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Years ago, when I lived in the St. Louis area I visited the art museum when they had a special exhibit with Monet’s paintings. The French artist painted a large three-panel scene of his Japanese-style pond covered with water lilies, complete with clouds dancing above. He requested that the panels be displayed on curved walls, giving the viewer the feeling of standing among the lilies. Although each panel by itself is beautiful, it’s only by viewing all three together that the viewer feels immersed in the water lilies, as though standing among them.

Other artists have also used the technique of creating three-panel art, called a triptych, to visualize a large scene, often with the two side panels smaller than the main center panel. Pietro Perugino painted a triptych portraying the crucifixion of Christ, with Jesus on the cross in the middle panel, with his mother Mary and St. John standing at the foot of the cross. The right panel depicts Mary Magdalene, complete with the jar of oil in her hand, reminding us of the anointing of Jesus’.

The left panel jumps centuries into the future by portraying the scholar Jerome who lived hundreds

of years after Jesus. Jerome translated an early edition of the Bible and wrote many biblical commentaries.

By looking at all three panels together, one notes “that the lines of the rocky landscape and the heads of the saints form the sides of a ‘V’ which converges at the base of the Cross and emphasizes the figure of Christ silhouetted against the sky.” If you looked at only one panel, you would miss the visual flow from one panel to the next. Placing someone from a different time period in the triptych emphasized that Jesus’ teachings continued to reach into later centuries.

In a similar manner, the Gospel writer Mark creates a verbal triptych by lining up three conversations Jesus had. Imagine the conversations as a triptych, three panels portraying questions that people asked of Jesus.

In the first panel, which we heard read earlier—a man runs up to Jesus and asks what he needs to do to gain eternal life. Jesus suggested following the Ten Commandments, and I imagine the man may have jumped for joy as he



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replied, “Yes! I’ve kept all these since my youth. So, I’ve got a sure spot in heaven then, right?”

Somehow, I think he may have sensed Jesus’ response seemed too easy, but he hoped that was the entire list of requirements and that he was “in.”

Jesus replied, “Sell everything you have, give the money to the poor, follow me, and then you will have treasures in heaven.”

That’s not the answer the rich man was hoping to hear, for he had many possessions and walked away grieving. I imagine many of us may squirm a bit when we hear this response from Jesus, for we’ve become very attached to our stuff. It’s hard to imagine that we can’t take it all with us when we

die, which a young girl thought about as she was listening to a minister one Sunday.

A pastor was preaching to his congregation concerning what heaven would be like. He explained that there would be no money in heaven—those things would no longer matter. A little girl was sitting with her mother and listening intently. Upon hearing these words, she leaned toward her mother and whispered into her ear, “Hey, Mom, it sounds like we are already in heaven.”¹

If we look at only this one conversation with Jesus about eternal life, we may find ourselves wondering, “So is the rich man in, or is he out?” Due to the rich man’s inability to get rid of his wealth, this encounter with Jesus seems to leave him on the outside, which then may lead you and me to wonder about our own status. Compared to much of the world, we’re wealthy, for “the typical person in the bottom 5 percent of the American income distribution is still richer than 68 percent of the world’s inhabitants.”² If we don’t give all our money away, do we walk away from eternal life as the rich man walked away from Jesus?

That’s an uncomfortable question, one that Derrick didn’t want to think about. He was the president of a local bank and had a beautiful home, one that hosted the annual church Easter egg hunt and summer swimming party. His daughter and my foster daughter enjoyed playing together, and all seemed good. One day, however, he confronted me, “Why did you speak so harshly against me in your sermon?” he asked.



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I strive not to mention people personally in a bad way, so I was a bit confused by his statement. “I’m sorry, Derrick, but I’m not sure what you mean.”

“You stated that Jesus cares more for poor people than for me, that Jesus doesn’t love people like me who have money, and I was offended.”

I didn’t recall ever saying those words, and when I looked back at my sermon manuscripts, I found one that mentioned Jesus inviting us to care for those in need, to share our resources with those less fortunate, for God cared for the oppressed.

Somehow Derrick had heard that he was on the outside, that God only loved the poor. Maybe Derrick had read the passage about the rich man’s conversation with Jesus about selling everything and was feeling a bit guilty, for he had been stewing on the issue for months. By the time the bank president spoke to me, he had become very distraught.

We have this tendency to want to make sure we’re always on the inside, and even the disciples entered the competition in the third panel of the

verbal triptych. Peter boasted, “We have left everything and followed you. So we’re in, right?”

Jesus replied, “Mark my words, no one who sacrifices house, brothers, sisters, mother, father, children, land—whatever—because of me and the Message will lose out. They’ll get it all back.”³

This sounds like really good news, but there’s a catch when Jesus added: “You’ll also have many troubles before you get the bonus of eternal life.” And then he ended with a confusing summary: “Many who are first will end up last, and the last first.”

I imagine the disciples mumbling to themselves, “So does that mean we’re in or out? Are we first, which means we’re last; or are we last, which means we’re first?”

To gain a better understanding of what Jesus was trying to say, we have to look at the center panel of the verbal triptych, a conversation sandwiched between the disciples hearing about who is the first and last and the one where Jesus suggested that the rich man sell everything.



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Jesus began by asking, “How hard is it for those with wealth to enter the kingdom of heaven,” but then he asked a more general question: “How hard is it for anyone to enter the kingdom of heaven?” I imagine the disciples with eyes cast to the ground, feet shuffling as they murmur, “Not sure.”

Jesus then offered a picture of the difficulty: it’s as difficult as threading a camel through the eye of a needle. I have enough difficulty getting thread through the eye of a needle, let alone a camel through the tiny hole! It’s sounds impossible.

And that was the main point of Jesus: it’s not possible for any of us, even those with wealth, to earn our way into God’s favor. The disciples began mummering once again, and finally one was bold enough to ask, “Who then can be saved?”

“For humans it’s impossible,” Jesus replied. We don’t have the ability to get there on our own. No

amount of money, academic degrees, hard work, religious efforts, volunteer time, or anything else will get us there. So, are we in or out?

Just as a visual triptych may focus our eyes toward the center, this verbal conversation with Jesus moves our ears toward a center point when Jesus suggested, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

You see, it’s not up to you and me to decide who’s in and who’s out, that’s God role. Just like the artist Monet painted a triptych of water lilies in a way to make us feel included in the scene, the verbal triptych Jesus had with his disciples reminds us that we are included in God’s scene. And even if we might feel tempted to leave some out, with God, it’s possible to welcome everyone into the kingdom of heaven.



³ Mark 10:29-30, *The Message*.

¹ Hodgkin, Michael. *1001 More Humorous Illustrations for Public Speaking: Fresh, Timely, and Compelling Illustrations for Preachers, Teachers, and Speakers* (Kindle Locations 2600-2603). Zondervan. Kindle Edition, #424.

² [Tim Worstall, “Astonishing Numbers: America’s Poor Still Live Better Than Most Of The Rest Of Humanity,” June 1, 2013, www.forbes.com/sites/timworstall/2013/06/01/astonishing-numbers-americas-poor-still-live-better-than-most-of-the-rest-of-humanity/#10a3bf0e54ef](http://www.forbes.com/sites/timworstall/2013/06/01/astonishing-numbers-americas-poor-still-live-better-than-most-of-the-rest-of-humanity/#10a3bf0e54ef)