

“Threading Camels”

Matthew 19:16-26

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Introduction:

This morning I would invite you to turn with me to **Matthew 19**. In our pew Bibles, the passage is found starting on **page 1535**. And this morning, I would like for us to continue in our series of parables from the New Testament. These lessons were first requested by one of our senior saints, and over the past few weeks, we have studied a number of parables (word pictures or comparisons) that were told by Christ in the various gospel accounts. We have looked at the picture of wolves in sheep's clothing, we have considered the parable of the ten minas, we have looked at the story of the friend who went next door looking for food for his guest at midnight, dad came up and we considered the parable of the sower and the parable of the seed, and then last week we looked together at the parable of the wheat and the weeds. Next week, Lord willing, I'd like for us to conclude by considering a rather bizarre parable from the Old Testament book of **Ezekiel**, but for this morning we will focus our attention on one more little word picture from the life of Christ, and it is the comparison that has been pictured for us on the front of this morning's bulletin—the picture of a camel trying to fit through the eye of a needle. **▶▶PPT▶▶**

This rather unusual scenario is recorded for us in all three of the parallel gospel accounts, and in all three accounts, the story is told immediately after the interaction between Jesus and a man commonly referred to today as the Rich Young Ruler. He is never described as a Rich Young Ruler in any one place in the Bible, and yet Matthew tells us that he was young, Luke tells us that he was a ruler, and all three accounts tell us that he was rich, and so he is usually referred to as being the Rich Young Ruler. This morning, then, in order for us to understand what Jesus was saying with the camel and needle comparison, I would like for us to start by looking at Matthew's account—we will use Matthew's account as a home base, and we will add in some information from **Mark** and **Luke** as it becomes helpful. But as we study the camel picture in context, I would invite you to look with me at **Matthew 19:16-26**...

16 And someone came to Him and said, "Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?" 17 And He said to him, "Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good; but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." 18 Then he said to Him, "Which ones?" And Jesus said, "YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT MURDER; YOU SHALL NOT COMMIT ADULTERY; YOU SHALL NOT STEAL; YOU SHALL NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS; 19 HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER;

and YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF." ²⁰ *The young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?"* ²¹ *Jesus said to him, "If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."* ²² *But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property.* 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."*

As we look back at this paragraph, I would like for us to study the difficulty of threading a camel through a needle by looking at several basic ideas.

I. **And first of all, we notice right away that WORLDLY SUCCESS AND WEALTH CANNOT SATISFY OUR DEEPEST NEEDS.** ▶PPT▶

Again, this was a rich and prominent man. Luke's account tells us that he was a *"ruler,"* perhaps a leader in the local synagogue, perhaps even a member of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling body, perhaps some other kind of ruler, but a man in a position of authority. Matthew describes him as a *"young"* man, and so he was apparently quite responsible for his age. Luke's account describes the young man as being *"extremely rich."* We might even refer to him as the Bill Gates of his generation.

And yet in spite of his youth, and wealth, and power, we find that the Rich Young Ruler was not satisfied with his life the way that it was. He had an itch in his heart that money couldn't scratch. He understood that something was missing, there was a gaping hole in his life, he was missing something that his wealth and his power had failed to provide, and so he comes to Jesus, not arguing, but asking for advice, and he wants to know, *"What good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?"* In other words, he was looking for something that all of his money could not buy, he was looking for something that all of his power could not obtain. Something was missing. He was a young man who had everything...almost everything—everything except the one thing that really mattered.

When I think of those things that do not really matter in this life, I tend to think of the prizes over at Rocky Roccoco's. The kids are so into it—winning those little tickets, and then it takes them half an hour to decide what they want, and it means everything to them, but then you look at those little things they get—those plastic monster teeth, little plastic paratroopers, the balsa wood airplanes—basically junk—stuff that satisfies for maybe 30 seconds—stuff that those of us as adults have to scrape out of the back of the car every few months! Of course, as we get older, we

don't win tickets, we get paid in dollars, and then we trade those dollars in on bigger stuff that doesn't really matter—cars, and homes, and junk—like those little plastic do-dads from Rocky's, stuff that does not really satisfy in the long run; in fact, stuff that can very easily pull us away from God—stuff that does nothing to fill the hole that all of us have in our hearts.

Of course, as we're earning the stuff, we think that we have to have it—we think we need the latest and the greatest. Perhaps we have a nice cell phone that works really well and we're happy with it—but then I see that yours can play music, and then I'm not happy, and I need a nicer, newer phone. And then in a few months I see that your phone has a camera, and then I need an upgrade. And then I notice that yours has a keyboard and you can do e-mail and go on-line with your phone, and then I notice that yours has a touch-screen, and on, and on, and on. We know from experience that wealth and stuff cannot really satisfy. So, first of all, then, we learn from the Rich Young Ruler that worldly success and wealth cannot satisfy our deepest needs.

II. There is a second idea I'd like for us to consider here, and that is: THE RICH YOUNG RULER TEACHES US THAT IT IS GOOD TO GO TO JESUS FOR ETERNAL LIFE. **▶▶PPT▶▶**

I mean, here is a man who is missing something in his life, so we can at least appreciate that he went to the right person looking for the answer. And we notice that he did not just come casually strolling up to the Lord, he did not come to Jesus with a demanding attitude, he was not trying to trip Jesus up with a trick question (as many tried to do), but he came with great humility. In Mark's account, we find that the Rich Young Ruler actually *"ran up"* to Jesus and *"knelt before Him."* He knew that Jesus could help, and so he threw himself at the Lord's feet. Here was a man who was most likely used to people kneeling at his feet, but here the tables are turned, and he knows that Jesus has the answer to the aching in his soul. He came at a time in his life when he had the youthful enthusiasm to do something about it. He came with the right question (as Luke puts it), *"Good teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?"* He referred to Jesus as being *"good,"* and as we learn from the Lord's response to this, the young man apparently realized that Jesus was, in fact, more than good. It was more than a compliment, but it was the young man's way of recognizing that Jesus was more than just a man. Jesus was more than just a teacher, and so the young man had come to the right place for the answer to such an important question.

As our brother read for us in the scripture reading this morning, *"The LORD is near to all who call upon Him, to all who call upon Him in truth"* (Psalm 145:18). The young man, then, understood that he was not satisfied with life, and so he went to Jesus—he went to the right place for an answer.

III. There is a third basic idea I'd like for us to notice from this passage, and that is: **THERE IS ROOM FOR ONLY ONE GOD IN OUR LIVES.**

»PPT»

We find very quickly that the Rich Young Ruler is a very moral man. He follows the commandments, but when he asks the Lord (in **verse 20**) what he is lacking, the Lord very quickly gets to the heart of it and says, ***"If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."*** Like a good doctor who pokes you right where it hurts, the Lord reaches into this man's heart and pinpoints the problem immediately, and the solution is: Sell it all and give it away! In other words, the problem was MONEY! The problem was STUFF! The problem was that this man was trying to keep God and money up there in first place together. But the Lord says that will not work! And so he is commanded (according to Mark and Luke) to sell everything.

Now, it's interesting to me that Jesus did not tell every rich person to do this. We think about others in the Bible who were rich. We think about Abraham in the Old Testament. We think about Joseph, a man who became extremely wealthy. We think about Job, one of the wealthiest men in the world at his time. In the New Testament, we think of Nicodemus, and Barnabas, and Joseph of Arimathea, and Lydia, the seller of purple fabric. Although they were all very wealthy, none of them were ever commanded to sell everything and give it to the poor. It seems, then, that these others did not have the problem of the Rich Young Ruler. Apparently, they had God first in their lives. But with the Rich Young Ruler, God and wealth were competing for first place. Like plaque in an artery, there was something in this man's heart that prevented him from putting God first, and the Lord said that the blockage had to be cleared—drastic surgery for a serious problem—a little bit like what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount, ***"If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell"*** (**Matthew 5:30**). We could say the same thing not only for money, but also for sports, or recreation, or music, or work, or using the Internet, or even a relationship—if it starts taking on "god" status in our lives, then it needs to go. And so, perhaps in a similar way, knowing this man's very personal struggle, Jesus said, ***"Go and sell your possessions."*** As Jesus said earlier in **Luke 16:13**, ***"No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money."*** Jesus knew that in this man's heart he was an idol worshiper, he worshiped the god of money, and so the Lord said that it all needed to go.

What I find interesting is that Jesus was not asking for a contribution. This was not even for the Lord's own personal support, but the point is: The money had to go. Many years ago, someone said to me that, ***"Giving is the process of separating ourselves from the world."*** In other words, as we give it away, we are voluntarily releasing our grip on the world. The Lord was basically saying: You need to give it up before it ruins your life. And then, after selling everything, Jesus invites the man to, ***"Come, follow Me."***

And then we get to one of the saddest verses anywhere in the Bible, **verse 22**, ***“But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property.”*** And what I find interesting is that Jesus let him go. Jesus didn’t start chasing him down the road. Jesus didn’t say, ***“Well, how about 50%? What I really meant to say was that you need to give half of it away!”*** Jesus never harassed the man. Jesus never apologized. Jesus never backed down. But instead, Jesus let the young man walk away, and as far as we know, that was the end of it.

Jesus presented the man with a clear choice, but the young man decides that the price is too steep, and so he walks away—such a sad moment. And yet we know today that some will make the same decision. You need to move out of the house of that woman you’re living with. You need to stop using the illegal drugs. You need to stop lying to your parents. For some, the price is too high, and so they will walk away. We learn from the Rich Young Ruler that there is room for only one God in our lives. And so in sorrow, the Bible tells us that the young man walked away. In his heart, he was an idol-worshiper. He worshiped the idol of money, and he refused to give it up.

IV. As the young man is walking away, we come to the camel statement as we discover that RICHES CREATE A HUGE BARRIER TO SPIRITUAL HEALTH. »PPT»

As the young man is walking away, Jesus turns to His disciples and says, ***“Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. 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.”*** Now, most of us know how hard it is to get even a thread through the eye of a needle! But Jesus takes the largest common animal in that part of the world at that time, and he paints this word picture by using the smallest hole that most of us are able to see. Some people have tried to soften the statement by saying that Jesus was really referring to a gate in the city wall that was supposedly referred to as the ***“eye of the needle”*** because it was so small, and a camel could fit through it, but it was hard—the camel had to kneel down, just as we need to kneel down. Others have made a point that the Greek word for ***“rope”*** is similar to the Greek word for ***“camel,”*** and that the gospel writers simply got it wrong, that Jesus really meant to say it was hard to thread a rope made out of camel hair through a needle. But there is no real evidence for any of this. In fact, the word Mark uses for needle is tied to the word for sewing, and not only that, but the word Luke uses is a word that sometimes referred to the needle of a surgeon. We remember that Luke was a medical doctor. And so there is no need to soften the words of Jesus here, ***“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.”***

I appreciate what C.S. Lewis said on this passage. He said, ***“All things (for example a camel’s journey through a needle’s eye) are possible, it’s true; but picture how the camel feels, squeezed out in one long bloody thread from tail to snout.”*** Now that is a disgusting picture! You could squeeze a camel

through a needle, but that nasty thread would probably be hundreds of miles long. That is disgusting!

But we know what Jesus was saying here! The Lord was using a humorous mental image, basically a parable, to teach an important spiritual lesson: Riches are a barrier to entering the kingdom of heaven! We know this. We know that stuff can get in the way. We know how tempting it is to get caught up in the cycle of always wanting more. Of all people, living in one of the richest nations on earth, we should know this. I have read that by the age of 20, we have seen more than a million commercials. We are living in a land of great wealth, and yet just recently, more Americans declared bankruptcy than graduated from college. As a culture, we are always wanting more and more, even if it kills us financially, and so we know how hard it is to wrap our minds around the idea that we are just passing through. Someone has explained it to me like this: Imagine that we are sent to Europe on business for six months. They put us up in a hotel, they tell us that we cannot take anything back on the plane with us, but we do have the option of sending our salary home to our bank back in the US. During those six months, would we fill our hotel room with expensive furniture? Would we spend a lot of money redecorating our hotel room? No, we would not, but we would send our money home. We would buy the necessities of life, but we would send the rest on home so it would be there waiting for us when we got home. That's the basic concept, but it is so hard to do. We know that riches can be a huge barrier to spiritual health.

V. However, knowing this, I would like for us to close this section with the reassurance that Jesus gives, and that is: WHAT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR US IS POSSIBLE WITH GOD. »PPT»

We notice the disciples' reaction to the camel story in verse 25. Matthew says that they were "*astonished*" and said, "*Then who can be saved?*" In other words, they looked at this young man with his health, and power, having kept all of the commandments, and if it is impossible for a powerful young rich man to be saved, then what about the rest of us? And Jesus responded, "*With people, this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.*" In other words, if it were up to us to save ourselves, if it were up to us to purchase our way into heaven, we would be like that camel trying to squeeze through the eye of the needle—it would truly be impossible. But with God, salvation is possible. For the rich, it will be difficult, but it is possible.

We think of Moses pressed up against the Red Sea with Pharaoh's soldiers closing in—Moses found himself in an impossible situation, but it was possible with God. We think about David as a teenager, facing down a 9-foot tall giant on the battlefield with nothing but a slingshot and five small stones. David was facing an impossible situation, but it was possible with God. We think of Mary, an unwed teenager, as the angel Gabriel came to her and announced that she was pregnant and would bear a son. In Luke 1:34, Mary said to the angel, "*How can this be, since I am a virgin?*" And the angel responded, "*For nothing is impossible with God.*" The point here is that salvation is not possible on our own, but it is possible with God.

When we look at the commands that Jesus gave back in **verse 21**, nothing was too difficult to understand. Jesus told the young man to **“go,” “sell,” “give,” “come,”** and **“follow.”** Nothing too hard...if the young man had been willing to do it. And so the ball was back in his court. God was making it possible, but the decision was very personal.

Conclusion:

As we close this morning, I would simply ask you the question that I kept asking myself as I studied this passage all week: If Jesus had asked me to sell all of my possessions and give everything to the poor, would I have been willing to do it? I hope the answer is, **“Yes.”** Or perhaps another more realistic question: If my life were to end today, looking back over my life, would God see that I cared more for His kingdom than for my own physical comfort? Or to put it another way: Has my life been more defined by the pursuit of stuff, or has my life been more defined by my pursuit of God’s kingdom?

These are questions that only we can answer. Only God can put a camel through a needle. And in the same way, only God can break us free from the love of this world. If you have any special struggles in this area, we would be glad to pray with you this morning. But if you are not yet a disciple of Christ, the Bible teaches that we must turn away from sin—deciding that following the Lord is more important than any sacrifice we may need to make, we must confess the Lord (even if we may lose a friend or two), and we must allow ourselves to be buried in water for the forgiveness of sins. If you have any questions, we would love to study with you. But if you are ready to obey the gospel right now, you can let us know about your decision as we sing this next song. Let’s stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org