wealth is rather pedestrian, in fact.

The most serious problem with the camel and city gate view, however, is that there is no evidence that such gates existed in Jesus’ time.

The second view is that Jesus had a real camel and a real sewing needle in mind. This certainly would qualify as an astonishing and unnerving analogy, for no camel is ever going to fit through the eye of a sewing needle. But Jesus’ parables, in order to be assessable to his listeners, are nearly always taken from well-known and common occurrences in daily life. This view of the analogy would have no real-life application, as no one ever imagined a scenario in which anyone would attempt to pass a camel through a sewing needle’s eye.

The third view is that Jesus had in mind a rope and a sewing needle's eye. The Hebrew word for "camel" and "rope" have the same three consonants (*gml*) but different vowels. At some point, the theory goes, a scribe altered the vowels, thus giving us camel rather than rope. This view makes assumptions about the language Jesus spoke at the time he originally delivered the saying and about the language in which the saying was textually transmitted that are not without their detractors.

At the same time, this third view has the advantage of presenting a somewhat plausible real-life scenario. One can imagine someone attempting to thread a sewing needle with something too large for the eye. In addition, it presents an impossibility that the disciples would find shocking and disturbing.

No matter which view one takes, the message is the same: It is more than difficult for the wealthy to enter the kingdom, it is impossible.

Having clearly been brought up on some form of "prosperity gospel" delusion, the disciple's responded with, "Who then can be saved?" Apparently, it was their view that if the wealthy could not enter, then no one could.

Jesus affirmed that, indeed, no one can enter the kingdom through their own efforts or on their own merits. "With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible."

Some might suggest that since "all things are possible" it is possible for the wealthy to enter the kingdom. But we should, rather, see in this statement a direct attempt on Jesus' part to throw a comforting lifeline to his disciples and all those who follow his teachings.

As we have seen, in none of the three views of Jesus' analogy do the wealthy enter the kingdom. In each, it is an impossibility. Even in the unlikely case that Jesus had an unburdened camel going through a city's small security gate in mind, the wealthy do not enter, since, having unburdened themselves, they are no longer wealthy. It seems like a last

second ditching of wealth, like a death bed confession, is insufficient to undo a life in which habits have been formed and character shaped for eternity. We should not read Jesus' final testimony of God's power as contradicting anything he has previously said about the incompatibility of wealth and the kingdom of God.

We will all find it hard enough to enter the kingdom without the added burden of wealth with all its temptations and distractions. Here, we think of Paul's unpopular testimony—one that has also been subjected to diligent attempts at domestication.

“But they that will be rich fall into temptation and snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness.”¹

To flee wealth is to unburden ourselves of it. To unburden ourselves of it does not mean giving away a dime here and a nickel there to causes we find admirable and individuals we find needy. It means the giving up of wealth and the unhealthy wealthy lifestyle it produces. It means that we tame and domesticate ourselves, not Jesus' teachings.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus!

¹ 1 Timothy 6.⁹⁻¹¹