

Jesus and the early Christians regarded husband and wife as 'one flesh' and inseparable (see 10:7,8,9). They could not be 'abandoned' for Christ, and neither would God expect that.

Peter was an example of one who had given up everything for Jesus without reservation or expectation from the very beginning, and Jesus accepted this confession from Peter's lips (10:28). This was the kind of unreserved response which Jesus wanted, and still asks of each person He calls. From the point of view of Scripture, this remains the only starting point for the journey of faith and the path of discipleship which ends with entry into the Kingdom of God, the salvation of the individual and eternal life! God promises through Scripture that if we give everything away, then however much God gives us back to share with others on our earthly journey, we will gain immeasurable riches in glory!

Application

It is extraordinary to think that we are content today to 'lead people to Christ', offer baptism and confirmation, and eventually membership of a church to people, often before they have considered whether their new found faith has any bearing on the level of wealth they possess. This is largely because in most modern societies we tend to work on the presumption that a person's wealth is a private matter which is between that individual and God. Certainly, people today who come across the demands of this passage of Scripture after they have 'become a Christian', will sometimes read it and debate it, but not accept it as a basic requirement which must be met before they can assume that they have any firm hold on the path of discipleship and the blessing of eternal life!

For this reason, many a church is full of people who are not truly in contact with the faith they claim. Not one true Christian has any merit before God, and there is no Christian who is loved of God more than another; all of us depend solely on God's free offering of grace; but what do we find in most churches? People are full of presumptions about how godly this person or that is, and many a church is far more strongly influenced by people with money than those who have little, which seems at complete odds with the characteristics of the Kingdom of God which Jesus mentioned. In addition, submission of everything to God is not something we can represent merely by way of the 'symbolic' giving of a tithe; for example, tithing means little if someone has not offered all they have to the Lord first of all. However, if we have, then the tithe is a true representation of that offering.

There is only one way of true discipleship by which we are saved and come at last into God's eternal Kingdom, and that is by putting all else aside, leaving it, and offering ourselves to God in unfettered and free service, devoid of wealth, power and status. There can be no other conclusion to this passage of Scripture.

Questions (for use in groups)

1. Which part of this passage of Scripture speaks most to people of our own time?
2. What is the popular perception of who a Christian is, and does this bear any relationship to those who enter the Kingdom of God, as in this passage?
3. There is some indication in this passage of some exceptions to the rule about giving up everything in order to become a follower of Jesus. Are there others?

Discipleship

Take the opportunity to make a written note of those things you have given up in order to follow the path of Christian discipleship. How painful has it been to be without some of these things? Have you completely let these things go? And are there more things which you know you have to let go if you are to continue in the path God has set before you? These are all important questions which cannot be dismissed easily. Spend as much time as you can with these, and see what the Lord has to say to you.

Final Prayer

We praise You, Almighty God, for all the things you teach us. We cannot learn everything all at once, and You understand that we have limitations, so lead us to what You want us to know and what You want us to do for You, each day. We praise You for Your glory: AMEN

Prayer

Your love, Lord God, knows no limits. You are willing to go anywhere to show us this love, You are willing to spend any time waiting for us to respond to it, and You are willing to give Yourself completely, through Jesus Christ, so that we might know Your love and benefit from it. Open our hearts so that we do not turn away from Your Love, but receive it. Thank You Lord God: AMEN

Other Prayer Suggestions

Weekly Theme: Self and Sin

Pray for those people who struggle with a personal sense of unworthiness before God. We all need a realistic sense of what is right and wrong, but if someone's thoughts are dominated by a sense of not being good enough, it can adversely affect their life and relationships. Pray for such people to be wisely counselled about the love of God which breaks down all sin.

Meditation

The love of God delights us

Like the smile of a baby and the grasp of its hand.

The love of God surprises us

Like the joy of unexpectedly meeting a close friend.

The love of God enlightens us

Like the brilliance of the sun which brings dawn, each day.

The love of God reaches out to us

Like the hand of a lover, whose touch means more than words.

The love of God encourages us

Like the words of a father or mother, proud of our achievements.

The love of God strengthens us

Like the presence of an expert who guides, teaches and inspires us.

The love of God empowers us

Like the 'bread and wine' which feeds our souls by the power of the Spirit.

The love of God means everything to us.

Bible Study - Mark 10:23-31

²³ Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, 'How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God!' ²⁴ The disciples were amazed at His words; but Jesus said to them again, 'My children, how hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God! ²⁵ 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.' ²⁶ They were utterly astonished and said to one another, 'so, who then can be saved?' ²⁷ Jesus looked at them and said, 'It is impossible for ordinary people, but not for God. All things are possible with God.'

²⁸ Peter said to Him, 'Look, we have given up everything to follow You.' ²⁹ 'Amen, I tell to you,' Jesus said, 'There is no-one who has given up house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children or land because of me and the Gospel ³⁰ who will not receive one hundred times more right now; houses, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and lands (and not without persecutions); but in the age to come they will have eternal life. ³¹ But many who are first will be last, and the last, first.'

Review

This is an important passage from Mark's Gospel, and it contains the famous saying of Jesus about riches and the Kingdom of God; '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' (10:25). Our reading today follows the story of the wealthy man who was unable to leave behind all his wealth and give it to the poor (10:21f. see yesterday's study), and Jesus gave the parable in our reading today to teach an important truth. He said that not only were riches and wealth a barrier to discipleship (10:21,22), they were also a complete barrier to entry into the Kingdom. There is no doubt that Jesus intended

to stress the point that personal wealth and the Kingdom of God were incompatible, and the possession of one excluded the possession of the other. The disciples were shocked by this, and they had never heard anything like it. They had been brought up on stories of the 'forefathers' (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob) for whom wealth was a sign of God's Covenant blessing; so how could Jesus' teaching possibly be true (10:26)?

What Jesus said about the camel and the eye of a needle has attracted much attention. One very popular theory that can be heard in pulpits even today is that there was once a gate in the wall of Jerusalem called the 'eye of the needle'. This was so small that in order to pass through it, camels had to be dismounted and have all baggage removed so that the camel could be manhandled through the gate. Of course, a good preacher can use all this as an illustration to describe the necessity of stripping away all wealth before entering the gate into the city. However, no such gate exists (though there are plenty of small ones) or has existed; the myth has been created to explain Jesus' parable! Now, if such a gate had existed (they have been found in other cities), then Jesus would have known that once a camel was pushed through the narrow gate as described, an oriental traveller would have hauled his baggage through by hand, replaced it on the camel and continued on, wealth and all! This is obviously completely opposite to what Jesus was clearly attempting to convey!

The continuance of this myth makes it appear that we who have wealth today are to trying to alter the clear meaning of Jesus' words about possessing wealth and entry into the Kingdom. Jesus said that it was 'impossible' for people to take anything with them from this earth to the next. Also, in this and many other parables, Jesus also said plainly that people could not get into the Kingdom by any human means. People could only enter by the gift and grace of God who makes the impossible become possible (10:27).

Peter was aware of what had happened previously with the wealthy young man (10:21,22), and despite his astonishment, sought to justify himself and the other disciples to Jesus. He said; 'Look, we have given up everything to follow You'. For once, Jesus' reply was positive (10:29), and He went some way to help Peter (and us) understand something about the blessings and wealth God's people are sometimes given within this world. He promised that everything handed over for the sake of the Gospel (10:29,30) would be returned many times over. However, this would not mean that any such worldly 'wealth' could protect anyone from persecution, or play any part in someone's eternal salvation. The rules of the Kingdom of God were the opposite of what happened on earth; those 'who are first will be last, and the last, first.' (10:31).

In reading this passage, we naturally focus on the issue of wealth, just as the disciples did, it is probably not what Jesus wanted His listeners to do. The truly important theme here is 'entry into the Kingdom', and if wealth has no bearing on this, what does? The answer is that we must trust completely in Jesus' promise that God will do for us what we cannot do for ourselves (10:27). This is the only path of entry into the Kingdom, and our acceptance of this is essential to our spiritual health now, not just in eternity!

Going Deeper

Our reading today takes us closer to the reality of what Jesus intended to do for all people by going to Jerusalem. He, and He alone would die and rise again (10:32-34) in order to provide the only way for men and women to gain salvation and enter God's Kingdom. Our reading also has some interesting features which teach us not just about what attitude we should have towards wealth, but also what sacrifices are and are not required for true discipleship.

Who may enter the Kingdom, and how?

Jesus' first comment in verse 23 is a natural response to what had just happened. An earnest but wealthy man had just turned down Jesus completely (10:22) because he preferred to keep hold of his wealth. It was, perhaps an honest response, more honest than that of trying to pretend that one can keep hold of wealth and still enter the Kingdom, after Jesus has said quite flatly that this is impossible!

When Jesus said that a camel could not go through the eye of a needle, He was not doing anything other than using a well-known saying of the day which meant that it was impossible for a rich man to enter into the Kingdom of God. There are a number of recorded rabbinical sayings about elephants and hippopotamus' failing to do the same, and these different varieties of essentially the same saying indicate the nature of the humour involved and the hilarity with

which it was usually used. However, Jesus did not use this as a joke, far from it, and this may well have been part of the reason for the shock and amazement of the disciples. It was no laughing matter for Jesus to completely reverse something which was basic to Jewish understanding. This was that if you did what God required of you, then He would bless you, to a degree, with earthly blessings and wealth. The reason for this belief was simple; it was what had happened to the 'forefathers' (see above).

The problem that the disciples had and which people still have today, is that we tend to equate worldly wealth with God's blessing and the privilege of entry into eternal life. The whole of our passage today contains Jesus' powerful teaching which says that they are not. God does indeed give people earthly blessings, as He did to the 'forefathers' in order to help them establish the firm foundations for a nation of God's people; and He has continued to give people worldly wealth in different measure and for other purposes ever since. Indeed, this is the very point that Jesus makes in the second half of our reading, where He says that what people have given up for His sake and that of the Gospel will be returned to them many times over, but this is different from the gift of eternal life (10:30). Entry into the Kingdom is according to the gift of God, through Jesus Christ, because it is something we cannot access through our normal human faculties, assumptions, deeds, words or wishes.

Indeed, if you look at everything Jesus says in verse 23 to 27 and relegate the famous saying about the camel and the needle to the status of a mere example, then everything becomes clear. His first words are a reaction to the wealthy young man, 'How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the Kingdom of God!' (10:23). Then after the disciples show amazement at this apparent hardness of Jesus, He says again with personal emphasis; 'My children, how hard it is to enter the Kingdom of God!' (10:24). When the disciples react by saying; 'who then can be saved' (10:26), Jesus looks the disciples firmly in the eye (which is what the Greek implies at the beginning of verse 27) and says 'It is impossible for ordinary people, but not for God. All things are possible with God.' Entry into the Kingdom is impossible except for the love and mercy of God, and it was Jesus' task to reveal the truth of God's love and mercy through His life, death and resurrection.

There is one small point worth considering about this passage of Scripture, and it is something you may have noticed. If you read through the whole passage, you will find yourself reading at one point about 'entering the Kingdom of God' (10:23,24,25,etc), but when talking about the same thing later on in the passage, the disciples talk about being 'saved' (10:26), and Jesus talks about having 'eternal life' (10:30). This might not be the only place in Scripture where these three terms are used to describe essentially the same thing, but it is important. The Kingdom of God is the rule and authority of God which we experience in part now, but will one day come in glory. Salvation is the gift of God through Jesus Christ whereby we are brought by God's grace into that Kingdom; again, in part now, but one day in glory. Eternal life is the future glory which we see now only by faith in Jesus Christ.

It is perhaps a sign of the importance of this passage that all three words occur within it.

Giving things up to the Lord and receiving them back.

It would be wrong of us to give everything up for the Lord with the express motive of getting back more, purely on the basis of Jesus' promises of a return on our spiritual investment given in Mark 10:29 and 30! Jesus listed 'home, family and land' as what had to be given up to become a disciple and get ready for the Kingdom of God, but said that all these would be given back many times over. This was the experience of the Christians of the early church who began by sharing all things in common so that everyone could have access to far more than what they needed individually (see Acts 2:43-47 etc.), and such communal sharing has been a feature of important and successful Christian communities throughout history.

It is interesting to note, however, that there is a slight difference between the two lists; the first of these describes what is given away to God (10:29), and the second describes what is given back by God (10:30). A 'father' is mentioned in the first list, but not in the second! It is possible that the reason for this is that once someone has given all things to God, the He becomes our 'Father', and no earthly 'father' can replace Him. An example of this may be that when Jesus' family is mentioned in Scripture during His ministry, there is no mention made of his earthly father (some think Joseph died, but this is pure speculation). Certainly, Jesus regarded God as His 'Father', and addressed Him as such (Mark 14:36). Another difference between the lists is this; there is no mention of 'wives' or 'husbands' in either list, and the reason for this is because