

A man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” ... Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

I really like what Sarah Hinlicky Wilson, a pastor in Tokyo, writes about “managing” (or mismanaging this text):

- The rich young man didn’t actually keep the law, so that business about giving up his possessions was just a way of calling his bluff.
- Nobody can actually keep the law; hence nobody can give up everything either; it’s just a rhetorical device to call our bluff, and once we grasp that, we’re off the hook.
- Giving up everything was a command to this particular rich young man, but only to him. It makes no claim on anyone else, being but an object lesson on acquisitiveness.
- It was a real command, but it applies only to the rich. All of us can think of someone richer, so by contrast we don’t qualify.
- Then again, the disciples infer just the opposite: everyone is rich (presumably because even the poor can think of someone poorer). Luckily, Jesus gives us the ultimate divine out: we can’t do it, but God can. Whew. Off to the mall.
- Or if we’re still in the game at this point in the story, we can point to our paltry efforts at discipleship like Peter did, at which point we get rewarded with a hundredfold of everything. If we somehow “give up” everything we’ve got (preferably in our hearts—you know, like, detachment from material things as an act of spiritual self-will), we’ll get something better in return. Invest a penny, earn a pound. Even those unnerving “persecutions” will lend us martyr/rock-star status. It’s a brilliant act of hermeneutical contortion to get Jesus to sound like a prosperity preacher.

I am not going to tell you point-by-point why these are not helpful but want to ponder the harder and better part of the story: context. Jesus talks to the man and sees what the man really needs. When money, privilege, and patronage warp how he engages the world, he (we) need to unwarped that privilege for those who cannot repay us.

Jesus loved the man He did ask him not to bury or burn his wealth as a sign of dramatic commitment. Jesus did ask the rich young man to relinquish agency over his wealth. This act would have placed him at the center of a new community

that Jesus was creating. The story is shocking and frustrating maybe because it asks too much of us. This conversation was tailor made to the man, and any conversation Jesus has with us is also going to be tailor made to us. But I doubt we ever get a freebie when it comes to acquisitiveness and the stranglehold money can so easily make on us.

Jesus asks the man to consider how letting go of privilege might help him put his feet on the ground (that does not seem like a bad goal for us either). Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples,

“How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 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.”

There are no loopholes. This kind of generosity is miraculous: miracle driven. At the same time, you’ve probably heard an eye of the needle camel sermon that goes something like this: “Jesus wasn’t talking about impossible things; he was likely referring to gate called “the eye of the needle” in Jerusalem and that camel could not get through the gate but there are other options. So do not really take this literally.” To my knowledge, there is no gate. It was a medieval story pulled out of the air to blunt the edges of this encounter with Jesus.

They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for with God all things are possible.

This story does not include loopholes or gates but does include impossibilities and miracles. Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” Jesus said, *Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions— and in the age to come eternal life. But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.*

I hear and feel Peter’s frustration and chaffing because he knew how impossible Jesus was being. Here is what I know. This reading is one of the handful of times in the Gospels where Jesus is explicitly described as loving someone.

The invitation to give his stuff to the poor would allow the man to flourish in this new community Jesus was creating. If the man took Jesus’ offer, he would have lost social capital. He would no longer be able to participate in the patronage game. He would lose control over his destiny. He would be part of an impossible community of equality. Money and power are not corrupt or evil, but they can be a miracle when God asks you to bless others.

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