

Children and the Rich Young Ruler

📖 Matthew 19:13-26

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We're in the fifth narrative followed by discourse in Matthew's Gospel which begins in 19:1 and ends in 25:46. In this narrative we find *The Formal Rejection of the King*. Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem to be crucified. Every word, every deed, every page is filled with heightened expectation. The main things to see in 19:1ff are the continued training of the disciples and the increased intensity of rejection by the leadership. This all comes to a head with the formal presentation of the King at the Triumphal Entry and Jesus' pronouncement of judgment on the Pharisees. The nation would no longer see Him until they uttered the Messianic greeting of Ps 118:26, "Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord."

Review of Last Week's Lesson

Last time we worked with the difficult passage on divorce in 19:1-12. After we review the passage I'll have a few additional things to say about divorce and remarriage from 1 Cor 7. In 19:1 Jesus takes another conscious move toward Jerusalem and the cross. He departed from the Galilee south through the Valley of Jezreel past Beth-Shean and across the Jordan River and down the Jordan Rift Valley to the region beyond Jordan. In 19:2 there were large crowds following Him as they were all on their way in caravans to Jerusalem for the Passover. Mark says He was teaching them and Matthew that He healed them. The two went together. Along the way in 19:3 some Pharisees came to test Him as to whether he held to the lax interpretation of Deut 24:1 taught by the school of Hillel, that a man may divorce his wife for any reason at all, even for something as trivial as burning breakfast. They already knew that Jesus did not agree with Hillel but this was the prevailing interpretation of the day and His answer would at the very least alienate him from the people and at the very most raise the ire of Herod Antipas to arrest, imprison and execute him. Either way the Pharisees considered this a no lose situation. In 19:4 Jesus answered, but not according to the Law of Moses but according to the original creation. He asked if they had read the part of the Hebrew Bible where it said that God made them male and female and in a creative act rejoined them as one flesh? Did they read the way it was in the beginning and did they understand the phrase one flesh? Or did they just make a technical point from the Law? The implication of Genesis is clear;

marriage is viewed by God as a creative act and thereby permanent. In 19:7 the Pharisees grant this for the sake of argument but ask how this viewpoint reconciled with Moses command to give the wife a certificate of divorce and send her away. They didn't see how the two views could be in harmony. Jesus' answer, in 19:8, was that Moses did not command divorce but only permitted it because of their hardness of heart. One of the main purposes of the Law was to reveal hardness of heart and rather than allowing the Law to serve its purpose they had distorted the Law to serve their own purpose. And Jesus is quick to return to the real issue at hand, saying from the beginning it has not been this way. In 19:9, Jesus says, "And I say to you," assuming to Himself the full authority of the Lawgiver and pronounces, the true intent and meaning of the word "indecency" which was under dispute in Deut 24:1, saying, "whoever divorces his wife, except on the grounds of" *πορνεία*, which is best understood as "some gross sexual sin, and marries another woman commits adultery." So under the Law divorce was permitted if the wife had committed some gross sexual sin with another man. Then it seems that she could remarry another man. However, if the man divorced her on some other basis, such as burning breakfast or not liking her hair, the divorce papers were invalid and so if the woman went and married another man she and the other man would be committing adultery because the first marriage was still binding in God's eyes. So it does seem that divorce and remarriage were permitted under the Law of Moses, but it was a sign of hardness of heart and God put strict limitations on the remarriage and subsequent marriages in order to limit further sin. In 19:10 the disciples understood Jesus to be saying that marriage was a very permanent union and because married people are going to face many problems and to commit to marriage would require you to commit yourself to solving those problems together they conclude that it is better not to marry. This conclusion was correct. If you are not willing to commit to solving the problems that come with marriage you should not marry. But in 19:11 Jesus said to them, "Not all men can accept this." In 19:12 there are only three groups that can accept this; eunuchs from birth since they are impotent or have no sexual desire, eunuchs who are castrated since they are prohibited from marrying and eunuchs who decide for themselves not to marry so they can devote their total interest to the things of the kingdom of heaven.

Now that is what Jesus taught here and as we pointed out, some of the teaching was particularly about the Law of Moses and Jesus' interpretation of the Law as it applied to the nation Israel, but the main point is about the way it was from the beginning at Creation and this applies equally to the nation Israel and the Church and all people. When two people marry there is the covenant and when the two come together there is the creative act of God joining the two as one flesh. This is not supposed to be undone by man. But, of course, we live in a fallen world, both husband and wife have sin natures and commit personal sin. This causes problems. Believers have an advantage because they have a new nature and can choose to live by the Spirit and solve those problems according to Scripture. Believers who don't do this develop hardness of heart toward their partner. In these situations, Paul says in 1 Cor 7:10, "I give instructions, not I, but the Lord, that the wife should not divorce her husband." That should not be a valid alternative. However, 7:11 says "but if she does divorce," which is a third class condition, maybe she decides to divorce. If she does "she must remain unmarried, or else be reconciled to

her husband." So the whole situation is similar to that under the Law of Moses since it is recognized that hardness of heart may develop and the woman may decide to divorce her husband. But if she does the woman only has two options. "She must remain unmarried" or the other alternative is "be reconciled to her husband." Marrying a different man is not an alternative. We're not told why but the implied reason in Scripture is that it will result in even more problems and confusion. As for the husband it says "the husband should not divorce his wife" and there is no statement about what to do if he does. The husbands are held to a higher standard. And may I say that the Scriptures are trying to limit the negative consequences of sin. God is looking out for our own well-being. All the things that go beyond this that the Scriptures don't speak to are going to unknown territory, you are going on your own and that is never a good idea, you are without guidance. You had guidance but you rejected guidance and so you are left without guidance. Now if your spouse dies then you are free to remarry, only in the Lord. But I think the most important lesson to take away is that the enterprise of marriage is a very serious enterprise and you should carefully and prayerfully consider whether you should enter into it. And if you do enter into it you should determine beforehand that you are going to work through all the problems associated with it. And if one of you decides to divorce then that one should also decide to remain unmarried or else be reconciled. And the one who is divorced, that one is in a difficult situation because if they remarry and the basis of the divorce was illegitimate, and we have no stated legitimate basis in the NT epistles, so to remarry is to probably be committing adultery because the first marriage still stands in God's sight. And I realize the difficulty of the person in that situation. But they are not to be viewed as a victim. They contributed their own sin to the development of the problems and failure to solve them that led to the divorce in the first place. So I don't have an answer for this person other than to remain unmarried and go on serving the Lord. And Paul says that even if your spouse that divorced you has died "in his opinion she is happier if she remains unmarried, and he thinks that he also has the Spirit of God."

In any case, what Jesus did on this occasion in Matt 19 was take an attempt by the Pharisees to trip Him up and turn it into a teaching moment for His disciples. The take away for them is that if they do marry they should remain married because divorce will hinder their ministry in the Church age. Since ministry in the Church age is preparatory for the kingdom and there will be no marriage for us in the kingdom then ministry is more important than marriage. For Christians in the West not placing a priority on ministry over marriage is probably our largest obstacle.

Today's Lesson

Tonight we come to two pericope's where Jesus is continuing to train His disciples. The first is 19:13-15 where Jesus expands his earlier teaching about humility and applies it to literal children. The second is 19:16-26 where

the rich young ruler is on a quest for eternal life and Jesus discounts the common notion among the Jews that earthly riches is indicative of heavenly favor.

Taking up humility and children, in 19:13, the scene is probably the same as before. Jesus, His disciples and a large caravan of people are “beyond the Jordan” making their way to Jerusalem for Passover. The parallel in Mark 10:10 says that they were “in a house.” They had entered a house after the Pharisees tested Jesus. In the house the disciples further probed him about marriage and divorce. While they were in the house Matthew says, **Then some children were brought to Him so that He might lay His hands on them and pray.** Constable notes, “It was customary for people to bring their children to rabbis for blessings.”¹ Jesus was commonly recognized as a rabbi. For a rabbi to lay hands on a child was a customary practice from OT times. Since the **children were brought to Him** it is apparent that the parents were bringing them to Him. There are three Greek words commonly associated with **children**. The first is *βρεφος* and it usually refers to “infants.” The second is *τεχνον* and it usually refers to children in general. The third is *παιδια* and it is the word used here. It usually refers to young children. The parallel in Mark 10:16 says that Jesus took them in His arms, confirming that they were young children, probably three to eight years old. Some were probably too young to understand and exercise faith and others were probably old enough to understand and exercise faith. But one thing is sure, the parents recognized Jesus as a rabbi and they wanted Him to do two things for their **children**. First, **lay His hands on them**. This was a customary practice. They knew that many whom Jesus had touched had been blessed. They wanted Him to touch their children so that they might be blessed. Second, that **He might pray** for them. As always, the word used of prayer here, *προσευχομαι* emphasizes making a request of God. They wanted Jesus to make requests to God for their children.

At the end of verse 13 **the disciples rebuked them**. They saw the parents as intruding upon the Lord’s privacy and perhaps their rights to Him. Walvoord said, “The disciples felt that this was an unwarranted intrusion into the privacy of Jesus, and attempted to restrict the children, but Jesus rebuked the disciples instead...”² The mention of the rebuke is not recorded in Matthew but the parallel in Mark 10:13 mentions that Jesus became indignant. The reason is because they were hindering others from coming to Him. This was contrary to His previous teaching that one needed to have humility in order to be great in the kingdom. Constable said, “They were not behaving with humility as Jesus had previously taught them to do (ch. 18).”³

As a result, in 19:14 Jesus said, “Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.” Toussaint said, “It will be noted in this connection that the pronoun is “such as these” (*τοιουτων*) and not “these” (*τουτων*).”⁴ In other words, Jesus is not saying the kingdom belongs to “these” children but the kingdom belongs to such as these. There is a comparison being made by how these children were coming to Him and how one must come to Him in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. Since the children were coming to Him to be received and blessed by Him so one must come to Him to be received and blessed by Him in order to enter the kingdom. The concept of simply coming to Him to be

received and blessed signifies coming to Him by faith, recognizing that one has nothing to offer Him but He has everything to offer us. Pentecost said, "The faith that had brought the children to Jesus was a sign of the faith that would admit one into the kingdom."⁵ Therefore, Jesus used this episode of parents bringing their children to Him to be blessed by Him as an illustration of coming to Him by faith in order to receive His blessing in the kingdom.

In 19:15 **After laying His hands on them, He departed from there.** The fact that He did not depart until He had laid **hands on** all who were brought to Him signifies that Jesus took time for young children. Some people look on children as an annoyance and even as bugs to be squashed. Others view them as simply unworthy of their time and attention. Importantly, Jesus did not view them this way at all. He took time for them, all of them and His example should go a long way in how we look upon and receive children. After this, Jesus **departed from** the house to continue His journey to Jerusalem.

This pericope is primarily interested in two things; faith and humility. With respect to faith, faith alone is required to enter the kingdom. With respect to humility, humility is required to be great in the kingdom. These are not to be equated but distinguished. The first one, faith, is dealing with salvation that results in entrance into the kingdom. The second one, humility, is dealing with committed discipleship that results in being great in the kingdom. So the pericope deals with both salvation and discipleship. These two are not to be confused.

In 19:17 we come to Jesus' interaction with the rich young ruler and his quest for eternal life along with the common Jewish notion that earthly riches were evidence of heavenly favor. This passage also refers to both entrance into the kingdom, which is salvation, as well as greatness in the kingdom, which is committed discipleship and its rewards. But He uses the challenge to committed discipleship in a unique way. The challenge serves as the basis for Peter's question about rewards in 19:27 which we will pick up next week. Just keep in mind that these sections go together.

For this week we have an admittedly difficult passage. It's been a passage I've struggled with and wanted to work out. I'm glad to have finally had the time to work it out and am satisfied with the conclusions I've come to. Probably the most difficult thing about this passage is understanding Jesus' answer but as we will see the most important thing to understand is the man's question.

In 19:16 **someone came to Him and said, "Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?"** The scene is that Jesus was walking along somewhere beyond the Jordan when this man came to him. The parallel in Mark 10:17 says that a man ran to Him and knelt before Him. The parallel in Luke 18:18 says he was a ruler. He was probably a synagogue ruler. Verse 20 and 22 say that the man was "young." Verse 22 says that the man "owned much property." So putting the facts together this man is rightly referred to as the rich young ruler.

To understand Jesus' answer one has to understand the rich young ruler's question. His question has three vital elements. First, what does he mean by **eternal life**? The concept of **eternal life** becomes rich in later NT usage. But what was this man's understanding of **eternal life**? It is notable that this is Matthew's first usage of **eternal life** in his Gospel. In the OT the only usage was in the LXX of Dan 12:2 where it was connected with the resurrection of the remnant of believing Israel and their entrance into the kingdom. In that vein the question the rich young ruler asked connected eternal life with Israel's resurrection and entrance into the kingdom. In 19:23 Jesus agrees that to obtain eternal life is to enter the kingdom saying, "Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." Pentecost noted that "...in Jewish idiom to enter eternal life and to enter the kingdom were synonymous ideas."⁶ We should also note that in 19:25 another synonymous idea here is salvation. Jesus' disciples asked, "Then who can be saved?" showing they connected obtaining eternal life with entering the kingdom with being "saved." So what is the rich young ruler asking? By asking about how to obtain eternal life he is asking about how to enter the kingdom, how to be saved in that sense.

Now it is interesting that he thought there was something he must do. He asks, what good thing shall I do? This is interesting because the Pharisees taught that there was nothing a Jew must do because a Jew is a physical descendant of Abraham and is thereby granted automatic entrance into the kingdom. But this man was not settled by that opinion. He thought he must do something.

The second element is understanding what exactly he means by **some good thing**. The **good thing** is singular in the Greek text. The rich young ruler thinks he must do **some** singular **good thing** to enter the kingdom. Constable says, "He thought one had to perform some particular act of righteousness in addition to keeping the Mosaic Law (v. 20). He wanted Jesus to tell him what that act was."⁷ Another observation we should note is that he thought it was in his power to do this act. Toussaint agrees saying, "He believes (1) that entrance is contingent upon some outstanding act, and (2) that he is able to do it."⁸

The third element that is key to understanding his question is the word **good**. There are two Greek words for **good**. One is *καλος* and it refers to what is outwardly good, what is pleasing to the eye. The other is *αγαθος* and it refers to what is intrinsically good. Which one did this man use? He used the second word *αγαθος*. He's asking, "What intrinsically singular good thing am I to do?" These three elements together are the key to understanding why Jesus answers in the way He does. So to be clear, the man is asking, "What singular good act am I to do to enter the kingdom, to obtain eternal life?" And he does so under the assumption that he is able to do it.

Now in 19:17 Jesus does not directly answer. He takes the indirect approach. And it's the indirect approach that leaves people confused. They expect something direct and they're not going to get that because something else is going on here. What Jesus does in verse 17 is key in on the man's usage of the word **good**, we said *αγαθος*, something intrinsically good. **Why are you asking Me about what is intrinsically good? There is only One who is intrinsically good.** And we all know who that is. Who is intrinsically **good**? God is intrinsically good. He is the only **One who is intrinsically good**. So Jesus ask, **Why are you asking Me about what is good?** Do you think I

have some connection to the **One who is good**? Or do you think I am the **One who is good**? In the parallel in Mark 10:17-18 and Luke 18:18-19 the man addressed Jesus as, "Good teacher..." and Jesus said, "Why do you call Me good? None is good but God." There are two things going on here. First, Jesus seems to be asking the man if by calling Him good He is calling Him God? Are you saying that I am God? Or that I have a connection with God? And we may imagine that some time was given for the man to think about whether he was willing to identify Jesus as God or consider Him as having a special connection to God. And when no answer was forthcoming Jesus went on to challenge him to keep the commandments. Second, in the Matthew account this element seems to be there but the stronger element is on the fact that **only One is intrinsically good**. What is Jesus doing by this? He is pointing this man away from his own abilities. The man's question assumes that he has the ability to do some intrinsically good thing. "**What good thing shall I do?**" But Jesus is pointing out that there is not one intrinsically good thing that he could do because there is only One who is intrinsically good and can do intrinsically good things, and that is God. The point is there is no good thing we can do to enter the kingdom. This is why in 19:26 Jesus said, "**With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.**" So only God can save. Only He can do what is necessary. And He can do much more than that. There is no good work a man can do that will qualify him for salvation. In any case, this man thought that he could and Jesus is challenging that notion. And again, we may imagine that Jesus gave him some time to think about the question **Why are you asking Me about what is good? There is only One who is good...** And when no answer was forthcoming Jesus went on to challenge him to keep the commandments. I think you can see what He is trying to do. Not everyone sees it but hopefully you can see it.

So in the middle of verse 17 He says, **but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments**. Why didn't He say, believe in Me? Because this man was not ready to believe in Him. This man still thought that he could do some good thing that would merit God letting Him in. He did not have a right view of the holiness of God. He did not have a right view of his own abilities. This man had to be shown that he did not measure up to God's standards of righteousness, nor could he.

Now a great many people think that Jesus is saying that one must obey the commandments in order to be saved or to show that one is saved? But as Wiersbe says, "Jesus did not introduce the Law to show the young man how to be saved, but to show him that *he needed to be saved*."⁹ This is absolutely correct. The commandments were never given as a way of salvation and those who were saved in the OT understood that. For them they were a rule of life, a way of sanctification. But this man was still under the impression that he could keep them and do some singular great act that would get God to grant him eternal life. That was never the purpose of the commandments. The commandments were given as a rule of life for the nation Israel, they were given for sanctification. And as any unbelieving Israelite tried to follow them they would quickly realize that they could not keep them perfectly. And in this way they revealed sin and the need for God to save them. So this man was lost, this man was dead in his transgressions and sins, this man is all of us who think we can do some good thing. Interestingly, this man was right that some good thing must be done, there is one singular act of righteousness

that must be done to please God; but he was wrong to think that he could do it. He needed to be shown that he could not do it and that he was in need of the One who would do it, the One standing in His presence, the One Who He had come to die for our sins. So why did Jesus answer by turning him to the commandments? To expose this man's sin and inability to save himself.

In 19:18 the rich young ruler did not catch that he was unable to do the singular act of righteousness that must be done to be saved and so **said to Him, "Which ones?"** Which commandments? In reality this was not a silly question since the rabbis had counted the Law of Moses and concluded there were 613 Laws and further added thousands of commandments in oral law. As Toussaint points out, "The scribes and Pharisees had catalogued the commandments, misinterpreted them, and added so many of their own that the man took the Lord's command as being a bit ambiguous."¹⁰ So he asks, **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; ¹⁹HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER; and YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF."** Where do these come from? Everyone but the last one comes from the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments were the basis of the whole Law. Which table of the Ten Commandments do these come from? There were two tables of the Ten Commandments. The first table deals with the Jews relationship to God; the second table deals with the Jews relationship to his fellow Jew. Which table does He quote? The second table, the Jews relationship to his fellow Jew. So He quotes the 5th commandment, the 6th commandment, the 7th commandment, the 8th commandment and the 4th commandment. The final commandment in verse 19, **YOU SHALL LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF** is not from the Ten Commandments, it's from Lev 19:18. Why did He close with Lev 19:18? **LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF**. Because it's a summary of the second table of the Ten Commandments. It's a summary because if you are loving your neighbor as yourself you're not murdering your neighbor, you're not committing adultery with your neighbor's wife, you're not stealing from your neighbor, you're not bearing false witness against your neighbor and you are honoring your father and mother. So **LOVE YOUR NEIGHBOR AS YOURSELF** is a summary of the second table.

Now in 19:20 **The young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?"** It's the same issue as verse 16. He still thinks there is some single intrinsically good thing he needs to do to obtain eternal life. And it's at this point in the parallel of Mark 10:21 that Jesus, "Looking at him...loved him..." The Greek says He looked intently at him. He saw where this man was and he had a love for him. Now he may have kept **all these things** insofar as the Pharisees said they must be **kept**. In other words, he did not physically commit murder, he did not physically commit adultery, he did not physically steal and so forth and so on. But was that the true intent of the Law? Did it only pertain to outward things? No, as Jesus said, if you hate your brother you've committed murder in your heart because hate is the spirit of murder. If you've looked upon another woman with lust you've committed adultery because lust is the spirit of adultery. The Pharisees were concerned only about the external actions but God was concerned with the internal thoughts and motives that underlie and give rise to the actions. This man had obviously only **kept all these things** in the Pharisaic sense

because no one can keep them in the true internal sense. So his question, **what am I still lacking?** Manifests a failure to understand the true intent of the Law.

Now in 19:21 Jesus continues with the same tact and **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."** The Greek is a 1st class condition. We may translate, "Since you wish to be complete...." That is what the man wanted, yes? The man wanted to be complete and fit for the kingdom. The Greek word translated **complete** is *τελειος* and means "perfect." And that is what one must be to enter the kingdom of heaven. One must be perfect. To be perfect Jesus says, here is what you must do, **go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.** Now again, people think that Jesus is saying that to be saved you have to sell everything you have, or at least be willing to, and give it all to the poor and if you do that is evidence that you are really saved. But that is not what Jesus is saying. What Jesus says is that if you do these things **you will have treasure in heaven**, that is, in the kingdom of heaven you will have great reward. So He is stating a condition for committed discipleship, **go and sell your possessions and give to the poor**, and the resulting reward that a committed disciple would have is **treasure in heaven** to be enjoyed later in the kingdom on earth. But why does Jesus pronounce the conditions of a committed disciple to an unbeliever? For the same reason as before, to show this man his need for salvation. This man thought he had done the entire Law and more than that, all the requirements of the Pharisees. This man still didn't see his need. What more could Jesus tell him to do? Something he could not do. And why did Jesus do this? Mark says because He loved the man. And it hurt the man, as verse 22 shows, but it was this hurt that the man needed in order to understand his need.

In 19:22 we see how the man responded, **But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property.** This man said he wanted to obtain eternal life. He said that he was interested in doing one singularly good thing to enter the kingdom. He said he kept all the Law. Jesus knew there was one thing he could not do. He saw this man's heart. He knew this challenge would show him his need for salvation. The man could not handle it. He **went away grieving.** The explanation for why was because **he owned much property.** The bottom line is this man loved money. This man sought riches. This man like most Jews, viewed prosperity as a physical evidence of God's favor. But this man's god was his money. He worshipped money. He may have kept many of the commandments but his attitude toward money betrayed that he did not love his neighbor as himself. It also revealed that he did not "love the Lord his God with all his heart, mind, soul and strength" but he loved his money with all his heart, mind, soul and strength. And therefore his heart was laid bare. This man would not let go of his money.

Now at this point we don't know what happened to this man, whether he became a believer later or not, but in 19:23 and 24 Jesus used this discussion as an opportunity to teach His disciples. **And Jesus said to His disciples, "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."**

Note that both verses are teaching the same thing. Verse 24 begins with the words, **Again I say to you** to show that he is merely repeating what He just said in verse 23 with different words. In verse 23, when Jesus says **it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom** He does not just mean that it is difficult for a rich man to enter, He means that it is impossible. The reason is because He is not referring merely to **a rich man** but **a rich man** who trusts in his riches. It is impossible because he has placed his faith in his riches and not in God. Pentecost said, "A "rich" man (Mark 10:23) does not refer to one who has riches but rather to one who trusts in riches. Christ said it is impossible for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God (v. 23)."¹¹ The parallel statement in verse 24 shows the impossibility. **"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 some have said that the **eye of a needle** is a reference to a small gate within a larger city gate and that a camel had to get down on its knees to pass through this gate. By this they are saying that it is difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom but not impossible. This is not what Jesus is saying. The idea that **the eye of the needle** is a small gate within a larger city gate has no historical basis. Constable said, "I have not been able to find any basis for the view that "the eye of the needle" was a small gate. Jesus presented an impossible situation."¹² The Greek word translated **needle** is *ραφίς* and refers to a literal sewing needle. The Greek word used in the parallel of Luke 18:25 is *βελονή* which refers to a surgical needle. Both refer to literal needles which are tiny and literal camels which are large. The camel was the largest animal Jews traveled on. Since there is no way for a literal camel to pass through the eye of a literal needle then Jesus is saying that there is no way for one who is trusting in his riches to enter the kingdom. The reason is because he has a misplaced trust.

One final observation, in 19:23 Jesus used the expression **the kingdom of heaven** and in the parallel statement of 19:24 He used **the kingdom of God**. This proves that the two expressions are not distinct but synonymous. Earlier dispensationalists tried to distinguish the two but these types of examples show that they are one and the same. Both refer to the future Messianic kingdom to be established on earth. Only Matthew used **the kingdom of heaven**. The apparent reason was because he wrote to Jews who were sensitive about using the name of God. They permitted its use but only sparingly. As such Matthew uses **the kingdom of God** only four times (12:28; 19:24; 21:31; 21:43). It is one and the same with **the kingdom of heaven**.

Now the fact that it was impossible for one who trusted in his riches to enter the kingdom of God would shock Jews who believed that riches were a sign of divine favor. Thus, 19:25 is not too surprising, **When the disciples heard this, they were very astonished, and said, "Then who can be saved?"** They probably did not understand the full import at this time. **And looking at them Jesus said to them, "With people this is impossible."** In other words, if salvation were left up to people it would be **impossible**. People cannot save themselves. There is nothing a person can do to merit salvation. **"But with God all things are possible."** Salvation is a work of God alone. With **God** salvation is **possible** and not only salvation but **all things are possible**. Possibility does not lie back of God but God lies back of possibility. What Jesus was going to Jerusalem

to do was to provide the basis for God's salvation. If one has faith in Him God will save him. The rich young ruler never came to understand that, as far as we know.

In summary, in 19:16 the rich young ruler came to Him and asked Him, "What singular intrinsically good act must I do in order to obtain eternal life, enter the kingdom, be saved? In 19:17 Jesus centered in on the concept of intrinsic goodness. "Why are you asking Me about what is intrinsically good? Do you think I have some connection to the only One who is intrinsically good? Or do you think that I am the One who is intrinsically good? And do you realize that you are not that One and that you can do nothing intrinsically good? The man apparently did not respond and so Jesus said, "but if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments." He said this not to show the man how to be saved but to show him his need to be saved. In 19:18 the man said to Him, "Which ones?" because the Pharisees had added many commandments beyond the Law of Moses. And Jesus quoted from the second table of the Ten Commandments and in 19:9 gave a summary of that tablet, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." In 19:20 the young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept; what am I still lacking?" The man had kept them externally as the Pharisees required but not internally as God required. In response in 19:21 Jesus said to him, "Since you want to be perfect, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." These high standards for committed discipleship resulting in great reward were laid down to press the point that this man needed to be saved, not to tell him how to be saved. But this man, in 19:22, when he heard this statement, he went away grieving because he owned much property and he was not willing to part with it. He loved his riches. He put his trust in his riches. And therefore in 19:23 Jesus taught His disciples, saying, "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." That is to say that it is impossible for a person who is trusting in their riches to enter the kingdom of God because it is not riches that give one entrance into the kingdom of heaven but trust in the Messiah that gives one entrance into the kingdom of God. In 19:25, when the disciples heard this they were very astonished because they viewed wealthy people as being favored by God. And if they were not favored by God "Then who can be saved?" And Jesus, looking at them intently said to them, "With men this is impossible." Men cannot save themselves, they cannot merit salvation. "But with God all things are possible." God alone can save and He does so on the basis of grace alone through faith alone.

In conclusion, what can we learn? First, we can learn that a person who thinks he can be good enough or do something good enough to be saved is not ready to trust. A person must understand that they can do nothing to save themselves to be in a position to have faith. This is why, when we present the gospel, part of what we do upfront is talk about the sin problem. Jesus had a unique way of doing it. He tried to get a person who thought he was good to realize that there is none good but God. This is a valid way to approach people in evangelism. Second, salvation is entirely of God. It is His work. Salvation is not a cooperative effort where He does His part and we do ours. Salvation is of God alone. Third, the human condition for receiving salvation is faith alone. Faith is not a work. Faith is not doing something. It is when we realize that we can do nothing that we turn to faith in

the one who can do something. Faith is receiving that something. John 1:12-13, "But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name..."

¹ Tom Constable, Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible, Matt 19:13.

² John Walvoord, Thy Kingdom Come, p 143.

³ Tom Constable, Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 19:13.

⁴ Stanley Toussaint, Behold the King, p 226.

⁵ J Dwight Pentecost, The Words and Works of Jesus Christ, p 359.

⁶ J Dwight Pentecost, The Words and Works of Jesus Christ, p 359.

⁷ Tom Constable, Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 19:16.

⁸ Stanley Toussaint, Behold the King, p 226.

⁹ Warren W. Wiersbe, The Bible Exposition Commentary, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 72.

¹⁰ Stanley Toussaint, Behold the King, p 226.

¹¹ J Dwight Pentecost, The Words and Works of Jesus Christ, p 361.

¹² Tom Constable, Tom Constable's Expository Notes on the Bible (Galaxie Software, 2003), Mt 19:23.