October 10, 2021 “We cannot, but God can”

Psalm 33, Hebrews 4: 12-16, Mark 10: 17-31

Tim Keller, author and long-time pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, describes these verses from Mark’s Gospel as “hard candy” verses:

Some lessons of Jesus are like chocolate; they immediately melt in your mouth, revealing their sweetness right away (“blessed are the poor…” is a good example).

However, this lesson, and specifically the lesson that it is easier to put a camel through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the Kingdom; this one takes some time, and maybe even some chewing to reveal its sweetness.

To begin, both the process of working through this lesson and revealing its sweetness, we need to make sure that we are reading it faithfully.

Jesus’ words in Scripture are: “*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).

That is a challenging word, especially to those of us in the economic “West” of the globe, where we take our comparative wealth for granted.

However, as I say, let us read these words *faithfully*: a real camel and a real needle.

Who can do such a thing? Only God, not the camel him- or her-self. A strong *warning* and a strong *lesson*.

If you have heard someone preach on this text in the past, you have likely heard some alternative explanation that softens both the warning and the lesson.

Decades ago, someone decided that Jesus must not have been talking about a *literal* camel and a *literal* needle.

One interpretation I have heard years ago (I think on History Channel, not in any sermon), is that in ancient Jerusalem there was a gateway in a rock called the “Eye of the Needle,” and in order to get a packed camel through it, a traveller had unload their gear and luggage, walk the camel through the small gap, and then strap it back on on the other side.

Now, this is a nicer, softer version than what is on the page of Mark (a softer candy, if you will), but is that *really* what Jesus is saying in these verses?

If we adopt this “softer version” of the lesson, then it becomes easier to digest:

‘Jesus isn’t saying we have no change of entering the kingdom of heaven, only that we must give our possessions away here on earth so that we can have them again later in heaven…’

Even though the above is more comforting to the rich, to those of us in the West, I think we can agree that it’s not something God would have to take on human flesh and *die* in order to teach us.

This softer version; not only is it not true but it’s not *necessary.*

It’s not necessary to soften the Gospel into something that no longer challenges us, because if we do that, it’s no longer the Gospel.

Unfortunately for the rich man in Mark’s story, Jesus was speaking about a real camel and a real needle.

The *other* alternative reading you may have heard for this lesson is that it is all about “rich” vs. “poor”; a kind of class warfare that says God loves the poor and hates the rich.

But again, is that the kind of thing Jesus would come down and die to teach us?

The first time I preached on this text five years ago, when I was still a student minister, that sadly must have been the takeaway I gave, at least to one person.

After that service, as I was fixing my cup of church coffee in the fellowship hall, one of the congregation I was visiting came up to me and said “God doesn’t want us to be poor y’know!” before storming off in a huff.

At the time I wasn’t so sure.

At the time I still had enough of my youthful “tear it all down and rebuilt it/Occupy Wall Street” energy and I though ‘well, what’s so bad about that?’

These days, however, I don’t think that’s really the point of the lesson (for the same reason that softening it is not the right way to go): Jesus’ Good News is not Good News if it is *only* for socialists; Jesus is beyond our earthly politics.

Friends, whether we soften or harden this morning’s lesson; whether we soften it into an easy read for the rich, or whether we harden it into good news only for young socialists, we risk taking God out of the story.

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If we do either of these things, we risk taking God (and just as importantly) God’s *love* out of the picture.

There’s a beautiful moment in Mark’s story, and it’s so brief, but it shows how we should be reading this lesson faithfully: not defensive of our possessions, nor offended by other peoples’, but with *compassion* and *confession.*

Let’s go back and see:

Mark tells us at the beginning of the reading that a man ran up before Jesus, knelt before Him, and asked Him this question: “Good Teacher, what must *I* do to inherit eternal life?”

(and right away, Jesus shows the man that the answer will not be as he expects)

“Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone.”

Then Jesus invites the man to consider the Scriptures.

Jesus could see immediately that the man was rich; here he was in fine clothes, kneeling in the dirt before Him, not just rich but apparently faithful.

Well, Jesus says, let’s find out how faithful:

(v. 19) “You know the commandments…”

-You shall not murder

-You shall not steal

-You shall not bear false witness

-You shall not defraud

-Honor your father and mother

(v.20) The man replied, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth!”

(To paraphrase the man:) ‘Teacher, believe it or not, I am a rich man but I am not a crook! I have defrauded no one, stolen from no one, lied to no one, I even honor my father and mother!’

And then there is this *beautiful* moment that happens at verse 21:

“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 your treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

And before the man goes away grieving his possessions, we ought to stop here and really understand:

(v.21) Jesus, looking at him, *loved him* and said “You lack one thing…”

Friends, when it comes to the love of God, we (Christians, faithful people, human beings), we can be very *stingy,* very *cheap,* especially when it comes to accepting this *love* for ourselves.

This rich man, the man who was about to go away grieving his many possessions, this man was *loved by Jesus the Christ*, Mark takes time to tell us so.

And not only this; but this man was loved by Jesus the Christ *before* he made the decision to give up his wealth or not.

We do not actually find out whether the man was able to follow Jesus’ invitation, whether he was able to give us earthly wealth, but in light of *Christ’s love* for him, that is not really the point of the story.

Whether or not the man eventually gave it up, Jesus still loved him.

He loved him before, during, and after his grief, his struggle; however it eventually turned out.

Friends, this rich man is an example for us of what it means to struggle with the parts of our lives that prevent us from fully following Jesus

For this rich man Jesus made it very easy:

-Go

-Sell what you own

-Give the money to the poor

-Then come and follow me

(To paraphrase): ‘Take your treasure, put it in heaven where it belongs, then come and follow me.’

This man may have had an awful struggle on his hands after this encounter with Jesus, but he did come away with two clear truths:

1. Jesus loved him
2. He knew the thing that was preventing him from following Jesus

Friends, let me relay two truths to *you* this morning:

1. Jesus loves *you*
2. There is something in your life that prevents you from following Jesus, or from following Jesus more closely.

It is *possible* to read this story (Jesus’ encounter with the rich man and the lesson of the eye of the needle) and to come away saying ‘Well, that’s bad news for rich people…’

But I no longer believe that’s the way it should be read. Nor should it be read in a way to soften and relativize the lesson.

If we believe in a God who loves us, if we believe in a God who took on human flesh and looked at this man in love, then there is a lesson here for us to take seriously and openly:

If we are rich, that lesson may be the same: Give it all up, give it to the poor, follow Jesus.

Yet that is also the lesson no matter if we are rich or poor:

-Figure out what *it* is

-Give it up

-Follow Jesus

Friends, what is that thing in your own life that prevents you from following Jesus?

What is that thing that prevents you from coming to God in prayer or to Scripture in search of guidance?

Maybe, like this man, it is the possessions that take your time and possession, and your heart.

Maybe it is your priorities, your struggle to work less and live more.

Maybe it is old hurts, broken relationships, unforgiveness.

Or maybe it is the ways of this world:

-Whether you love its pleasures too much, or

-Whether you’re so convinced of its evil that you want nothing to do with it

Whatever that *thing* is, Jesus loves you *in* your struggle.

Jesus sees you, behind that obstacle, and loves you before, during, and after asking you to give it up.

If you take time to work through this love in our own life, if you take time with this “hard candy” lesson that reveals its sweetness slowly, you can do nothing but experience more and more of this love.

So that:

1. The more we are loved by Christ (or the more *aware* that we are)
2. The easier it is to acknowledge these obstacles
3. The more compassion we can learn to give ourselves, and let them go
4. The more we can come readily to God, and start back at #1

To now, I have left out what makes all of this actually *possible.*

To now, I have said: it is a real camel and a real needle, it is about us and our lives, whether we are rich or poor, but I have not revealed what makes this lesson actually *work.*

As Jesus taught the disciples that day, after He said “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 tells us that the disciples were “astounded,” and they said to one another, “Then who can be saved?”

(v. 27) *Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”*

Friends, if you are sitting there thinking to yourself:

-“My obstacle is just too big…”, or

-“It’s too late for me to change…”, or

-“This preacher doesn’t understand how sinful I really am…”

Let me say this: you may be *half* right.

You may be right that your obstacle *is* too great for a mortal person to fix, but here’s the Good News:

Jesus isn’t just a mortal person.

Whatever that obstacle is in your life

-Not only does Christ see you through it

-Not only does Christ love you through it

-But if you allow Him to, He will even move it for you

And even if you haven’t been able to see Him on the other side of that obstacle, believe that He has already begun to work on it

Jesus concludes this lesson with a word about His upside-down economy:

The Kingdom of Heaven, the place where the rich are poor, the mighty are weak, the place where, “Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (v. 31)

When the door to that place was finally opened to all of humanity, when the rock that prevented our way in was finally split, it happened because that same teacher, that same Jesus took on our pain and our sin and died in our place.

When that happened, Jesus did so not out of anger, not out of judgement, but out of a love that could be fulfilled in no other way, a love that says:

*Fear not, for God all things are possible.*

Amen.