

“What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Jesus, looking at him, loved the young man and said, ‘You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.’ When he heard this, the young man was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, ‘How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!’ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, ‘Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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.’ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, ‘Then who can be saved?’ Jesus looked at them and said, ‘For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.’

I love this passage. There is so much in this passage. But let’s start with the camel and the Eye of the Needle. When some people talk about this passage, they talk about how hard it would be to squash a large mammal into a pinhead. It’s quite a picture, I must admit.

But here’s another bit of helpful information—many of you may know—to help us make sense of this passage: during Jesus’ day there was a rather famous gate in the Middle East, and it was known as the Eye of the Needle. The gate was nicknamed The Eye of the Needle because it was a very small gate. “How small was it?” you ask? It was SO small, that, in order for visitors to enter this gate, they would have to totally unpack their camel—which was the standard beast of burden in those days-- and then they would have to make the camel get down on its knees in order to fit through the gate. It was quite a process. I mean, would YOU want to try and get a camel down on its knees? It’s difficult. Not impossible, but very difficult.

Jesus gives this example to his listeners to describe how difficult it is for some to enter the kingdom of heaven.

For those of us who don't have lots of money, it's sometimes tempting to think that we've gotten off safely, that somehow—in the faith department at least—we're better off than our wealthy neighbors. I'm sorry to burst that bubble, but that's probably not right, either.

Jesus was talking to a wealthy man, so he was using examples that the man could understand. What Jesus was telling this young man was that even when we think we're following the commandments, even when we love our neighbors, if we're really honest with ourselves—there is usually something in our lives that we're not willing to part with, something that we'd rather not give up even if Jesus asked us to.

For that young man—it was the security of his life. Could he really give it all up, and be one of the common people? Could he ever really think of himself as less than a pillar of society? Could he bear to let people think he was insolvent, could he stand it to have to take charity from people, rather than being the distributor of charity?

Think about it. If he gave it all up—he would have to accept hospitality from strangers, he would have to listen instead of be listened to. He would have to think of the poor as his equals.

He walked away from Jesus, grieved. And he wasn't grieved because he would have to sell his things—no—he was grieved because he knew *he couldn't do what Jesus asked*. He had seen himself as less than righteous, and it hurt. This young man knew that there were things in his life that he couldn't give up in order to follow Christ.

If we came up to Jesus today and asked him the same question, I think Jesus' answer would be different for each person who asked him the question. So here's the question for us to ask ourselves: "What is there in our lives that we would be unwilling to give up if Jesus asked us to?" Think about it.

The answer would be different for each of us.

Could I give up my new Subaru if Jesus for whatever reason asked me to? My home? Could I let go of my collection of Star Trek DVD's—every season? Or my voice? My prestige? My job? My pet peeves?

What possesses each of us more than we possess it?

The answer is between each of us, and God. And I'm sure this makes all of us uneasy: I know it makes ME uneasy, knowing that there is undoubtedly something I wouldn't want to give up. Jesus understands this. He says, "With mortals it is impossible, but with God, anything is possible.

That young man in the Gospel really wanted to know Christ. He really did. Jesus opened the gateway to the kingdom and asked the young man to follow him. The young man was tempted—**that** life beckoned to him—but somehow he couldn't give up the world he knew, for the new life he didn't know.

He couldn't quite separate himself from what had previously given him stability, happiness and status—for something new, untamed, and undoubtedly less secure. So he chose the known over the unknown.

And so it is with you and I. We are secure with what we know and have. Sometimes too secure. God knows this.

God understands this, but he also gives us opportunities and the courage to step through that gateway into the kingdom of God—right here, right now—*with Christ*, even though that gateway can seem very small from this side.

SO small, in fact, that we sometimes have to unload ourselves of our possessions—so that we are free to crawl through the narrow gateway.

We can follow Jesus through that gate only if we are willing to leave those things that weigh us down behind, so that we are free to follow wherever he leads us.

What do we have to do to inherit eternal life? Give up what possesses us. Give up what means more to us than following Jesus.

That's the challenge to us. And that's the adventure. Amen.