

Mark 10:17-31
Hebrews 4:12 - 16
Psalm 22:1 - 15
Job 23:1 - 9, 16 - 17

Notes on the Gospel Lesson

We often look at this passage and focus on one aspect: that the man who came to Jesus was very wealthy and we consider Jesus' instructions to sell what he owned and give the money to the poor. However, by focusing only on this one aspect, we neglect other messages.

When the rich man asks Jesus what he had to do to inherit eternal life, Jesus' response is almost brusque. "You know the commandments: 'You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.'". Note that Jesus selects these five out of the Ten Commandments. Why these five?

In his groundbreaking work, *Through Peasant Eyes*, Dr. Kenneth Bailey points out that there are three principles contained in these five commandments: loyalty to family (do not commit adultery and honor your parents), respect for property (do not steal and do not defraud), and neither physical or verbal destruction of others (do not kill and do not bear false witness). While the commandment against defrauding does not appear in the Ten Commandments, it is consistent with the prohibition against stealing.

It is the man's response that is startling: "Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth." He has kept *all* of these? This man has never committed any of these sins? Think of the audacity of that statement. This man places himself in rarefied company; according to the Talmud, only Abraham, Moses, and Aaron kept the entire law. Now consider the man's opening question to Jesus in light of this attitude. "What must I do to inherit eternal life?" This man, completely convinced of his own perfection, could not have imagined that there was any possible answer other than praise and a confirmation of his own goodness.

Could it be that it is this answer, this sin of unreasonable pride, that inspires Jesus' response? Mark makes it clear that Jesus is not simply dismissing this man but that he "loved him". Is Jesus challenging the man's own assumption of his own goodness by telling him that he must do more? The rich man was certainly not expecting such a response from Jesus for he was "shocked" at Jesus' words. The inevitable follow-up to this is, What would Jesus say to us that would shock us and how would we respond?

There have been attempts over the years to "soften" Jesus' following words by saying that the original Greek word translated as "camel" did not refer to the large animal but a thin rope. In other words, the act was difficult but not impossible. However, the textual evidence for this theory is very slight and highly improbable. Also, some have tried to say that the "eye of a needle" referred to a low gate in Jerusalem through which a camel had to get very low and almost crawl. Again, this is an act that is difficult but not impossible. There is, however, no evidence at all for such a gate in first century Jerusalem. Tourists today are sometimes shown

such a gate as if it were the one to which Jesus referred but that gate was built many centuries later than the ministry of Jesus.

We must remember that life for the vast majority of people in first century Palestine was very hard. Scholars estimate that approximately 95% of the population were peasants, living an almost hand-to-mouth existence. In such conditions, works of charity were primarily done by those with the means to do so. This is why we see the reaction of the disciples when Jesus said, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” and “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.” The disciples’ reaction must have been, “If a rich person can’t get into the kingdom of God, what hope is there for us?”

Jesus is describing impossible actions but that is exactly the point. Remember that the rich man asked Jesus, “What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?” Jesus’ answer is, you can do nothing. Yet God can do the impossible. You can do nothing to earn eternal life; it is a gift from the heavenly Father.

Notes on the Old Testament Lessons

The passages from Job and from Psalm 22 both share the theme of complaining to God about the writers’ suffering. This theme goes on throughout the book of Job as Job, despite the arguments of his friends and his wife, insists that he has not sinned and demands an audience with God. Job wants to present his case for his innocence and the injustice that he has suffered at God’s hands.

We are more accustomed to hearing the words of Psalm 22 on Good Friday as a part of our observance of Jesus’ Passion. This is one of the Psalms of Complaint. These can make us uncomfortable. Rather than words of praise to the creator, these psalms gripe to God about how the psalmist is suffering and demanding that God do something to fix the problem. Often, there is a call for God to destroy those who are afflicting the writer. This seems a far cry from Jesus’ message to turn the other cheek.

Yet, these Psalms of Complaint and the words of Job reveal both a deep faith as well as the very human nature of the writers. Over and over in Israel’s history, these ancient writers have seen God rescue his people in their hour of distress. They have no doubt that God has done these great works in the past and calls on God to do what he has done before; in this case, to come to the rescue of this faithful servant. A seminary professor once paraphrased the Psalms of Complaint in this way, “Wow, that was great, God! Now do it again!”