

JUST WHO IS THE RICH YOUNG RULER?

Sermon, October 10, 2021

Text: Mark 10:17-31

A little illustration related to our Gospel text that came up in my research this week doesn't really fit in with the rest of my sermon, but I (*somewhat irreverently*) thought it too good to go unmentioned. The story I found in a little devotional is about a jewelry designer who was seated on an airplane next to a woman with a huge diamond on her finger which caught his attention. Eventually he introduced himself and said, "I couldn't help but notice your beautiful diamond. I am a jewelry designer and something of an expert in precious stones. Please tell me about that stone." She replied, "That is the famous Klopman diamond, one of the largest in the world. But there is a strange curse that comes with it." Intrigued, he asked, "What is the curse?" She paused, then replied, "Mr. Klopman."

I think the devotional meant to illustrate, "Attachment to wealth can be a hindrance, rather than a blessing."

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

This is one of the more difficult statements of Jesus. When we've looked at this in past years, I explained how many interpretations have surfaced over the centuries attempting to explain this rather unusual metaphor. One interpretation, first posited by Cyril of Alexandria in the third century, is that there is a linguistic similarity between the Greek word for camel, *kamelos*, and the Greek word *kamilos*, which is a large rope. So, perhaps "camel" was a nickname for this rope, and if one sheds all the threads of the rope down to a single strand, one just might be able to get it through a needle's eye ... not impossible, but difficult. Another interpretation that surfaced in the 9th century is that in the walled cities there were huge gates over the main entryways through which all trade and traffic moved. These gates would have massive doors which would be closed, barred and guarded by night to protect the city. Beside some of these gates was a much smaller doorway. When the great main gates were closed and locked at night, the only way into the city was through the little gate, through which one person or one animal at a time would get through, and then only under the watchful eye of the gate keeper. The only way a laden camel could get through was to take everything off the camel, compel the camel to let go of everything it was hanging onto and almost kneel as it wiggles through ... again, something hard to do, but not entirely impossible. Do you remember what this little gate would sometimes be called? "The Needle's Eye." The obvious analogy, then, would be that to enter the gateway to the City of God and its life abundant and eternal, one must be willing to let go of everything, kneel before the One at the gate, and enter in humility.

A rope, a little gate, and a third possibility is that Jesus simply meant a real, live, hairy, long-necked, hump-backed camel. The camel was the biggest critter they knew in Palestine, and Jesus *meant* to paint this rather absurd picture of the huge beast, the largest of animals in Palestine, trying to get through the smallest of holes. He used this imagery in order to create a vivid, memorable illustration communicating that finding the way into the Kingdom of God is just impossible, especially for those who hold onto the riches of this world ... without letting go and letting God. Mark 10:27: "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God." We really don't know which is the proper interpretation, rope, gate or actual camel, but it doesn't matter ... I think they're all good! ¹

The setting in which this metaphor was used is that one morning a man ran up to Jesus, threw himself down on his knees in front of the Lord, and said, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" Now, many have traditionally understood this question to be, "What do I have to do to get to heaven when I die?" But some don't think so. (Please bear with me for a potentially boring Greek grammar lesson, but I think it'll be helpful.) The ancient Greek term translated "eternal" has other nuances to it that don't necessarily apply to *quantitative* time; nuances such as fullness, richness, abundance ... nuances that are about *quality* of life as opposed to *quantity* of life. Think of a moment or a time in your life that was just so full, so rich, that you just wanted the clock to stop, you never wanted that time to end ... well, that's a taste of the nuance of this use of the Greek term "eternal," as in "timeless." Lending a little weight to this argument is that the word translated "life" is not the Greek word "bios" (βίος), which means physical life, but the word is "zoe" (ζωή) which implies more of a *quality* of life. In English, we talk about "living," as in breathing, and we talk about "living," as in "living it up." The latter implies vigorous fullness, rich fulfillment, quality enjoyment ... a zestful life, a life that is full to the hilt. Where we use the one word "live" to mean two relatively different things, the Greeks used two ... again, "bios" is the living, heart-beating, biological life, and "zoe" is the living-it-up, zestful, fulfilling-to-the hilt, quality-kind of life. Somebody can be "bios" alive, but "zoe" dead; in the current vernacular, that's someone who needs to "get a life." I really don't think this rich

¹ Interpretations from *The Daily Study Bible* series by William Barclay, "Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2" pp. 238-239, Westminster Press, Philadelphia 1958

young man is asking so much about *"pie in the sky in the by and by when I die;"* I think he is more asking the same very practical question many people are asking: *"What do I have to do to get a good and full life, a ful-filled life, a 'zoey' life so full I just don't want it to ever end? A life that makes me want to get out of bed and say, 'Good morning, Lord!' instead of 'Good Lord, it's morning!?' What is it that I have to do to get my life ... right?"*

Back to the story. Jesus' immediate response to this question is to say, *"Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone."* This is a mini-sermon in itself, but I think Jesus is intimating that if you really want to know about what's good, then the first step is to get *right* with the One Who is the true source and paragon of Goodness. He goes on to say, *"You know the commandments: Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, honor your father and mother."* The man says, *"Jesus, I kept all of these things since I was a boy,"* as if to say, *"Jesus -- there has to be more to it than that! There has to be more to life than just living by the rules."* Now, from Matthew's account we know this man is young, and from Luke's account we know he is in a position of authority, a "ruler", and we know from all three accounts he is rich (*hence the Rich Young Ruler ... Mark doesn't tell us he's young or a ruler; Matthew and Luke fill in those details*) AND that we know from all three accounts he's conscientiously, and I believe sincerely, religious. He's probably worked hard to be good *at* life and he's probably worked hard to be good *in* life, and apparently he's done so **throughout** his life ... and that's commendable! But now he's here on his knees before Jesus, because I think he's discovered no matter how hard he works at life, no matter how good his life gets, he can't seem to get it quite good *enough*.

The next thing we are told is that Jesus, looking at him, *loved* him. This is so important; don't miss it! Jesus was visibly and obviously moved to compassion for this young aristocrat, so much so that Mark, alone among the Gospel writers, felt compelled to record it.² See the eyes of Jesus just fill with compassion for this honorable man who really does seem to want to do the right things with his life, a man who really does seem to want to do the right thing with his wealth and his position of authority; he really does want to get it "right" with his life which he just knows isn't good enough. It's the same love I believe Jesus has in looking at each and every one of us each and every time we come to Jesus asking Him, *"How do I get my life right?"* Whenever we do that, Jesus just fills with love for us, like He did this man. Too many people think Jesus is just waiting to WHACK us when we don't do things "good enough." No, He loves us, and especially so when we are trying hard to do what is right and good!

I think *another* reason Jesus may have looked with love at this young man is that they have something in common. Maybe Jesus is thinking: *"I'm a young man, too."* He is only about thirty-one years of age, here. Maybe He's thinking as He looks at this rich young man of authority and power on his knees before Him, *"You know, I'm also a rich young ruler..."* Think of it: All the wealth, power, glory in the universe was His ... and Jesus left it. As Paul puts it in II Corinthians 8:9, *"For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich."* Imagine Jesus thinking as He speaks to this young man, *"I'm a rich young ruler, too. I have riches beyond anything you ever had or could even dream about! I gave it all up to do the will of My Father. I'm not asking you to do anything I haven't already done! So, from one rich young ruler to another, let me say this -- Do you want real treasure? Then let go what you are hanging onto, sell what you have and give to the poor, then come follow Me ... and you will have treasure in heaven."* And as Jesus tells the disciples later, no one who has given up anything for Him will fail to be rewarded a hundredfold.

So much I'll have to leave unsaid about this passage due to constraints of time; I just end with this: This man was on his knees before Jesus, which is good. But can he let go of everything Jesus asks him to let go of? Well, apparently not ... at least not yet. And as we read the plain words of the text here we may wonder: Can he let go of ANYTHING Jesus asks him to let go of? Maybe this is reading between the lines, but at this point it seems to me that this young aristocrat walks away much too readily! Jesus says something hard, and he splits. He takes off. His "commitment" to do good wanes. He doesn't inquire, he doesn't seek clarification, he just ... leaves. Jesus asks him to do something difficult, and he says, "Goodbye." By the way, this is not a test that Christ gives to everyone. Having said that, though, let me add a caveat: We may not be asked to give up *everything* to follow Jesus. But you can be sure you may be asked to give up *something*. And if we have never given up *anything* out of love for and obedience to Jesus Christ, then we really need to examine the level and sincerity of our commitment.

On the cross, Jesus gave up everything, even His life, for each us. Will we be willing to trust Him with everything in return?

² I explained briefly during the sermon that this observation unique to Mark's Gospel is part of what has led to one tradition in the ancient church that believes this was autobiographical; that this young man WAS John Mark himself. If this tradition is true, it does hint that when he walked away, he didn't do so with finality. If it is John Mark, he's the one who also initially "walked away" ... actually, he ran away ... abandoning Paul and Barnabas when the going got tough on the first missionary journey in Acts. John Mark later reconsidered, was restored/reconciled with Paul, and among other things, penned the Gospel bearing his name.