

Title: The Eye of a Needle
Text: Luke 18.18-30
Theme: Saving faith or the only faith that saves
Series: Luke
Prop Stmtnt: The problem with money is that we are so enticed to trust in it.

Read Text:

In Acts 3, Peter and John see a lame man begging at a gate of the Temple. Peter said to the man. I don't have silver or gold but I will give you what I do have. Then Peter said, "In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, rise up and walk!" And the lame man was made whole. About 1,200 years later, Pope Innocent III was showing Thomas Aquinas the wealth and treasures of the Vatican and he said to Thomas that no longer can the church say, "I don't have silver or gold." To which Aquinas responded, "neither can she say, "rise up and walk." His point was that the accumulation of worldly wealth has been at the cost of spiritual power. I don't know if that really happened. It sounds like it could have, but it is very true that Christianity has had a confusing relationship with money. Follow the logic.

- 1) In Matthew 16, Peter was given the keys of the kingdom. That means he has the authority to admit or lock out anyone to the kingdom.
- 2) Peter passed on the keys to the whoever took his place as the leader of the church, who eventually was thought to be the bishop of Rome.
- 3) The bishop of Rome became known as the papa, father, the Pope who possessed the keys. The church (the hierarchy) therefore was given the authority to grant eternal life to whomever they determined were worthy of it. Wow, talk about ultimate leverage over a person, a king, a kingdom, etc! Therefore,
- 4) If a wealthy king or baron, landowner, etc would give money to the church, he would be promised eternal life. This "promise" resulted in churches and chapels being built all over Europe by wealthy people in order to buy their eternal life, or to be places where their names would be mentioned in masses in perpetuity in order to help them atone for their sins.
- 5) When St. Peter's Basilica was being constructed, the Pope used this "power of the keys" for quite the fundraising program. He created indulgences that were for sale. If you bought one, he declared (because he had the keys) that no matter what sins you had committed, this indulgence would atone for that, and when you died you would skip purgatory and go straight to heaven. So yes, eternal life was for sale for money.

This egregious distortion and functional denial of the gospel helped pour gasoline on the flicker of protests against the abuses of the Roman Church which became an inferno known as the Protestant Reformation. But protestant Christianity, in the States, in South America and in Africa has been seriously warped by another gospel of money, called the prosperity gospel.

The Roman Church taught that wealth can be used to purchase eternal life. The prosperity gospel teaches that wealth is the evidence that you have eternal life (favor from God). In the

Roman Church, money is a means to get salvation. In the prosperity gospel, salvation is the means to get money. In the Roman Church the message is: money will corrupt you, so give it to us to save your soul. In the Prosperity Gospel, the message is: money will bless you, so give it to us so you will get blessed. Many of you have these and other influences that you bring to conversation. My task is help you understand what Jesus is saying, by not adding to the text, nor taking anything away from it. And then to help you evaluate your thinking in view of what Jesus is saying.

What has been the focus of Jesus' teaching as he gets closer to Jerusalem? He keeps talking about what it means to be a follower of Christ and how you become one. He uses different settings and stories to say the same thing. Which is this: Salvation is not based on what you do, but on who you trust. And you must trust in Christ alone. The strong person cannot work for it, and the rich person cannot pay for it. If you trust in your strength, your wealth, even your morality (like the older brother in Luke 15, you will never receive grace and if you don't receive grace your sins will never be forgiven. Do you see those contrasts? The prodigal vs. the older brother (15), the rich man and Lazarus (16), the leper vs. the other 9 (17), the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (18), and now, the little children and the rich ruler, followed by a blind beggar and Zacchaeus. Salvation, eternal life, belonging to the kingdom of God are all different terms that describe what it means to be a genuine Christian, or follower of Christ. Why are there so many stories about this? Because it is so hard for people to understand this, including some of you. Now Luke tells us the story of an encounter that Jesus had with a ruler. And you know what? This man is asking a good question about eternal life and he is asking the right person too.

1. The Damning Blindness of Self-righteousness. (18-23)

If you are going to investigate anything in this life, you need to investigate this issue. There will come a time when nothing else in your life will matter than you knowing the truth about eternal life and whether or not you are in a right place with God. For some of you, this question weighs on you, almost hauntingly so. That is a good thing, because that means that you still have a conscience about this. This man was either unsettled about this, or perhaps he just wanted some reassurance that he was good enough. But while he is asking about an important issue (eternal life) he is asking about it with a wrong assumption. The assumption is that there is something that I need to do in order to inherit eternal life. There is some good deed, or achievement to accomplish, or donation to make, or penance to earn forgiveness or favor. Oh beloved, the answer to the question of eternal life is never in the 1st person. What do I do to get eternal life. No, the answer is in the 3rd person. The answer is in what Christ has done in my place. However, I will never grasp my desperate need of Christ until I embrace the true condition of my heart. So, this man was asking about the right issue but in the wrong way.

It had to take some measure of humility to approach Christ and talk to him. Note his question: *"Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"* Before Jesus addresses the question, Jesus addresses the way this man addressed him. *"Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone."* Is Jesus saying, "hey, you do realize that you just called me God, right, because only God is good?" I don't think that's his point, even though it is true that Jesus is

God. Here is a man who, like the Pharisee in v.9, is full of himself. He is trusting in himself and Jesus is simply directing his attention to God. No one is good except God alone. This man needs to face this. Only God is good. Therefore, no matter what he has done, he is not good enough. However, he thinks he is. His self-righteousness is blinding him to his need and unless he will face the truth about his need he will never trust Christ and this will damn him.

But that is so difficult for us to face about ourselves. So, Jesus takes this man back to the law and tells him, *"You know the commandments."* The 10 commandments are a summary of the law of God that was designed to expose our need for forgiveness.

How many of you have heard about Wilhelm Conrad Rontgen? Rontgen was a German physicist working at the University of Wurzburg, Germany. He was messing around with cathode rays in a vacuum tube one day (actually November 8, 1895) when he discovered that barium platinocyanide screens in his lab began to fluoresce. He discovered a new type of radiation that could pass through solid objects. So, he went and got his wife and tried it out on her hand, which produced the first X-ray image, marking the beginning of medical imaging. As you know, the discovery of X-ray technology was a wonderful thing. Imagine that your town is the first town in the state to get an X-ray machine and this is a big deal. Now imagine that you get some x-rays and they reveal that you have a broken bone, arthritis, bone cancer, pneumonia, tuberculosis, emphysema, fluid around your lungs, kidney stones, gallstones and intestinal blockages. In other words, you are a colossal mess and you need to get serious about getting medical attention, now! Instead, however, you go about bragging about the fact that your town, and your doctor is the only town in the state to have an x-ray machine. Therefore, you and your town must be inherently better than all others. We would say, you missed the point!

Jesus tells this guy to go the commandments which expose, like an x-ray machine what Jesus already said, that no one is good except God alone. The 10 commandments cover two categories; loving God and loving others. If you truly love God, you will love others. This man assumes that he loves God, so Jesus takes him to the commandments that are designed to reveal whether or not someone really loves God. If you love God, you will love others, which means that you will not commit adultery, murder, steal, lie or fail to honor your parents. No one does these perfectly. No one but Jesus has ever done these perfectly and yet, what does this man say? *"All of these I have kept from my youth."*

Look, if that's all it takes, then I'm good. But he's not. In fact, we could point out that he just lied. He just bore false witness. So now Jesus goes right to the heart of his problem. He is trusting in himself. He is trusting in who he is, what he has, what he has done or what he hasn't done and believes that his goodness is good enough and that his goodness makes him good enough for God. So, Jesus says, *"One thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me."* Now, hold the phone for a second. What did this man call Jesus? He called him, "good Teacher." Now we are about to find out if this man really believed if Jesus was good, then at the very least, Jesus is from God and his message is from God. Does he really believe that Jesus is a good teacher from God, because if he believes that Jesus is a good teacher, then he is going to do exactly what Jesus tells him. So,

Jesus tells him to sell everything that he has, distribute it to the poor and come follow him. And he wouldn't do it. He was sad. He was torn. He was conflicted. But in that moment, he was not willing to do it. Why did Jesus say that? He was showing this man that he really wasn't good after all. He loved his money more than others and in fact, he loved his money more than God. Therefore, he would not inherit eternal life.

Don't you just love Jesus? He is not impressed with the fact that this man was young, rich and in an influential position. Jesus loves this man, not his riches. That is so refreshing and is exactly what this man needs. He needs someone to love him, not what he has. We all need that, but we are all tempted to try to buy love with what we have, or how we look, and we are tempted to think that those things impress God as well. Jesus loves this man enough to tell him the truth, even though this man rejects it.

I wonder if this guy came into our churches today asking this same question, if people would love him enough to have the courage to tell him the truth. We'd probably want to put him on a board or put his name on a plaque, you know do something to give him acclaim so he would be flattered and give money. Isn't that how the system works? Flatter people, tell them what they want to hear and then get them to give to your cause? Promise them titles, honor or ETERNAL LIFE, so they will give money, all of which reveals that those who play that game do not really believe the gospel. I'm guessing that Judas Iscariot was not the only disciple who hoped for a little bump in their standard of living and probably saw this guy coming to Jesus, thinking, "well, here's some potential. Boys, we may be getting more than ramen noodles tonight!" Jesus doesn't need our money; he demands our complete faith. But when you have much that this world is impressed with, you are so tempted to be impressed too, which is why becoming a follower of Christ is so difficult for those with means.

V. 23 is sad. This man is sad, and we find out from Mark's account of this that Jesus loved this guy. To see him walk away because he wasn't willing to admit his need was hard. That is the massive weight of self-sufficiency.

2. The Damning Deception of Self-Sufficiency (24-25)

At this point, Jesus addresses his disciples and says, "*How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God! For 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.*" The question we ask when we read this account, especially if we read it all by itself is this: Do I have to sell everything I have and give it to the poor in order to be a follower of Christ? It is what Jesus said to this guy, isn't it? And when the guy heard these things, he was very sad, he walked away, and Jesus did not run after him and tell him that he didn't mean it literally. He really said that. So, is that what everyone has to do? I do not want to water down what Jesus says, but neither should we miss what is going on. This entire section of Luke's gospel has been focused on what does it mean and not mean to follow Christ, or to inherit eternal life (same thing). Back in chapter 10, a lawyer asked Jesus the exact same question. What did Jesus say? Jesus said the same then as he did here. He took the man back to the law in order to expose the fact that the

lawyer then, like this ruler here was asking about the right issue in the wrong way. Did Jesus tell him that he had to sell everything and give to the poor? No. Instead, Jesus put his finger on the issue that this man needed to face. That man claimed to love God and love his neighbor, so Jesus told him the story about the Good Samaritan in order to help this guy face the fact that he really didn't love his neighbor like he thought. He was not good like he thought he was good. The law did not justify him, the law revealed his need, just like this guy here. For the lawyer in chapter 10, for this rich ruler in chapter 18, for the prodigal son in chapter 15, the rich man in chapter 16, the Pharisee back in v.9, the issue is the same. You have to acknowledge your complete need of Christ. You have to see the weight of your sin, so you can trust the weight of his grace. You have to admit spiritual bankruptcy, which is so difficult for a person with means to do. If you are privileged (and we need to know that compared to the 1st century world, we are privileged). Most of you have enough food in your home or apartment that you are not wondering if you are going to eat tomorrow.

If you get behind on your payments and your creditors are threatening to overwhelm you with fees and penalties and you just can't get a handle on things, you can declare bankruptcy. Chapter 13 bankruptcy is known as the "wage earner's plan." This is the one where you get somewhere between 3-5 years to get your act together and pay your creditors. This generally holds off foreclosure. Chapter 7 bankruptcy is liquidation. It is giving up and turning everything over to a trustee who will sell off whatever you have and pay your creditors. You have nothing left. This is what Jesus is saying. In order to follow him, you have to declare spiritual chapter 7 bankruptcy. Meaning, you have nothing that you are claiming as merit or worth that makes you deserving of God's grace.

When all you have is Christ, then you will realize that Christ is all you need. But when you have all sorts of other things, then you are tempted to trust in those things, particularly money. Jesus is saying that those with means are tempted to trust in their means. Those with education, personal status and privilege are tempted to trust in their education, personal status and privilege. It is so difficult for those with means to trust in Christ because we are so easily deceived by the promises of wealth. But they cannot save us. They cannot justify us.

3. **What about us?** (26-30)

The prevailing view of the disciples and their setting was that wealth was a sign of God's favor. Which is why Jesus said it was so hard for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. It would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. Some of have thought that perhaps there was a small city gate known as the eye of a needle that was impossible for a camel to go through, unless it got on its knees. If that was true, then the response of the disciples doesn't make sense, nor the response of Christ. Jesus is using hyperbole. Camels don't fit through the eye of a needle. The door into the kingdom of God is wide open for the humble and repentant who trust in Christ. But, if you try to bring in your merit, your status, your wealth, your spiritual resume, then it's like the door shrinks to a pin hole and you can't fit.

A rich person already assumed he had the favor of God, why would he need to repent of his sin and trust in Christ? So now the disciples are wondering, if it was almost impossible for a person who had the favor of God to enter the kingdom, then what hope was there for us? The question is, "Can anyone be saved?" Jesus said in v.27, "what is impossible with men..." meaning, it is impossible for anyone to save himself. That means, rich, poor, slave, free – anyone. But it is possible with God, and in fact is only possible with God. Salvation belongs to God.

Peter, on behalf of the disciples is looking for a bit of reassurance and Jesus gives it. These disciples have done what the ruler did not. They followed him, above everything and everyone else. That is what it means to be a follower of Christ. He is worth everything, now and forever.