

Shrinking Camels

Hespeler, 10 October, 2021 © Scott McAndless – Thanksgiving

Amos 5:6-7, 10-15, Psalm 90:12-17, Hebrews 4:12-16, [Mark 10:17-31](#)

The story is told that, in Jerusalem in the early years of the first century, there was a gate in the city wall that was popularly known as the eye of the needle. This gate was apparently quite handy for those who engaged in the import/export trade – maybe especially those who engaged in it without wanting to bother paying annoying things like taxes and tariffs, if you know what I mean. The reason they liked this gate was because it was generally left open at night when the main gates were closed. As such, it offered an easy way to avoid the attention of customs inspectors.

Getting Through the Gate

But there was one problem. The gate was very small. And so, when a trader arrived at this gate with a camel train carrying all manner of goods that he wanted to take to market, he would quickly discover that it was so small that a camel bearing all of its burdens could not pass through it.

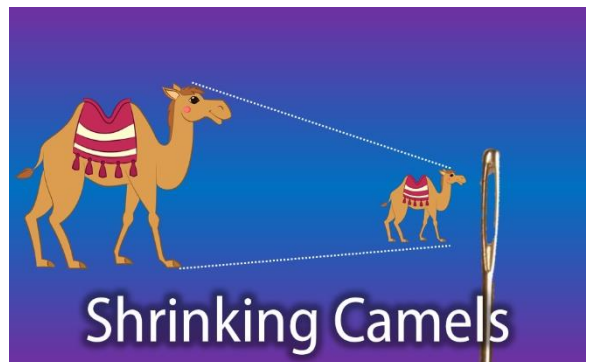
And so the merchant would have to remove every pack from the animal's back. Then he would have to remove the beautifully engraved saddle that he had inherited from his father and even the fine metal bridles and bits that had been in his family for generations. The man would have to lay all of these possessions and assets of his on the ground and only then lead the camel towards the gate.

But even then, it was not possible for the camel to pass. Camels are quite unique as beasts of burden in their ability to bend their knees and get right down to the ground, and that is what the camel would have to do next. And it was only in that extremely humble position that the camel was able to crawl its way through the gate. Only then, could it stand again, and the trader could push all of his possessions through the gate, put them back on the animal and go on his way.

The Saying of Jesus

And it is said that, when Jesus turned to his disciples one day and said to them, **“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,”** that he understood and all his disciples understood that what he was actually referring to was not the eye of a literal sewing needle, don't be ridiculous! No, they all understood that he was talking about that gate in Jerusalem.

And if they all understood that, then doesn't that give us a perfect interpretation of that famous saying of Jesus? Because then it would mean that Jesus was saying that the problem is not really with our wealth and possessions. It is not *really* these things that prevent us from being part of the kingdom of God. The problem is



our *attitude* towards our wealth and possessions. And if we, like the camel, can lay aside all of our earthly possessions without regret and if we can get down on our knees in thanksgiving to the God who has provided all of these things for us, well, then we too can pass through the gate and into the kingdom, at which point, I guess, we get all our possessions back too.

A Perfect Thanksgiving Application

It seems just perfect, doesn't it? And wouldn't that just make a beautiful application of this saying of Jesus on this day when we celebrate Thanksgiving? It's a reminder that we can enjoy the good things of life, so long as we set aside a day like this on which we are truly grateful. You have maybe even heard that interpretation of this saying of Jesus before because it has been used in many sermons by preachers of all sorts. It is a very popular interpretation.

It is Bunk

There is just one problem. It is all bunk. The fact of the matter is that there was no such gate in the city of Jerusalem in the times of Jesus nor at any other point in time. Jerusalem is one of the most archaeologically investigated sites on the face of the earth, no such gate has ever been found. Even more significant, there is no mention of such a gate in any of the ancient records. In fact, nobody ever seems to have heard of such a gate until, in relatively modern times, the story I just told you began to circulate.

The Illustration that Took Off

So, do you know what I think likely happened? I suspect that, at some point, there was a Christian preacher much like myself who was struggling with this particular saying of Jesus because it is, of course, a really troubling saying. And he (let's face it, given how long ago this likely happened, it was probably a male preacher) – he was looking for some way to make this saying relevant and palatable to the people in his congregation.

So, he made up a gate that never existed. He probably originally made it up just as an illustration. I'll bet, in the original sermon, he did not actually say that the gate really existed. But, you know how people are. They always remember the sermon illustrations much better than they remember the actual point of the sermon. So, the story just spread around. And, before long, the actual existence of the gate was taken for granted. Nobody questioned it.

Looking for Loopholes

And I can understand why. Such an interpretation is so much easier to take than what Jesus was apparently really saying. In fact, the history of this particular saying of Jesus is a history of people looking for loopholes. I heard a joke the other day saying that Elon Musk, who is apparently now the richest man in the world, has been funding research lately on the miniaturization of camels and the magnification of needles' eyes.

I heard that joke and I laughed, but then I thought about what the richest men in the world, men like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos, have been doing lately. They, and a few other global billionaires, have literally been engaging in a self-funded space race. It rather seems as if they have decided

that, if they can't fit a camel through a needle's eye, they are just going to fly directly to the kingdom of heaven in rockets.

How Jesus would Reply to the Super Rich

I can't help but wonder how Jesus might reply to such men and their quest today. I think that men like that actually have a lot in common with that rich young ruler that had come up to Jesus that day. We are told that this man came up to Jesus with this question, **“Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”** And notice that that question is very specific.

He doesn't ask, for example, “Good teacher, how can I get into heaven?” Nor does he ask, “How can I be part of this ‘kingdom of God’ that you are always going on about?” Being part of the kingdom of God was all about how you lived out this life as a part of what God was accomplishing in the world. Getting into heaven was all about what happened after you died, but this man asks about neither of those things. This man just wants to straight up live forever.

What the Super Rich are Doing

That is what I see the likes of Jeff Bezos and Elon Musk doing these days. They've already got everything of this world they could possibly desire. I mean, these are men who have so much wealth that they literally could not possibly spend it all no matter what they did. The interest and return on investment they earn grows much faster than what they could possibly spend buying things. They've gotten to this place where possessions don't actually mean anything anymore.

And so what do they seek? They seek eternal life. To quote a movie score, *“(Fame) I'm gonna make it to heaven, Light up the sky like a flame. (Fame) I'm gonna live forever. Baby, remember my name.”* And they think that using their wealth to conquer outer space is the way they are going to do that.

And I know that they've done their best to present what they do as being ultra cool and all for the sake of the future of humanity, but I really think most people see through that. I suspect that Jesus would have seen through it too. Had they come up to Jesus and said, “What must I do to live forever?” They would have probably cut Jesus off even before he started listing off the commandments and said, “Hey, did you hear that I went into space?”

But the story still would have ended with Jesus shaking his head and saying, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and use it to lift billions from poverty, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.”

Little has Changed

These men remind us of just how little has changed since Jesus first spoke to that rich young ruler. The richest people in the world are still full of themselves. And even when they do things that



they like to think of as trying to better the world, their extreme wealth tends to skew their perception.

Yes, today's billionaires may think of themselves as saving humanity by providing us a path to the stars, but it's pretty clear, from the way they go about it, that it's all about *them* saving the world. Yes, Bill Gates, who was once the world's richest man, may have given away huge quantities of money through the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, but when you look at how he set all of that up, he managed to keep a whole lot of control over how the money was spent so that it would align with his vision of what the world was supposed to be. He made sure that it was kind of all about him.

The Distortion Caused by Wealth

And I think that that is what Jesus is really getting at in his interaction with this rich young ruler and his saying about camels and needles' eyes. There is no denying that you can do a lot of good with wealth. In fact, given all of the ways in which the world actually works, it is practically impossible to do good without access to wealth. That is why churches and non-profits actually have to invest a fair bit of energy into raising funds. But what Jesus is saying is that wealth itself has a power to distort even the noblest of goals. And the more there is of it, the more distortion may occur. I think that's what we are seeing happening in the billionaire space race these days.

Jesus Asks for More

And Jesus was saying more than just that we have to take all of our belongings off of the camel and make the camel kneel down before going through the gate. He was saying that, if we really want to be part of the kingdom of God, which, remember, is all about what God is doing in this world to bring about God's vision of peace and justice and goodness for all, then we have to let go of that distorting influence in our life. Wealth and the pursuit of it and the illusion of security that it brings, these are the very things that prevent us from being a part of the kingdom of God here and now.

And, while some can and will take Jesus' advice to just give everything away to the poor, the practical truth of living in this world is that most of us will not be able to do that. But understand that, by not giving everything away, we are choosing the much more difficult path, indeed the impossible path. We have to deny the power that wealth has over us. The good news, however, is that God is so committed to bringing about God's kingdom, that the impossible can happen.

Embracing the Impossible

So, yes, we are in a tough spot on this Thanksgiving Sunday. We do want to gather and celebrate the incredible bounty of harvest and all of the good things that God gives us in this world. And I would say yes, be truly thankful for all of these things today and every day. But do not forget to go beyond thanks to embrace the real challenge that your God gives to you today, to actually pursue the impossible reality of the kingdom of God.