

Bellaire Community United Methodist Church

January 22, 2017

“Camels Are Better Off Than You”

“Jesus Said That?!” part 3

Mark 10:17-31

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.

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.

There are a lot of important questions in life we need to answer. 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.

Now I think 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. And his lesson is ours, as well.

This passage starts with a great question. The man 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. But this young man understands that Jesus can help him. So, he asks.

Like any good teacher, Jesus answers a question with a question. “Why do you call me good? No one is good-except God alone.” (Mark 10:18) I believe Jesus does this to catch the man’s attention, to make sure he is really listening. I think you and I can agree, Jesus is good. But he is more than that. Jesus is saying, calling someone good is like calling someone God. Jesus is the Son of God, and in our understanding of the Trinity, Jesus is God. In other words, listen up! Jesus is talking with God’s authority here.

Then Jesus goes on with an answer that seems odd to me. Let me explain. 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 do. The only problem is, I don't believe those things actually lead to eternal life. God gave us the commandments to show us how sinful we are. We can't ever live up to them. I used to teach my youth groups that following the law is pure legalism: "Do this" and "Do that," which is just a bunch of do-do. I never preach that you can earn eternal life by doing something and not doing something else. I understand that Jesus freely offers us forgiveness and grace. When we accept that gift, then, out of gratitude, we can live our lives to honor him. But you can't earn your salvation.

Jesus is clearly testing this young man. The man replies that he has been perfectly obedient from his youth. (Mark 10:20) I really think this young man is being sincere, but he's either delusional, or he's lying. No one is perfect. Not him. Not you. Not me. I may not have killed anybody, but I've certainly hurt people in anger. And I've lusted. And I've been angry with my parents. So while I believe this young man is a nice guy, he must have some issues, because we all do. I think Jesus knows this, too.

The scripture says, "Jesus looked at him and loved him." (Mark 10:21) Jesus is filled with compassion. He knows what is coming next. It's going to be hard, but he 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 10:21b)

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

follow you!” But instead, the Bible says, this man’s face fell, and he walked away from Jesus. He could not bear to leave his great wealth behind. (Mark 10:22)

Now this is where the story takes a deeper, theological turn. Jesus goes on to teach that it is very, very, very hard for the rich to enter God’s kingdom. The disciples are shocked and dismayed. “Really? Jesus, you can open the eyes of the blind and command demons to come out of people, but you can’t make room for a rich man in God’s kingdom?” They were probably thinking, there goes our free lunch for tomorrow!

Jesus makes a strange statement that amazes his disciples. “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) They are shocked. 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. The only common animal that would overshadow a camel would be an elephant. ***(Aladdin clip)***

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

So why the need to explain away Jesus’ hard words? There are probably several reasons. For one thing, wealth is an obstacle to discipleship. And there are modern evangelists and preachers that do not want to draw attention to their own vast possessions, so they preach that humility and letting go of your burdens is what you really need to find eternal life. Well, I disagree. The Bible talks about rebirth, regeneration through the Holy Spirit. It’s God’s work, not our own, that saves us, whether we are wealthy or penniless. That’s the point.

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 and possessions are a blessing from God, a mark of heavenly favor. There are even scriptures that say this, like the book of Job for instance. But there is another, more dominant thought that wealth is dangerous. That the rich lord it over each other and use their power to abuse the downtrodden. When Jesus says that it is impossible for the wealthy to enter God’s kingdom, it is the complete opposite of dominant thought. Rich people are supposed to be able to do anything! No. Jesus is clear about that. This is your memory verse for today. Mark 10:27 – “With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.” By human means, you cannot save yourself. Whether or not you have money. But God can do anything.

Why do we get so hung up on this verse? I think this passage scares us. What if Jesus were to come to you and ask you to literally give up everything? What would you say? Would you do it, or walk away? Jesus is trying to make it

perfectly clear, to his disciples and to us. It is impossible to enter God's kingdom under our own power, will, or possessions. You cannot buy eternal life. You cannot earn it. You can only receive it as a free gift of God.

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."

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

It comes down to this: do you want to have eternal life? If the answer is yes, then you need to know the gospel, the whole story. 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 suffer and die on our behalf, carrying our sins to the cross. When Jesus rose from the grave three days later, he proved that he was the Son of God and that nothing could ever stop his love from reaching us. That leaves us with the simple choice. Accept that Jesus alone has paid the price for our sin and receive the gift of eternal life, or walk away from it all. Those who accept this free gift live the rest of their lives in the grace and love of Jesus, striving to become like him and telling others of the goodness of the grace that they have found. They receive their final reward in heaven. Those who walk away will one day face the judgment of the

Almighty God, and he will ask them, What did you do with my gift of life that I gave you?

I don't believe it is necessary to sell all that you have to become a Christian. But I am not surprised at all when people turn their entire life over to God, including all of their possessions. Jesus himself said we would receive back everything we gave up and more in this life and the next. He wasn't being literal. I don't need a hundred brothers. Two is enough. But the family of God are my brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers and daughters and sons and cousins and uncles and aunts and...you get the point. 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.

If there are possessions in your life that trip you up, 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. It's impossible for you to get to heaven on your own. But 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 slow you down, whether it's cars or camels or cash, and run to Jesus, and simply tell him, "Yes!"

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.bcumc@gmail.com

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?