

Matthew 19:23-26

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Jesus says that it is very difficult for a rich person to enter the kingdom of heaven. He compares this difficulty with a camel passing through the eye of a needle. The disciples wonder aloud who then can be saved to enter the kingdom. Jesus assures them that for them it is impossible. But with God all things are possible.

The parallel gospel accounts of this event are found in Mark 10:23-27 and Luke 18:24-27.

As the *rich* young ruler sadly walked away, *Jesus* began to speak. As the commentary on Matthew 19:16-22 shows, this young ruler was someone *Jesus* loved, and was very close to entering fully into the experience of the kingdom and of eternal life. The three gospel writers each record something different about whom *Jesus* was addressing after the young man left. And each quote *Jesus* as saying something slightly different. These accounts reflect a different emphasis, but carry the same core message.

Matthew wrote that *Jesus* spoke to *His disciples*. Luke said it was to the rich young ruler (Luke 18:24). And Mark wrote that *Jesus* was “looking around” when He spoke to *His disciples* (Mark 10:23), as if to indicate that as *Jesus* was speaking to them, He was speaking above them so that everyone in earshot, including the departing *rich* young ruler, could also hear what He was saying.

Mark and Luke record *Jesus* as speaking a rhetorical statement. “How hard it will be/is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God” (Mark 10:23; Luke 18:24). Mark ends *Jesus*’s remark there, but Luke continues.

“For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.
(Luke 18:25)

Matthew, on the other hand depicts *Jesus* as explaining these things to His disciples. Matthew quotes *Jesus* as saying His common preface referencing His personal, divine authority: *Truly I say to you* before telling them that *it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven*.

Mark adds that after they heard *Jesus* say these things that the disciples were perplexed. And so “*Jesus* said” these things “to them again” but with a different tone (Mark 10:24). Layering these three gospel accounts together shows *Jesus* saying these things twice. First to *His disciples*, and the *rich* young man, and anyone else gathered within earshot. And then *again* to those of *His disciples* who asked Him what He meant by these startling words.

Luke recorded what Jesus said the first time when He loudly spoke rhetorically. Matthew recorded what *Jesus said* the second time when He was explaining to *His disciples*. And Mark gives excerpts of what *Jesus said* both times.

In each case, the core question is: *Why is it so difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven?*

There are at least two reasons why *it is hard* for them.

The first danger is that riches can skew a man's perspective of what is true. It is difficult for a *rich man* who has his needs met from his abundance of wealth to see himself for what he really is; which is poor, needy, and totally dependent upon *God*. And if a *rich man* fails to recognize the reality of spiritual poverty and turn *to God* to supply his spiritual needs, then he will not be able *to enter the kingdom of heaven*, because he will not be poor in spirit. Here again, "*enter the kingdom of heaven*" does not refer to becoming a child of God through faith (John 3:14-16) but rather refers to entering into the fullest experience and blessing of God's *kingdom*, a kingdom that is not of this world (John 18:36).

Proverbs warns how our material prosperity or material poverty can warp our perspective.

"Keep deception and lies far from me,
Give me neither poverty nor riches;
Feed me with the food that is my portion,
That I not be full and deny You and say, "Who is the Lord?"
Or that I not be in want and steal,
And profane the name of my God."
(Proverbs 30:8-9)

James encourages the rich and poor alike to overcome the trials of their material circumstances by seeking God's wisdom and perspective in faith. He says that when a man has done this over the course of his life he will receive the crown of life—which is another way of saying he will *enter the kingdom* (James 1:4-12). James makes it clear that the rich must remind themselves of the fleeting nature of riches, and seek fulfillment elsewhere, in things that last (James 1:10-11).

Material wealth can be an intoxicating temptation to believe the lie that we do not need God, or need to humble ourselves *to enter His kingdom*. The materially wealthy church of Laodicea succumbed to this temptation when *Jesus* knocked at its door to invite it back to reality.

"Because you say, 'I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,' and you do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked."
(Revelation 3:17)

This is particularly challenging for those living in the West and in the 21st century. The median income of the world is around \$2000, while the median income for workers in the United States is twenty times that amount (as of 2020). Those in the West are undoubtedly "rich" as compared to the rest of the world, and "rich" is a comparative term, like "large" or "small." Anyone with

sufficient monetary resources to meet their basic needs and wants can gain great benefit from reflecting on these passages.

A second reason that *it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven* is because earthly wealth can easily become a false idol. *Jesus* taught that where your treasure is your heart will be also (Matthew 6:21). And if a man's heart is in his riches or even the pursuit of riches then he will serve that master and hate all rivals. "You cannot serve *God* and wealth" (Matthew 6:24).

The *rich man* who walked away in sadness from entering *the kingdom* seemed to have done so because he loved his wealth more than he believed *Jesus's* words about the great benefit of laying up "treasure in heaven"(Matthew 19:21-22). This does not mean he was not a believer. Mark tells us that *Jesus* looked at the young man and loved him. That *Jesus* did not tell him how to be born again would indicate that he was a believer. However, only those who overcome, as *Jesus* overcame, will gain the greatest of rewards (Revelation 3:21). And one of the main things we must overcome is attachments to the things of this world.

Jesus continued teaching *His disciples*. *Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.* This is a strange and funny comparison. A *camel* is a large mammal. Camels were used for transporting goods and people across long distances in hot dry climates because they did not need much water. The eye of a needle is one of the tiniest visible holes. It is used to hold thread when sewing clothes, blankets, and tapestries. It is absurdly impossible for an actual *camel to go through* the tiny opening of a *needle's eye*. And it is ridiculous to imagine.

Some have said that this is a copyist error because the word for *camel* in Greek, "kamélon" is very similar to the Aramaic word for "rope" "kamilon." While rope is admittedly a more obvious fit for the metaphor than *camel*, it still makes the main point, for it is impossible for a rope to fit through the eye of a needle.

Others have suggested that there was a small gate in Jerusalem nicknamed "The Eye of the Needle" because it was so small. This gate was supposedly too small for a full loaded *camel to enter through*. It was said that the only *possible way for a camel to pass through* it was for it to unload its burdens and inch *through* on its knees. If true, this image neatly fits the metaphor of a *rich man* abandoning his wealth and coming to *God* humbly and entering the narrow gate on his knees. However, there are no ancient records of a small gate *with this name*.

When the disciples heard Jesus say this they were astonished. Their hearts sank. They feared that since this was true, that they could not *be saved* or delivered from missing the opportunity to *enter the kingdom of God*.

One can hear the despair in their question, *who then can be saved?* When we see "saved" we should always ask "what is being delivered from what?" in this context, the *rich man* is clearly being delivered from being unable to *enter the kingdom*. It does not mean avoid going to the lake of fire and living forever in *heaven*. If it did, then the way to heaven would include paying a material price, rather than relying on simple faith. The *disciples* were lamenting that it seemed *impossible for them to enter the kingdom*, and receive its great blessings.

Jesus, too, saw their hopelessness. And looking at them He encouraged them, “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”

Jesus told them that they would not be able to be saved from clinging to the things of this world and enter the kingdom of heaven on their own. It was impossible for them to enter the kingdom in their own strength. By application, this would apply to any human effort. But with God it is possible. It was possible for them to enter the kingdom by trusting God to give them His wisdom; by relying upon the power of His grace; by clinging to His mercy; by walking in His Spirit; by exercising the authority and using the talents that He equipped them with for His kingdom purposes. It is possible to enter God’s kingdom by following Jesus and abiding in His love.

This is similar to what *Jesus* told *His disciples* the night before He was crucified. He told *them* that apart from Him we can do nothing, but if we abide in Him as branches to the Vine, we will bear much fruit (John 15:5)

Finally, and as an aside, *Jesus’s* teaching about entering *the kingdom of heaven* is further evidence that the *rich* young ruler was asking about how to *enter the kingdom* rather than how to live forever in *heaven*, when he approached *Jesus* about how to obtain eternal life (Matthew 19:16).

Biblical Text

²³ And Jesus said to His disciples, “Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ Again I say to you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.” ²⁵ When the disciples heard *this*, they were very astonished and said, “Then who can be saved?” ²⁶ And looking at *them* Jesus said to them, “With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”