

Serving God and Google October 10, 2021

Last weekend, Becca and I went to a wedding for our two friends. The wedding took place on a Friday evening about an hour away from here. The bride, the groom, and I all met in college, and so the ceremony was near our campus.

Before the wedding, as Becca and I were getting dressed up, I opened up my phone and pulled up Google Maps to see how the traffic was for the drive. It turned out that traffic was bad (since it was Friday afternoon at rush hour), and so Becca and I hurried along so that we could leave earlier than we planned to make sure we arrived on time.

We left and drove with my phone's GPS on. And as we got closer to the wedding, the traffic got progressively worse, my phone told me. It turned out that there was a road closure on our route. So all-powerful Google suggested a faster route, which we took. We ended up arriving in time for the ceremony – we didn't have as much cushion as we would have liked, but all was well.

When we left the wedding reception to go home, both Becca and I looked at our phones, and we saw that they were both running low on battery. I unfortunately didn't have a phone charger in my car for reasons I won't get into, so we were a little worried that if our phones died, we wouldn't have GPS to get us home. Fortunately, I knew my way around the area, so I was confident that I'd be able to get us home, even if it wouldn't be by the fastest route. And we did, in fact, get home safely.

When I learned how to drive, cell phones were not widespread. Most people did not carry a GPS-capable device wherever they went, and we somehow survived. But in the last 15 years really, we've become dependent on cell phones to travel in unfamiliar places. Our phones give us directions when we travel to new places; they help us gauge traffic; if we need to stop, they tell us where the nearest gas station is (and how much gas costs there).

Our cell phones can be wonderful tools, but we can also be dependent on them. We rely on our cell phones.

“Good teacher, what must I do to inherit knowledge of the communities around me?”

“You know what to do: look at maps, drive around, explore your neighborhoods, talk with your neighbors.”

“Teacher, I've been doing that since I turned 16.”

“You lack one thing: throw your phone out the window.”

And I went away grieving... and looking at my phone.

This passage from Mark's Gospel is fairly well known. Jesus gives his disciples this image: “It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.” That's a pretty memorable picture right there. I imagine a man standing at the rump of a camel, trying to shove the animal forward, as his buddy holds up a sewing needle in front of the camel's nose. The camel stands there and chews its cud.

It's a ridiculous picture. And there are explanations to soften the absurdity of this parable. Some Biblical interpreters point out that the Greek word for "camel" and the word for "rope" are almost identical and are actually pronounced the same, so Jesus was in fact saying, "It's easier for a rope to pass through the eye of a needle."

Or other Biblical scholars point out that there was a gate in the walls of Jerusalem that was known as "The Needle's Eye" because it was so narrow. Legend has it that only way that a camel could enter the gate was if all the belongings and luggage were removed from its back and carried in separately; then the unburdened animal could scrape its way in.

The problem with those explanations is that (1) they are probably simply untrue, and (2) they take away from the absurdity of Jesus' parable. The point isn't that it's hard for rich people to enter the kingdom; it's "impossible," as Jesus says in the next sentence. Only by God's grace can the rich (or anyone) see the kingdom of God.

And so what we can easily hear is, "Riches and money and possessions are evil; we need to get rid of them to go to heaven when we die." First point, Jesus and the man aren't talking about heaven or where we go when we die. Second, the problem isn't money. As 1 Timothy 6:10 reminds us, it isn't money that is the root of all kinds of evil; it's the love of money that is the root of all kinds of evil.

The downfall of this rich man who approaches Jesus is his love of money, his reliance on his possessions. His wealth gives him meaning, and when Jesus asks him to give his belongings and money away to the poor, he can't do it. His wealth is too precious for him. He goes away grieving (as least for a time).

If we use this text to decry the evils of money, then the corollary is that it is virtuous to be poor. First of all, we don't believe that in our society – many people say that people who are poor deserve to be that way because they're lazy (which is patently false), while others work to try to help people out of poverty. Second, if you've been poor, you know how miserable it is, and you don't know how impossible it is to break out of poverty. Talk about fitting a camel through the eye of a needle; try starting with no money and becoming rich.

I don't think Jesus is telling everyone to be poor. After all, history tells us that Jesus ministry was possible only because of the generosity of wealthy women benefactors who believed in Jesus' mission donated money to buy food and housing for Jesus and his disciples.

All that is to say, this passage isn't about money.

No, I think Jesus is telling us to be suspicious of, to be questioning of, to examine closely those things that we rely on. What do we take security in, rather than turning to God and to our neighbors? What causes us to say, "I am self-sufficient"?

If that rich man gave away all his belongings, he'd be dependent on the hospitality and generosity of others, like Jesus' followers were. That would be a humbling and difficult place to be, especially for someone who is used to status and power and independence.

What if we threw away that GPS? We'd have to stop and ask for directions, which might lead to a warmer community. But it's not without risk, is it? What if we find ourselves in an unsafe area? What if someone is hurt and we need to know the fastest way to a hospital?

Am I advising you to throw out your GPS? No, no more than I am telling you to give away all your money. But the end goal for us is the same as the goal for the rich man who knelt at the feet of Jesus: detachment. If we are able to detach ourselves from money or our devices or whatever gives us a false sense of security, then we might find some freedom.

It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for someone who relies on GPS to find God's presence.

If we can treat money as a resource and nothing more, if we can use our cell phone as a helpful tool, the result is nothing less than abundant life. We can live into a world like God's kingdom, where human connection and where our relationship with God is rich and full and life-giving.

Amen.

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