

CAMEL-AND-NEEDLE QUIP STRAINS CREDIBILITY

You can't squeeze a camel through a needle's eye. It just won't fit. And you can't squeeze rich people into God's kingdom. They just won't fit. Or so Jesus seems to suggest.

You can read his often quoted remark three places in the Christian Scriptures: Matthew 19:24, Mark 10:25 and Luke 18:25. In each case the story is told a little differently, but the remark is substantially the same. "It's easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye," he announces, "than for a rich person to go into God's kingdom."

At first blush Jesus' quip seems to be an obvious exaggeration, the kind of overstatement he uses more than once to make a point. But for some reason people have tried time and again to blunt it.

In the Greek language, the language in which the Gospels were written, the word for "camel" is almost the same as the word for "rope" or "cable."

Some ancient commentators softened his statement to talk about a *cable* going through the eye of a needle. It's still a tough trick to thread a needle with a rope, but not quite as impossible as stringing a camel through.

During the Middle Ages someone imagined that there might have been a small gate in the wall around Jerusalem. A camel might be able to scrunch down and crawl through such a needle-eye gate, but it would have been a humbling experience.

Likewise Jesus could mean that rich people will have to get on their knees in order to enter the kingdom, not that they couldn't get in at all.

Bologna.

That interpretation completely ignores the fact that there is no evidence whatever of any such gate into Jerusalem in Jesus' day.

Furthermore, according to these three gospels, Jesus and his followers were still miles away. They couldn't even see the city, much less a low door in its wall, when he said what he said about the camel and the needle.

The best approach is the direct one. Take the man for what he says: It's impossible for a rich person to squeeze into God's kingdom. That's the way the people around him understood it. "If that's the case," they reason, "nobody can get in."

Do they think that wealthy people have a better chance than most ordinary folks? Probably. In their day the three most popular forms of piety were praying, fasting, and giving alms.

Anyone can say their prayers. And most people can go without eating for a few hours. But it's hard to give alms if you don't have a little extra cash to spare for the poor.

So to their way of thinking rich people have a better chance to qualify for God's kingdom because they are better able to contribute to charity. Consequently, they reason, if the wealthy can't qualify nobody can.

And that's precisely the point of Jesus' remark.

It's impossible for any people—rich, poor or otherwise—to work themselves into God's company. If anyone gets in, it's only because God himself brings them in, not because they squeeze in under their own power.

As a result you can guess what Jesus is up to. He is challenging people to toss aside some of their preconceptions.

He wants to free them from being locked into their own ideas, no matter how pious or well-intentioned they may be. He strains the bounds of credibility and in so doing invites them to try on a new idea or two.

You can't cram yourself into God's kingdom any more than a camel can stuff itself through the eye of a needle.

On the other hand, what you can't do yourself God can do for you. Camels through needles, rich people in the kingdom—all are in the realm of divine possibilities.