

## CAMEL MAGIC

I imagine you don't think about camels very often. Maybe you've seen one in the zoo or at a circus. Maybe you think of them as a little goofy looking, and agree with the wag who once said a camel is simply a horse designed by a committee. But all that said, you've probably *not* given camels much thought. And when you do think about them, it probably reminds you of far-off deserts and old black and white movies about the French foreign legion. Indeed, for most of us, camels are pretty far removed from day-to-day life here in Fairfield County.

But that was not the case in Jesus' time. Camels were very much a part of daily life. They were a primary means of transportation. They were the ships of the desert. Caravans of camels loaded with all sorts of merchandise criss-crossed the region day and night. They were the UPS trucks of the day. "What can brown and furry do for you?"

Camels were also the biggest animals in that part of the ancient world. So when Jesus wanted to illustrate just how difficult it is for a rich person to gain eternal life, he couldn't have pictured it in a more graphic or humorous way. Everybody knew how big a camel was—and everybody knew the tiny size of a sewing needle. Put a camel through the eye of a needle? Now that would be some trick!

But that's how hard it is, Jesus said, for someone who's wealthy to inherit eternal life. It's a bit of a paradox, for even us twenty first century suburbanites can see that a camel can't pass through the eye of a needle. So does that mean rich people won't have eternal life? Does that mean they can never find peace with God?

Not exactly. But what it does mean is of great significance to all of us—whether we're rich or poor or somewhere in between. So let's take a closer look at the story.

Clearly it's an important one. We find it recorded not only here in the gospel of Mark, but also, with minor variations, in Matthew and Luke as well.

There was a rich man, who was maybe young, and maybe in a position of authority in his synagogue. Hence, he is sometimes called the rich young ruler. He approaches Jesus with a key question. A question that has plagued almost every human generation: "What must I do to inherit eternal life?"

We don't know how rich this fellow was. We don't know if he was a Donald Trump, or a successful hedge fund CEO or just the owner of two or three condos in Jerusalem. But obviously he was a man who had discovered that if he worked hard, if he did all the right things, it paid off. So it is only natural that he would ask,

**“What must I *do* to inherit eternal life?” To him it was one more acquisition, one more investment, one more accomplishment.**

**Jesus responds with a virtual to-do list: in essence, a summary of the Ten Commandments. Don’t steal. Don’t commit adultery. Honor your parents, and so on.**

**But the rich man had already done these things, and somehow it still felt like something was missing. He had kept the law, he had done the right things, but there was still an empty, gnawing feeling deep in his soul. He just wasn’t sure that all was right between God and himself.**

**“Well,” says Jesus, “there is one more thing you could do.”**

**The rich man’s ears perk up. Here at last was the answer to his uncertainties. But then what Jesus suggests practically blows him away: “Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” (Mark 10:21b)**

**Everything? Every last stitch? The house? The stocks and bonds? Even the red Porsche? Yes. Everything. He is to sell it all, give away the proceeds, and then join up with Jesus’ traveling troupe of disciples.**

**Now the important thing to note here is that Jesus doesn’t just give the rich man a suggestion for one more thing to do in order to inherit eternal life, what Jesus tells him is that he needs to do everything differently. In fact, its not so much about what he does, it’s about why. Although it’s true that Jesus suggests four specific actions (sell, distribute, come and follow) the bottom line is not about his actions, but rather his focus.**

**The real question is not what the rich man owns or how he has acquired it or what he has done with it all, but rather what lies at the core of his existence. The real question is what is his life’s central focus. How is he oriented? Put bluntly: what God is he serving? The God of heaven and Earth? The God of Love? The God who cares about the poor, the widowed, the orphaned? Or the God of Wealth and Material Prosperity, the God of Power and Fame?**

**One scholar puts it this way: “What Jesus says to the [rich man] . . . is not a new . . . demand imposed only on this man or members of his [socio-economic] class; it is an expression of the basic axioms of the kingdom [of God] . . . [O]ur priorities . . . cannot be divided; either we serve God or pursue wealth . . . .” (New Interpreter’s Bible: IX, 347)**

**All this, Mark tells us, makes the rich man very sad. Sad because his focus has been on gaining wealth—he has much, and to give it all up would be a shift of seismic proportions. Sad, because he realizes at some level just how far astray he has gone.**

He has lived a selfish and shallow life. He has not paid attention to his neighbor's needs, only to his own. He has not placed God first in his life, rather he has focused on the pursuit of material well-being—and he's just now discovering it's gotten him nowhere. He is sad, he is discontented, he is unsure of the future. Yet, it is so much a part of him, he wonders if he can give it up.

Now you might be inclined to rather sarcastically say something like, "The guy has too much money and that's a problem? If only that were my problem!" But that would be short-sighted.

In the cartoon strip *Kudzu*, the Rev. Will B. Dunn is speaking to his congregation about the problems of materialism: "Now brother and sisters," he says, "I've heard a lot of criticism of [the rich folks in town] and I want it to stop. You shouldn't hold it against a man just because he's rich beyond your wildest dreams! Judge not! Envy not! Before you condemn a man walk a mile in his Gucci's."

Of course, we don't have to be rich to be caught up in the pursuit of material prosperity. One poll indicated that while 75% of Americans feel there is too much emphasis on money in our culture, 80% feel it's either absolutely essential very important or fairly important to have a high paying job. And 78% feel the same way about having a beautiful home, a new car and other nice things. (Source: *The Record*, 9-23-94, S-13)

In other words, wealth, material prosperity, money and the things it can buy, these can be the focus of life for all sorts of people: rich people, poor people and middle class folks as well. And a study done in 2004 indicates we are passing these values along to the young as well. The average American child, for instance, sees 40,000 television commercials a year—most aimed at telling them it's important to buy and buy and buy some more. Indeed, children can recognize logos by the age of 18 months, and often ask for products at age two by brand name. ([www.usnews.com](http://www.usnews.com), 9-13-04)

So, Jesus asks the rich man, and in turn, each one of us, who are you going to serve? Who are your children going to serve? God or wealth? The Creator of the Universe, or the universe of material things?

You aren't sure? Then take the rich young ruler test. Imagine Jesus says to you "Sell it all, the house, the new car the cottage at the shore. Sell it all! Then give the money to the poor and become missionary in India or a worker in a soup kitchen."

Does it sound pretty radical? Well it is! It calls into question the very focus of our lives. It causes us to ask: What's most important? Who's number one?

Now the reality is that Jesus does not call most of us to sell everything. And being rich, in and of itself, is not a bad thing. And those who are rich are not inherently evil. But before you take a deep sigh and relax, remember this: Jesus does call us to

be prepared to do just that. Said another way, if you're going to follow Jesus, don't get too attached to your stuff.

Stephen King, the prolific author of horror stories like *Carrie* and *The Green Mile*, learned this the hard way a few years ago when he was hit by a van and left for dead beside the road. In a speech at Vassar College he recalled that night and said: I had a MasterCard in my wallet, but when you're lying in the ditch with broken glass in your hair, no one accepts MasterCard. [In the months that followed I came to realize] We came in naked and broke . . . . All you have is on loan . . . All you want . . . from the Maserati you may dream about to the retirement fund . . . none of that is real. All that lasts is what you [give away], what you pass on. The rest is smoke and mirrors." (Stephen King, "Scaring You to Action," [www.Beliefnet.com](http://www.Beliefnet.com))

Smoke and mirrors. Camel tricks.

So what are we to do? If the material stuff is fleeting anyway, what's the alternative?

When the rich man walks away—apparently unable or unwilling to do what Jesus asks—we are left wondering and worrying, about the whole situation. Not just his, but ours as well.

"It's tough," says Jesus, "Let me tell you, for a rich guy to get right with God is harder than shoving a camel through the eye of a needle." You get to a certain station in life where you think you can take care of everything by writing a check or signing a deal, and it becomes very hard to remember that ultimately you must depend on God. For a rich guy to enter the kingdom of God it's as bad as trying to land a 747 on Post Road East. It's worse than trying to teach your parents how to program an iPod."

And the crowd responds, "Holy mackerel! If it's so tough for that guy, who we really thought had it all together, what about us poor slobs?"

Good question. What about us? Deep down you and I both know how much we're attached to our things. Our CD players and wide screen TVs. Our cars and our boats and our country club memberships. Our college educations and family vacations. Personally, I just want to say Hey Jesus, take everything you want, but leave me my books and music, that's all I ask!

We want to think God's number one in our lives—but it's so hard to remember that when we're making decisions about how to spend money, and how to spend our lives. In fact, it's almost impossible! It's almost impossible for us frail human beings to choose God first. Ever since the time of Adam and Eve, folks just like you and me have been tempted by the shiny fruits of materialism, of power, of fame and self-determination

**But the story in Mark doesn't end there, for at the end comes a grace note, a word of salvation. Because it's not about what you do, it is, instead, about God.**

**"What is impossible for mortals," says Jesus "is possible with God." (10:27)**

**The answer to your dilemma and mine is, in the end, all about constantly and consistently placing yourself in God's hands and allowing God into your life. For given the chance, God will transform selfishness into generosity. If you and I are willing to give God a chance, God will work with and in and through each one of us. Eternally. It may take time, but God's got all the time in the world, and then some!**

**The rich man in the story walks away. But you don't need to. Today. Here. Now. Commit yourself again to the God who in and through Jesus Christ did sell everything, even life itself, out of love for you. Put that God first, and then do it again. Every day. Every hour. If necessary, every minute.**

**For if you do, God will transform your life. God will give you a surety which transcends anything the world has to offer. God will fill your life with a joy so deep it can never be lost in a corporate merger, it can never be taken in a hostile takeover.**

**As the folks at MasterCard might say, it's priceless.**

**And, in the end, my friends, it's no camel trick.**

**Rather it is Divine Love in action.**

**Amen  
John H. Danner**