



“What Must I Do?”

a sermon by

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Our message this afternoon comes to us from the gospel of Matthew 19:16-30. It illustrates beautifully the struggle of the early community to understand Jesus and his message, and tends to hit home as we see that the struggle really, in many ways, is every bit as present today. There are few texts that evoke such an uncomfortable reaction as this one so, since Lent is about going into those often uncomfortable spaces in our lives and our faith, it is perhaps appropriate to take up today. People have been flocking to Jesus for his healing and his teaching, and now a wealthy young man approaches him.

“Then someone came to him and said, “Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?” And he said to him, “Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good. If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments.” 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; Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” The young man said to him, “I have kept all these; what do I still lack?” Jesus said to him, “If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When the young man heard this word, he went away grieving, for he had many possessions.” Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, 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.” When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astounded and said, “Then who can be saved?” But Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but for God all things are possible.” Then Peter said in reply, “Look, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” Jesus said to them, “Truly I tell you, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man is seated on the throne of his glory, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold, and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

It is a little sad and somewhat amusing to see how quick we are to discount this text. Talk about stirring things up. I remember first reading this text as an adult. My reaction was to gloss over it as quickly as possible. After all, I know what Jesus is calling for here, and I know how I’m *not* going to respond, so why not just whisper a prayer for forgiveness, hope for the best, and move on with it? It is amazing to see that even the prospect of being shut out of the kingdom seems more bearable than what Jesus is asking for here. For decades the faithful have been trying to reconcile their lifestyles with this stinging word from our Lord. Some more recent Biblical translations have taken the Greek word for camel, which is *kamelos* in the Greek, and speculated that there must have been an error in the original manuscripts, perhaps, they conjecture, the word was actually *kamilos*, which is the word for rope. This would change things a little- surely passing a rope through the eye of a needle would be a very, very difficult task to be sure- but at least, in some way, it could be possible. It seems that we’re always trying to bend translations to suit our purposes. The joke is told of a monk who desired to go to the earliest documents of the church and copy them as a spiritual exercise. He went deep into the archives and translated for a time before he came out with tears streaming down his face. ‘What’s wrong?’ a young monk asked. ‘Oh! He said, it’s horrible...the word is celebrate!’ Unfortunately, we can’t chalk this one up to scribal error. Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, it will be hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven...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.”

But we in modern times haven't been the only ones to struggle with this word. Between the time of the dejected young bourgeois and us today stands a legend that developed in the medieval church that claimed that there was actually a very small gate in the wall of Jerusalem that was named, 'The Eye of the Needle.' It was said that it was so small that a camel couldn't pass through it unless it was completely stripped of its cargo and led through the passage crawling on its knees. So it would, again, be very, very difficult. And just barely but definitely possible. I almost titled this sermon 'Skinny Camels' in honor of this one. I remember hearing this proposal passionately argued by a classmate of mine in a religion course in college. We'll do almost anything to keep from engaging the hard word that Jesus delivers. But there is no little gate. The word is camel. And the rest are merely platitudes. It is shocking to be sure- even the disciples thought so. But the truth of the matter is that Jesus was going for shock value. He wants to be very clear on this point, though he is obviously sympathetic to this young man who seems to be searching for something more. "Teacher, what good deed must I do to have eternal life?" The young man asks. He is a likable guy. A familiar one. A young adult who is making his way in the world. Doing all right for himself and living an industrious, good and upright life. Successful and looking for more tasks to achieve to attain the one thing he perhaps desires most but instead of rejoicing he goes away grieving. For Christ has suggested too much. He has to first let go of his stuff before his hands can be empty enough to grasp the kingdom of God.

"If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me." Jesus says. The word 'perfect' does not mean 'sinless' here, as it would seem. It means 'undivided.' It is not so much that possessions are a crime. It is that they are a distraction. Grace may be free but it certainly isn't cheap. It requires letting go and embracing the fact that the Christian life is not about what we can achieve, earn, or possess, but that it is always and only about seeking after the Lord. And it so happens that wealth and all the other things like status, possessions, favor, and power that we seek to attain, manage, increase, direct, or multiply tend so often to divide us within ourselves instead of free us up to follow a life of wholeness in God. And Christ knows well that those very things we seek out to justify ourselves before others are, in a subconscious and insidious way, the same things that we utilize to try and justify ourselves before God. It is like the king who was stricken with leprosy who is told by the prophet to go and bathe in the river to be healed. Instead of rejoicing, he is angry and insulted that he was not given a more difficult task by which he could prove himself or earn his wellness. But it was not his work to accomplish. It was the Lord's.

It is hard to hear that the one thing we wish to accomplish for ourselves, eternal life, blessedness in the kingdom, requires giving up everything and following him because we probably won't be selling all of our possessions any time soon. It cannot help but call us to humility and perhaps even a little shame to hear from Christ's own mouth that, for us mortals, entering the kingdom of God will be hard- it is easier, in fact, for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, though those who attain 'perfection' by Christ's standards would be first in the kingdom of heaven like the disciples ruling over the tribes of Israel. And though I hear what Jesus is saying here, that this is truly impossible, immediately my mind begins to turn over to see how I could perhaps scale back. Trim the fat in my own life, clean out my closets this weekend to give some old clothes away, perhaps up my tithe, or maybe really show Jesus how faithful I can be - abandon my husband and my family, move to Calcutta or the hills of Appalachia and join Mother Theresa's Sisters of Mercy. Anything, I think to try to justify myself before Jesus. To show him how I am truly worthy of his love and able to rise to his call- I could go after that heavenly kingdom and be first among them. Maybe ruling over the people of Charlotte if not one of the tribes of Israel.

But I'm not going to. Most likely neither are you. And the good news of this text is- that we don't have to.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that we are dismissed of our responsibility to the poor or that faith without works isn't dead for it surely is. Jesus is not telling us that we aren't responsible for our neighbor- quite the contrary actually. But the good news is that there is more to the story of salvation than what we can accomplish. Giving away all your possessions won't even earn you the kingdom- only the grace of God will. But do you see what a powerful force of orientation toward achievement and success it is that we are driven by? Strong enough to turn even, what can be a joyful response of renunciation of self that some are surely and blessedly called to, into another task to accomplish, a self-depreciating competition that we will never win. Something to prove and justify ourselves to ourselves, our pastors, our colleagues, and our Lord. But when we seek to justify ourselves, even when we know the task is an impossible one, we turn our back on grace. And say we would still rather prove it to you, God, than accept the grim fact that this one task we will inevitably fail- and only because of your love is that ok.

As the young man turns away in grief, for he had many possessions, the disciples are perplexed. "Then who can be saved?" they asked. "But Jesus looked at them and said, "For mortals it is impossible. But for God all things are possible." Do not misunderstand me. It is not that I'm saying that we should just throw in the towel on this task of discipleship. Jesus still sets before us what will bring us a truly undivided life that leads to a great bounty in spiritual return and blessing to all in the kingdom. If you are feeling called to sell all that you have to give it to the poor- or perhaps even to surrender just a little more than is comfortable, or are being called upon to examine all your ways to see in what ways you might give a little more and a little more over to God each and every day, which I certainly hope that we all are, than thanks be to God. Christ doesn't give us this word to discourage us or to lead us to despair. He tells us so that we can be real about who we are, what we are called to be, and why it is that we are saved anyway- not because of what we do. But because of who God is. So that we can be reminded that there is not a thing in this world that we can rely upon for salvation except for him.

For the Lenten road we now travel is not just a season of self-examination for its own sake- but self examination that we might understand how truly unworthy we are of God's grace. So that we would be astounded and overjoyed on Easter morning and always that it is Jesus- *Jesus*- who gives it to us anyway. We are called to live out our lives not in satisfaction with what we can do for ourselves in the eyes of the kingdom. But in joyful, self-giving response that though we were yet sinners Christ died for us that we might have eternal life still. And have it in abundance. Thanks be to God. Amen.