

# “Justice, Camels, and Kool-Aid”

John Carlson

Elder, Fort Collins Mennonite Fellowship

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## Scripture: Micah 6:6-8, Matthew 19:16-26

**Micah 6:** <sup>6</sup> With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old?

<sup>7</sup> Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?

<sup>8</sup> He has shown you, O mortal, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly<sup>l</sup> with your God.

**Matthew 19:** <sup>16</sup> Just then a man came up to Jesus and asked, “Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” <sup>17</sup> “Why do you ask me about what is good?” Jesus replied. “There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, keep the commandments.”

<sup>18</sup> “Which ones?” he inquired. Jesus replied, “‘You shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal, you shall not give false testimony, <sup>19</sup> honor your father and mother,’ and ‘love your neighbor as yourself.’”

<sup>20</sup> “All these I have kept,” the young man said. “What do I still lack?” <sup>21</sup> Jesus answered, “If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.”

<sup>22</sup> When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.

<sup>23</sup> Then Jesus said to his disciples, “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>24</sup> Again I tell you, 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.”

<sup>25</sup> When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, “Who then can be saved?” <sup>26</sup> Jesus looked at them and said, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”



## Sermon



The young boy’s mother came into the kitchen a little too late. Danny was in tears. He was trying to make Kool-Aid and had read the instructions with precision: Add 8 tall glasses of water to the contents of this package. There was water and orange powder all over the floor.

I have worried that some people’s theology is just as messy as the floor in Danny’s kitchen. If you google the story of the camel and the eye of the needle you will find an amazing display of twisted logic involving camels, camel hair, camel hair rope, needles, gates around the cities of Jerusalem and Damascus designed too small for camels – it is amazing.

In fact, there is a sizable group of folks who subscribe to the explanation that Jesus was talking about a gate designed intentionally difficult to get through. And if a rich man was to

enter the city, he would have to unload his possessions from the camel so he could travel into the city. But they face the argument that a rich man would not leave all his possessions at the gate – they would be stolen right off. Then there is the problem that a gate known as the eye of the needle is never mentioned in either the old testament or the new. The google search landed a whole page full of variations on the story in an effort to fit this round story into the square hole of history and logic. It got just as messy as Danny's kitchen.

As I looked for some helpful solutions to the question, I concluded I would side with the idea that Jesus was simply making a point through parable, perhaps even tongue in cheek, that some things seem downright impossible. But with the force of God's creative and redemptive power, all things are possible. Even rich men can get into heaven.

The clue to the camel story actually lies in the preceding paragraph in the Matthew text. Remember the Micah text? The guy wants to know if God will be pleased with him if he offers sacrifices. The answer is no. Micah suggests it is real simple: do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly. The Matthew text is an exact parallel. The guy wants to know what he must do to have eternal life.

Notice that Jesus actually reframes the question. Jesus says, if you want to enter life, not just eternal life, if you want to truly live and be satisfied, then keep the commandments. The guy is unrelenting. Which ones? Jesus names a few. The guy says, I have done all that. What am I lacking? Well, if you really want to be satisfied, sell everything, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Well, I guess he had too many possessions, because he could not bring himself to do that.

That paragraph is the backdrop to the camel story. Jesus explained to his disciples that the guy who just left is a perfect example. It is hard for people with great wealth to give it up. In fact, it is harder for a rich man to enter the kingdom, that is to be truly satisfied and living, than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Of course, that confounds all logic. And the finale is that with God, all things are possible. It is a metaphor with profound implications beyond some rich guy.

I have entertained some rather grandiose ideas of justice potentially achievable right here in Fort Collins. Then I look around and I am faced with the actual social and legal challenges of such change. I am overwhelmed. I go into the courthouse and look at the video screen display of all the cases being heard that day. Maybe two or three hundred. Then I realize that tomorrow there will be another screen with another few hundred. And this goes on every day.

And I look at the Jail's website which lists the 4 to 500 folks in there waiting for processing. Then I look at the homeless list and see there are 150 of those 500 who do not list any address. I just become overwhelmed. I don't know what to think. Is this really justice and I am just the fool? Talk about trying to get a camel through the eye of a needle.

On the national scene, it's even worse. Police in the US fatally shot 1,055 people last year, a new record. And this is after George Floyd reforms.

The last time an actual defense attorney served on the Supreme Court was 30 years ago, Thurgood Marshall. Our courts are still pursuing a law and order agenda while research has demonstrated over and over that harsher sentencing does not deter crime. Increased crime

is driven by other social factors. The past 20 years of war on drugs and war on crime has been an abject failure. If punishing crime worked, wouldn't crime be going down?

A man by the name of Michael Politte will be released from prison this April, after serving 20 years for a murder he insists he did not commit. Larimer County had its own wrongful murder conviction scandal in the Timothy Masters case. States throughout the nation are paying out millions of dollars in settlements for wrongful convictions and wrongful policing.

The challenge of correcting the massive injustice is quite plainly overwhelming. One does not even know where to begin. But something needs to change.

Last year a strong man of faith in the Mormon Church became a whistleblower of sorts. He had a crisis during covid and needed help with rent. The bishop instead gave him a food voucher for \$40. He did some investigating. He disclosed to the public that the church had a secret financial reserve account of 100 billion dollars. This, in light of the church's own public report that they gave 108 million in services to the poor. When disclosed, the elders said the funds were held for potential hard times. Another possible camel parable? Things need to change.

I have decided that maybe the prophet Micah was right after all. I do not have to solve all injustices. I do not have to donate rivers of oil to the local charity. It really can be simple: do a little justice, love a whole lot, and walk with incredible humility.

I learned the other day that the Larimer County probation office can only expect that half the people on probation will leave successfully. The other half will regress or re-offend. I believe we can do better. What are the key factors in the empowerment of change? How do we best help the poor, the homeless and the offenders of justice?

There is one key element that crosses theological, philosophical, psychological and social boundaries. It may be summarized in our basic understanding of justice. We have been misled into believing that justice is equality. But the truth is, people are not equal. We are born into unequal states of family support, social status, economic status, educational opportunity, and many others. But we all share one commonality: we are human. We are connected to the creator by the same cords of energy. We all have one common need: to be nurtured with compassion. We all need to be reunited with ourselves and with one another.

Father Richard Rohr's writings tell this so eloquently. When we achieve unity of self and community, we are neither violent nor destructive. Justice is actually a state of that kind of unity. It was Paul Tillich who put it this way: "Nothing seems to contradict more the idea of justice than the Pauline doctrine of justification by grace. And everybody who has pronounced it has been accused of promoting injustice. It seems to be utterly unjust to declare him who is unjust, just. But nothing less than this is what has been called the good news. And nothing less than this is the fulfillment of justice."

In theological language, justice happens when a person is treated as a just soul, in spite of his unjust behavior. Justice is achieved through relationship. We can begin the work of justice very simply, by treating each other and all others with the dignity of forgiving love. As we promote unity and community with this redemptive love, change begins to evolve. The core of justice is not about challenging police misconduct. It is not about arguing alternative sentences for defendants. It is not about changing community policies in management of homeless residents. These are needed. But they can only eventually evolve if we practice

now the art of redemptive love: engaging the unjust with the same forgiving love we would hold for the just among us.

I do have some grandiose visions. I see a day when the Larimer County Commissioners will be sorry they went against the wishes of the voters and funded a major expansion of the jail. A day when they will be looking for ways to house the homeless in all those unused beds. Because our community will have embraced a way to empower and employ and restore the ones among us who lost their way, the ones who became disconnected and harmful. A day when we will understand that as a community justice only really happens in relationships.

I have envisioned a non-profit effort all across town to provide shelter and pre-trial support so those pending a court sentence will be blown away knowing the community cares for them. Failed compliance will drop from 50% to 10% because there are services provided by outreach rather than roadblocks.

I even had a vision the other night of Old Testament outrageous intensity. A vision we created a 90-acre campus for the homeless, modeled after a small college campus with dormitories, cafeteria, health clinic, recreation center, classes for GED and college credit, and a welcome mat for any citizen who could benefit. Then the police could drop off their latest disruptive contact to the campus and suggest she get some help there.

When the crazy vision finally subsided, I could identify with Danny in the kitchen trying to make Kool-Aid. I could not for the life of me figure out how to get all that stuff in a single package of community justice.

I have also welcomed other moments of humility. I have had my challenges. I have not always done the right thing, said the right things, treated my community as they deserve. I have failed some people. But I go forward and trust that God's grace and wisdom will provide me with new ways to mend. And I do not relinquish the vision of justice for either myself or my neighbor.

When the disciples heard Jesus tell the little quip about rich guys and the camel, they were quite astonished. Who then can even get into heaven? I am sure Jesus had a smirk on his face when he replied: Well, with you guys it is impossible. But with God, all things are possible.

We tend to direct our lives with limited trust and imagination. We lose sight of the potential for the impossible to emerge. We erroneously assume that since it is so difficult to get a camel through a needle that it becomes our responsibility to find a very small camel and a very large needle and take on the task.

How many times have you and I taken life's bull by the horns and with amazing determination set out to arrange an outcome fully according to our own will? And then how many of those times have we retired for the day, exhausted, beaten, confused, completely ready to give up? And then, how many of those times have we gone to bed with a prayer, a release of all the personal investment, and woke up the next morning, looked out the window, and saw the camel standing on the other side of the needle?

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