

It is very hard for a rich man to enter heaven

Money's effect upon our soul

Matthew 19:16-26

Trying to gain heaven

In Matthew 19:16-26, Jesus meets a young rich ruler who asks Him how to get eternal life. The man supposes that some good work may merit his entrance into heaven.

We can clearly see from the New Testament that our “good” works do not earn us salvation, “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.” [Ephesians 2:8-9] But even the Old Testament was crystal clear on this point. Isaiah said, “All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags...” [Isaiah 64:6]. David said, “there is no one who does good, not even one.” [Psalm 14:3]

This young rich ruler had both the Psalms and Isaiah at his disposal, and yet he asks Jesus, “what good thing must I do to get eternal life?” [Matthew 19:16] He did not understand that eternal life is a free gift that can neither be earned, nor bought, but can only be received by faith.

Today, as in the past, many rich people suppose that they can do something to earn heaven. This notion is certainly not unique to the rich, as many middle income and poor people also believe that, but amongst the rich it is an epidemic belief. When we have everything we want we suppose that we deserve, or can earn heaven.

Impossible with man. Possible with God.

After a brief discussion on “good” and God’s commandments, Jesus gets to the heart of the matter. He knows that this young man is attached to his wealth. Challenging the man to give it all up and follow Him, Jesus leaves the man with one choice: Jesus or wealth. [“No one can serve two masters... You cannot serve both God and money.” –Matthew 6:24] The man went away sad, but chose his wealth instead of Jesus.

Jesus uses this as an opportunity to teach His disciples about money and its effects upon our likelihood of entering heaven. He compares the likelihood of a rich man entering heaven with that of a camel passing through the eye of a needle. Upon hearing this, the disciples were astonished and asked “Who then can be saved?” [v.25] They asked this because the common thinking of the time was that earthly wealth was God’s blessing upon a godly man. Therefore, if a man is wealthy, he must be godly.

{But had the disciples and their Jewish contemporaries taken Psalm 49 to heart, they would not have equated wealth with godliness. [“But man, despite his riches, does not endure; he is like the beasts that perish. This is the fate of those who trust in themselves...death will feed on them.” “A man who has riches without understanding is like the beasts that perish.” –Psalm 49:12-14; 20]}

Jesus’ answer was to say, “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” [v.26]

“The eye of the needle” analysis of the text

Because of the strength and exaggeration of Jesus’ statement that 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, many have proposed alternate translations.

The “needle’s eye”

This theory states that a gate in Jerusalem was called the “needle’s eye” and was low and narrow, requiring a man to dismount his camel and for the camel to get on its knees to enter through the gate. Variations of this story claim this gate to be a protection from thieves or invaders. Unfortunately, there is no gate that bears this name which has been uncovered by archaeologists. The desire here to take Jesus’ from “impossible” to “possible” does not hold water.

Camel’s hair rope instead of a camel?

Another theory is that Jesus was not referring to a camel, but to a rope made of camel’s hair which was fed through a very large carpet needle. A few Minuscules [a type of Greek manuscript] use the Greek word for ‘rope’, but every major manuscript and all church fathers use the word for “camel”, not “rope”. In fact, the United Bible Society is certain that the original autograph used “camel” instead of “rope”. Again, this is a theory that seeks to change “impossible” into “possible.”

Hebrew idiom

This phrase is a common Hebrew idiom [expression of speech] that was simply a way of saying “impossible” by exaggeration. The Jewish Babylonian Talmud refers to an elephant going through a needle as a way of saying that something is impossible [Babylonian Talmud, *Berakoth*, 55b Babylonian Talmud, *Baba Mezi’a*, 38b]. Another Talmudic and Midrash idiom is "A needle’s eye is not too narrow for two friends, nor is the world wide enough for two enemies."

Jesus’ intent is to use a hyperbole to further emphasize that it is impossible for a rich man to enter heaven by his own strength. Money tends to have an effect on most of us to the point that those who are rich are particularly susceptible to apathy, indifference, or even animosity when it comes to Jesus. In this way it is impossible for a rich man to enter heaven. If he were saying anything less than “impossible”, the disciples would not likely be astonished and wonder who could be saved. The response of the disciples adds further evidence that Jesus did intend to say exactly what is recorded in our modern translations. If it were not for the wonderful grace of God that woos us to Himself, no one would be saved.

Moreover, it is the rich who generally resist this grace.

“Now listen, you rich people, weep and wail because of the misery that is coming upon you.... You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter.” [James 5:1,2,5]

“Are they [the rich] not the ones who are slandering the noble name of Him to whom you belong?” [James 2:7]

“Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love Him?” [James 2:5]

This generality that the rich slander God, while the poor tend to recognize their need for God may be what Jesus meant in the beatitudes found in Luke 6:20-27. There He says “blessed are you who are poor” and “woe to you who are rich.” These blessings and woes may refer to spiritual poverty and spiritual self-righteous “wealth” as Matthew’s beatitudes proclaim, but it is also true that worldly wealth tends to be an impediment to gaining heavenly wealth.

Wonderful exceptions to this rule:

Joseph of Arimathea was a wealthy man, and yet is called a disciple of Jesus [Matthew 27:57]. Many Old Testament saints enjoyed earthly wealth [Abraham, David, Solomon] though this wealth did at times cause problems. But the passage that clearly states that there will be saints in heaven who were rich on earth can be found in

I Timothy 6:17-19: “Command those who are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.”

There will be saints in heaven who were counted as rich on earth [Hallelujah!], but it is imperative that they not place their hope in that wealth, as it can be a stumbling stone.

Riches, a blessing but a possible stumbling stone

The Bible tells us that wealth and the ability to enjoy it is a gift from God. (*“Moreover, when God gives any man wealth and possessions, and enables him to enjoy them, to accept his lot and be happy in his work—this is a gift of God.”—Ecclesiastes 5:19*) But this wealth can also become a stumbling stone for us that keeps us from living a life of faith. Solomon was blessed with wealth, but that and his many wives became an obstacle for him. Likewise, money can be an obstacle for us today.

Jesus said that you cannot serve both Him and money [Matt 6:24], many people think that only rich people serve money, but it is possible to serve money even when you think you don’t have much of it!

If you have done any of the following, you may be serving money even if you think you aren’t rich:

- * You have withheld from tithing 10% because finances are just too “tight”
- * You have gotten upset that someone didn’t pay back money they owed you
- * You complained about how much money you make at work
- * Spend more money on entertainment than on God’s Kingdom
- * You say “no” to someone in need when you have the means to help them
- * You own a car, home, or other possession that is out of pace with your income
- * You are getting deeper in debt, partly because of your spending habits
- * You seem to be addicted to shopping
- * You aren’t saving any money, but you still are taking vacations and buying non-essential items
- * You argue about money
- * You dream of what you would do with a jackpot from the lottery
- * You gamble even a small amount of money
- * You would consider committing a very small sin if you would get a lot of money in return

You may be richer than you think!

If you own your home, you have more than most in the world do.

If you have a car, you are richer than most.

If you eat out at a restaurant, you spend more than the average monthly income in Nicaragua.

If you have ever spent money to lose weight, then you are wealthy in the world's eyes

If you buy a Coke, a lottery ticket, or a cup of coffee, you spent a day's wages for many humans.

If you take the trash out every week, think about the millions who rummage through trash to live

One pack of disposable diapers is more than most babies will ever wear

A personal computer is an unaffordable luxury to most in the world.

A glass of clean water is unheard of in much of the world.

If you have a toilet, you have more than 60-80% of people in the world

If you take a week's vacation, you will spend more than the world's average yearly income

Most people in the world make less money in a month than you will spend on dinner and a movie!

What should I do?

1) Don't love money. Money is a tool, or an instrument to help you do God's will in your life. The Bible says, "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs." [I Timothy 6:10]

2) Be generous and willing to share. If we practice generosity, it will help us to not put our affections upon money. If we practice selfishness, it will cause us to become more and more attached to our money. Generosity is a fruit of the Spirit. The New Revised Standard Version translates "agathosune" as 'generosity' in place of 'goodness'. We are commanded in I Timothy 6:17-19 to be generous with our money.

3) Tithe. Much could be said about the Bible's stance on tithing. Malachi 3:9-12 is one of many passages that speak God's will for us in regards to giving to the church. Give at least 10%.

4) Work hard, spend modestly, save wisely, give generously

With your spending, consider these three categories: **Daily necessities, reasonable entertainment, and God's Kingdom.**

5) Don't underestimate the danger of not heeding these commands

The Bible says that there are people who have been eager for money and have wandered from the faith [I Timothy 6:10]. Jesus also says that you cannot serve Him and money [Matthew 6:24]. There is danger for you and I if we decide to continue to pursue money and neglect the proper management of God's resources that He has entrusted us with. Jesus told a story about three servant-managers whom were entrusted with money from God. One servant mismanaged the money and Jesus said of him, "throw that worthless servant outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." [Matthew 25:30]. Of note: the worthless servant was given less money to manage than the other two men. One man was given twice as much money as him and the other was given five times as much money. So let's not delude ourselves into thinking that only the rich are at risk for misusing God's money! Is there not a serious danger to us if we misuse or mismanage the money God has entrusted us with?

Some Proverbs to consider:

Proverbs 16:2; “All a man's ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the LORD .”

Proverbs 16:25; “There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death.”

Proverbs 23:4; “Do not wear yourself out to get rich; have the wisdom to show restraint.”

Proverbs 21:13; “If a man shuts his ears to the cry of the poor, he too will cry out and not be answered.”

Proverbs 19:17; “He who is kind to the poor lends to the LORD , and he will reward him for what he has done.”

Proverbs 10:4; “Lazy hands make a man poor, but diligent hands bring wealth.”

Proverbs 11:4; “Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death.”

Ecclesiastes 5:10; “Whoever loves money never has money enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with his income. This too is meaningless.”