

Title: The Eye of a Needle

Text: Mark 10.17-31

Theme: Wealth vs. Money

Series: Christ said that?!

Prop Stmt. It is so difficult for rich people to go to heaven because they are far too easily convinced that they already have what they need.

Read Text:

Bernard Madoff is an easy target to shoot at. In the first place, I don't know him. He lives a long way away from here, his world is very, very different than mine and he (until recently) was obscenely wealthy. He used his wealth and friendships to hurt many people. He knew that he was operating a massive Ponzi scheme, he knew that it was going to come crashing down. He knew that it would wipe out billions of dollars in assets, and yet, like an addict on crack, he didn't stop his game. He continued to build relationships, acquire trust, take in money on false pretenses and pay-off previous investors. For years and years, while the stock market went up and went down, his fund consistently paid for some 12% and for others 15-22% returns. He became a legend. How could he do it? Well, that was the problem. One investor whose life savings was wiped out said, that he knew better, but didn't want to know. Bernie operated with an air of invincibility. The SEC (Securities and Exchange Commission) charged with oversight and investing suspicious activities was warned on five separate occasions that Bernie was operating a Ponzi scheme. But Bernie's niece had married an SEC boy. And as recently as 2007, Bernie publicly complimented the SEC on what a great job they were doing.

He did not look like a snake oil salesman. He was a respected, revered, some what mysterious man whose fabulous wealth and powerful base of clients insulated him from the type of scrutiny that he should have received. And therein lies the problem. People who are rich have a tendency to believe that they live according to different rules. But can you blame them? Rich people are treated differently. People who are not rich usually want to be rich because they also usually believe that those who are rich live according to different rules. Experience and history reveals that rich people or powerful people usually operate under different rules than others. For those who are rich, it is easy to conclude – that's the way it ought to be. When you are rich you are treated differently. Your world responds to you differently. And what is happening? Your world is telling you what your heart desperately wants to believe, and that is, that you really are different. You really are worthy of this attention. You really are superior to the others. For those who aren't, it is easy to fantasize about what it would be like to live that way. Why?

- Rich people have what we think we want (and need) and they are what we wish we were.

Did you notice how the disciples reacted to what Christ said in v. 23 and then in v. 24? Wealth and privilege not only went hand in hand, but Jerusalem, and therefore the politics of Israel, was heavily influenced by key wealthy families. The position of chief priest had become a political position of power. The disciples' reaction made it clear that

if wealthy people found it next to impossible to enter the kingdom of God, then no one stood a chance. What do rich people have that we think we want or need? They have influence. They have connections. They have respect. They have opportunities. They have comforts. They have friends. But think about it, why do we think we want and need those things? What is attractive about having influence and connections? It means we have power. What is attractive about having people respect us and wanting to be like us? It means that we are worshipped. What is attractive about having comforts and having the ability to buy whatever we want? It means that we have no needs. Power, worship and totally sufficient are attributes that only God is worthy of. But, that is why we are so attracted to wealth. It is our tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is viewed as our means to not only, not needing God, but being our own God.

But that is why wealth is usually a curse. Wealth is often nothing more than a band-aid that temporarily covers the real need. Wealth protects me from having to fully rely upon God. And yet, even though wealthy people are usually treated differently and often see themselves as being different, before God, wealthy people are no different than any one else. The problem is; wealth and power makes it almost impossible for us to believe that.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all record this story, and each of them place this story right after he blesses the children and uses them as an example of what kind of spirit you have to have in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. Notice verse 15. “Anyone who will not receive (gift) the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.”

That is a powerful statement! Wealthy people pay their own way (and for others too). They do not need welfare, food stamps or hand-outs. Wealthy people are the ones organizing and sponsoring the fund-raisers. They are the ones whose names appear in the back of the programs and in the photo section of the magazines featuring their generosity. Everyone wants to be the ones giving. It not only sounds so noble and humanitarian it also means that you have enough to give away and you don't need anyone to give to you. But, if you are going to enter the kingdom of God, you have to come like a child. You have to come unlike this rich young man. You have to come with empty hands, empty pockets, and an empty spirit.

Mark calls him “a man.” Matthew describes him as being young and Luke mentions that he is a ruler of some kind. Notice the verbs. “ran” “fell” (or knelt) “asked” This man clearly humbled himself before Christ. He addresses Christ as “good teacher” a term that Christ immediately responds to asking him why he would use a term like that when there is only one who is truly good – and that is God. The point was that it was right for this man to call him that, but the man did not realize what he was saying, even by his respectful greeting. Then the question: “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

That is what everyone wants to know. And look at the position that this guy was in to be able to do it. He was clearly ambitious. He was wealthy. He was in a position of influence and he was young, which probably meant that he had some energy and drive. Give me a mission. Give me a challenge. Give me a cause that I can do, in order to make myself appear to be so wonderful, so charitable and yet still in control. So, Christ

did. But why did Christ tell this man to sell all of his possessions and we have no record of Christ saying this to Matthew? Why did Christ not say this to Nicodemus or to Martha, Mary and Lazarus? They still had a home they could have sold? (unless they lived in Detroit) Why didn't he tell Mary Magdalene to sell the perfume and give the money to the poor instead of washing his feet with it? Why didn't Paul tell Lydia in Philippi to sell her business and give all the money to the poor? Christ told this man to sell everything that he had and then follow Christ, because his stuff was his god. His stuff was his security. His stuff was his identity. His stuff was his means to godliness. So, when Christ took him to the Decalogue, he initially listed commandments from the second half of the list (v.19). Do not murder, commit adultery, steal, lie, defraud and honor father and mother. This young man not understanding the true heart of these commands gave a response that revealed it by saying in essence that these things have never been a problem for him. He's kept those since he was a boy (perhaps referring to his bar mitzvah when he formally became a son of the law). So, what does Jesus say then? He goes after the very first command – doesn't he? You shall have no other gods before me!

Now, stop here for a second. Does this not add a little more “ahhh now I get it” to verse 18? Why do you call me good? The guy blows right over it, although in verse 20 he does drop the “good” part when he calls him teacher. Jesus is challenging him. Do you know who I am? He is actually right in calling Christ good, he just doesn't know it. So, Christ is saying – I am good because I am God! And I am calling you to obey the very first commandment. You shall have no other gods before me. Christ is going after his idol. You cannot follow Christ and hold on to your idols.

Now, let's pursue this idea for just a bit from another text before we come back. In Acts 17, Paul is in one of the major religious, educational, philosophical and cultural centers of the world. Paul is on Mars Hill in Athens. Rome may have conquered the world militarily, but Athens conquered the world culturally. Paul is at the epicenter of it all. He is hanging with the big dogs. These are the guys who in our day would write the journal articles, be referenced on the talk shows, and have large facebook followers. Paul is debating with world renowned philosophers and he is holding his own just fine. Which has led many to conclude that the church (which has often chosen isolation and seclusion) needs to raise up and equip artists, musicians, actors, film makers, writers, educators, bankers, philosophers, scientists and politicians in order to infiltrate all levels of society so that we can have a seat at the table and a voice in the conversation. I totally agree! But, for what purpose? Are we to pursue this in order to gain respect – No! Our task is to expose the idols for what they are. And when you expose idols, expect rejection and in some cases, war. All that Christ was doing was revealing to this man, what he was trusting in. And notice verse 21. Christ loved him. Christ was telling this man what he needed to hear. This was the most loving thing that Christ could say. You are trusting in something that cannot save you! The following conversation between Christ and his disciples makes it clear that this was not a problem limited to this one man.

1. **The Warning - Wealth is usually a curse.** (vs. 23-25)

Wealth, riches, success, and fame make it so difficult to realize how much you need Christ. (v.23) Do not envy the wealthy. This rich, young, ruler is not someone to hold up before your children and say – strive to be like him. No, warn your children of the deceitfulness of wealth. Warn them of the dangers of success that are lurking to steal the affections of their hearts away from Christ. Teach them, model for them humility. Do not brag about what you have, but boast only in the cross. Point out to your children the real heroes and the real models. Show them the people who are not held by stuff, but are held by grace.

Do you realize that if you push and push your children to be successful in order to be wealthy that you are exposing them to serious danger? It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. And by the way, the eye of the needle is NOT referring to a small gate in the city wall that a camel can make it through if it lowers itself. I don't know where that interpretation came from, but it is not valid. When Jesus said eye of a needle he was referring to a very, very small opening, that a camel obviously could not fit through. In a way it seems that Christ was using humor to get his point across. Can you imagine a camel fitting in the eye of a needle? Of course not! But when you see from v.21 that Jesus looked at him and loved him, I think it is safe to say that Christ was grieved over this.

We need to be warned about wealth because most of the time wealth possesses us instead of us possessing wealth. It is so difficult for wealthy people to be poor in spirit. But God's Kingdom is only populated with people who are poor in spirit. Having money does not mean you are proud. And being poor does not mean you are humble. But, they often go together. This is a warning. When you envy the wealthy, you are pursuing the wrong goal. They are not to be envied, they are to be pitied. What a shame, what a shock to discover that instead of their wealth being the blessing that it should have been it was a curse. Like Gollum's ring it was too much power for the heart to be able handle.

The disciples got the point in v. 26. "Who then can be saved?" If the wealthy who we all thought were actually a little better off, have less of a chance of getting in the kingdom than a camel going through the eye of a needle, what hope is there? Their minds are spinning. Almost every person in their world who was in a position of religious influence was a man of means. John the Baptist was a notable exception. This statement by Christ has once again just turned their value system upside down and inside out. We all battle this desire.

2. The Provision – God can change even the heart of the wealthy. (vs. 26-28)

Verse 27 is a very famous verse that is often quoted for and applied in situations that appear to us to be impossible. Think of the most impossible situations that you can, like the Lions going to the Super Bowl kind of impossible. What is more amazing that someone who has stage IV cancer being healed? What is more amazing than a couple who are told that they cannot have children to find out they are expecting? What is more amazing than someone being rescued out of a burning building? Jesus says that it is impossible for a wealthy person to not trust in his wealth, except by the intervention of

God. When a person, even a wealthy person becomes attracted to, convinced of and committed to the infinite worthiness and eternal value of the gospel of and the kingdom of Jesus Christ, then their wealth and possessions and stuff all becomes rightfully diminished in value because it does not compare to Christ. No longer does their wealth define them or hold them. No longer do riches consume their thinking or determine their value system or goals. No longer does image, and connections and keeping up have any appeal. They see through it all because they see and hear and taste that which really matters.

As I studied this rich, young man, I thought of the contrast between him and the rich, old man – Abraham. Abraham had the stuff, but he had no heir. What mattered to him more than the stuff was a son. In his old age, God gave him Isaac. What do you think he was tempted to worship even more than money? What did God ask of him? For the sake of God, give up your son. Humanly speaking, that is impossible. And yet, by God's grace, Abraham was able to see that loving God and trusting God is worth even more than his son.

If you have wealthy friends, preach the gospel to them. In spite of their appearance, they need Christ. In spite of their circumstances, they need the gospel. I grant you that money can insulate people from many of the harsh realities of life, but it still cannot compare to the worthiness of Christ. If you have friends who are not wealthy, preach the gospel to them, lest they believe the lies of this world, that life has more value if you have more things. Peter's question in verse 28 brings us to the final point that I want you to grasp.

3. **The Promise - God's Kingdom provides wealth that money cannot buy.** (vs. 29-31)

Jesus did not say what we thought he would say in v.30 did he? What would you expect him to say? Give up your home now and you will get a great big mansion in heaven – right? Christ did tell the rich, young ruler that if he sold all that he had, he would have treasure in heaven, but that is not the only reward. Christ talks about a reward “in this present age.” Now, wait a minute, did Christ not say that wealth makes it so difficult for a person to enter the kingdom of heaven? So, why does he promise a hundred times as much of what you used to have, if you leave it all for his sake? The hundred times as much homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children, and fields – along with persecutions (don't forget that) is referring to all that you have in the body of Christ. When you do not trust in the stuff and instead trust in Christ, you are not only born into the family of God, but you can now enjoy relationships that are not defined or determined by image, possessions, talent, degrees, job title or any other non-eternal issue. Christ frees you to have authentic relationships with others.

How many of you have gone on missions trips in order to bring help and resources to people who need it and you are struck with how happy the believers are who are in economic conditions far worse than yours? On the one hand you are made aware of how much you have compared with others, but on a deeper level, you are made aware of how little you have of what really matters.

A friend of mine is a divorced father whose kids go back and forth between him and his ex-wife who after leaving him, married into some serious money. There is no way that he can compete with that. But all these years he has simply loved the kids, been available, been deeply involved in their lives, talked to them about the real issues of life and has never tried to buy their affection. The other day, one of his boys commented to him on how relaxing it was to be with him and his dad's friends. He asked him – what do you mean? The boy said, mom is all about image, and we can't even breathe. But you and your friends – their just real. Now, you tell me, which one is rich and which one is poor.

When money becomes your god, you cannot enjoy that which it provides. You become controlled by what you worship. That is why you become what you worship. But those who have taken their hands off of their stuff in order to hold on to God are able to enjoy it like no one else.

Brothers and sisters of Cornerstone, our hope is not in an economic recovery. This job market has forced some of you to say – I need help, and has stretched the hearts of others to help in ways that you never have before. You see the depression that weighs down those who have believed the lie of the American dream that happiness is found in having a secure job, a nice home and a long, disease-free, retirement. If you have a job – be grateful, but don't worship it. If you have some retirement funds, savings, or a measure of security, don't trust it. Live with an open heart and open hand. That is what Christ did. He gave up every treasure in order to have a relationship with you. Nothing compares to the treasure that we have in Christ and his family, because no one and no thing can save us from our sin, other than Christ.