

**Gate of Heaven**  
**28<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time (B)**  
**(Mk 10:17-30)**

*“It is easier for a camel to pass through a needle’s eye,  
than for a rich man to enter heaven.”*

When Jesus teaches the parable of the “Needle’s Eye,” he is referring to a small and narrow gate that the ancients would build into a city wall, in order to help with defense. It looks just like the eye of a needle. A heavily armed soldier, or someone on horseback, would not be able to go through.

It is actually possible to get a camel through a needle’s eye, but not easy. You have to get the camel down on its knees, bow its head, then shove and cajole it to squeeze through. But there is simply no way to get a camel through a needle’s eye if it is carrying baggage and supplies.

Jesus gives us this memorable, comical image to describe the gate of heaven. I always imagined the gate of heaven as a glorious, tall, open gateway made of gold. The Bible describes the city of heaven as a glorious city with great walls (cf. Rv 21), but Jesus always described the gate as very small and narrow: *“Enter through the narrow gate... How narrow the gate and constricted the road that leads to life. And those who find it are few”* (Mt 7:13-14).

On the other hand, the gates of hell are the ones that are big and wide: *“...the gate is wide and the road broad that leads to destruction, and those who enter through it are many.”*

In today’s Gospel, Jesus teaches how to get to heaven. That is what the young man was asking him: *“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”* And Jesus begins with the commandments: *“You shall not kill; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not steal or defraud; you shall not bear false witness; honor your father and your mother.”*

We can’t get to heaven if we violate God’s Law. The 10 Commandments outline the narrow pathway to heaven’s gate. If you are driving to a new destination, you need correct signs and guidance, or you will get lost. If you are navigating a ship to the harbor, the markers guide you safely through the shoals and reefs. Moral situations can become clouded, which is why we have then Commandments. If we follow them, they will infallibly keep us on the right path. If we rely on our own judgments or feelings, or look for moral shortcuts, we will go wrong. The easier way is the one that leads to hell.

It's not easy to get to heaven. Jesus said it's a difficult road. Our sinful tendencies ("concupiscence") easily lead us down the wrong path. Jesus says many choose the easy path, the "highway to hell."

Jesus commends the man who kept all the Commandments since his youth, and "*looked on him with love.*" He is very close to heaven. The Commandments will get you to the gate of heaven. But then there's the gate.

Jesus tells the man there's just one thing more he needs to do, to get through the gate: he must give away his possessions, and become poor and humble. In order to get through the gate, we have to give up our attachments, we have to be truly humble, and this the man could not do.

In classical spirituality, the first stage of holiness is turning away from sin and keeping the commandments. It is called "**Conversion.**" But the second stage is being freed from attachments to anything less than God. It is called "**Purification,**" and it is the harder part. The camel has to give up its cargo, get on its knees, bow its head, and be whipped through that tiny gate.

It's not enough to keep the Commandments. We have to love God above all things, including our own will. Attachments are things that "possess" us, that hold us back, that keep us from passing through that gate. Jesus exposes the man's deep attachment to his wealth and possessions, showing how they actually possess him. Jesus says he should give them away, in order to have true riches waiting for him in heaven. "You can't take it with you, but you can send it on ahead!"

Purification deals with the seven "Capital Sins," which are false loves deeply rooted in the soul, and that need to be rooted out in order for us to be saved. Jesus highlights the capital sin of Greed in this parable, but the greatest is Pride. Like the camel which doesn't go easily through the needle's eye, we cling to our own will, and resist God's efforts to help us. Pride is expressed in disobedience, and the unwillingness to serve. It is found in the attitude by which we easily get upset, or impatient, or disagreeable when things don't go our way.

Other Capital Sins are Envy, when we easily get offended by others, clinging to our own sense of what is just and fair. Anger is building ourselves up by tearing others down, being vengeful, spiteful, and hurtful. Through Gluttony we refuse to give up our selfish pleasures and indulge them instead; through Lust we turn the other person into an object of desire; through Sloth we cling to the easy and convenient way.

To get to into heaven, then, we have to be freed from this spiritual baggage we carry: the reluctance to do the right thing, the spirit of resistance and complaint within us, and the ease by which worldly pleasures tempt us.

When we go to confession, we therefore have a two-fold task in our Examination of Conscience. First of all, we need to confess sins against the 10 Commandments. But then we also need to examine the 7 Capital Sins, and how these deeply rooted attachments underlie our other sins. Confession is not only for reconciliation after we have gone on the wrong path and broken the moral law, but also for purification and healing of our disordered soul that does not yet love God alone above all things.

Jesus tells us, by our own efforts it is impossible to get to heaven. To get through the needle's eye we will need God's help (and that of the Church). The comical image of the camel going through a needle's eye is such a good one to illustrate spiritual purification. We are that clumsy beast, and the Church helps push us through. We are taught to be free of unnecessary possessions through almsgiving; we are taught to live "on our knees," in heartfelt and sincere prayer. We are taught to bow our neck in humility, and accept discipline. The "whip" of penance, fasting, and self-sacrifices moves us forward.

From time to time, God will find the way to strip us of our prize possessions even if we do not do it voluntarily. God will find the way to bring us to our knees even though we may not pray a lot. And for the stubborn-willed and stiff-necked God will put His mighty hand on us to bend the neck and crush our pride.

One of God's most important tools is death. Death forces us to confront those attachments in our lives. In the face of death, our possessions, our desires and plans, and our will, no longer suffice. There is nothing but God to cling to.

The way of Purification is what we mean in the Church by "Purgatory." Whereas we usually think of Purgatory as some place between heaven and hell somewhere, this is not accurate. The Catechism describes purgatory as the process of final *purification* following death, by which the soul is freed of all sin and attachments so that it might enter heaven. Purgatory *is* the gate of heaven.

It will be easier for us to get through that gate if we start our purgatory (our "purification") now, living in the grace of baptism, avoiding sin, being often on our knees, bowing humbly to God's will, and seeking to be free of encumbrances. Whatever we do not complete on earth, provided we die in the state of grace free from mortal sin (having kept the commandments), we will complete following death in Purgatory. God will painfully bring this beast through the gate, stripping away everything that is unworthy of heaven. And we in the Church can help shove that poor soul through, by means of our prayers and intercessions. It will be a painful process, this Purgatory, because a lot has to be stripped away, but the soul will finally be fully humble and free.