

Mark 10:23-31

“The prison of prosperity”

- I. **Introduction**
- II. **Vs. 23-27 A chainsaw, a blender and a syringe**
- III. **Vs. 28-31 The advantage of adversity**

I. **Introduction**

We conclude this section with the aftermath of the temporary decision of the rich young ruler, whom I believe is none other than our very own gospel writer Mark. Jesus’ words on the “*prison of prosperity*” has caused much debate for thousands of years. This has led to many a twisted interpretation of not only Christians and prosperity but the illustration Jesus chose to use of “*a camel going through an eye of a needle*”. I promise that we will give the proper interpretation both of these based upon the context this morning. But before we get to that we will need to set the scene: This passage like the story of the rich young ruler is still connected to the three essentials that all children possess. This passage breaks apart into two sections:

- A. First Jesus addresses in verses 23-27 the danger of affluence. He points out the “*trap of treasures*” upon the affluent as such wealth impedes the essential child like qualities for the kingdom of God. Those characteristics of: *Transparency, teach ability* and *transference*.
- B. Jesus’ second point is discussed in verses 28-31 where Jesus contrasts the “*prison of prosperity*” with the “*advantage of adversity*” as it relates to producing those essential qualities for the kingdom of God!

II. **Vs. 23-27 A chainsaw, a blender and a syringe**

Vs. 23-24 *Jesus doesn’t declare the impossibility of a wealthy person getting saved, but the difficulty of him getting saved.* The disciples were astonished at the type of kingdom God had: A place where it is essential to possess the characteristics of a child and a

disadvantage to be a person of means. Especially sense the Jews regard affluence as a token of God's favor and Jesus says the opposite. We would not associate the wealthy as being "*disadvantaged*" yet clearly Jesus did. The Scottish historian Thomas Carlyle once observed that "*For every hundred men who can withstand adversity, only one can withstand prosperity!*"

Vs. 25-27 The astonishment of verse 24 now broke into despair with regards to the salvation of all, "*If the rich couldn't achieve salvation how could the poor*"? The affluent had advantages that others didn't have and the disciples believed this gave them a greater advantage not only in this present life but for the kingdom of God. The thought was that they could "buy" their way to a better place. Prosperity has nothing to do with salvation or spiritual health for that matter. There is no more "*righteousness in riches*" than there is "*piety in poverty*"; a mistake that the early church made as they took vows of poverty and took up life in monasteries.

Because of the disciple's astonishment Jesus has to repeat His truth and even use an illustration. I have read for years the multiple ways well meaning people have tried to interpret this passage that would allow under difficult circumstance the affluent being able to acquire the essential traits to enter the kingdom of God. The most popular interpretation of this illustration is that there was a gate in the wall that surrounded Jerusalem that allowed unloaded camels to pass through if they got on their knees. In this story this gate was known as the "*eye of the needle*" or the camel's gate. So **in this interpretation the point is that if you humble yourself, unload the advantages of affluence from your life get on your knees you can make into the kingdom of God.**

Those that hold to this interpretation point out Jesus words to the rich young ruler and his

reluctance as the reason that their interpretation is correct. While I agree that the interpretation is consistent with the story it is not consistent with the context. First there are **three small matters**:

- The word for needle does not refer to a gate but the tiny eye of a sewing needle.
- They were not at Jerusalem when Jesus said these words, so the illustration didn't match the geography.
- They have never found any historical or archeological evidence that there was a gate or a situation that required such a gate in Jerusalem or else where.

Simply put the interpretation of this illustration is made up! This interpretation has about as much relevance to the story as the the boy who answered his Sunday school teacher. The teacher was trying to pound the point of the illustration home to his class with the use of props. He held up a sewing needle and a life size picture of a camel and asked if it was possible to get a camel through the needle. Expecting to get the correct answer from the students he was surprised when a boy with a big imagination answered YES! When the teacher asked how? The boy said, "*Why all I need is three things: a chainsaw, a blender and a syringe*"! The reason I reject this interpretation of the "*eye of the needle*" is the context of the passage as it gives us the answer. The disciples clearly understood the illustration as they were again astonished and asked "*Who then can be saved*" to which Jesus responded, "*with men it is **IMPOSSIBLE**...*" That was the point of the illustration to demonstrate the **impossibility** of not only the affluent being saved but all men being saved apart from God. The wealthy have no more advantage than the poor have a disadvantage it is impossible for all apart from God. Now remember that **this has to do with the three essentials necessary for the entrance into the kingdom of God** that all children posses that adults and especially the affluent lack.

Transparency: Affluence destroys the child like characteristic of *self evaluation* as it creates a false sense of security that is dependent upon secondary values. The affluent aren't concerned where their next meal is coming from; their only concern is whether or not they will like what they are eating. They are not concerned about whether or not they will have clothing or shelter only if what they are wearing or where they are staying is fashionable. ***The affluent are more concerned about secondary things than they are primary things. So the evaluation of their own heart and lack tends to be on external things not internal things.*** Thus often the concern of the spiritual aspects of their life are in their surroundings not the condition of their own heart. It is for this reason that Jesus said that the affluent were at a disadvantage when it came to being open to change as they were *less likely to examine their own life* as to what needed to change and *more likely to try to change their surroundings!*

Teach ability: As a whole the affluent are less teachable as *their wealth has created in them a sense of success which they attribute to superior knowledge.* Instead of humility and a teachable spirit the affluent are often afflicted with arrogance. ***The affluent would much rather people listen to them, than to listen and learn from others. They would much rather be served than to serve and because of this they are much more inclined to demand their way than seek God's way.***

Transference: Finally, affluence removes people from the realities of life the consequences of disobedience. *Life on earth becomes the affluent person's heaven!* It can gradually cause people *to be so dependent upon the "good life" that they won't let go for the "better life". They become owned by what they own, possessed by what they possess, left cling to the very things that entrap them to this temporary life.* This is why Jesus warned against the affluent life as it has an inherent danger of keeping folks from the three essential child like traits necessary for the kingdom of God.

But note this, Jesus says with man it is impossible but not with God, with God all things are possible. That's grace! We will see this change in the example of our rich young ruler, John Mark, who turned down the offer of Jesus and went away sorrowful only to be found at Jesus' arrest where he will leave even his clothes behind to follow Him. Yes, riches can remove us and keep us from these traits that are essential for the kingdom but God can remove us from the enslavement to of our treasures and return us to a transparent, teachable and transferent heart. ***It is marvelous to see a wealthy person in the hands of the living God freed from what they possess because they are so thoroughly possessed by Jesus!*** They realize that they are only stewards of God's resources not owners of wealth. They begin to freely invest into the kingdom of God and

instead of worrying about their investments. They are more concerned over their own moral bankruptcy and spiritual poverty than their portfolios.

III. Vs. 28-31 The advantage of adversity

Vs. 28-31 Jesus now moves of to the contrast between the “*prison of prosperity*” with the “*advantage of adversity*” as it relates to producing those essential qualities for the kingdom of God! The key to this section is Jesus’ closing statement of “*But many who are first will be last, and the last first.*” This phrase of Jesus’ has caused many through church history to interpret this to mean that Christians should do what Jesus said to John Mark, the rich young ruler. That is to sell everything they own and give it to the poor if you are going to be a true follower of Jesus. But again the context of this final phrase eliminates this as the meaning. Jesus had said this in response to Peter’s assertion of what they gave up to follow Jesus. Jesus’ response indicates that Peter was still missing the point that *poverty didn’t lead to piety any more than riches led to righteousness.* Jesus wasn’t referring to external things but an inward attitude of the heart that recognizes that all we have is a gift from God and gifts from God are meant to be shared, not hoarded or squandered. We do not own our possessions and finances we are stewards over the things God has entrusted to us. We are responsible to take care of our needs and the needs of our family’s. It may come as a surprise to some of you that one of those needs is our enjoyment and pleasure as Paul wrote to Timothy in 1 Timothy 6:17 that “*God, gives us richly all things to enjoy.*” We should enjoy “all things” that God has given us as we are being responsible as good stewards. It is interesting that with this change of attitude concerning what God has given us we become more free and secure than if we believe that everything we have belongs to us. When we see our self’s as stewards and we see a

lose in wealth and resources we see it as God limiting His provision instead of us losing money. When our financial situation changes we aren't devastated as we realize it wasn't ours it was all His and this change was His doing not ours. We also will recognize that our true wealth is in the "riches we have in Christ" not material things that can be affected by "rust, moth and thief". As such there is nothing that can ever happen to take away our wealth in Christ instead the only thing that can affect our true wealth is when we fail and see our earthly assets as ours and of greater value than our eternal treasures!

The truth Jesus told Peter was that *we never give up anything for God that He hasn't first given us!* Second Jesus told Peter that *you never turn over anything that God won't restore to you a hundredfold.* That words "*hundredfold*" doesn't mean 100% but 100X as much. In other words, *we aren't just receiving back what we gave back to God but 100 times that!* You might have noticed that little two words "*with persecutions*" in verse 30. Jesus offers 100 times the *persecution* along with all the blessings of "*houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children and lands*". Now persecutions don't seem to be a blessed advantage in the Christian life do they? But according to Jesus they are "*blessed persecutions*" when we have enemies because of our faith as believers they indicate that we are living with the right priorities and essential child like characteristics. They also enable us to stay transparent, teachable and transferent.