



Matthew 19:23-26

(23) Then Jesus said to his disciples, "I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. (24) Again I tell 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 greatly astonished and asked, "Who then can be saved?" (26) Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."

New International Version

This proverb has always been intriguing. Years ago, a friend related a story of a gate in the wall around ancient Jerusalem called the "Eye of the Needle," or the "Needle's Eye." This gate was designed in such a way that it could be used by pedestrians but not by marauding bandits on their camels. The only way a camel could get through this "Eye of the Needle" was to be unloaded and crawl through on its knees. This great story—*and several variations of it*—have made the rounds over the years.

The spiritual analogies were clear. The camel *could* go through the "Eye of the Needle," but only after being stripped of its baggage—its wealth!

The only problem with this story is that it is not true! There is absolutely no archaeological or historical evidence for the existence of such a gate. The story was first told several centuries ago and has been repeated ever since. It is yet another example of people trying to make Christ's words fit their own concepts of what He meant.

Jesus clearly says that it would be easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. Can this be done? Of course not! That is the point! Yet, people have tried in vain to make it happen. Some have suggested that there is a misprint in the Greek. The Greek word *kamelos*, meaning "camel" should really be *kamilos*, meaning "cable" or "rope." Still, passing a rope through a needle's eye is nevertheless impossible. Ah, but what if one uses a six-inch carpet needle, and the rope is actually made of camel's hair? Others have suggested that this was an Aramaic pun on the word for a camel and that

The Berean: Daily Verse and Commentary for Matthew 19:23-26 (<http://www.theberean.org>) of a gnat or louse, from the Aramaic *kalma* meaning "vermin" or "louse." It can become quite ridiculous.

All this maneuvering is unnecessary. Christ was using hyperbole, just as He did when He spoke of a plank being in one's eye while attempting to remove the splinter in a brother's eye ([Matthew 7:3-4](#)). Everyone seems to understand that this is exaggeration for effect; commentators do not claim, "Well, He really meant a toothpick, not a 2 x 4." In our own speech, we use hyperbole all the time, such as, "This book weighs a ton," or "I'm so hungry I could eat a horse."

Jesus' hyperbole in [Matthew 19:24](#) is easily explained. The camel was the largest animal regularly seen in Israel, and its contrast with the small size of a needle's eye shows the utter impossibility of the effort to squeeze the former through the latter. In Babylon, where portions of the Jewish Talmud were written, since the elephant was the largest animal, it was substituted for "camel" in this common aphorism.

Why do so many want to act as apologists for what Christ "really" meant in Matthew 19? Is it because we secretly—oreven openly—desire wealth and do not want any biblical negativity slowing us down? Just in case we inherit big bucks from the uncle we forgot we had, we would not want any spiritual stigma attached to the money! To reiterate, the wealth itself is not the problem, but our attachment to it or what it can buy.

Jesus' disciples were horrified at His words. "Who then can be saved?" they wondered. It is very simple. Christ is instructing them that, through his own efforts, *no one* can be saved. He does not mean just the wealthy cannot be saved, but *no one* can be saved through his money, his skills, his talents, his intellect, or his good looks!

During the time of Christ, the Jews believed that wealth and prosperity were a sign of God's blessing, so the reaction of His disciples is sheer incredulity. Later, professing Christians fell into the opposite ditch by portraying riches as a hindrance to salvation—which they can be—but so can many other things.

What if we are considered to be poor by this world? Are we somehow better than those with more physical goods? It would be just as dangerous for an underprivileged person to think that he had it made—that his poverty gave him some sort of piety—as it would for a rich man to trust in his wealth. We can be tempted from the path of righteousness by just about anything. Our downfall might be drink, food, television, or any number of things available to us in this world.

It is easy for us to look at the wealthy and judge them to be unfit for God's Kingdom,

The Berean: Daily Verse and Commentary for Matthew 19:23-26 (<http://www.theberean.org>) congratulating ourselves in the process for not having that particular distraction in our lives. While the rich young ruler walked away from Christ, extremely sad that he could not make that leap of [faith](#), what in our own lives has the same hold on us? What is the anchor that keeps our spiritual ship from sailing?

In [II Timothy 4:10](#), Paul writes, "Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world." What caused Demas to leave Paul and Christ? Demas loved [the world](#); the particulars are not divulged. Whatever it was is of less import than the simple, spiritual fact that a camel cannot go through the eye of a needle. Someone who loves the world, whether rich or poor, will not be in God's Kingdom ([James 4:4](#); [I John 2:15-17](#)).

The point is that we do not achieve [salvation](#) through our own efforts; it is from [God](#) alone, by His [grace](#). "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible," Jesus assures us. We have our part to play and are rewarded for our efforts, as Romans 2 explains, but when God takes us from this world, works with us, blesses us, and brings us into His Family, it is truly a miracle.

— Mike Ford

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[**The Rich Young Ruler and the Needle's Eye**](#)

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