

LIFE STYLE: Thread the Needle

I walked away. I had such high hopes that day; I hoped I would find an answer or at least an affirmation that I was on the right track. Keeping the commandments isn't easy, especially when you are running a business. How do I keep from making money an all-consuming idol where there is never enough and my "god" demands more? "You shall have no other gods before me." How do I resist the temptation to cut a corner here or skimp a little there, to give less than my best so I have something in reserve? "You shall not steal." How do I make sure that the promises I make when I sign a contract are promises my company keeps? "You shall not bear false witness."

Keeping the commandments isn't easy; it's a struggle, a struggle that left me wanting more; not more money, more meaning, more hope, more of a sense that my devotion and obedience mattered and I was making a difference; that all of this effort was going somewhere, somewhere good.

I had such high hopes. Everyone was talking about Jesus. Most talked about the miracles, water into wine, feeding 5000, casting out demons, but what caught my attention was when they talked about his teaching; he taught as one with authority. Maybe he knew the answer. I hoped. I hoped.

So I saddled my camel and went to the Roman road to Damascus; from what I'd heard, Jesus was on his way from Galilee to Jerusalem, he was sure to pass that way. It wasn't long before he and the disciples came into view. I knelt before him and asked, *Mark 10:17 (NRSV) "Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"*

I don't know what I expected his answer to be; a word of encouragement or some great task perhaps; first, he said that he isn't good, only God is good. Ok, that's humble and pious; then, he pointed to the commandments. Again, good and proper teaching as from any rabbi (from every rabbi), but when I replied that I have kept the commandments from my youth, then he looked at me with such love and gentleness in his eyes as he said, *Mark 10:21 (NRSV) "You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."*

I was stunned. My jaw dropped. Sell everything and give it to the poor? I give alms. I am a generous benefactor in my community; I pay my tithe. How could I do that if I sold everything and gave it away? I walked away. I couldn't look at him. I'd had such high hopes. Now I felt like the rug had been pulled out from under me.

Dimly, I heard him say, *Mark 10:23–26 (NRSV) "How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"²⁴ And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, "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 someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God."²⁶ They were greatly astounded and said to one another, "Then who can be saved?"*

Who indeed? Surely not me, so I mounted my camel and returned to my home wondering if it could ever be possible for a camel to thread the needle.

I walked away, and Jesus watched me go.

I went home. The camel knew the way and it was just as well. I felt so empty. I'd had such hopes; I thought I was on the verge of a spiritual breakthrough that would put all the pieces together and everything would make sense.

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Now, nothing made sense and nothing seemed to matter. Even my obedience to the law left me cold and without the sense that somehow my struggle was pleasing to God.

Soon enough, it was time to celebrate Passover, and we were on our way to Jerusalem; my wife, my children, my servants; all of us would make our pilgrimage; perhaps that was what I needed. Perhaps the temple and being near the Holy of Holies and the presence of God there would renew my faith and show me the way to eternal life.

It was in Jerusalem that I saw Jesus again, and he saw me. I'm sure of it. It was Friday, the day of preparation; we were on the verge of the holiest Sabbath of the year. I heard the crowd jeering; that was a strange sound on the Eve of Passover, so I went to see what was going on.

That's when I saw him; bleeding with a cross beam across his back and a crown of thorns on his head. The crowd was spewing such hate; the looks on the soldiers faces (they were enjoying his suffering!); and the religious leaders were encouraging the crowd and blessing what they were doing!

Somehow he made it to the place of the skull. They nailed his hands and feet and raised him up. I was numb. I couldn't hear anything. It was too much to comprehend, but then he looked at me (I'm sure of it) and he looked at the crowd and that look of love that I'd seen back in Galilee on the road, that look of love was there as he said, *Luke 23:34 (NRSV) "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing."*

The thieves who were crucified beside Jesus began to squabble, and the one turned to Jesus and asked him the question I didn't know how to ask, *Luke 23:42-43 (NRSV) "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom."* [and Jesus said to him] *"Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."* Then he looked at me and the crowd with such love, and he died. He'd given everything. The soldiers had taken his robe and his life. He had nothing; he'd given everything.

And I understood. I had my answer. The law is right and good, but eternal life is more than mere obedience; eternal life is a life of love; a life that is given freely, fully completely, the way Jesus gave His life for us all. Jesus showed me that God is more than law and obedience. God is love. God is love that gives and gives and gives.

I was so proud of all that I did, and I was empty. Now, I am so grateful for all that I have received. God has given everything for me, and for you too. My obedience and devotion have a new purpose. I give because of what God has given for me. I give because eternal life is a life style; eternal life is a life of love; love that is free; love that gives and gives and gives, because my giving is a tangible sign of God's love in this world; my giving connects eternal life to this life, and that connection makes all the difference!

I walked away. Jesus looked at me, and there on the cross I finally saw him; I finally saw that eternal life is living for him. Eternal life is living in the hope that what is impossible for a man like me is possible for God, who is love, who is good and generous, generous enough to make it possible for a camel to thread the needle. Amen.