



*Christ Blessing. Wood carving by Tilman Riemenschneider. 1509. Heidelberg, Germany.*

# The Camel in the Needle's Eye

Mark 10:17-31

## INTRODUCTION

One of the most difficult things about Christian discipleship is the choice that must be made between loving God and loving our money. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, "It would of course be tempting to show how far we had advanced in the Christian life by endeavoring to serve two masters and giving each his due, both God and mammon. Why should we not be happy children of the world just because we are the children of God? After all, do we not rejoice in his good gifts, and do we not receive our treasures as a blessing from him? No, God and the world, God and its goods are incompatible, because the world and its goods make a bid for our hearts, and only when they have won them do they become what they really are. That is how they thrive, and that is why they are incompatible with allegiance to God."

There is no way for Christians to escape this difficult choice. Therefore why not get on with it? Why not spend time with the Gospel passages in which this message is presented so clearly and then work with the meaning of the message for our own lives? For many of us, this is the one major area of our existence we are still holding out on, still refusing to let God have his way with us. We are willing to relinquish everything except our money and possessions, and this one exception is the greatest threat to our health and wholeness of life.

## COMMENTARY

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus confronts us with an ultimate "either/or." Either we love God or we love earthly goods. "No one can serve two masters," he said. "For either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." (Matt. 6:24) The point of this saying would be very clear to the followers of Jesus because in the ancient world a slave was literally owned by his or her master. If we belong to God, then there is no possible way for us to belong to "mammon" at the same time. But mammon has a way of claiming a major share of our time and attention. The temptation to put our trust in our material wealth is very great, and the tragedy is not so much that we deliberately choose against God but that so few of us are able *to choose God alone*.

One of the most dramatic stories in the Gospels involves a "rich young ruler" who was unable to make this choice. (Mark 10:17-31) The title is actually a composite from the first three Gospels. Mark describes him as a rich man, Matthew as a young man, and Luke as a ruler. He came to Jesus to talk about the purpose of life. In the ensuing conversation Jesus discerned many strong qualities in his personality. By obeying the religious commandments he was, in Paul's words, blameless "as to righteousness under the law." (Phil. 3:6) "And Jesus looking upon him loved him." But there was one serious problem, one place where he was still holding out in his loyalty to God. He not only had great possessions, but he was attached to them in a way which made it impossible for him to be completely "attached" to God. Jesus said to him, "You lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me." At this saying the young man's "countenance fell, and he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions."

In this incident Jesus does not lay down the renunciation of all wealth as a general rule for all of his followers. What concerned him here was the way in which this young man's wealth

interfered with his undivided loyalty to God. The word of Jesus to this man is not to be taken as a general principle concerning wealth but as a general principle concerning the kingdom of God. Our union with God takes precedence over everything else in life without exception. We must cut off hand or foot—or possessions—if they interfere with the one thing needful in life, the rule of God.

It should be noted that the actual amount of money we possess is not the real issue. In some ways the poor are in greater danger than the rich because of their desperate need for money. The Book of Proverbs recognizes this fact in a striking passage:

Remove far from me falsehood and lying;  
give me neither poverty nor riches;  
feed me with the food that is needful for me,  
lest I be full, and deny thee,  
and say, "Who is the Lord?"  
or lest I be poor, and steal,  
and profane the name of my God.

(Prov. 30:8-9)

After the rich young ruler left, Jesus talked to his disciples about the dangers of wealth, and here the teaching becomes more difficult for us because he generalizes beyond the single case. "How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! 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." It is not surprising that the disciples "were exceedingly astonished, and said to him, 'Then who can be saved?'"

Biblical interpreters have usually taken one of three paths in trying to deal with the "impossibility" of this demand. (1) Some insist that the word for camel and the word for cable in Aramaic are very similar and what Jesus said was, "It is easier for a cable to go through the eye of a needle." But reliable linguistic justification for this interpretation is lacking. (2) Others believe that the "needle's eye" is the name of a postern gate in the city wall of Jerusalem, a gate often pointed out to

modern day visitors. Small in dimension, it is intended only for human foot traffic, but a camel stripped of baggage might be forced through on his knees with much difficulty. This interpretation is more of a commentary on how desperate we are to keep our wealth than it is on the biblical text in question. (3) The majority of interpreters insist that Jesus is speaking in hyperbole here in order to make a point. He can no more be taken literally than when on another occasion he speaks of a man swallowing a camel. This interpretation is probably the best, but it must not be allowed to diminish the intensity of Jesus' concern or the importance of his teaching. Our material wealth has a way of "inevitably" claiming our loyalty and making it impossible for us to give our undivided loyalty to God.

In order to appreciate this teaching we need to remind ourselves of the importance of the relationship with God which Jesus' ministry makes possible for us. Through his life, teaching, death, and resurrection we are able to enter into a life-giving union with God which gives meaning to everything else in our lives. Withering and dying like detached "branches," we now find life and health flowing through us because we have become attached to the living vine. (John 15) There is absolutely nothing in life that compares with the importance of the union with God which makes this possible. Jesus talks so much about material wealth because more than anything else in our lives it weakens and may even destroy this life-giving relationship with God. As Bonhoeffer says, "Our hearts have room only for one all-embracing devotion, and we can only cleave to one Lord. Every competitor to that devotion must be hated . . . We shall indignantly repudiate the suggestion that we hate God, and we will be firmly convinced that we love him, whereas by trying to combine love for him with love for the world, we are turning our love for him into hatred."

There are at least two very practical ways for us to work with the application of this teaching to our lives. First, we can begin to deal more realistically with the *feeling* portion of our attitude toward money and possessions. Jesus, for example, in

the Sermon on the Mount talks about the "anxiety" we feel in connection with our material things. (Matt. 6:25-33) Many of us have little trouble dealing with this issue on a rational level. We say that we believe in God and that we love him with our whole being. But there are feelings aroused by the subject of money which jeopardize our relationship with God largely because we have not recognized them and dealt with them honestly.

Anxiety is a good example. When our wealth is threatened it frightens us because our ability to live in this society is largely dependent on adequate money for the necessities of life. We are anxious about having enough money for the present and for our "old age." Anxiety is aroused if we are not recognized for our success in making money, but we are also anxious if we think people are overestimating our wealth.

One participant in a "money workshop" described another kind of anxiety: "What kind of freedom do we have when we are afraid to discuss money freely, even—perhaps among our brothers and sisters in Christ? Perhaps the most moving experience of the weekend for all of us was to face that fear squarely, talk about our concerns openly, and find that in affirming those 'parts' of ourselves we disliked or were ashamed of, we were not only not judged, but we gained control over feelings and actions we thought were beyond us." Anxiety and fear, guilt, frustration and anger—all of these are real and all, at one time or another, are experienced in connection with money and possessions. When we name these feelings for what they are and begin to deal with them openly in the context of the Christian community, then our attitude toward money can become an avenue to freedom rather than bondage.

A second practical way of working with the teaching of Jesus is by discovering the true joy of *giving*. A great deal of emphasis is placed on the rich young ruler in the Gospels who made the wrong choice when confronted with the "either/or" of God and mammon. But there was another rich man who used his money to make the right choice. Zacchaeus used his money to repay all those whom he had cheated and he gave

half of his wealth to the poor. (Luke 19:1-10) These concrete acts of giving and the resultant changed life-style obviously brought Zacchaeus much closer to God. "Today," said Jesus, "salvation has come to this house."

Many of us find it very difficult to be generous in our giving. For the most part, it causes us more pain than pleasure because we give grudgingly and with great reluctance. But those who have experienced liberation in this area of their lives report that giving opens up hitherto unknown channels of power and love. The wall between ourselves and God comes down and we discover why it is literally more blessed to give than to receive.