

Possible

You all know the story, it's told in three of the four gospels with very little variation. A wealthy young man comes up to Jesus and asks him what he should do to get the good stuff. Jesus tells him to follow the law; check, done that since he was little. Jesus really likes this guy, he's sincere and a genuinely good person, so only one thing really remains: getting rid of all the things that hold him back. But he can't do it, he can't cut the cord of his wealth and follow Jesus, I would dare to say very few of us could or would. What is the problem here? Because I think understanding the problem this rich guy has is important for all of us who aren't exactly living like beggars and giving all we have to the poor. Is that the standard?

Well, I think at the very least it is one of those teachings that should prompt us to ask ourselves some very searching questions; it is for this young man, and he doesn't end up liking the answer. This is one of those places where Jesus knows more about what is inside a person than they even know themselves. He is not a bad person, he's not a man consumed with greed. He is one of those people who has wealth and doesn't really know any different, he's young, rich and he has the power that comes with that. He is the kind of person who would have grown up being able to keep the Law, because his wealth would have insulated him from situations where he had to break it just to survive. Life had never pushed his back against the wall and forced him into a choice that went against the Law. But he has an idol, and that means that he is guilty of breaking the first commandment, one of the ones Jesus didn't mention specifically.

It's hard for this man, and even the disciples to recognize the idolatry, because it's so very acceptable. We so inherently believe that wealthy people must have earned it or somehow deserve it that we have a hard time believing that it might not actually mean they can see or take part in what God is doing. If you see a well-dressed person and a dirty ragamuffin side by side, you will automatically assume that the clean cut one is good and the dirty one is dangerous. The fact of the matter is that the clean one might be a Mafioso or a serial killer and the dirty one could be a saint, but you will unconsciously ascribe better attributes to the first one. The false god known as Mammon puts on a very respectable front.

Conversely, there is no great virtue in being poor. Poverty often brings out people's baser instincts, it often drives them into despair and desperation can produce many lawbreaking tendencies, but this is also the work of Mammon, it is the shadow cast by radiant, hot greed. The advantage that the poor have in contrast to the rich, is that they often see their own wretchedness, they suffer for it daily, and they are consequently more willing to lay down their sin and follow Christ. It may be simply that their advantage is having much less to lose.

The disciples, like everyone else, looked at this young man and saw nothing but good. He would be a fine addition to their ranks to be sure. His resources could really help them in their ministry, his charisma (all the reasons why Jesus loved him), and his clear righteousness could only help their cause. But he goes away sad, and the disciples are truly puzzled; why would Jesus discourage such a person? They ask, "who then can be saved?" Because for them, if that shining example of humanity is not going to make it into the Kingdom of God, who is going to make it?

Honestly, I think a lot of us would look at it the same way. He would be a person we would have no trouble at all welcoming into our church: righteous, likeable and rich, who wouldn't want more folk like that around? We would think that someone with all those advantages must be doing something right.

We forget, and perhaps even deny that the Kingdom of God is upside down: the last will be first and the first will be last. That is not just a vague, mystical incantation that Jesus put out there to confuse people, it is a foundational description of how God works. To “inherit eternal life” as the young man puts it, we must be willing to part with whatever is mortal. Paul says it this way, “the perishable cannot inherit the imperishable.” Jesus says, “it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” Let me rephrase that just a bit: it is easier for something utterly impossible to happen than for someone who makes an idol of money to come into the presence of God. There is no moral judgment in that, Jesus loves that guy, he actually believes that he has been as upright and righteous as he says, but that’s not the point, he can’t let go of the perishable things in order to take hold of the imperishable.

The disciples have this problem too. I have this problem too, without being too presumptuous, I’m guessing that you all share in that problem. So it’s a good thing there’s a statement of grace in there: “For God all things are possible.” But see that’s the rub, we have to trust God, and that’s not always easy. Especially when it comes to things that we feel like we have on lock down. When I was in Seminary, and we had no money, I had to trust God a lot, and use some credit cards creatively. Nowadays I find that I much prefer not having to trust God quite that much, but I try and remember that my own notions of self-reliance can become a dangerous idol. The more I try and control things and do things my way, the more I am in danger of missing the Kingdom of God, the less I become like a little one and the more I neglect the foundational principle that “the first will be last and the last will be first.”

You have heard me go on and on about the fundamental idolatry that we humans seem to have wired into us. Give us a thing, anything really, and we will probably make an idol out of it. The Kingdom of God, however, challenges that impulse and breaks down the grip that it can have on us. It’s no easy task, tearing away our idols, and it is not generally a pleasant experience for us. We give ourselves to idols because they offer us control: follow rule X, offer sacrifice Y, get blessing Z, predictable right? The Living God stubbornly refuses to fit into that equation. Jesus recognizes that the young man, and a lot of other people were looking for him to give them some missing variable in the divine formula. They were hoping for something that would make “eternal life” or the Kingdom of God seem like a possible thing for them to “inherit” or even earn.

They are so comfortable with the way Mammon works that they cannot conceive of the possibility that God might just give it away. Thus the idolatry is deeper and thicker than we imagine, we always think that God is waiting for us to earn the Kingdom somehow, but he’s really just waiting for us to accept it. Maybe it would be easier just to put a camel through the eye of a needle.