

# The Rich Young Ruler And The Needle's Eye

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*Forerunner*, "Ready Answer," December 2004

In the three and a half years of Christ's earthly ministry, He held thousands of conversations and counseled perhaps many hundreds of people. The Gospels record only a portion of those exchanges, indicating that those dialogues chosen for inclusion in the Bible are of particular importance to us, and we should pay close attention to the lessons there for us. One such conversation is found in Matthew 19:16-22:

Now behold, one came and said to Him, "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" So He said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments." He said to Him, "Which ones?" Jesus said, "'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not bear false witness,' 'Honor your father and your mother,' and 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" The young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.

What can we learn from this brief discourse? We see a very polite, respectful, and eager young man who leaves Christ and goes away sorrowful. Why? The story makes it clear that he is young, and Luke tells us he is a ruler (Luke 18:18), possibly a magistrate or a kind of Justice of the Peace.

In the parallel account in Mark, we are told that the young man came "running" up to Christ and "knelt" before him (Mark 10:17), indicating a sense of urgency and respect. He then shows submissiveness and a willingness to be taught when he addresses Jesus as "Good Teacher." This was not a typical form of address for the Jews at this time. A more respectful greeting may not be found in the entire Bible.

This young man came, not to tempt Christ, but to learn from him. We know that he was not a Sadducee because it is clear that he believed in eternal life and wanted to attain it—an unusual goal in someone of his position and age. A man of wealth will often trust his riches and not be interested in what God has to offer. The young do not often look beyond today, much less to the far reaches of eternity.

This rich young ruler was a very sensible fellow. He knew something must be done to attain this happiness; eternal life is not a game of chance or blind fate. Romans 2:6-7 tells us that we are rewarded for our works, good and bad, and that "eternal life [goes] to those who by patient continuance in doing good seek for glory, honor, and immortality."

## Jesus' Reply

Christ's response to all this is interesting. He first establishes that none are truly good except God, and to Him goes all glory. Then Jesus tells him to "keep the commandments," specifically listing the last six of the Ten Commandments, the ones dealing with human-to-human relationships. The Jews

of the time were well-versed in the mechanics of the first four commandments, in terms of the letter of the law, so Christ lists the ones in which they were weakest.

It seems so simple, right? In order to have eternal life, "keep the commandments." How do today's professing Christians, who claim the law has been done away, get around this simple instruction? Other verses, such as John 14:15, "If you love Me, keep My commandments," reinforce this straightforward directive.

The young ruler tells Christ that he has kept the commandments since he was a child. What else should he do? Jesus does not contradict him. In Mark's account, it says He looked at him and "loved him." Possibly, this man was adept at keeping the letter of the law, but he was coming up short in abiding by the spirit of the law. Perhaps Jesus saw that he was absolutely sincere in his efforts to abide by those commandments.

Whatever the case, Christ does not attempt to sermonize on this point. The way the young man phrased his question, "What do I still lack?" smacks a bit of pride or self-righteousness. In effect, he says, "I'm keeping the commandments and have done well in that regard all my life. Show me where I'm coming up short."

Unlike what many of us would do, Christ avoids becoming mired in a dispute about this claim, but gets right to the bottom line: The young man's love of the world. He tells him to sell his possessions, give the money away, and follow Him as a disciple. Yet, the young ruler was unwilling to do this. His treasure was here on earth. His money exerted a stronger tug on his heart than Christ did. Matthew Henry says in his commentary, "When we embrace Christ, we must let go of the world, for we cannot serve God and money."

To the young man's credit, he was not hypocritical. He did not pretend he could do this when he could not. He knew what this meant: Christ's high standards and his own ambitions and desires were incompatible. Being both thoughtful and well-intentioned, he went away "sorrowful."

## **Love of Money**

What did he possess that had such a hold on him as to make him willing to walk away from eternal life? To put it into terms we can relate to: Did he have a fully equipped game room with pinball, billiards, jukebox, and wet bar? Maybe he had the latest and hottest SUV? Perhaps his living room sported a plasma television, where he could kick back and watch all the sports he could handle?

What was holding him back? What did he really trust in? There is nothing spiritually wrong with wealth itself. The Bible is full of examples of godly men who were very wealthy—for instance, great men of God like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job, and David. The problem is in the love of money.

Because we live in a consumer-driven society, the love of money can hold us back too. Advertisements call to us constantly, informing us of "needs" we did not even know we had. It is difficult to maintain a proper balance while under such an assault. We may not think of it this way, but it could be considered a blessing not to have great wealth because of the additional stress it can put on our spiritual lives.

It is instructive to study what Christ had to say to His disciples after the rich young ruler sadly walked away:

"Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And 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." When His disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, "Who then can be saved?" But Jesus looked at them and said to them, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."  
(Matthew 19:23-26)

*Twice* Jesus tells us how hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of God. The Christian walk is not easy for anyone, but it is particularly hard for the wealthy. In fact, Jesus goes on to say, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.

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.

### **Camels, Rope, and Gnats**

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 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—or even 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, 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.