

“Camels Are Better Off Than You”

“Jesus Said That?!” part 4

Mark 10:17-31

[59] I am so glad you are here this morning. You have chosen to come to this place, to worship God together. For some of us, this was an easy decision. We have been part of this congregation’s ministry for a long time. For others, it was a struggle. You didn’t get to sleep in this morning. You might have needed three or four cups of coffee to get going. Maybe you had to bribe the kids with ice cream. But the fact remains that you are honoring God with your presence in this place. Now we have the opportunity explore God’s Word together, challenge and encourage each other, and watch God do miracles in this place. That is why we are here.

I invite you to pray with me, holding out your hands with the palms open, to show God that you are ready to receive what He has for you today. Let’s pray.

God Almighty, we stand in awe of your power and holiness. You are a God who moves mountains and makes the seas roar. You know every one of us. Thank you for your grace and love. Teach us in this moment now to live as worthy disciples following your Son, Jesus Christ, our Savior and Lord. We pray this in his precious name. Amen.

[60] My kids are pretty good at asking questions. “Why?” is one of their favorites. Usually it follows a command given by a parent, such as “Take off your shoes,” “Get ready for school,” or, “No, you cannot have another brownie.” Asking questions is a great way to learn.

The last three weeks, we have been asking “Why” a lot in church. “Why did Jesus say that?” We have covered some of his difficult sayings in the Bible and discovered that being a disciple of Jesus, a person who follows Christ, is actually hard work. And when Jesus says hard stuff, it’s because we need to listen.

[61] There are a lot of important questions in life: What should I do for a living? Should I get married, and to whom? What will my priorities be? Vanilla or chocolate? (Chocolate, always chocolate.) Some questions we answer for ourselves, but most of the time, we go to others for advice.

Jesus is a great person to go to with difficult questions, but when you ask them, be prepared for tough answers. That's the lesson the rich young man learned in our story today. His lesson is ours, as well.

[62] This passage starts with a great question. The man falls to his knees and asks Jesus, "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" (Mark 10:17b) It's a question we all want to ask. "How can I live forever?" Sometimes we say it with churchy words. "How do I get to heaven?" "How can I be saved?" Most of us have the understanding that this earthly life is not a destination in and of itself. There is more. Finding the answer is tricky, and Jesus can help.

[63] Jesus answers the question with another question. "Why do you call me good? No one is good-except God alone." (Mark 10:18) Jesus does this to catch the man's attention, to make sure he is really listening. I think we all can agree, Jesus is good. But Jesus is more than that. Jesus is the Son of God. So, listen up! Jesus is talking with God's authority.

[64] I think the way Jesus answers seems a little odd. Jesus lists several of the Ten Commandments: don't murder, don't cheat, don't steal, honor your parents, etc. Those are certainly good things to obey. The only problem is, those things do not specifically lead to eternal life. God gave us the commandments to show us how sinful we are. We can't ever live up to them.

Trying to follow the commandments perfectly is pure legalism. Someone explained to me once: "Do this" and "Don't do that" is just a bunch of do-do. You cannot earn eternal life by legalism. Jesus freely offers us forgiveness and grace. When we accept that gift, then, out of gratitude, we can live our lives to honor God. You cannot earn your salvation; it is the gift of God.

[65] Look how the young man replies to Jesus' test. This man claims to have been perfectly obedient from his youth. (Mark 10:20) I'm sure he was sincere, but he's either delusional or he's lying. No one is perfect. Not him. Not me. Not you. I may not have killed anybody, but I've certainly hurt people in anger. I've envied. I've lusted. I've lied. I've been forgiven, but if I'm going to be honest, I have to confess my sin. So while I believe this young man is a nice guy, he must have had some issues, because we all do. Jesus knows this, too.

The thing is, this man is trying to save himself. He is trying to check all the boxes to make God love him. Yet this man is avoiding something that would truly move him into a loving, thriving relationship with God.

[66] The scripture says, “Jesus looked at him and loved him.” (Mark 10:21) Jesus is filled with compassion. Jesus knows what is coming next. It’s going to be hard, but Jesus has to say it.

“One thing you lack,” [Jesus] said. “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” (Mark 10:21)

I can almost hear the crowd in the background, hoping against hope that this man will say, “Yes! Of course, Jesus, that’s it! That’s what I need to do. I will give away everything and follow you!” But instead, the Bible says, the man’s face fell, and he walked away from Jesus. He could not bear to leave his great wealth behind. (Mark 10:22)

[67] This is where the story takes a deeper, theological turn. Jesus goes on to teach that it is very hard for the rich to enter God’s kingdom. Then Jesus makes an amazing yet strange statement. “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.” (Mark 10:25) The disciples are shocked and dismayed. To them, this seems impossible, because it is.

Did you know that the largest animal in Palestine is the camel? An adult camel weighs over a thousand pounds. At the shoulder, a camel stands seven feet high. Of course, a camel could not pass through the eye of a needle!

This verse, Mark 10:25, is a frequently abused verse in the Bible. For centuries, apparently, some people have been teaching that Jesus was referring to a fictitious gate somewhere called the “Eye of the Needle,” that was too small for a camel to pass through without unloading it and forcing it to crawl on its knees. A comical illustration, but completely untrue. No evidence in history shows us a gate by such name ever existed, and even if it did, why would anyone use it for a camel? **[68]** No, Jesus’ comment is a straightforward hyperbolic illustration that needs no further explanation. Cameron Buettel puts it this way: “Manufacturing your own salvation is just as impossible as threading a massive

beast of burden through the eye of a sewing needle. Apart from the intervention of the Lord, it cannot be done.”¹

This idea about camels being better off than rich people is shocking to us and to Jesus’ audience. There was and still is a common belief that wealth is a blessing from God, a mark of heavenly favor. There are even scriptures that say this, like in the book of Job. But there is another, more frequent teaching that wealth is dangerous. For example, in Matthew 20:25, Jesus says the rich lord it over each other and use their power to abuse the downtrodden.

[69] When Jesus says that it is nearly impossible for the wealthy to enter God’s kingdom, it is the complete opposite of common sense. Like us, the disciples thought rich people could do anything!

No, Jesus is clear about that. Memorize this verse: Mark 10:27 – “With humans this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.” No one, no matter how rich they are, can save themselves. But God can do anything.

What if Jesus were to come to you and tell you, the one thing you lack was to literally give away everything you have? What would you say? Would you do it, or walk away? Jesus makes it perfectly clear: It is impossible to enter God’s kingdom by your own power or will. You cannot buy eternal life. You cannot earn it. You can only receive it as a free gift of God.

[70-71] I love this quote from John MacArthur on this passage: “The obvious point of that picturesque expression of hyperbole is not that salvation is difficult, but rather that it is humanly impossible for everyone by any means, including the wealthy. Sinners are aware of their guilt and fear, and may even desire a relationship with God that would bring forgiveness and peace. But they cannot hold on to their sinful priorities and personal control and think they can come to God on their own terms. The young man illustrates that reality.”²

[72] It comes down to this: do you want eternal life? If the answer is yes, then you need to believe the gospel, the whole gospel. God created us. But our selfishness, our sin, separates us from God, because God is perfectly holy. God’s love creates a predicament. God cannot overlook our sin, but God knows that we cannot rescue ourselves. So God sent his own Son into the world, Jesus Christ, to

¹ (<http://www.gty.org/blog/B150914/frequently-abused-verses-what-is-the-eye-of-a-needle>)

² <http://www.gty.org/blog/B150914/frequently-abused-verses-what-is-the-eye-of-a-needle>

suffer and die on our behalf, carrying our sins to the cross. When Jesus rose from the grave three days later, he proved that nothing could ever stop his love from reaching us.

That leaves us with the simple choice. Accept that Jesus as Lord and receive the life he offers you, or walk away from it all. Those who accept this free gift live in the grace and love of Jesus, striving to become like him and telling others of the grace they have found. They give up all rights to their own wealth and property, understanding all those things ultimately belong to God. Instead, they receive their final reward in heaven. Those who walk away from Christ will one day face the judgment of the Almighty God, and God will ask them, "What did you do with the gifts I gave you?"

[73] I don't believe it is necessary to literally sell all that you have to become a Christian. Yet all of your possessions really do belong to God. You are just a steward. I am not surprised at all when people give their lives to Jesus and they turn their all of their possessions to him. Jesus himself said we would receive back everything we gave up and more in this life and the next. (Mark 10:29-30) That includes any wealth we own. I have regretted nothing that I have given up in my life for the sake of Christ. And I pray that you will discover the same thing.

[74] If your possessions are a stumbling block, if you find yourself walking away from Jesus full of shame, sorrow, and regret, it's not too late. You don't have to wait for some metaphysical miracle to beam a camel through the eye of a needle. God provides that miracle to you right here, right now, in the form of the Savior Jesus. The answer to life's most important question is right in front of you. Believe in the power of the cross to save you, and follow Jesus. Throw everything aside that would prevent you from experiencing eternal life, whether it's cars or camels or cash, and run to Jesus, and simply tell him, "Yes!"

Let's pray.

A prayer was offered at the end of this message, asking those to respond by releasing any burden that prevents them from following Jesus. If you made a decision to follow Christ after reading this message, I would love to know about it. Please contact me at eric.gumc@gmail.com.

Continue with World Methodist Social Affirmation.

Memory verse

Mark 10:27 – “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.”

Reflection questions

1. What is the most impossible thing you have ever seen?
2. If God’s commandments do not bring us eternal life, why should we follow them?
3. Do you consider yourself to be rich? Is your wealth a hindrance to your faith?
4. How has God made salvation possible for you? Do you follow Jesus at all costs?