

Who Then Can Be Saved?

Mark 10:17-31

DO THE HARD THING FIRST

A principle for success

Many years ago I became acquainted with a principle of personal success that I have found helpful any time I've actually put it into practice. It is a simple principle, really, though it is often easier said than done. The principle is this: **Do the hard thing first**. Tackle the difficult things at the beginning. Commit the greatest energy to the hardest task and let the easy things be "icing on the cake."

Principle applied to the text

There is always an "us"

In light of this principle, as we approach this text this morning, the follow up to the encounter between Jesus and the rich young ruler, I want to do the hard thing first. **The narrative about Jesus and the young man prepares us for the consideration of Jesus and us**. What we read about in Scripture is rarely only about "them." There is always an "us" component in the word of God.

Scripture support for "us"

We learn that from **Romans 15:4 (ESV)**, where Paul, inspired by the Spirit of God, writes,

"For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope."

As we read the story of Jesus and the rich young ruler, and the follow up conversation with the disciples, we ought to read this asking, "Okay Jesus, I see them, now what's in this for me?" I will tell you it is never a good thing to be greedy for the things of this world, but it is always a good thing to be greedy for God, to desire Him with our whole heart, our entire being.

Back to the Hard Thing

No Evidence

So, what is the hard thing I have to do at the beginning of this message? I have to disappoint someone. I don't know who it is. I don't know how what I have to do will affect you. But here it is. For those of you who read this text and you are hoping I am going to explain the whole "camel through the eye of a needle" thing in terms of an ancient gate in the wall of Jerusalem that was so small camels would have to be unloaded and coaxed to their knees to crawl through the gate . . . I'm sorry. As romantic and poetic as that interpretation of Jesus' words here appears, **there is no archeological or historical evidence that supports that interpretation**. It is an interpretive speculation that carries great preaching weight but it has no real substance.

Likely Origin and *Hyperbole*

There is an ancient rabbinic tradition that mentions the impossibility of an elephant passing through the eye of a needle. It is likely that Jesus contextualizes the ancient proverb using the largest land animal in Palestine to complete the picture. The proverb is a case of *hyperbole*. A few weeks ago I focused your attention on the word *hupomone*, patient endurance. This morning I want you to hear the word *hyperbole*. It is a communication/teaching term. **When someone uses an extreme example to make a simple point, they are likely using *hyperbole*.**

That is what Jesus is using here, the rhetorical device of *hyperbole*. He is using an extreme example of impossibility to make a simple point about entry into the kingdom of God. Jesus' words here are not meant to lead us to focus on camels and gates and needles and eyes. Jesus intends us to formulate for ourselves how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God. And friends, we really need to understand Jesus here, because I am afraid for a good many decades, the church in America has made entry into the kingdom of God appear much easier than it is.

On To The Easy Part

So, I'm sorry to disappoint you. It's hard. But! There is good news. Now that the hard part is over, we can move on to the easy part. I can tell the truth about Jesus and what He means for you to know in this conversation with His disciples. It is always easier to tell the truth about Jesus than fabricate a story to make Him appear more appealing to the world. So, let's move on to the easy part of this message, shall we?

HOW DIFFICULT IT IS TO ENTER THE KINGDOM

An Amazing Observation from Jesus

After the rich young ruler went away sad, more in love with his possessions than in love with God, Jesus makes an observation for His disciples. He looks around and comments, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God."

The disciples' reaction

These words amaze the disciples. They are flabbergasted. They are operating under the assumption that wealth is evidence of God's favor, of God's blessing, and that if anyone should be in a position to obey the law, including the laws for charity and generosity, it ought to be the wealthy. They have looked at the well to do in their society and assumed that these are the people most likely to succeed, most likely to enter the kingdom of God. These are the people most likely to have the biggest mansions on the heavenly hilltop.

Jesus introduces spiritual reality

The Sermon on the Mount

But Jesus' corrects our thinking here. He introduces spiritual reality to our worldly delusions. He does here exactly what He does in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5-7, remember. He takes up various expressions of the Law, some of the ten commandments and He says, "You have heard it said, "Thou shalt not kill," but I say unto you if anyone is angry with someone in their heart, they've already committed murder." Jesus applies the commandments to the intent of the heart and not just the public behavior or action. He introduces spiritual reality to our worldly delusions.

Another spiritual reality: Impossibility

The difficulty summarized

So, Jesus says, "How difficult it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God." He introduces spiritual reality to our worldly delusions. And to give us a sense, a picture, an illustration of what He means. He uses *hyperbole* by quoting an ancient rabbinic proverb that uses an extreme example to make a simple point. You want to know how difficult it is to enter the kingdom of God? It is impossible. It is as impossible as the largest animal you know passing through the smallest hole you can think of.

The impossibility begs the question

It is this impossibility Jesus means to focus on. The next question that comes from the disciples is exactly the question Jesus wants them to ask. It is the question Jesus wants us to ask. It is the

question spiritual reality in place of worldly delusions demands that we ask. **If it is impossible to enter the kingdom of God, then who can be saved?** If not even the rich can get in, then what hope is there for the rest of us? If the work and wealth of the rich doesn't open the gates of the kingdom, then how will any of the rest of us, in lesser position in the world, ever get in?

Personal nature of the question

That is the question Jesus means for us to ask. **"Who then can be saved?"** It is the most important question any human can ask of God and it is the one question every human should ask of God. If there are requirements for entering your kingdom, for being saved, for inheriting eternal life, for reconciliation and restoration of fellowship with you, and it is impossible for us to meet the requirements, then what hope do we have?

If amassing possessions is not evidence of God's blessing; if our conduct and choices don't guarantee our spiritual outcomes and entrance into the kingdom of God; if the level of difficulty rises from hard to impossible for us, then what can we do? What can we do?

All Things Are Possible With God

Jesus' response is sheer glory. **He affirms our weakness and exalts God's power.** "With man it is impossible, but not with God, for all things are possible with God." Jesus tells His disciples, and He tells us, that we cannot save ourselves (because that is the question they are asking), but God can save us. **God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves.**

God's saving grace in Christ announced by Jesus

This narrative about camels and needles is not primarily about us as much as it is about God, as much as it is about Jesus and what He is about to do in Jerusalem for us. Jump ahead just a moment and look at what comes next in Mark 10:32-34,

³² And they were on the road, going up to Jerusalem, and Jesus was walking ahead of them. And they were amazed, and those who followed were afraid. And taking the twelve again, he began to tell them what was to happen to him, ³³ saying, "See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and the scribes, and they will condemn him to death and deliver him over to the Gentiles. ³⁴ And they will mock him and spit on him, and flog him and kill him. And after three days he will rise."

And the disciples, if they had grasped the full meaning of Jesus and the rich young ruler would have heard Jesus say He was going to be killed and rise from the dead and they would have said, "That's impossible! That like a camel going through the eye of a needle!" And Jesus would have said, "Exactly! With man it is impossible, but not with God, for all things are possible with God." And that includes sending His own Son into the world to live a sinless life, die a substitutionary death, and rise from the dead so that all who believe in Him might have eternal life.

God makes the impossible possible through Christ

How can we be forgiven, adopted as God's children, inherit eternal life, enter and live forever in the kingdom of God, dwelling in the unveiled presence of His glory? With man it is impossible, but not with God, for all things are possible with God. Consider what God has done to make it possible for you to enter the kingdom of God.

1. **God predestined a Son**

- a. **1 Peter 1:18-21 (ESV)** ¹⁸ *knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold,¹⁹ but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.²⁰ He was foreknown before the foundation of the world but was made manifest in the last times for the sake of you²¹ who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.*
2. **God promised a Son**
 - a. **Genesis 3:15 (ESV)** *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.”*
3. **God presented His Son**
 - a. **John 3:16-17 (ESV)** ¹⁶ *“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.¹⁷ For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*
 - b. **Romans 8:3 (ESV)** *For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh,*
4. **God sacrificed His Son**
 - a. **Romans 8:32 (ESV)** *He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*
 - b. **Romans 5:8 (ESV)** *but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*
 - c. **1 John 4:9-10 (ESV)** ⁹ *In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*
5. **God resurrected His Son**
 - a. **Romans 1:4 (ESV)** *and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord,*
 - b. **1 Thessalonians 1:10 (ESV)** *and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.*
6. **God exalted His Son**
 - a. **Hebrews 1:2 (ESV)** *but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world.*
7. **God enthrones His Son**
 - a. **Matthew 19:28 (ESV)** *Jesus said to them, “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.*
 - b. **Matthew 25:31 (ESV)** *“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.*
 - c. **Luke 1:32 (ESV)** *He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David,*

What is impossible for us to accomplish on our own, our salvation, God accomplishes through Jesus. God does the impossible. Speaking of Jesus, **Hebrews 5:9 (ESV)** says, *And being made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him,*

The question, “Who then can be saved?” is vitally important for each of us to ask because all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We are all subject to the righteous justice of God on account of our sin. We all need a means for forgiveness, an avenue of hope. We will all die and face the judgment of God unless someone does the impossible for us. **In Christ Jesus, God does the impossible.**

To Enter the Kingdom We Must Give Up Everything for Christ

We must leave everything behind that stands in our way

Now, let us be clear. Let’s bring the lesson of the rich young ruler and the *hyperbolic* story of the camel and the eye of the needle together. There is a message in the world today that says that you can have it all and heaven too. That is not the message of Jesus. The message of Jesus to those who would be His disciples, to those who would enter the kingdom of God, to those who would inherit eternal life, to those who would be saved is that the demands of discipleship are total in nature. **To enter the kingdom of God, which God has made possible through faith in Christ, you must give up everything that stands in the way.** Whatever you are holding back from God is holding you back from God.

What we love more than God stands in our way

For the rich young ruler wealth stood in the way

For the rich young ruler who could not release his possessions, prestige, and power to God and take on humility, faith, and obedience to Christ, the door to the kingdom was closed. Jesus does not here set a principle that all wealthy people must follow. He doesn’t mean for us to think that the way to heaven is poverty. He singles out the main problem that keeps this specific man from the kingdom. It is not wealth that impedes, it is the love of wealth more than the love of God. It is the love of self-effort more than the love of God’s effort in Christ.

What obsessions stand in our way?

That is the principle Jesus reveals here. He faithfully shows to each of us the obsession with sin that obstructs our entrance into grace, He calls for our humble repentance. For the rich young ruler who loved wealth more than God, possessions were the obstacle. For others lust, or selfishness, or pride, or anger, or greed, or fear may stand in the way of our entrance into fellowship with Christ and the kingdom of God. Or it may be things that are good in and of themselves and seem less sinful than these others: houses or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or lands. **Anything in this world that we love and cherish more than God stands in the way and hinders our entrance into the kingdom of God, his grace, his eternal glory, his unending joy.**

In the end, entry is through faith in Christ alone

No matter what the specific sin is, entry into the grace of God will always boil down to faith in Christ and love of God over anything and everything else in this world. Christ’s command is simple: remove whatever stands in your way and come follow Him. Entry to the kingdom is through faith in Jesus Christ alone. If you want to go to heaven someday, if you want the presence and power of God in your life today, if you want your sins forgiven, your guilt removed, your shame repealed, if you want to hear these words, “Well done, good and faithful servant, enter into the joy of your Lord,” then now is the time to act. **Put everything aside and follow Jesus.** There simply is no other way.

How do we put our sin aside?

Confess your sin. God assures us that “if we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9.)

Ask God to give you His Spirit, the same Spirit who lived in Jesus. Jesus said to His disciples, on the night before He was crucified, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you” (John 14:16-17 (ESV.))

Trust God to keep the promise He makes in Christ and walk in obedience.

If God is working, then you need to be responding

Today is the day to get right with God, and Christ is the only way. You know in your heart if you love God. You know if you have a desire to follow Him, to belong to Him, to honor Him with your heart and your life and to receive from Him the blessing and grace He has for you. In your heart, you know. Act on what you know. God is calling you to Himself. Jesus is calling you to discipleship and the kingdom of God. He is pointing out the way. The Spirit of God has brought to mind the obstacles standing in the way of the kingdom for you. Set them aside, whatever it is. Leave it behind, take up a new grace, and follow Jesus in faith.

Whatever stands in your way, give it to God and leave it behind

If lust is your heart issue, ask God for true love. If greed is your issue, ask God for real trust. If relationships are your issue, and there are people in your life you love more than God, ask Him for personal presence. Ask Him to be real in your life in ways you have not experienced before.

Whatever stands in the way between you and God, identify it, ask Him to remove it, and commit to leaving it behind to follow Jesus.