

**HOMILY AT ST. MATTHEW ORTHODOX CHURCH  
SUNDAY, AUGUST 27TH, 2023**

**MATTHEW 19: 16-26**

**“CAMELS AND NEEDLES”**

In April, 1941, Hitler conquered Yugoslavia. Before the capital, Belgrade, was taken, King Peter and his cabinet ministers arranged a special airplane flight to escape the Nazis' clutches. And they decided to rob their own country of as much of the gold in the National Bank as they could! So heavy cases of gold, as many as space allowed, were put on the plane. Their escape succeeded---they evaded the German air force and made it to freedom. But a tragedy occurred on the way. They ran into heavy turbulence which gave the plane a rough shaking. All the shaking shifted the stacked cases of gold and the top one fell off and landed on one of the cabinet members, instantly crushing him to death. The love for gold turned a successful escape into a tragedy. (Tito and the Fall of Yugoslavia, Richard West, Carroll & Graf, 1996, p. 71)

Gold, money, wealth---very dangerous things! Especially to our souls! In today's gospel lesson from Matthew 19 a very rich young man comes up to our Lord and basically asks how to get to heaven. Jesus tells him to obey the 10 Commandments. He says he is already doing that---and then asks what more he should do to be saved. Jesus tells him to sell all he owns and then take all his riches and give them to the poor.

That commandment was just too much for the young man. He wanted to go to heaven, but he didn't want it enough to go quickly from being wealthy to being poor. We hear the sad ending to the story in verse 22---“When the young man heard this, he went away sorrowful; for he had great possessions.” And so the encounter has a very sad end---because walking away from Jesus Christ is the saddest thing any of us can ever do!

The Church Fathers, our spiritual guides, are clear that this passage does not mean that everyone must give all away to be saved. But some are called by God to do so. And we should be willing to do just that if God asks us, too. And the Lord does ask that of some people just like He asked it of the young man that day long ago. Some of those He still asks to do that are our monks and nuns---and they obey him.

So why did Christ ask for such radical behavior from this particular fellow? Probably because the man was way too attached to his wealth. It was spiritually crushing him like the gold on the plane crushed the cabinet member fleeing Yugoslavia in 1941! Jesus could see into the man's heart---his wealth would destroy him spiritually. His only hope was to give it all away! But he wouldn't do it and walked away.

Then Christ went on to tell His Disciples how hard it is for the rich to be saved---in verse 23: “And Jesus said to His disciples, ‘Truly I say to you, it will be hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you---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.’”

Tough indeed for the wealthy to go to heaven---tougher than getting a camel through the eye of a needle! And that's not easy!

I avoid sewing. But there have been a few times I have at least attempted to sew on a button. And it is really hard for me, with my clumsy fingers, to get that thread through that tiny little eye on the needle! And if I can hardly do *that*, just imagine getting a camel through it!

The Lord is using humorous hyperbole, of course, to strongly make a point. It's tough for the rich to be saved! Perhaps He spoke so strongly because this would be a hard thing for the disciples to accept. The common Jewish thinking of that time was that it was the *poor* who would have the hardest time being saved----that it wasn't so hard for the rich! So as was common for Him, the Lord just turned normal thinking totally upside down!

The 12 expressed their shock in verse 25---"When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished, saying, 'Who then can be saved?'" But Jesus encouraged them to not give up hope by saying famous words in verse 26---"With men, this impossible, but with God, all things are possible."

With God, it's possible for a camel to get through a needle's eye. And with God, it's possible for a rich man to go to heaven. But still very hard. The great English writer, C. S. Lewis, wrote---"Even if it is possible to get a camel through the eye of a needle, it will be very rough on the camel!" (quoted in *Pastor, William Willimon*, Abingdon Press, 2000, p. 297) Possible, but tough. Hard on the camels---namely, hard on us!

Now, I'm sure many are reacting to all this by thinking---"Well, all very interesting---but of no interest to be because I'm not rich." Ah, but if we compare ourselves to our world as a whole, almost all of us really are rich. Not quite all---our food pantry does get used! But the vast majority of us, compared to the whole world, are wealthy.

We generally live comfortably---cars that start most of the time, a roof over our head, clothes to wear..... And the quickest way to see this truth---plenty of food! Food is a big problem in much of the world. The problem is---not enough! And many suffering from hunger. And food is also a big problem in our nation----but the problem is too *much* food!

You know what a popular topic for conversation dieting is-----what to eat to get thin, which diet program is best, how to control our appetites when there is a seemingly infinite amount of food available..... But I'm pretty sure in the nation of Haiti, conversations about diets and losing weight are very rare!

Yes, we are rich; almost all of us. So we have a problem---how will we get into heaven? How we will get that camel (us!) through the eye of the needle? Only with God's help, and with His help, anything is possible. But we have to do our part as well. We have to be cooperative camels.

There is a biblical principle that we should live by that will help us cooperate with God to get through the eye of a needle. It is called "stewardship". The scriptures teach us that we don't really own what we think we own. All we have is not really *ours*---it all belongs to God. He turns it over to us temporarily, He loans it to us, so that we can be good stewards of what is really His---and use what He loans us for His glory and to help His poor.

In the fall our parish will have our annual stewardship campaign and you will hear teaching about giving to God through the church to help the work God does through His church. Supporting our parish with our giving is obviously a very important part of our

serving God. So I'm jumping the gun today by talking about stewardship because today's assigned gospel lesson is about it.

When we give to the parish, we are actually giving to the needy because our annual budget always contains help for the needy—through our work at St. Herman Shelter, our food pantry, etc. But to finish today, I will focus on the type of stewardship that involves our own *individual* help for the needy... and we have many opportunities for that!

First, we as individuals and families can help the needy *through ministries in our parish*-----donating to our food pantry, donating grocery gift cards to the parish to distribute, cooking and serving in the meals we do at St. Herman Shelter, donating and/or working on our 2 street delivery ministries (one is monthly, one is quarterly), our food donation box for St. Mary of Egypt Mission, our Christmas Gifts For Kids program, our holiday food deliveries to homes, archdiocese sponsored offerings to help with various disasters in our country and the world, etc.

Second, we can help the needy *outside of our parish ministries*. Again, all kinds of possibilities: that neighbor that needs some help, a relative in a bind, all the various charities to help the hungry, somebody in the parish that is really struggling, those in prison, those in other types of needy situations, the beggar that asks you for a little cash, etc.....

There are so many ways that we can help the needy and so cut our ties to our wealth some, cooperating with God to get ourselves through the eye of the needle!

All we have is a gift from God. None of it is really ours. St. Basil the Great, about 1600 years ago, wrote this---“The bread in your cupboard belongs to the poor; the coat in your closet belongs to the poor.”

St. Basil said that because all we have belongs to Christ----and as Christ told us in Matthew 25, He most definitely comes to us in the poor.

There is a Greek story about a woman who prayed a lot! She spoke to Christ at great length and every day. One day, she made a very special request---“Lord, I love you so much and I want to see you. Can you please visit my house and have dinner with me?” And the Lord answered---He said, “Yes, I will visit your home tomorrow.” The woman was very happy and the next morning started a whirlwind of work, cleaning every inch of her home, cooking up a great meal, etc. Then she got interrupted by a knock at the door. She almost fainted for joy, assuming it was Jesus Himself! She opened the door to see a very poorly dressed elderly man, leaning on crutches. He said he was very hungry and asked to please have some food. The woman was upset and said, “I'm just too busy to even deal with you! An important guest is coming---you need to leave right away!” The man said, “But I am so hungry---could you please just give me a slice of bread?” Now the woman because so angry she screamed at the beggar and even slapped him in the face. He turned around and limped away down the road.

The day went on---and Jesus never showed up. She was very disappointed and saddened. The next day, in her prayers, she complained, saying---“Lord, you promised you would come visit me but you never came... what happened?” And Christ answered and said, “But I did come! I knocked on your door and asked for food. You refused to feed me and became very angry. You yelled at me and even slapped me!” Horrified, the woman realized the poor crippled man was Jesus! (Juliet Du Boulay, Cosmos, Life, & Liturgy in a

Greek Orthodox Village, Denise Hawey Publishers, 2009, p. 359)

Jesus Christ comes to us in the poor. When we help the needy, we are helping Him as He clearly teaches us in Matthew 25: 31-46. And by helping Him, we also help ourselves. You might say we are making the eye of the needle bigger, making it easier for us (we who are camels) to squeeze through to the other side, to heaven.

Almost all of us are wealthy compared to the human race as a whole---so it is hard for us to be saved. But our gospel reading tells us----that with God all things are possible. So let us work together with God's grace to be good stewards of all God has given us. And a main way of being a good steward, is to generously help the needy. May God help us camels to do that!