

# Squeezing through the Needle's Eye

Thomas Robinson, *Wide-Eyed – Listening to Jesus 3*, January 25, 2015

## **Matthew 19:16-30** (ESV Adapted)

<sup>16</sup> And behold, a man came up to him, saying, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to have life of the age to come (*aionios*, eternal)?”

<sup>17</sup> And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you want to enter into that life, keep the commandments.”

<sup>18</sup> He said to him, “Which ones?”

And Jesus said, “You shall not murder, You shall not commit adultery, You shall not steal, You shall not bear false witness, <sup>19</sup> Honor your father and mother [Exod 20:12-16], and, You shall love your neighbor as yourself [Lev 19:18].”

<sup>20</sup> The young man said to him, “All these I have guarded. What do I still lack?”

<sup>21</sup> Jesus said to him, “If you want to be perfect (*teleios*), go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.” <sup>22</sup> When the young man heard this he went away grieving, for he had great possessions.

<sup>23</sup> And Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>24</sup> Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”

<sup>25</sup> When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, “Who then can be saved?”

<sup>26</sup> But Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

<sup>27</sup> Then Peter said in reply, “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will there be for us?”

<sup>28</sup> Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, in the renewed world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne [Dan 7:13-14], you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. <sup>29</sup> And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name's sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit life of the age to come (*aionios*, eternal). <sup>30</sup> But many who are first will be last, and the last first.”

---

## **Matthew 6:19-21, 24 Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount**

<sup>19</sup> “Do not treasure up treasures for yourselves on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal, <sup>20</sup> but treasure up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. <sup>21</sup> For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ...

<sup>24</sup> No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and Mammon.

## **Matthew 16:24-26 Jesus' teaching about discipleship**

<sup>24</sup> Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. <sup>25</sup> For whoever would save his life (*psyche*) will lose it, but whoever loses his life (*psyche*) for my sake will find it. <sup>26</sup> For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul (*psyche*)? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul (*psyche*)?”

## **Matthew 5:48 Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount**

<sup>48</sup> [Jesus said] “You, therefore, shall be perfect (*teleios*) as your heavenly father is perfect.”

## What Just Went Wrong?

We are looking at a section of Mt in which people listen to Jesus' teaching and are agog, wide-eyed, at what he says. This is one of the most striking because of the incident and the famous image that Jesus creates. A man comes to Jesus, a young man, devout and honorable, wealthy. He seeks Jesus' instruction. He goes away grieving. What happened? He seems aware that things have gone well for him in life. He is concerned about *'life of the age to come' (aionios)*. Jesus is 'Teacher' to give instruction about what to do to have that life. We can hear a sense of confidence, expectation. Jesus probes, reminding him indirectly about God, unmentioned in his request. Jesus takes the assigned role and gives a traditional answer: commandments, the ten, expanded with love of neighbor. He has guarded them all. What do I lack? Perhaps, nothing! You're good! We easily imagine he had often been praised for such faithfulness in a wealthy youth. There were so many rich people who disdained the law, extorted, and robbed the poor. A rising leader in Israel. But Jesus answers his question on his terms – something to do. Do you wish to be complete (*teleios*, fill your lack)? *Go. Sell your possessions. Give to the poor. You'll have treasures in heaven. Come. Follow me!* Jesus doesn't analyze and discuss his problem first. He acts as though the man understands his problem on a deep level that he has covered over with rationalizations. Your lack? It's what you have! Your possessions. Get rid of them. Jesus lets him walk away. Still astonishing. Can I approve? Would I have walked away?

## Can a Camel go through a Needle's Eye?

But Jesus just increases the intensity: "only with difficulty" ... "a camel through the eye of a needle" ... "this is impossible!" The disciples are astonished. They and we thought we could tell the difference between a blessing and a curse. We pray for things to go well, not for us and our families to be impoverished! What's going on? We want to duck and weave. Jesus is breaking our sense that we've got things under control. We possess our possessions! No, they possess us. I can see it in those wealthy people. But I'm one of them. Who can be saved? Jesus won't let us duck. No camel can get through a needle's eye. No rich person can do the good thing to have life. But also no tax collector, no woman with five previous marriages, no Pharisee, no fisherman, no zealot, no scholar, no toll-taker, no doctor. But there's a reason that Jesus emphasizes the problem of possessions. Something that is the common language of our world for success, "blessing," accomplishment, high standing, is also the most dangerous counterfeit god, the ruler of violence and power, corruption, lies.

## God of the Impossible

Can we with possessions enter the "kingdom of God"? The problem of the Kingdom of God is God. We understand and thrive in the kingdom of mammon. We don't always succeed, but we know where we are, we know when we're ahead, we learn its promises, payoffs. We know what "good" thing we need to do to have something. Greed clarifies things. But with God, with Jesus, there's not a good thing I can do. The scale is entirely different. God doesn't want my stuff, or even my good deed, he wants me. Mammon is external and doesn't last an instant beyond death. Dealing with God challenges me to see my life on the scale of God's life. God already owns me, past, present, future. He alone has power to truly destroy me. He is also astonishingly loving. I can't fool him or impress him. He simply wants you/me. He wants us whole, freely, lovingly given. In turn he will give you you. Filled with his eternal life, healed, forgiven, filled with joy, beloved forever.