

“SLIMMING DOWN FOR THE NEEDLE OF GOD”

Mark 10:17-31

He is young. He is rich. He is already a success as far as this world is concerned. He's made money in real estate, buying and selling, and renting out his properties. He builds a new home for his family every five years while selling the previous home for a nice profit and paying cash for the new home. Yet his wife and two sons long for stability and time with Dad.

He is the successful salesman, but wishing to be delivered from the tantrums of his cell phone and the whispers of his secretaries. He puts in long hours, accumulates large profits, trades for a new car each year, and hopes to spend more time with his family at their lake cabin.

He is a yuppie if there ever was one. He is a winner who will do whatever it takes to keep on winning. He is a winner who runs up to Jesus, kneels before him, and wants to know, how in the end, he can keep on winning into eternity.

He asked Jesus, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Now, do you see the man's problem as Jesus saw it? This man is a winner who will not give up trying to win. The good thing is that the man has come to the realization that there is something beyond the winning in this world. He realizes there is something beyond new homes, a lake cabin, selling a product, and buying new cars. He has gotten beyond mere worldly winning to a desire for something better. But he cannot, for the life of him, imagine the pursuit of that "spiritual something" by any other means than still more winning. He is sure there must be techniques for making a spiritual profit just as there were techniques for making a business profit, and he has come to Jesus to study them. "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

Jesus, however, has his number just as he has your number and mine. "Good Teacher?? What's with all this talk about good?" Jesus asks him. Nobody's good and nobody's going to be. Maybe I'm good, but my goodness looks so much like badness that people will end up nailing me to a cross. And God, of course, really is good, but not in any way you can hope to imitate. So just knock off this goodness routine, this sales routine, this winning routine, and listen to what I'm trying to tell you."

Jesus said to him, "Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."

After Jesus tells us that “goodness” eludes us all, he then tries to challenge the young man to take an honest look at just how successful he has actually been at practicing the goodness he thinks is the answer to his problems. In other words, Jesus is hoping the man will see that the law can save no one because the law can be kept by no one.

So Jesus says to him, “Hey, you know the commandments: You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not bear false witness, you shall not defraud; honor your father and mother.”

“Why don’t you take a really good look at them?” Jesus, you see, is handing the rich young man a straight line. And the yuppie is supposed to respond with something like, “Oh, I get you. I haven’t really been a winner even at those things, so why should I run around looking for even more “good” things I can be a failure at?”

But it doesn’t work. This young man cannot even conceive of losing, so he simply cuts Jesus off with, “Oh, teacher, I’ve done all those things perfectly ever since I was a kid. Why don’t you give me a really hard, grown-up assignment?”

In verse 21, Jesus looked at him and loved him. Jesus is probably thinking to himself, “You poor man. I love you more than you’ll ever know. But it just doesn’t work that way. If you try to save your life like that, you’ll only lose it. You have to lose, L.O.S.E., your life to save it. Still, I’ll give you a shot at what I mean, just to prove I love you.”

Jesus then breaks the Good News to him about L.O.S.E. rather than W.I.N. “You only have to do one simple little thing – sell everything you have and give it to the poor. That will take care of getting your treasury of merits off your back. Then come and follow me into my death.”

And, at that saying, the young man got very gloomy in the face and went off in a deep depression because “he had great possessions” and because he couldn’t bear the thought of being a “LOSER”.

The saddest part of the whole thing, though, is that he turned his back on the only really good piece of news he would ever hear; because not that many years down the road, all that great stuff of his, the great possessions would be taken away from him anyway as they will be taken away from all of us.

And all his terrible stuff would be taken away as well; his unacknowledged failures, his broken relationships with family, friends and God.

Everything – his successful virtues as well as his success-loving vices – would someday go whistling into the ultimate no-win situation – the final, redeeming unsuccess of death.

The next saddest part of it is that - in spite of Jesus' clear insistence that no winner will ever do anything but lose - you and I go right on trying to win. Like with our rich, young man, if it's not financial success that keeps us from the saving emptiness of Jesus on the cross, then it's some kind of intellectual success or moral success. We simply will not lose; and, without losing, we will never, ever, win. Jesus teaches us over and over again that, in order to win, we first have to lose.

The cross comes before the resurrection. Bear your cross, sell what you own, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure eternally in heaven. Then come follow me. "When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions."

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!"

This is not an edict from Jesus that says, "I will make it tough on the rich." Rather, it is a sad, loving commentary on how tough the rich make it for themselves. It is Jesus grieving that he is being rejected which is the only thing that can put us in darkness rather than light. *Rejecting Jesus puts us in darkness.*

The disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them, "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."

Just like you can't stuff a camel through an opening designed to only take a thread, so you can't get someone who has a great, fat, successful life to volunteer to go through the narrow eye of lastness and death. If we do not consent to the radical slimming down that Jesus, the Needle of God, calls for, then he will not be able to pull us through into the Kingdom.

Jesus is the Divine Vacuum Cleaner who will suck everyone who is not obsessed with the wide gate of success smack into the kingdom through the narrow slot of his death on the cross. Unlike the rich, young man, we have to let go of every effort to walk the easy road of winning – and upon that letting go, Jesus will draw us home.

The disciples were greatly astounded by this and said to another, “Then who can be saved?”

Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.

Jesus looked at them. Looks are worth a thousand words. In verse 21, Jesus “looks” at the young man walking dejectedly away. In verse 27, Jesus “looks” at his disciples in their incomprehension. In his mind’s eye Jesus “looks” at his impending death on the cross. You can see in his eyes that the only thing that’s going to get evil out of the world is for him to take it into himself on the cross – to drop it down the black hole of his death, and to make a new creation by the power of his resurrection. “For God, all things are possible.”

At the end of this text Peter wants to remind Jesus that his disciples have left everything behind and followed him. I don't think Peter is looking for a payback as much as he's saying and will say again later, "Hey, no matter what happens, I'm with you all the way."

Jesus appreciates Peter's sincerity and faith. Jesus reminds him of the age to come and eternal life when Jesus will pull us through the needle of God, the gate of death to our eternal home.

In the last verse Jesus reminds us again that "many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

Are you and I slimmed down enough to be pulled through the needle of God?

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#364 – Son of God, Eternal Savior.