



Hebrews 4:12-16; Mark 10:17-31
Reverend Giuseppe Mattei (October 13, 2024)

BY GRACE ALONE!

A camel through a needles eye? That's quite impossible, isn't it? That's exactly what Jesus tried to impress on the wealthy man and to all of us. It's not about big personal sacrifices like renouncing wealth or leaving family behind. There is nothing we can do to enter eternal life. It's a free gift of God! It's by grace alone. There is nothing we can do to score points with God.

This image is a perfect description of what our own spiritual lives should look like! To enter into the kingdom of heaven...in order to come into complete communion and union with God...we have to drop all of the baggage in our lives that have been weighing us down! If we are busy holding material things worries, expectations, judgments, grudges...how can we wrap our arms around Jesus? Around the poor and all who are vulnerable and at the margin of society?

Bible and spiritual literature, prayer and meditation help us to become aware of our baggage... the sinfulness of our everyday life that is keeping us from entering into communion with God.

After we consider our woeful predicament, and confess our inability to purge our sinfulness and do anything to improve our lot, we worry with the disciples: "then, who can be saved?"

But what's impossible to humans is possible to God. Not by a magic act but by cooperating with God's grace. God will never substitute for us, taking our place in our difficulties. But God won't abandon us either. God will assist with the gift of the Spirit for those who are ready to receive it.

Wealth can stand between us and God. If we exaggerate its importance and are so attached to it that we can't put it at the service of those in need, then we won't hear Jesus say, "Come, follow me." It's not that we got to get rid of wealth, it's that Jesus must come first. Wealth is at the service of life.

So, let us open to God. Let us listen; let us follow God's lead, God's instructions, God's example in Jesus, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

We can practice the virtue of silence and patience when we are tempted with pride, judgment, anger, and hatred. We can observe and feel remorse for our own stubbornness, our closed mindedness, our disobedience and self-justification, our tendency to render evil for evil, our bitterness, our gossip, our lies, our carelessness, our vanity, our laziness, and our indifference; in short, we sin in thoughts, words and actions, the evil inflicted and the justice not done.

When I am too rich of myself, I need to remember to lay my baggage down if I want a chance to enter the kingdom of heaven. Not my ways but Jesus' way. Not my arrogant thoughts but Jesus' humility. Not my search for vainglory but standing with Jesus in his glory on the cross.

JESUS, THE SUPREME HIGH PRIEST.

How else do I hope to make my way through the chaos that sin brings to my life and find peace if not by the virtues of God's

high priest “who has passed through the heavens” (Heb 4:14) and stands in the glorious presence of God? Not on our own but through Jesus. Not with our strength but through his power. Not by our effort but with our cooperation, with our humility, and with our endurance.

We do our part, but we are not alone. That’s the good news: Jesus is with us always through the end of time. He is a valiant and faithful high priest.

The wealthy man of today’s gospel story was a devout, open-hearted keeper of the Law ready to learn more from the Master. His question to Jesus, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” is honest. What it reveals, though, is a marginal relationship with God. Jesus wants all of him. He wants all of us.

Jesus sets him up by asking about the Commandments, prompting a defensive reply: “I have kept all these since I was a boy.” It’s like he was thinking: “Following the Commandments? Already done! Boring: there must be something harder, something that makes me sweat and can give me reassurance, some benchmarks, some form of measurement that I am making progress and getting closer to the goal.”

If it were that simple. Who’s ever not coveted? Who’s always kept the Sabbath holy? Honored one’s mother and father? Not worshipped other gods? Nobody really can because we are way too full of ourselves. So, Jesus loved him.

But Jesus’ love was not reciprocated. Perhaps, the wealthy man did not even notice Jesus’ loving look. He only heard what sounded like an undoable demand. Jesus offered him a way to interpret the Ten Commandments and get closer to God: Give

away your possessions to the poor and come, follow me. The Ten Commandments are about noticing how full of ourselves we truly are; they are about laying down our load and love God rather than ourselves. But he couldn't perceive it.

“Give up all my possessions? No thank you.”

So, he walked away, disheartened and sorrowful, loving his stuff more than the eternal life he was seeking and had right in front of his eyes. The man was loaded, and he couldn't bring himself to put it down. He wouldn't pick up the one thing he was missing: Grace. Salvation is following Jesus, being near him – which is hard to do while holding your stuff. What must we do to inherit eternal life? Forget the doing. It's all a gift, not entitlement or earning. But to receive it, notice how full your arms are already...

Following the Commandments out of obligation or, worst yet, out of fear of punishment leaves one with an unsettling sense of insecurity. God wants a relationship. Obligation and fear keep God at a distance. God wants our trust: we can come closer to God... just like children. Always.

THE LIVING WORD

Thanks be to God for the gift of the Word, alive and piercing, penetrating our innermost self, “able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” (Hebrews 4:12) God, who has created us and knitted us in our mother's womb, knows us well. Where can one hide from God?¹

This sounds terrifying and rather rough but it is in fact good news! Why would I want to hang on to my sin? Don't I want to

¹ Psalm 139

be set free and enjoy the **rest of God** to which I am called? (Heb 4:1)

This is in our future: rest with God, the enjoyment of God's peaceful kingdom, eternal life.

Jesus, the supreme high priest, understands us and sympathizes with our weaknesses, having gone through the same things we go through but sin. And he loves us.

Hold on to him. Don't lose your faith; don't let go of the vision (Hebrews 4:12).

So, we can be bold and admit to our weaknesses. By doing that we lay down our baggage and confess our trust in Jesus to save and not in our strength to gain salvation, which is an illusion anyhow. It's a bold thing living humbly and unincumbered for God, with God, in God.

JESUS ALONE SAVES

The world needs to hear there is hope in Christ. The world's attention is focused on a myriad of things and places its hope on human strategies.

But the world will be saved by the love of God. The world needs the Truth of God. The world needs clear testimonials that a new way of living is possible; that people are made capable of setting aside their differences and love one another; that honesty and decency and truth-telling are not weaknesses to look down on but the power of a renewed community; and that God in Jesus has come to show us the way, to be the Way.

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:35)

May we be Love to one another. Amen.