

Can the Wealthy Be Saved?

Mark 10:23-31

The Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 18, 2015

Immanuel Lutheran Church, Broadlands

Our Lord raises the question of the salvation of the wealthy. Since you folks are wealthy it raises the question of your salvation. I know that this question troubles some of you because you wonder about your salvation and your wealth. Let us deal with this question head on shall we?

First of all, our Lord tells the rich young man that he must sell everything and give it to the poor and follow Jesus in order to inherit eternal life. The rich young man goes away grieved because he had great wealth. That would seem to indicate the wealthy people can only make it to eternal life if they sell everything and give it away.

This Sunday our Lord points out how difficult it is for the wealthy to enter into the Kingdom of God. Maybe that holds out some hope for us. If it is difficult that means that it is not impossible. But then our Lord says it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a wealthy person to enter the Kingdom of God.

Have any of you heard the theory that the eye of the needle about which our Lord is speaking is really a narrow opening in the wall of Jerusalem? The theory says that the eye of the needle about which our Lord is speaking is not a sewing needle but rather a narrow opening in the wall of Jerusalem at which there was not a lot of clearance. Camels had to get down on their knees and scoot their way through this opening in order to get into Jerusalem. Whenever someone propounds this theory they are doing so in order to demonstrate that it is possible for wealthy people to be saved. It is just difficult.

The problem is that when I studied our Lord's words in this sentence I looked up the Greek words for eye and needle. The word eye means hole. The word needle means sewing needle. There is nothing to indicate that our Lord does not mean exactly what He says in this statement. When He says that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a wealthy person to enter into the Kingdom of God, our Lord is talking about sewing needles.

I have heard no archaeological evidence for this supposed opening in the wall of Jerusalem. I have not seen it on any ancient maps of Jerusalem. So far as I know this thing does not exist and is therefore an invention by wealthy people who want to secure for themselves a place in salvation without having to give up any of their wealth.

Therefore our Lord is saying that it is impossible for wealthy people to enter the Kingdom of God. After all it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a sewing needle than it is for a wealthy person to enter into the Kingdom of God and we know how possible it is for camels to go through the eyes of needles.

Our Lord and His Father take a dim view of wealth. Many times we are warned against the deceitfulness of riches. Our Lord's apostles teach us that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. He warns us against greed. He tells us that when we gather for the Divine Service if a visitor comes to our assembly wearing shabby clothing and another comes in wearing wealthy clothing and we pay attention to the one in the splendid clothing and ignore the one in the shabby clothing that we have become judges with evil thoughts. In our Lord's parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the rich man goes to hell and is in torment. Lazarus who was poor his whole life is carried by the angels to Abraham's side. Abraham's side is a fancy way of talking about heaven. Our Lord warns us against all kinds of greediness. He tells us that

our lives do consist in the abundance of our possessions. That is good news if you don't have any possessions. It is bad news if you do.

The Pharisees loved wealthy people and many were wealthy themselves. They considered it the mark of the blessing of almighty God on their lives and yet our Lord condemns them. Our Lord tells parables where a wealthy man's possessions own him. They are the ones who run his life and dictate to him out it shall be lived. The desire to hang on to the wealth means that there are certain things that wealthy people must do in order to hang on to it. What happens when what is required of your possessions is contrary to what is required by your God? Our Lord points out to us personally and through His apostles that wealth fades. Riches fade. Rust takes the things that are ours. Moths eat the clothing that we possess. Decay and tarnish comes over our nice things. It all wastes away and finally when we are dead our wealth will go to someone else. You do not get to keep it. And if you do not get to keep it, why did you work so hard to amass it? Will your children actually starve without it? What good does your retirement savings do you if you are dead? And I have met people who outlived their wealth and they are still living. It did not kill them or are you worried about something more than life? And if you are worried about something more than life, then wealth has become important to you. Is it more important than God? Well, that depends on the times when you must choose between God and money. You cannot serve both. You will either love the one and hate the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other.

Well, it would seem that is an open and shut case. The wealthy will not enter the Kingdom of God.

At this point there is usually a wealthy person to say, "Hang on a minute. What about all of the wealthy people in the Old Testament who were counted righteous?" What about Solomon? He was the most wealthy person in the Old Testament. While a person may argue that his wealth was his downfall in that he married many foreign women to maintain his wealth and they led his heart astray after other gods someone who is paying attention to the Bible will be quick to point out that Solomon was wealthy even while his heart was faithful to the Lord his God. That means that a person can be wealthy and faithful at the same time. All a wealthy person has to do nowadays is make sure that his wife does not lead him astray to another god. In fact the Bible, God's word itself, praises Solomon's wealth and recounts all of the wealth that he had as a blessing from almighty God. Surely that means that wealthy people can enter into the Kingdom of God. All they have to do is avoid messing it up at the end the way that Solomon did.

Or let us take a better example than Solomon. Let us talk about Abraham. Abraham was wealthy. By Bedouin standards he was loaded. He was wealthy because God blessed him. His wealth was a sign of divine favor. When our Lord talks about the Kingdom of God Abraham is a given. In other words our Lord talks about people coming from the east and the west to sit at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in the Kingdom of God. Our Lord presupposes that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob made it. Therefore when it comes to the Kingdom of God Abraham is a given. He is by definition part of the Kingdom of God. The question is not whether or not he made it, but whether or not we will be with Abraham in the Kingdom of God. Therefore Abraham is in and he had great wealth.

Therefore there are wealthy people who enter into the Kingdom of God. There may not be many, but at least it is possible. If I, a pastor, or any other pastor says that it is impossible for the wealthy to enter the Kingdom of God, how do I explain these Old Testament examples? And more could be given besides these two. What about David or Job?

What is interesting is that for the most part it is only wealthy people who point out Old Testament wealthy people as examples of salvation. It is obvious that they are trying to hang on to their wealth and make it in also. What about someone like Zacheus shows his repentance by giving away half of his wealth and then paying back everyone he had cheated four times over? The rich young ruler really flips us out and our Lord says that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a wealthy person to enter into the Kingdom of God.

And so Peter asks the question that is on everyone's mind, "Lord, if this is the case who can be saved?" We have always assumed that wealthy people would be saved. We have assumed it because even in ancient times wealth was a sign of God's blessing on a person. If wealth is a sign of divine favor, then the wealthy are going to make it into eternal life because they are wealthy. And our Lord says that this line of reasoning is false. There are people who are wealthy through false means. They have cheated their way into wealth. Does that mean that they have God's favor? And it's not like the rest of the wealthy are not a bunch of sinners.

And our Lord simply unilaterally dismisses them. They will not be saved, not until camels go through the eyes of needles or pigs fly. Well, then is it possible for wealthy people to be saved? No, not with wealthy people anyway. But with God all things are possible and that means that it is possible for God. God can make pigs fly. He can make camels go through the eyes of needles. In fact God can raise the dead. If God can raise the dead, then making camels go through the eyes of needles, making pigs fly, and saving the wealthy so that they may enter into the Kingdom of God are all possible. They are even easy for Him.

Well, now that we have the wealthy all sorted out what about the people who have given up everything for the Kingdom of God? What about people who have given up fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, lands, houses and all that they possess in order to enter into the Kingdom of God? And there are people who have done and are doing these things. Obviously the apostles gave up all of these things in order to follow Jesus. The sons of Zebedee left their father in the boat with the hired men to follow our Lord. There are also people nowadays who leave everything to follow Jesus. The Syrian Christians who are suffering persecution from ISIS are leaving everything to go to Europe and other places. They are leaving their homes and their lands for the sake of the Kingdom of God. Some of them are even giving up their lives rather than to renounce their faith in Jesus Christ. They are giving up their lives for the Kingdom of God.

They will not lose their reward. In fact they will receive a hundred times over what they have given up in brothers and sisters and homes and lands and in the age to come eternal life. And with that hundred fold wealth that they will receive because of what they have given up they will also receive a hundredfold persecutions. Even the wealthy believers in Jesus do not suffer persecution. In fact wealthy people who believe in Jesus suffer worse persecution in some ways because they have more to lose. But that is the way of things. When you receive your reward in this life you also receive persecutions. They come together and then in the age to come eternal life.

In the Name of Jesus. Amen.