

23 Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!"

24 The disciples were amazed at his words. But Jesus said again, "Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25 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."

26 The disciples were even more amazed, and said to each other, "Who then can be saved?"

27 Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."

28 Peter said to him, "We have left everything to follow you!"

29 "I tell you the truth," Jesus replied, "no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel 30 will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life.

31 But many who are first will be last, and the last first."

Remember last week when the bad news was that Jesus told the rich man that he had to sell all of his stuff in order to follow him and then we discovered that the issue wasn't the man's possessions, but rather was that the man's possessions possessed him such that they were a stumbling block to his following Jesus. We then talked about the many different things that are stumbling blocks to following Jesus but that Jesus loves us anyway and that even though there was just that little bit of good news I told you all to come back today, promising that there would be a lot of good news. BUT, in the meantime, I have done some studying on what I thought was going to be good news and in the process discovered that what I thought was going to be good news is actually more bad news such that what before last week would have just been bad news is now even worse news, because you've come expecting good news. And here's what the good news was going to be.

The good news was going to be about this camel through the eye of the needle thing. At some point I learned that Jesus wasn't actually referring to the eye of a literal needle but rather was talking about a gate called the Eye of the Needle that is located in the wall around the old city of Jerusalem. Now, according to whoever it was who taught me this, the Eye of the Needle gate was big enough for a camel to pass through IF all of the possessions that the camel was carrying were removed and just the camel inched its way through said gate. When Corey and I were in Jerusalem, I remember being shown this Eye of the Needle Gate—indeed I walked through it. Now, you can see how, if this theory was true—it would be good news. It would reveal that while the camel's possessions couldn't make it to the kingdom of God, the camel could, if it was stripped of all its possessions. Now this is an interpretation I can get behind. After all, who needs a 5 carat diamond ring in heaven if the streets are paved with gold, right? See how this was going to be good news. Last week, I thought today was going to be grand—as you enjoyed the freedom and relief that come from hearing this explanation. But alas, when I was searching for a picture of the Eye of the Needle Gate in Jerusalem to put on the bulletin cover, indeed a picture of the gate that I myself supposedly walked through, I began to have some problems. I couldn't find a picture of the Eye of the Needle Gate in Jerusalem. Instead what I found was website after website sponsored by reputable organizations and scholars that said that the whole theory is a bunch of bunk developed in the Middle Ages for the purposes of making wealthy patrons of the church feel better about themselves and justify their extravagant tendencies. So, do you see how news that was supposed to be good news is really bad news and indeed is even worse news since it had promised to be such good news?

So now the question is, what do we do with this bad news? If you're like me you try to find some other theory to explain it away. Because I don't know about you, but I REALLY don't want this to be true. I really don't want entering the Kingdom of God to be as hard for a wealthy person as it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle. But, according to the reputable scholars “. . . we are not meant to reason away the apparent difficulty of getting a camel through a needle's eye. For the difficulty is not apparent, *it is real*, and not to be solved by textual trickery but by taking the ludicrous language at face value . . . the ludicrous contrast between the small size of the needle's eye and the largest indigenous animal (in Israel) is to be preserved for its very improbability.”¹ Shoot. I quite enjoy an engaging game of textual trickery. Now, in case you're thinking, as I

¹ www.biblicalhebrew.com/nt/camelneedle.htm

was at this point, that this is just these peoples' interpretation just like the Eye of the Needle being a gate in the Jerusalem was some other peoples' theory—so who's to say that one is right and the other is wrong . . . listen to this. The saying that something is “as impossible as a camel going through the eye of a needle” was common in Israel during Jesus' time. A similar saying was popular in India, except that in India, something was said to be as impossible as an *elephant* passing through the eye of a needle. It seems that whatever the biggest indigenous animal of the area was, that became part of this saying. And, if we think about our modern context, we realize that we don't say that something is as impossible as an eight point buck passing through the eye of a needle but we do say something nearly as outrageous when we declare that something has a “a snowball's chance in hell” of happening. Basically, whether it be an elephant or a camel passing through the eye of a needle or a snowball surviving the fires of hell, we're talking about something that is impossible.

And if we're flummoxed and disturbed by Jesus saying that “it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God”, imagine his first hearers. At that time, it was a generally accepted principle that wealth was a sign of God's blessing. If God thought you were good, God gave you wealth. And so, if Jesus is saying that wealthy folks, who are supposedly the best folks around, if even THEY can't get into heaven just as a camel can't get through the eye of a needle, well geez, as the disciples asked, “Who then can be saved?” We might compare it to Jesus saying to us, “it is easier for a snowball to remain frozen in hell than it is for Mother Teresa to enter the kingdom of heaven” to which we would then reply in exasperation, “Who then can be saved?” It would seem to be impossible.

Which is exactly the point. It is impossible. It is impossible for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God and it is impossible for Mother Teresa to enter the Kingdom of God and it is impossible for you and for me to enter the Kingdom of God, or to do much else that is good and pure and Jesus-like—impossible, indeed, if it were left up to us. And here's why the “eye of a needle is a gate in Jerusalem” is so attractive. Because if that theory was true, it would mean that all we would need do is be willing to part with our possessions in order to follow Jesus. It would mean it is in our control. That would mean that if only we decided to pledge a little more, or volunteer a little more, or give up the alcohol, or stop the drugs, or cease and desist with whatever stumbling block it is that is keeping us from being free to follow Jesus, if only we would give those things up, we'd be golden. All set. Ready to go. Kingdom of God, here we come. But anyone who is possessed by their possessions or is an addict, or can't control the spending, or can't let go of control or can't cease and desist with whatever it is no matter how hard they try, indeed, anyone of us who is truly honest with ourselves about the stumbling blocks that stand between us and Jesus, any one of us knows that when it comes right down to it—we DON'T have control. When we're honest with ourselves we know that it is impossible for us to stop or start or whatever it is we need to do to follow Jesus.

This is exactly the point Jesus is making when he says, “With people this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God.” ALL things are possible with God. All things. It's possible for a rich person to leave possessions behind, with God's help. It's possible for an alcoholic or an addict to be clean, with God's help. It's possible for the control freak to let go, with God's help. And, it's possible for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle and an elephant to pass through the eye of a needle and an eight point buck to pass through the eye of a needle—shoot it's possible for all three to pass through the same needle eye at the same time, with God's help. It's ALL possible with God. It's all impossible with people alone, but it's ALL possible with God. All of it—you, me, this church, our vision statement, a master's thesis, finding a job, selling a house, getting better, loving our enemies, saying “no”, saying “yes”, losing the weight, paying it off, loving again, making the grade, finding a friend, restoring trust, entering the Kingdom of God—all of it is possible with God.

And THAT is the good news. Indeed, it's even better news than it would have been when it was going to be just good news that turned to bad news that then turned to worse news but has now, in reality, turned into the BEST news. The Good News, the BEST news, is that all things are possible with God. We don't know how. We don't know why. But Jesus tells us to trust, to trust God, to trust our God with whom all things are possible. All things are possible. Thanks be to God.