

The Gospel Unashamed

"From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth, from the laziness that is content with half-truths, from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, O, God of Truth, deliver us."

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Camel Through a Needle's Eye



I do not remember who was preaching, but I do remember the explanation of the passage of Scripture very well. It made quite an impression on me as a child. It explained the verse so well that I could understand what Jesus meant. Further, the application to our own lives was obvious and clearly needed.

I kept this thought in my mind for many years. By most accounts the preacher, whoever it was, had done an excellent job. He had explained the text, he had made relevant application of it to the lives of his listeners, and it was memorable.

Many years later I discovered that there was just one small problem; actually, it was a big problem. The explanation that he gave for the passage was simply wrong. The text was where Jesus said that 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 found in all three of the synoptic Gospels. Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record the statement with very little variation between them. I don't remember which Gospel account was being used in that sermon so many years ago, but we will quote Luke's version for our readers today.

"For 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." **Luke 18:25 (NKJV)**

The preacher was waxing eloquent as he gave the explanation for this statement. He told us that there was one gate into the city that was much smaller than the other gates. It was called the, "Eye of the Needle" because it was so small and difficult to pass through.

He went on to explain that although it was difficult, a camel could actually pass through this gate. However, to get through the gate, the camel would have to be unloaded of all the burdens it was carrying and get down on its knees. This was fascinating to me as a child. It made so much sense and made the passage come alive. I could picture a camel with no burdens crawling through the gate on its knees.

Even to me, as young as I was, the application was obvious. If we want to enter the kingdom of God, we too must remove all the things that load us down in the world and get on our knees in humility before God. Just like the camel who could not remove his own burden, we all have a burden of sin that we cannot remove ourselves. Only God can remove that burden for us.

"What a powerful message," I thought for years to come. How disappointed I was to find out that the whole story of the camel going through a gate called the "Eye of the Needle" was not true. I wondered how such a powerful idea that made so much sense could

possibly be wrong. Then I wondered how many other explanations I had been given were wrong as well.

Fortunately, I did not dwell on that last thought as I realized that anyone can be mistaken about some things but still be right about most things. Furthermore, they can still be sincere in their convictions and pure in their intentions. As much as I wish it were not true, even preachers can make the mistake of passing on bad information, especially when it "preaches well".

The truth is that there has never been any discovery of a gate called the "Eye of the Needle" that dates to the time of Jesus. In the 19th century, the idea was put forward that Jesus was referring to a gate that was then called, "The Needle's Eye". However, it appears that it was named after the statement of Jesus rather than before it (see the Fourfold Gospel quote on next page).

There is another explanation of this passage that I have also run into before. That is, that it should read "rope", not "camel".

It is true that the Greek words for "rope", (*kamilon*) and "camel" (*kamelon*) are very similar, differing only by one letter. There are some manuscripts that do use the word for "rope", but the overwhelming majority of them have the word for "camel".

However, the rope explanation does not really explain anything. Threading a rope through the eye of needle might be easier than a camel but it is

still not possible. In fact, the impossibility of the task seems to be the point.

After Jesus made this statement, His disciples asked who could be saved. Evidently, they understood that Jesus was describing an impossible task. The answer that Jesus gave to their question, further shows this to be the case. He said that things which are impossible with men are possible with God.

"26 And those who heard it said, **"Who then can be saved?"** 27 But He said, **"The things which are impossible with men are possible with God."** **Luke 18:26-27 (NKJV)**

The real and true explanation of this passage is clear from the context. It does not require any knowledge of manuscript variants or the original language. It does not require any knowledge of ancient gates into the city or archaeological finds. All it takes is an examination of the immediate context.

Jesus made this statement after speaking with the man we call "the rich young ruler" who asked Jesus what he had to do to inherit eternal life. Jesus referred him to the commandments. The rich young ruler said he had done those from his youth. Jesus then told him that he only lacked one thing. He needed to sell what he had and give it to the poor. This made the young ruler very sorrowful because he was very rich. It was this man's sorrow that prompted Jesus to talk about a camel going through the eye of a needle.

"24 And **when Jesus saw that he became very sorrowful, He said,** "How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God! 25 "For 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." **Luke 18:24-26 (NKJV)**

Jesus was using a proverbial statement, about the impossible, in order to teach that salvation is possible only with God (see reorder of sentence). With man it is impossible.

There is no need to explain how a camel or rope can go through the eye of a needle or small gate with that name. Let the passage speak for itself.

It warns us about the peril of riches to our Spiritual well-being. It tells us of our need for God in obtaining salvation. The bad news is that salvation is impossible with man. The good news is that it is possible with God.

There is no need to invent gates that did not exist in the time of Jesus. There is no need to build on flimsy manuscript evidence. Just let Jesus speak for Himself. Allow Him to use a hyperbolic proverbial saying to make His point. I say things like, "that is like trying to hold back the tide" and people understand that I am referring to an impossible task. Allow Jesus to do the same.

The following statements by various commentators are worth considering: *"It as [sic] easier for a camel. Instead of καμηλον, a camel, S, and four other MSS., read καμιλον, a cable. See the same reading noticed on the parallel place, Mt 19:24."* --Clarke

"This is probably a current proverb for the impossible. The Talmud twice speaks of an elephant passing through the eye of a needle as being impossible.

It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye...Jesus, of course, means by this comparison, whether an eastern proverb or not, to express the impossible. The efforts to explain it away are... like a ship's cable...as a narrow gorge or gate of entrance for camels which recognized stooping, etc. All these are hopeless, for Jesus pointedly calls the thing "impossible" (verse Mt 19:26). The Jews in the Babylonian Talmud did have a proverb that a man even in his dreams did not see an elephant pass through the eye of a needle (Vincent)." --Robertson's Word Pictures

"A proverbial expression denoting literally a thing impossible, but

figuratively, very difficult." --Jameison, Fausset, & Brown

"The needle's eye here is that of the literal needle, and the expression was a proverbial one to indicate that which was absolutely impossible. Lord George Nugent (1845-6) introduced the explanation that Jesus referred to the two gates of a city, the large one for beast of burden, and the small one for foot-passengers. This smaller one is now called "The Needle's Eye," but there is no evidence whatever that it was so called in our Saviour's time. In fact, as Canon Farrar observes, we have every reason to believe that this smaller gate received its name in late years because of the efforts of those who were endeavoring to soften this saying of Jesus." --The Fourfold Gospel

"This is a proverbial expression, denoting a difficulty altogether unconquerable by the art and power of man; nothing less than the almighty grace of God will enable a rich man to get over this difficulty." --Matthew Henry

"To explain what Jesus means it is useless and unwarranted to try to change 'camel' into 'cable'...where a real camel must have been meant – or to define the 'needle's eye' as the narrow gate in a city wall...Such 'explanations' (?), aside from being objectionable from a linguistic point of view, strive to make possible what Jesus specifically declared to be impossible.

The Lord means that for a rich man in his own power to try to work or worm his way into the Kingdom of God is impossible. So powerful is the hold which wealth has on the heart of natural man! He is held fast by its bewitching charm, and is thereby prevented from obtaining the attitude of heart and mind necessary for entrance into God's Kingdom." --William Hendriksen

There are some lessons to be learned from all this beyond the lessons Jesus was teaching in this passage.

First, be careful about using an explanation that preaches well but is

not accurate. That is an easy trap to fall into for a teacher or preacher.

Second, look to the context first in understanding any passage of Scripture. It is most likely where you will find the correct explanation. Archaeological discoveries and manuscript evidence are useful in their place, but facts matter. Contrary to one of the current members of the House of Representatives, you cannot be morally right if you are factually wrong.

Third, preachers are human, and they sometimes make mistakes. Don't let that derail your faith. Even sincere and well-intentioned people are wrong from time to time. However, a good preacher will appreciate it when factual errors are pointed out to him. He wants to learn from his mistakes and not repeat them.

Fourth, never be satisfied with an explanation just because it is "beautiful". Make sure it is true and accurate. There are a lot of beautiful songs whose lyrics are ridiculously wrong. The truth is the most beautiful thing you can find.

Fifth, don't get so wrapped up in the details of an explanation that you overlook the main point of the passage. It is easy to miss the forest for the trees. The trees are important but so is the forest. As Jesus put it, we don't want to "strain at a gnat and swallow a camel". Maybe we shouldn't strain at a camel and swallow a fictional gate.

Finally, praise the Lord for doing what is impossible with man. Thanks to Jesus, we can all be rich in spiritual things whether we are rich in material things or not.

If you are rich in material things, don't let them hinder you from entering the Kingdom of God. Be willing to do what made the rich young ruler sorrowful. Better to enter into life and the riches of Heaven poor and ragged than to be cast into hell as a formerly wealthy man.

Be sure your wealth will not follow you there. If you set your heart on riches you will lose both them and eternal life.