

Keep Your Eye on the Camel¹

(Preached by Cheryl Williams at FBC, October 13th, 2024, Hebrews 4:12-16& Mark 10:17-31)

I come from a good family. We are fairly well off and don't want for much. I have a significant bank balance, mostly inherited wealth. I am a fairly devout person; I go to synagogue every week and I listen intently to the teaching of the Rabbi and when I go home, I really try to put into practice what he has said. I read the Torah, and I know the commandments back to front and do my best to keep them all.

Truth is though, I have a question that I grapple with every day, it won't go away, and I need to try and find an answer to it, I can't seem to find the answer in my reading and listening. I want to know what else I need to do to inherit eternal life. I have heard about this new teacher who seems to be doing amazing things with people and think I might make my way to him and see what he has to say, to see if he can help me with the answer.

I heard he was passing by, so I took the opportunity to meet with him. I thought I should show him some respect, and that I was really serious, and sincere with my questioning, I wasn't like others he encountered and trying to trap him. I just needed to know what else there was, I needed to find an answer to life's ultimate question.

So, I asked him – what do I need to do to inherit eternal life? I'd called him 'good teacher' to be respectful, but he turned that around and reminded me that only God was good. Then he reminded me of some of the commandments, the ones that had to do with others, with my relationships – of course I knew them backwards, and had kept them all my life. Then came the challenge, and what a challenge it was. He looked at me with warmth, he wasn't being judgmental, but he told me I lacked one thing. Okay, I was up for it, or so I thought. He told me to go and sell everything, give the proceeds to the poor and follow him.

What – too much! How could I give it all up? After all I wasn't made of the same stuff as Zaccheus who did the right thing and gave back what he had taken dishonestly. Why? I had never done anything wrong. I wasn't tough like those fishermen who gave up their fishing and followed him, anyway they could always go back to that if need be. If I gave up everything I had, I would have nothing. Just wasn't ready for that, wasn't made for the destitute life. So, I turned away, sad, despondent, back to life as I knew it, even though that wasn't satisfying either.

It was as though this poem was written about me.²

“One thing you lack,” Jesus said,

To him who lacked for nothing.

“Sell what you own and follow me”

And there was warmth in Jesus' eyes,

There was love for him who questioned

¹ Title taken from p.86 'Life on the Road – the gospel basis for a Messianic Lifestyle' by Athol Gill, Lancer Books NSW, 1989.

² Last two stanzas of poem "The Questioning" by Andrew King found at A Poetic Kind of Place

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*About inheriting eternal life.
But then
Such sadness in their depths
As he turned away.
Now today his thoughts, unsettled,
Gray as dull daybreak,
Interrogate the hollow
In his soul.*

*Behind him in his rooms
Stretch the trophies of the years,
The gathered costly trinkets
That once so warmed his heart.
But their colours seem now cold
And today he is uncertain
About what is and is not 'treasure'.
And he cannot turn his face
From the window.
He cannot
Turn his gaze from the road.*

I have now spent many years pondering if I had made the right decision that day, in turning away. If I had stuck around, I would have heard Jesus explain in greater depth what he meant. Entering the kingdom of God, or in other words, inheriting eternal life is difficult for wealthy people, more difficult than a camel going through the eye of a needle.

No wonder the disciples were shocked, this was an absurd analogy, impossible. Over the years many people have tried to explain what Jesus meant. I heard someone had talked about the eye of the needle being a small hole in the wall around Jerusalem that could be entered once the city gates were shut, although camels, the biggest animals we knew of, couldn't pass through unless they were unloaded. Sure, that helps try and explain how it is possible for a camel to pass through the eye of the needle and provides a good moral, that if we unload our possessions, then it is possible. A bit like the experiment where you try to put a boiled egg into a bottle, into which it clearly cannot fit – unless you put some lit matches in the bottom of the bottle and quickly put the egg in the neck of the bottle, the gases will mean the egg changes and is able to squeeze through. Trouble is no such gate or hole exists. The idea remains absurd, it is impossible.

Keeping an eye on the camel is missing the point a bit. It is what Jesus says after that is the important thing. With God all things are possible. Time to focus back on God rather than on self. A bit like a I missed the final point Jesus said, I was so focused on what I had to give up that I didn't really hear him say and 'follow me'. I was so focused on the power, the security, the lifestyle, the money that I would have to give up that I had almost forgotten what my initial question was.

As I look back, I wonder if Jesus was inviting me to not just live by the letter of the law but to live its essence. When I think about the commandments, the ones we talked about they were all about relationships, about how one should treat their neighbours. Perhaps the way I treat others might be part of the key to inheriting eternal life?

Maybe I have looked at this all the wrong way. Perhaps it is God in the person of Jesus who is the gate to eternal life. As I look back, I remember how Jesus looked at me, it was the look of love. Maybe it wasn't what I did that mattered as much as learning to accept that God in his grace had opened the way for me, all I needed to do was accept that and then everything else would follow. Maybe then my dependence on my stuff would disappear and I would gladly share it with others, I could let go and truly love my neighbours and the poor in both words and action. Maybe that is what the kingdom of God is all about, maybe that would bring blessings one hundred-fold like Jesus told his disciples.

So let me give you some advice based on my experience if I may, after all I don't want you to live a sad and despondent existence always wondering what if.

- Like a writer later would say the word of God is a double-edged sword, we need to let it interrogate our lives, a bit like Jesus did with me, let it challenge you, sit with feeling uncomfortable for a while.
- We need to be honest and acknowledge that, in reality, we are among some of the richest people in the world and Jesus calls us to share what we have, to give to the poor. How we use our possessions and wealth is deeply connected to how we live out God's commandments. Are we happy to have treasure in the world or do we desire treasure in heaven/eternal life/kingdom of God?
- Holding onto possessions doesn't really bring you happiness, often it is a burden – you have to find a place to store them, you have to maintain them, is that really living? How does that help you participate in the kingdom of God? Cutting ties with stuff will bring freedom, freedom to follow Jesus wherever he calls us.
- Think about what stops you from living the life you are called to, what gets in the way, what trips you up, what holds you back – is it the desire for stuff, for power, for a particular lifestyle? What, to use Jesus' analogy, is your camel that can't get through the eye of the needle?
- Maybe sharing what you have will bring you more joy than you think.
- God is the one who makes things possible – it is with God's help that we find the strength to do difficult things, it is God who energizes and enables us to do the seemingly impossible.

Learn from me, learn from the way Jesus challenged me. Don't make the same choice as I did and walk away downcast and live a life of regret and wondering, put love into action and enjoy blessings one hundredfold. Jesus calls his followers to follow him, turning the world upside down and doing the seemingly impossible. Amen.