PARABLES

The Camel and the Needle: The Rich Young Ruler

Luke 18:18-30

Introduction

The Parabolic Inversion (inverted parallelism)
Note the parable at the centre

1. Inherit eternal life
    2. The five Old Testament requirements set out with special emphasis on:
        - Loyalty to family
        - Attitude to property
    3. The demands of the new obedience
        - Sell everything you have
        - Come and follow me
    4. The new obedience is seen as:
        - Too hard
    5. **The parable of the camel and the needle**
       (entering the Kingdom)
    4* The new obedience seen as:
        - Too hard
        - Possible only with God
    3* The demands of the new obedience are fulfilled
        - We have left everything
        - We have followed you
2* Five new requirements set forth with special emphasis on:
    - Attitude to property
    - Loyalty to family

1* Receive eternal life

The same question was asked in Lk. 10:25-37. In both passages there is a discussion about the Law. In each there is a dialogue with **the punch line** being the parable in the centre. Here there are five inverted topics. It begins and ends with 'eternal life'. The rich young ruler wants to **do** something to gain eternal life as an inheritance. At the end eternal life is a gift, not a reward for a good life.

The second stanza involves five commands from the Ten Commandments. Jesus places them out of their original order so we need to assume that the re-arrangement is intentional and serves a purpose.

The order Jesus chooses gives special emphasis to:

- **Loyalty to family** – ***"Do not commit adultery."***

  There is another inverted parabolic arrangement:

  "Do not commit adultery."

  "Do not kill." (physical destruction of another)

  "Do not steal." (respect for property)

  "Do not bear false witness." (verbal destruction of another)

  "Honour your father and mother." (again loyalty to family)

The focus is on the first command, the middle one and the last one

i.e. be faithful to your spouse
be trustworthy regarding property
be faithful to your parents

Loyalty to family – especially your father – is the highest demand that any person in the Arab World can imagine.

- **The question of property** is also given prominence by being at the centre.

In the third stanza two demands are made of the ruler and he finds these too difficult – in fact he finds them impossible. There is an expression often used in Arabic, *'mish mumkin'*. It means 'impossible'. In this story there are lots of impossibilities. Now a new theme is introduced: **only with God is salvation possible**.

At the centre - the parable – there is a shift from singular to plural – i.e. from one man to all disciples.

The theme of eternal life comes again at the end. Clearly the parable should be studied and understood in the light of the whole passage. The themes are presented and then repeated in an inverted form.

Stanza One

This ruler had probably heard Jesus speak about children and His attitude to them. His question was a response to what he had heard Jesus say and seen Him do (Lk. 18:15-17, Mt. 19:16-30 and Mk. 10:17-31). Did the ruler's approval precipitate the question? Compared with the goodness of Jesus he may have felt deficient in some way despite his excellent record at law-keeping.

"A certain ruler asked Him:
'Good teacher, what having done I shall inherit eternal life?' " [a literal translation]

This is awkward in English, but it highlights what the ruler is saying. He wants to achieve eternal life by his own efforts. His focus is on the future. He assumes he has to achieve a certain standard of performance now that will secure him eternal life in the future. Eternal life has significance for him **only** in that future. Jesus changes this emphasis – eternal life **now and in the age to come**.

In a sense he has asked an impossible question: ***"How do I inherit eternal life?"*** One inherits by being part of a family, not by doing anything!

Do-it-yourself salvation has at its heart the questions: 'How can I be sure I have done enough?' 'Have I got it right?' 'Will it be acceptable? The greatest fear of many is the judgement day.

The ruler begins by addressing Jesus as, ***"Good teacher"***. Jesus' response begins to focus on this form of address.

Stanza Two

Many have found Jesus' response to be a problem, ***"No one is good but one, even God"*** .
Is this Jesus denying that He is God?

In reality Jesus is asking, *"Why do you call Me good? Do you really understand what you are saying? 'Good' is a quality that is only characteristic of God. Are you serious in applying this title to me?"*

The implication was: *"Only God is good. Do you believe Me to be God?"* He meant either, "I am not good" or "I am God!"

The ruler doesn't answer! In many parables there are parts that are unfinished and we are left to wonder [cf. Lk. 9:57-62 – What do the three potential disciples do?]

"Good teacher" is only found once in rabbinic literature and this is in the context of a dream and not in a real situation.

"To me in my dream the following was said, 'Good greetings to the good teacher from the good Lord who from His bounty disperses good to His people'."

Probably the greeting was very rare. The ruler is clearly trying to 'overdo it' – trying too hard! In typical Middle East fashion he is trying to impress with a compliment. He would expect a lofty title in return, for one compliment deserves another! Perhaps he was expecting, *"O most excellent and noble ruler"*.

Jesus gives him no title! In the text there seems to be a tension from Jesus response that is abrupt and even harsh. Jesus used this type of response quite often. The purpose was to test the seriousness of the enquirer's intentions. (See Mt. 15:25, Jn. 3:3 and Lk. 12:13-14)

So Jesus' response is a forthright challenge to the seriousness of the ruler's intentions. In any case this can't be a denial of the deity of Jesus. The ruler wants to know what he must **do** to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him, ***"Come and follow Me"*** (not follow God). The climax of what is required of him is "follow Jesus" for Jesus is God's unique agent through whom obedience to God must be expressed.

Jesus emphasised family and property in the laws listed. Then there is another impossible statement, ***"All these I have kept from my youth"***. The ruler's reply is presumptuous for he says he has kept all these laws from his youth. In the Talmud only Abraham, Moses and Aaron are reported to have kept the whole law. So the ruler is putting himself in exalted company! Jesus gives a challenge to this self-righteous ruler.

Stanza Three

"One thing you lack" – this is also a theme in Lk. 10:42 in the story of Mary and Martha. Mary had a love for Jesus. Martha lacked such a love. This ruler lacks the same thing. This is a common theme in Luke (4:25-27; 15:3-10 etc.).

"Treasure in heaven" is the eternal life that the ruler seeks. The two demands touch the heart of the two primary values of all Middle Easterners – family and property.

What did he lack? Money? No! He lacked the element of control over his life that comes from the outside. The Lord Jesus called him to submit his life to His control – ***"Come and follow Me".*** In other words, *"If you want eternal life, put all other priorities out of your life."*

All Middle Eastern families will go to great lengths to keep some members of the family in the ancestral home and lands. This is the root of the 'Palestinian Problem'. So Jesus is asking the ruler to place his loyalty to Jesus at a higher level than his loyalty to his family and to his family's estate!

Abraham was faced with the same demand on two occasions.

- He left Ur in response to God's call for obedience – i.e. to leave property
- On Mt. Moriah God required him to demonstrate an even higher level of loyalty – loyalty to his family

Abraham passed. This ruler failed! He failed the first test about property. Perhaps if he had passed he would have received back his wealth as Abraham had received back his son. But this is speculation. We see this ruler confronted by the radical demands of obedience. How does he respond?

If you want anything or anyone more than Jesus you cannot be His disciple. Jesus must be first in our loyalty and in our love. The Cross must end all self-centred living. Materialism, as a way of life, must go.

Stanza Four

"And having heard this, he was grieved for he was very rich."

The new obedience doesn't contradict the old but it goes far beyond it. The new standard set went beyond the ruler's ability to reach. Why was the ruler ***"deeply grieved"***? Perhaps it was because of his love of wealth and the influence his money gave him. Perhaps it was more than this. Perhaps it was the painful realisation that he can't **earn** his way into God's grace.

If Jesus had given the ruler a long list of expensive good works to be funded and carried out, he would probably have carried them out with great enthusiasm. But no, he could do nothing to achieve the goal of entering the Kingdom.

People of wealth are often proud of their achievements. They encourage self-will and self-indulgence. They ask for no favours and accept none. With a great deal of effort they achieve wealth and the honour and the respect that goes with it. This ruler is rich. In the Middle East people considered rich are understood by everyone to be blessed by God. But status with God can't be earned. It can only be received with great gratitude. So this ruler's worldview with all that it involved of merit, honour and worth was being re-evaluated. With God there is no self-salvation.

So the self-confidence of the self-made person crashes and dissolves. The ruler hears Jesus' statement and so do those in the crowd. The crowd is probably shocked and somewhat pleased! The ruler was grieved because of his love of wealth. In the Middle East most of this wealth would have been in his family's land, so it was a visible symbol of the honour and influence of his extended family with him as the ruler (leader).

Jesus is demanding of him a higher loyalty than family and wealth – honour and prestige. Honour and prestige are probably the most prized possessions for Middle Eastern people. The ruler grieves in silence. His brash self-confidence is shattered. He probably understands that if he tries to sell his family's land, he will lose his family. They will disown him for getting rid of the family assets. Seeing this, Jesus responds with a short parable in six lines of a step parallelism.

The Parable

The popular opinion would have been that if a rich man could not be saved, then no one could be saved.

"How <u>hard</u> it is

for those who have <u>possessions</u>

to <u>enter the Kingdom of God</u>.

It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye

than for a rich man

to enter the Kingdom of Heaven."

Three Ideas: "how hard" – "wealth" – "entering the Kingdom"

Trying to enter the Kingdom through relying on possessions and wealth is impossible. If you are wealthy, the natural tendency is to want to earn your way into God's good graces. It is impossible to set aside the drive to 'make it on your own' **and** to accept grace.

In the history of Biblical interpretation two ways have been found to make this a little easier:

- Change the Greek word *'kamelon'* to *'kamilon'*. `*Kamelon*` is a camel and `*kamilon'* is a rope. If it was a very thin rope (almost a thread) and a very large needle then perhaps it is possible! In other words, salvation is possible for the rich if they try hard enough. But there is no textual evidence at all for this!
- In the Middle East, homes used to have large double doors opening on to the street and leading into a courtyard. Doors had to be about 12 ft. high and at least 12 ft wide for a loaded camel to get through the door. These big doors only opened occasionally because in one of them there was a small door through which people could go in and out easily. It has been suggested (by Westerners) that the name of the small door was the 'needle's eye'. Nowhere in the Middle East does anyone call it by this name.

In the Talmud (from a Mesopotamian source) there is a phrase: *"An elephant going through the eye of a needle"* as an expression of something impossible. In Mesopotamia an elephant was the largest animal. In Palestine the largest animal is a camel.

Both of the above explanations try to mitigate the force of what the Lord Jesus is saying. **The salvation of every person is a miracle**. Even a rich man cannot enter the Kingdom through his own efforts. The decision to dethrone self or wealth cannot be made without God's help.

Stanza Four *

The question of the onlookers emerges out of a typical Middle Eastern mentality/culture:

They think to themselves: rich people are able to build mosques, endow orphanages, give charity to the poor and fund many worthwhile efforts. Such things please God, so if anyone is saved it will be the rich. We poor common people don't have the wealth to carry out such deeds. It is so much harder for us!

The onlookers are shocked! The ruler found the demands of Jesus too hard and the onlookers echo this and ask the question, *"Who then can be saved?"*

Key Statement (really part of the parable)

> ***"What is impossible with men is possible with God."***

Salvation is an act of God.
No one enters the Kingdom by his/her own efforts.
No one achieves great things and so inherits eternal life.
An inheritance is a gift – not an earned right.
No one has rights in the Kingdom – not even the rich.
Salvation is equally impossible for all people. It is only possible by God acting unilaterally.

So now the question is: Can anyone meet that which is too hard for the ruler?
Stanza 3* gives the answer.

Stanza Three* - note the parallels

The Ruler (3)	**The Disciples (3*)**
"Jesus said to him, 'Sell everything you have … Come and follow Me.' "	***"Peter said, 'We have left what is ours and have followed You.' "***

Remember that the requirement put on the ruler is not primarily dealing with wealth, but with the dethronement of the demands of the extended family. The majority of BMBs (Believers from a Muslim Background) have had to leave (or been expelled from) their extended family in order to follow Jesus.

Peter says, ***"We have left 'ta idia' and have followed You."***

'Ta idia' is the neuter plural + 'things'. This same word is used in Jn. 1:11, ***"He came unto His own (things or domain) and His own people - '[hoi idioi]' "***

In Arabic Peter says, *"We have left what is ours'* "– implying both people and property.

So Peter and the other disciples are living proof of the miracle of which Jesus speaks. The disciples also had families and property. They too were Middle Eastern with all the same cultural pressures – absolute loyalty to family and the honour (land) of the family.

But then the miracle happened. What was impossible with men was demonstrated as possible with God. So in every culture in every generation the impossible demands of obedience are made possible through the miracle of God's grace. Peter affirms the reality of this happening in their lives.

Stanza Two*

This stanza together with stanza 1* forms the response of Jesus to Peter:

"And He said to them,
'Truly I say to you
there is no one who has left:
house (loyalty to property)
or wife (" " family)
or brothers "
or parents "
or children "
for the sake of the Kingdom

Stanza One *

Who will not receive much more in this time
and in the age to come <u>eternal life</u>.' "

It is clear that this doesn't mean we should dissolve marriages and break family ties. It teaches us to honour love and obey the Lord Jesus as our supreme authority. His authority is over that of marriage, brothers, race and relatives.

Note in Stanza 2 Jesus selected five commandments and arranged them to give special prominence to property and family. Here again are five possible loyalties – 'house' is first and then four that relate to family.

Notice the contrasts between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant

- **Old:** We were told not to steal another person's property.
  New: We are told our own property might have to be left behind.
- **Old:** We are told to leave our neighbour's wife alone.
  New: We are told that a disciple may have to leave his **own** wife alone.

  (Nearly every male BMB who is married is forced by his wife's family to divorce his wife. Many female BMBs are divorced after they tell their husbands they are now followers of Jesus.)
- **Old:** We were to honour our father and mother. Then as now this means to stay at home and take care of them until they die and are respectfully buried.
  New: We may have to leave them in response to a higher loyalty.

To Middle Easterners this is an impossible choice. Family and the village have always come first – even to the detriment of one's own life. Yet Jesus demands a loyalty that supersedes both. The ruler can manage the Ten Commandments at least most of the time. But this is too much with all the cultural pressures. This is indeed very shocking. It cuts right through all the pre-suppositions of all cultures. What are our loyalties? Education? Stability? In all cultures there are particular values that are supreme.

Jesus is aware of the very radical rupture of the fabric of cultural loyalties that this creates. This is why He starts with, ***"<u>Truly</u> I say to you."*** This is only used six times in Luke and each time it introduces a saying of awesome proportions that will really shock the listener. It's use here is no exception.

The final stanza (1*) speaks of rewards. There are two aspects to this:

1. The ruler already has his reward in mind – eternal life. He asks what he has to do to gain it. The standard is presented. It is too high and he fails to meet it for it is impossible to achieve. Salvation is shown to be a work of God, not an achievement of people. The disciples were given grace to respond to the pattern of the new loyalty. They broke the pattern of cultural demands and placed loyalty to Jesus higher than loyalty to family and property. Jesus says that the Kingdom has boundless rewards **in this life** for those who respond in obedience **with no thought of reward**. Loyalty to Jesus will be vindicated. The small sacrifices we make are more than compensated for in the here and now.

2. In addition, **in the age to come** they will **receive** eternal life. They cannot earn it. The emphasis is on **assurance**. Everyone who responds to the call of obedience will be included. Note again the emphasis on **"receive"** and not "earn".

Summary

The ruler understands that eternal life is not inherited through good works, but those who allow God to work the impossible with them **receive** it.

The ruler's ability to do good works through his wealth proves a stumbling block to his humble acceptance of a miracle of grace that would have enabled him to respond with the radical change of loyalty and obedience Jesus demanded of him.

Here are the main conclusions:

- Salvation is beyond human reach. It is only possible with God.
- There is a new obedience that doesn't cancel the old, but rather builds on it and surpasses it.
- Salvation, entering the Kingdom and receiving eternal life are all integrally related to following Jesus. Jesus is God's unique agent through whom obedience to God can be expressed.
- The life of faith is defined in terms of loyalty to the person of Jesus. This loyalty must surpass loyalty to family and property.
- Those who seek to earn rewards will find insurmountable obstacles in their path.
- Disciples, like Peter, who accept the miracle of God's work of salvation and respond in radical obedience are assured of the rewards of the Kingdom. These are offered freely to all disciples and are for this life **and** for the life to come.
- Possessions and what they represent can be a major obstacle to an obedient response to the call, ***"Follow Me"***.

Some accepted God's grace. Others rejected it.