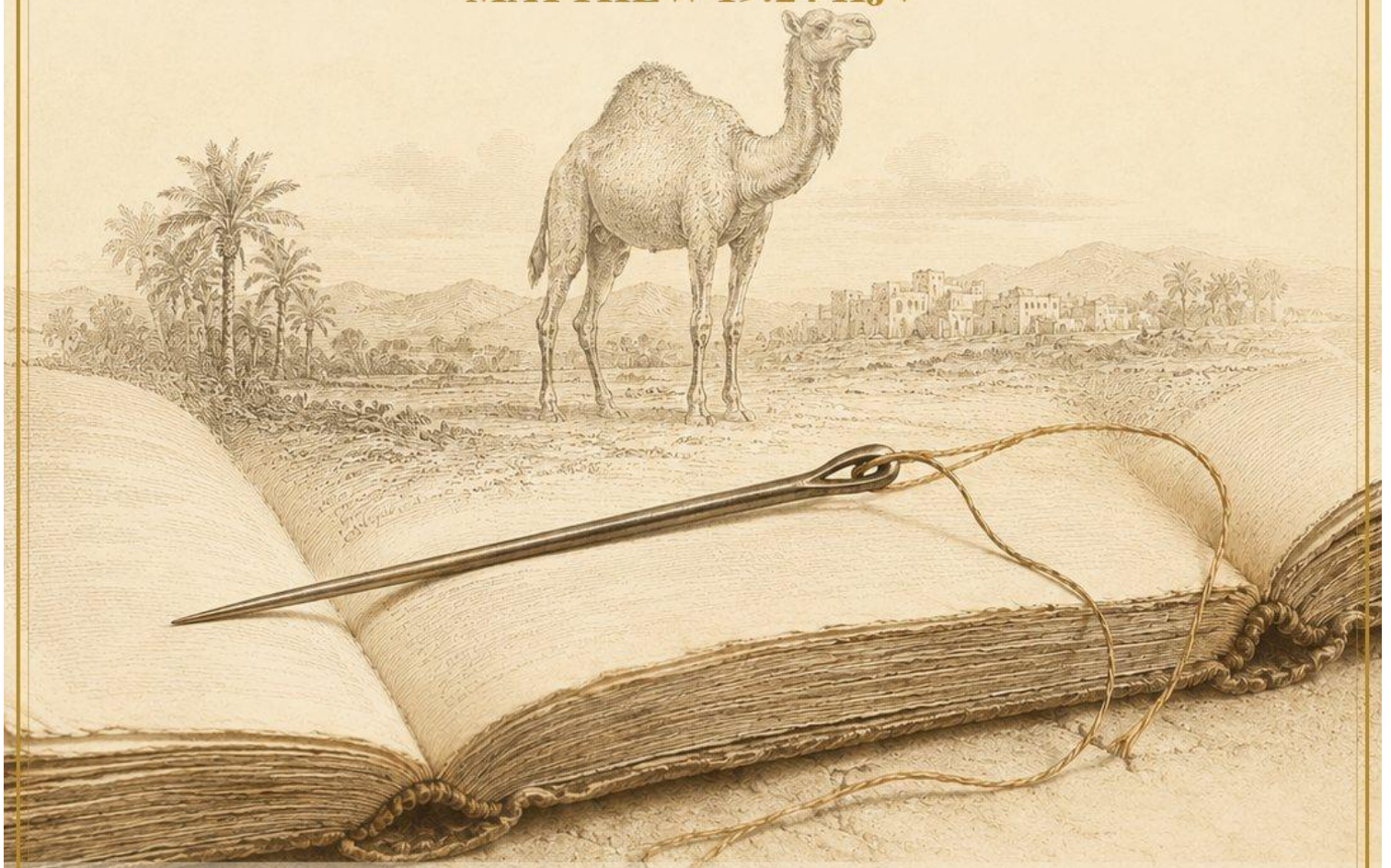


REASON TOGETHER CHURCH

WHAT IS MEANT BY THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE?

MATTHEW 19:24 KJV



Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Reason Together Church
www.ReasonTogether.Church

Bring your questions. Open your Bible. Let's Reason Together the Word of God.

REASON TOGETHER STUDY

THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE

What Did Jesus Mean by "The Eye of the Needle"?

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley
Reason Together Church
www.ReasonTogether.Church

Aloha.

Welcome to Reason Together Church.

To every member, every friend and every honored guest who is with us today, we are grateful that you are here.

This is a place where questions are not treated as enemies of faith.

We bring our questions.

We open our Bible.

And we Reason Together the Word of God.

Let us pray.

Our heavenly Father, we thank You for Your Word.

We thank You that it does not flatter us, deceive us or leave us trusting in things that cannot save.

Give us wisdom today.

Give us honesty.

Keep us from looking at someone else while Your Word is speaking to us.

Help us to understand the danger of riches without condemning those whom You have prospered.

Help us to understand the blessing of generosity without imagining that generosity can purchase salvation.

Show us what we trust.

Show us what we fear losing.

And above all, show us Jesus Christ, who accomplished for us what we could never accomplish for ourselves.

In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen.

Our principal Scripture is found in Luke chapter 18, beginning with verse 18.

The Bible says:

"And a certain ruler asked him, saying, Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?

"And Jesus said unto him, Why callest thou me good? none is good, save one, that is, God.

"Thou knowest the commandments, Do not commit adultery, Do not kill, Do not steal, Do not bear false witness, Honour thy father and thy mother.

"And he said, All these have I kept from my youth up.

"Now when Jesus heard these things, he said unto him, Yet lackest thou one thing: sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me.

"And when he heard this, he was very sorrowful: for he was very rich.

"And when Jesus saw that he was very sorrowful, he said, How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!

"For it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.

"And they that heard it said, Who then can be saved?

"And he said, The things which are impossible with men are possible with God."

Before we begin, let me say something about giving.

Guests are never expected to give to Reason Together Church.

If you are a member of another church, we encourage you to support your home church.

For those who consider this their church home, there is a giving box available in the back.

Give only as the Lord leads you and give cheerfully.

No gift purchases prayer.

No offering purchases favor with God.

No amount of money purchases salvation.

The Gospel is offered freely to us because Jesus Christ paid its entire cost.

And that brings us naturally to today's question.

Money can be uncomfortable to discuss in church.

Sometimes it has been used to pressure people.

Sometimes it has been used to measure people.

Sometimes people have been made to feel that the size of their gift determines the size of God's love.

That is not the Gospel.

Our question today is not, "How much can a church persuade someone to give?"

Our question is much older and much more important.

What did Jesus mean by "the eye of the needle"?

Many of us have heard an explanation that sounds wonderful.

The story says that Jerusalem had large gates through which travelers, animals and merchandise entered the city.

At night, those large gates were closed for security.

But supposedly there was a much smaller entrance that remained available.

That little gate, we are told, was called "the Eye of the Needle."

If a merchant arrived after the large gate had closed, his camel could not simply walk through the smaller entrance.

The merchant had to remove everything from the camel's back.

The camel had to kneel.

Then, with considerable struggle, the animal could squeeze through.

That story certainly preaches.

Unload your baggage.

Humble yourself.

Get down on your knees.

Work your way through the narrow entrance.

There is only one problem.

There is no dependable evidence that a gate in first-century Jerusalem was called "the Eye of the Needle."

Small doors and pedestrian openings certainly existed in walled cities.

But that does not prove that Jesus was referring to one.

The familiar details about unloading the camel, making it kneel and forcing it through do not appear in Matthew.

They do not appear in Mark.

They do not appear in Luke.

And they do not appear in any dependable first-century description of Jerusalem.

Versions of that explanation appear centuries after Jesus spoke these words.

Many sincere preachers repeated what they had been taught.

We do not need to ridicule them.

But a beautiful illustration does not become history simply because it has been preached for generations.

And the greatest problem is not merely that history cannot locate the gate.

The greater problem is that the gate changes the meaning of what Jesus said.

If it were a small gate, the camel could eventually get through.

It would be difficult.

It would be inconvenient.

It might take humility and effort.

But it would be possible.

Jesus did not end this conversation by saying, "With enough effort, this is possible."

He said, "With men this is impossible."

The gate makes salvation difficult.

Jesus said that with man salvation is impossible.

Matthew records a camel and a needle.

Mark records a camel and a needle.

Luke records a camel and a needle.

The Gospel writers use ordinary language for a needle and its opening.

Jesus placed one of the largest animals familiar to His audience beside one of the smallest openings familiar to His audience.

This was the kind of unforgettable picture Jesus often used.

He spoke of a man trying to remove a small mote from another person's eye while a beam was protruding from his own eye.

He spoke of religious leaders straining at a gnat and swallowing a camel.

He spoke of faith moving a mountain.

Jesus knew how to place an image in the mind that nobody could forget.

He was not developing a camel-handling procedure.

He was describing an impossibility.

There is another theory we should mention.

Some have suggested that the original word was not "camel" but a similar word meaning a rope or a ship's cable.

But the manuscript evidence overwhelmingly supports "camel."

All three Gospel accounts preserve the camel.

Later Jewish writings use an elephant passing through the eye of a needle as an example of something inconceivable.

And even if the word were rope, a ship's cable cannot pass through a sewing needle either.

We do not need to shrink the camel.

We do not need to enlarge the needle.

We need to allow the picture to remain impossible.

A camel cannot force itself through a needle.

And a sinner cannot force himself into the kingdom of God.

But why did Jesus use that particular image at that particular moment?

To understand that, we must meet the man whose departure prompted it.
We usually call him the rich young ruler.
That familiar description combines the information from three Gospels.
Matthew tells us that he was young.
Luke tells us that he was a ruler.
Matthew, Mark and Luke all tell us that he was rich.
Luke says he was very rich.
Mark gives us another detail.
The man came running.
He did not stroll over casually.
He did not wait until Jesus approached him.
He ran to Jesus.
Then he kneeled before Him.
He was urgent.
He was respectful.
He was spiritually interested.
He asked the most important question a person can ask.
"Good Master, what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?"
From the world's perspective, this man had almost everything.
He had youth.
He had money.
He had authority.
He had respectability.
He had religious knowledge.
He had moral discipline.
He had enough humility to kneel publicly.
He had enough urgency to run to Jesus.
He had enough spiritual concern to ask about eternity.
If this man walked into most churches, people would be excited to meet him.
Successful.
Young.
Influential.

Moral.

Interested in eternal life.

What more could a person want?

Jesus looked at this man who appeared to have everything and said:

"One thing thou lackest."

He had everything that could be counted.

But he lacked the one thing that could not be purchased.

And Luke has carefully placed this man beside several other people.

If we only lift his encounter out of the chapter, we miss part of the message.

Earlier in Luke 18, Jesus described two men who went to the temple to pray.

One was a Pharisee.

The other was a publican.

The Pharisee stood and began presenting his record to God.

He was not like other men.

He was not an extortioner.

He was not unjust.

He was not an adulterer.

He fasted twice every week.

He gave tithes of everything he possessed.

The Pharisee was rich in morality.

He believed his record gave him standing before God.

The publican stood afar off.

He would not so much as lift his eyes toward heaven.

He smote upon his breast and said:

"God be merciful to me a sinner."

He did not bring a list of accomplishments.

He brought a plea for mercy.

Jesus said that the publican went down to his house justified rather than the Pharisee.

Then people began bringing little children to Jesus.

The disciples tried to send them away.

But Jesus called the children to Him and said:

"Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for of such is the kingdom of God."

Then He said:

"Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein."

Notice the word.

Receive.

The children brought no wealth.

They brought no authority.

They brought no record of achievement.

They brought no ability to negotiate.

They could only receive what another was willing to give.

And immediately after Jesus spoke about receiving the kingdom as a child, the ruler asked:

"What shall I do to inherit eternal life?"

There is tension inside his question.

He wanted to do something in order to inherit something.

But an inheritance is not usually purchased from a father.

An inheritance is received because another has provided it.

The ruler was trying to accomplish what the children were willing to receive.

The Pharisee trusted what he had done.

The ruler trusted what he possessed.

The publican asked for mercy.

The children simply received.

Jesus said to the ruler:

"Why callest thou me good? none is good, save one, that is, God."

Jesus was not denying His deity.

He was forcing the man to think about the word "good."

Was "good" merely a polite title?

Did the ruler understand the One before whom he kneeled?

And did he understand the standard of goodness he was invoking?

Then Jesus directed him to the commandments.

Do not commit adultery.

Do not kill.

Do not steal.

Do not bear false witness.

Honor your father and mother.

The man answered:

"All these have I kept from my youth up."

We do not need to assume that he was intentionally lying.

He may have sincerely believed that his outward conduct satisfied the Law.

He had not murdered anyone.

He had not committed adultery.

He had not built a public reputation as a thief or liar.

He had honored his parents according to the visible expectations of his community.

He looked clean on the outside.

But Jesus was about to take the examination from the man's visible behavior into the treasury of his heart.

Mark tells us something Luke does not record.

"Then Jesus beholding him loved him."

Please do not miss that.

Jesus loved him.

The next words were not spoken because Jesus hated wealthy people.

They were not spoken because Jesus wanted to embarrass him.

They were spoken in love.

Jesus loved him too much to reinforce a false assurance.

Jesus loved him too much to let him believe that outward morality had cured the heart.

Jesus loved him too much to leave his hidden master unchallenged.

So Jesus said:

"Yet lackest thou one thing: sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come, follow me."

Jesus did not end the command with "sell."

Jesus did not end the command with "give."

He ended it with:

"Come, follow me."

The man was not merely being invited to become poor.

He was being invited to become a disciple.

Jesus placed His finger upon the one thing the ruler would not place under His authority.

The ruler could say that he had not murdered.
But could he love God above his wealth?
He could say that he had not stolen.
But could he open his abundance to the poor?
He could say that he honored his parents.
But would he honor the command of Christ?
He could speak respectfully to Jesus.
But would he follow Jesus when following became costly?
His possessions were not simply things he owned.
They had become the place where he stored his security.
They supported his identity.
They protected his position.
They gave him control.
He possessed many things.
But his possessions also possessed him.
Jesus did not confront his wealth because Jesus needed his money.
Jesus confronted his wealth because the man needed freedom.
The Bible says that when he heard this, he became very sorrowful.
He did not laugh at Jesus.
He did not curse Jesus.
He did not announce that eternal life was unimportant.
He went away grieving.
He wanted eternal life.
But he wanted to retain sovereignty over the treasure that ruled his heart.
He ran to Jesus.
He kneeled before Jesus.
He asked Jesus the right question.
And he still walked away from Jesus.
A person can be sincere and still be unsundered.
A person can show religious urgency and still refuse the Lordship of Christ.
A person can kneel with the body while the heart remains standing in resistance.
The text does not tell us what eventually happened to this man.

We should not invent the rest of his story.

Perhaps he later repented.

Perhaps he did not.

Scripture tells us only that on this day, when Jesus touched his controlling treasure, he went away sorrowful.

Centuries before, Psalm 49 had already explained the limitation of wealth.

The Psalm says:

"They that trust in their wealth, and boast themselves in the multitude of their riches;

"None of them can by any means redeem his brother, nor give to God a ransom for him:

"For the redemption of their soul is precious."

Money can buy many things.

It can buy land.

It can buy comfort.

It can buy education.

It can buy influence.

It can buy medicine.

It can buy a ticket almost anywhere in the world.

It can surround a house with gates and alarms.

It can hire attorneys and advisers.

But money cannot forgive one sin.

It cannot purchase righteousness.

It cannot defeat death.

It cannot reconcile a sinner to God.

It cannot purchase one additional eternity.

Money can buy many things, but Psalm 49 says that it cannot ransom one soul.

Then the Psalmist says:

"But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave: for he shall receive me."

Do you see the movement?

Riches cannot redeem.

Man cannot redeem.

But God can redeem.

That is the same movement we find in the words of Jesus.

The ruler walked away.

Jesus looked around and said:

"How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!"

In the older English of the King James Bible, "hardly" here means with great difficulty.

Riches are not evil merely because they exist.

But riches can become an especially persuasive counterfeit savior.

They can make a person feel protected.

They can make a person feel independent.

They can make a person feel that every problem has a purchasable solution.

Deuteronomy warned Israel that after they had eaten and were full, built goodly houses and multiplied silver and gold, their heart might be lifted up.

They might forget the Lord.

They might say:

"My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth."

Proverbs 30 contains a wise prayer:

"Give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me:

"Lest I be full, and deny thee, and say, Who is the LORD?"

Poverty brings real temptations and suffering.

Riches bring temptations of their own.

The dangerous sentence is:

"I have need of nothing."

Jesus then said:

"For it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God."

The disciples were astonished.

Why?

The Old Testament sometimes presents wealth as accompanying God's blessing.

Abraham was rich.

Job possessed great wealth and was described as upright.

David possessed wealth.

God gave Solomon riches.

Deuteronomy described material blessings connected with covenant faithfulness.

The Old Testament also repeatedly condemns wealthy oppressors and warns against trusting riches.

So we should not say that every Jewish person believed every rich person was righteous.

But consider the man who had just walked away.

He appeared moral.

He appeared earnest.

He appeared respected.

He appeared successful.

He appeared religiously informed.

He appeared blessed.

If a man with all those apparent advantages could not enter, the disciples asked:

"Who then can be saved?"

They did not ask, "Which rich person can be saved?"

They asked, "Who can be saved?"

The question moved beyond one economic class.

And Jesus answered:

"The things which are impossible with men are possible with God."

The poor cannot purchase salvation.

The rich cannot purchase salvation.

The immoral cannot earn salvation.

The moral cannot earn salvation.

The irreligious cannot save themselves.

The religious cannot save themselves.

The ungenerous cannot save themselves.

The generous cannot save themselves by generosity.

Financial riches say, "I have enough."

Moral riches say, "I have done enough."

The Gospel says, "Christ is enough."

This is where the gate story does its greatest damage.

The gate story offers a method.

Unload enough.

Kneel deeply enough.

Struggle hard enough.

Eventually you can squeeze yourself through.

But Jesus did not give the camel a technique.

He gave the sinner a verdict.

"With men this is impossible."

Then He gave the sinner hope.

"With God all things are possible."

That sentence is sometimes placed on signs and used to encourage us about every difficult goal we can imagine.

But in this passage, Jesus was not talking about winning a competition, completing a project or reaching a personal dream.

He was talking about salvation.

Only God can do in a human heart what a human being cannot do for himself.

Only God can grant repentance.

Only God can awaken faith.

Only God can replace a heart of stone.

Only God can justify the ungodly.

Only God can bring a spiritually dead sinner to life.

And Luke shows us how God would accomplish it.

Immediately after this conversation, Jesus gathered the twelve and said:

"Behold, we go up to Jerusalem."

He told them that He would be delivered to the Gentiles.

He would be mocked.

He would be spitefully entreated.

He would be spitted upon.

He would be scourged.

He would be put to death.

And on the third day He would rise again.

The disciples asked, "Who then can be saved?"

The answer was standing in front of them.

The answer was walking toward Jerusalem.

The answer was going to the cross.

Jesus would accomplish what wealth could not purchase.

Jesus would accomplish what morality could not merit.

Jesus would accomplish what human sacrifice could not earn.

Second Corinthians 8:9 says:

"For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich."

The ruler would not surrender earthly wealth to follow Jesus.

Jesus surrendered heavenly glory to save sinners.

He took upon Himself the form of a servant.

He humbled Himself.

He became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.

The ruler went away because the cost of following Jesus appeared too great.

Jesus continued toward Jerusalem because the cost of saving sinners was not too great for Him to pay.

Christ did not become poor so that every believer would become materially wealthy.

He gave Himself so that sinners could receive treasures money can never buy.

Forgiveness.

Reconciliation.

Adoption.

Righteousness.

Resurrection.

Eternal life.

Treasure in heaven.

Luke then gives us another encounter.

As Jesus approached Jericho, a blind man sat beside the road begging.

He had none of the ruler's apparent advantages.

He had no wealth to present.

He had no position to present.

He had no impressive record to present.

When he learned that Jesus was passing by, he cried:

"Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me."

The people tried to silence him.

He cried even more:

"Thou Son of David, have mercy on me."

That sounds like the publican.

"God be merciful to me a sinner."

The Pharisee presented a record.

The ruler presented commandments he believed he had kept.

The blind man presented his need and asked for mercy.

Jesus stopped.

The man received his sight.

And he followed Jesus, glorifying God.

One man received and followed.

Another man possessed and walked away.

Then Luke introduces us to Zacchaeus.

The Bible says Zacchaeus was a chief among the publicans.

And then Luke adds two important words:

"And he was rich."

Jesus had just said how difficult it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom.

The disciples had just asked who could be saved.

Jesus had just said that what is impossible with men is possible with God.

Now Luke shows us a rich man being saved.

Zacchaeus was not admired like the ruler.

He was despised.

As a chief publican, he was associated with a system known for taking money from his own people on behalf of Rome.

He was rich, but his riches did not make him respectable.

He wanted to see Jesus.

Because he was short, he climbed a sycamore tree.

Jesus came to the place, looked up and called him by name.

"Zacchaeus, make haste, and come down; for to day I must abide at thy house."

The Bible says:

"And he made haste, and came down, and received him joyfully."

Received Him.

There is that word again.

The children received the kingdom.

Zacchaeus received Jesus.

The ruler wanted to know what he could do to add eternal life to everything else he possessed.

Zacchaeus welcomed Jesus into his house.

Then Zacchaeus said:

"Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have taken any thing from any man by false accusation, I restore him fourfold."

Zacchaeus did not purchase salvation by giving away money.

His changed relationship with money showed that salvation had changed his heart.

The ruler called Jesus "Good Master" but retained control.

Zacchaeus called Jesus "Lord" and opened his possessions.

The ruler had a respected reputation but went away sorrowful.

Zacchaeus had a sinful reputation but received Jesus joyfully.

The ruler claimed that he had kept the commandments.

Zacchaeus acknowledged the need for restitution.

The ruler held his riches tightly.

Zacchaeus began using riches to bless the poor and repair what he had wrongfully taken.

Then Jesus said:

"This day is salvation come to this house."

Jesus did not say, "This day a wealthy man purchased salvation."

Salvation came to the house.

Grace entered.

Lordship entered.

And the evidence appeared in the way Zacchaeus now viewed what he owned.

Can a rich man be saved?

Yes.

Zacchaeus is the answer.

Luke gives us the warning through one rich man and the miracle through another.

If we may say it carefully, Zacchaeus is the camel God brought through the needle.

Not because a literal camel passed through a literal needle.

But because God accomplished in a rich man's heart what that man could never accomplish for himself.

The ruler and Zacchaeus also help us answer another question.

Does Jesus command every Christian to sell every possession?

We must not weaken what Jesus required of the ruler.

Jesus truly told him to sell, give and follow.

It was not merely a suggestion to feel less attached while changing nothing.

The ruler's obedience would have required action.

But the New Testament does not give every believer exactly the same financial instruction.

Zacchaeus gave half and promised restitution.

Joseph of Arimathaea was a rich man and a disciple who still possessed a tomb in which Jesus was buried.

Lydia maintained a household that became a place of ministry.

Believers opened their homes to churches.

In Acts chapter 5, Peter acknowledged that property remained under its owner's authority before it was voluntarily given.

Paul did not tell Timothy that no wealthy Christian could exist.

He said:

"Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God."

He instructed them to do good.

To be rich in good works.

To be ready to distribute.

To be willing to communicate.

Wealth is not an automatic sentence of condemnation.

But wealth is a dangerous place to store trust.

Christ may not command every disciple to distribute possessions in exactly the same manner.

But every disciple must surrender ownership at the level of Lordship.

Nothing may remain outside the authority of Christ.

So here is the uncomfortable question.

If Jesus placed His finger upon the thing you are most afraid to lose, would you still follow Him?

For the ruler, it was wealth.

For another person, it may be reputation.

For another, career.

For another, a relationship.

For another, political influence.

For another, education and intellectual pride.

For another, a ministry position.

For another, the need to remain in control.

We must not spiritualize the money out of this passage.

Jesus was really talking about riches.

But money is not the only treasure that can become a master.

What makes you feel secure?

What do you believe you cannot live without?

What would cause your face to fall if Christ required it?

What would make you walk away sorrowful?

The church at Laodicea said:

"I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing."

Jesus said they did not recognize that they were spiritually wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked.

An entire congregation can make the ruler's mistake.

A church may possess a building.

Programs.

Equipment.

Savings.

Reputation.

Attendance.

And still have Christ standing outside the door.

We can even turn sacrifice into a transaction.

After the ruler left, Peter said:

"Lo, we have left all, and followed thee."

Matthew records Peter asking:

"What shall we have therefore?"

Peter had done what the ruler would not do.

But now Peter was beginning to calculate what his sacrifice should earn.

The ruler asked what he must do to obtain eternal life.

Peter asked what the disciples should receive because of what they had surrendered.

Both needed to understand grace.

Jesus promised that no faithful sacrifice for His sake would be forgotten.

But Mark includes two words that prosperity preaching sometimes overlooks.

"With persecutions."

The hundredfold promise is not a financial investment formula.

It does not mean that if you surrender one house, God owes you one hundred more luxurious houses.

When believers lose family, home or community for Christ, they enter the enormous household of faith.

They receive brothers, sisters, mothers, homes and fellowship among the people of God.

And they may receive persecution with it.

Kingdom abundance is not the same thing as worldly luxury.

Then Matthew records Jesus telling the parable of the laborers in the vineyard.

Some worked all day.

Some entered later.

Some worked only a short time.

The master acted according to his own goodness and generosity.

The lesson is framed by the statement:

"The last shall be first, and the first last."

The ruler calculated obedience.

Peter calculated sacrifice.

The laborers calculated wages.

Jesus directed all of them toward the goodness of the Master.

God faithfully rewards service.

But salvation is not a wage that God owes us because our performance surpassed someone else's.

So what did Jesus mean by the eye of the needle?

He was not referring to a historically established gate in Jerusalem.

He was not telling us how to make a camel kneel.

He was not teaching that salvation can be achieved by unloading enough baggage.

He was not presenting poverty as a payment for eternal life.

He meant the tiny opening of a needle.
The camel pictured an impossibility.
Riches cannot ransom the soul.
Morality cannot ransom the soul.
Religious activity cannot ransom the soul.
Sacrifice cannot ransom the soul.
A camel cannot force itself through a needle.
A sinner cannot force himself into the kingdom.
Salvation must be accomplished by God and received by grace.
Perhaps you have been trusting financial wealth.
Your possessions may provide comfort in this life.
But they cannot forgive your sins.
They cannot defeat death.
They cannot reconcile you to God.
They cannot purchase eternal life.
Perhaps you have been trusting moral wealth.
You attend church.
You give.
You serve.
You try to treat people well.
You have avoided the scandals that marked someone else's life.
You look at your record and say, "All these have I kept from my youth up."
But none is good save God.
All have sinned and come short of the glory of God.
Our best works cannot pay the ransom of our soul.
Perhaps you feel that you have nothing to offer.
Then you are closer to understanding the invitation than you may realize.
The publican had only a plea for mercy.
The children could only receive.
The blind man could only call upon the Son of David.
Zacchaeus received Jesus joyfully.
You do not need wealth, status or an impressive past to come to Christ.

You need to recognize your sin and your need for a Savior.

The Bible says that all have sinned.

The wages of sin is death.

But God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Jesus bore our sins upon the cross.

He was buried.

On the third day, He rose from the dead.

The impossible work of salvation has been accomplished by Christ.

You cannot buy it.

You cannot earn it.

You cannot inherit it because your parents believed.

You must repent of your sin, believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and receive the gift God offers.

If you are ready to trust Christ today, I invite you to pray.

The words of a prayer do not save by themselves.

Jesus saves.

But you may use these words to express the faith and repentance of your heart.

Let us pray.

Lord Jesus, I know that I am a sinner.

I know that my money cannot save me.

My morality cannot save me.

My religious works cannot save me.

I cannot earn eternal life.

I believe that You died upon the cross for my sins.

I believe that You were buried and rose again.

Please forgive me.

Come into my life.

Be my Savior and my Lord.

I receive the salvation that I could never accomplish for myself.

Help me to follow You and place everything I possess under Your authority.

Thank You for saving me.

In Jesus' name.

Amen.

If you prayed that prayer sincerely, please tell someone before you leave.

We want to pray with you, encourage you and help you begin following Christ.

And for all of us, do not walk away sorrowful when Jesus touches the treasure that has been controlling you.

His exposure of the heart is an act of love.

He does not call us away from lesser treasures in order to leave us empty.

He calls us to treasure in heaven that cannot decay, disappear or be taken away.

Do not trust what you own.

Do not trust what you have accomplished.

Receive Christ.

Follow Christ.

Place everything under His authority.

The question was never how to make the camel small enough or the needle large enough.

The question is whether God can accomplish what we cannot.

Jesus answered that question at the cross and the empty tomb.

With men this is impossible.

But with God all things are possible.

May the Lord bless you.

May He guard your heart from uncertain riches.

May He make you rich in faith, rich in good works and rich toward God.

May He teach you to receive His kingdom like a child and follow Jesus with joy.

Aloha Nui Loa.

BIBLICAL COMMENTARY

The Eye of the Needle

What Did Jesus Mean by ‘The Eye of the Needle’?

Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31
and Luke 18:18-30

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley
Reason Together Church
www.ReasonTogether.Church

Bring your questions. Open your Bible. Let's Reason Together the Word of God.

The Question Behind the Familiar Phrase

Matthew 19:24 And again I say unto you, It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.

Few sayings of Jesus are more vivid. A large camel stands before the tiny opening of a sewing needle. The contrast is comic, memorable and impossible. Yet many Christians have heard a different picture. In that version the eye of the needle was a small gate in Jerusalem. A camel could supposedly pass through after its load was removed and it knelt low enough.

The gate story changes the force of the passage. It turns an impossibility into a difficult procedure. It suggests that the rich man may enter if he becomes humble, unloads his possessions and works hard enough. Jesus explains His own comparison differently. When the disciples ask who can be saved, He answers, ‘With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible.’

This commentary reads the saying within all three Synoptic accounts, examines its ordinary words and follows the disciples’ astonishment to Jesus’ answer. The central issue is not architectural ingenuity. It is the inability of human beings to save themselves and the sovereign ability of God to save those who cannot save themselves.

GOVERNING ANSWER: The eye of the needle is the opening of an ordinary sewing needle. Jesus uses the largest familiar animal and one of the smallest familiar openings to picture a human impossibility that only God can overcome.

One Encounter in Three Gospels

Mark 10:23-25 How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God! ... It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.

Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31 and Luke 18:18-30 preserve the same encounter. A man of standing asks Jesus about eternal life. Jesus directs him to the commandments. The man claims to have kept them. Jesus then places His finger upon the possession that possesses the man. He must sell, give to the poor and follow Christ. He goes away sorrowful because he has great wealth.

Each Gospel retains the camel, the needle, the astonishment of the hearers and the declaration that salvation is impossible with men but possible with God. These repeated features are not decoration. They form the inspired interpretation of the event. The ruler’s refusal displays bondage. The camel saying names the impossibility. The disciples’ question widens the problem. Jesus’ answer locates hope in God.

The accounts contain small differences in wording and emphasis. Matthew calls the man young. Luke identifies him as a ruler. Mark describes Jesus beholding him and loving him. Such differences enrich rather than overturn the common testimony. The three witnesses agree that wealth exposed a heart unable to release its confidence and follow the Lord.

SYNOPTIC AGREEMENT: The ruler’s sorrow, the impossible image and God’s saving power belong together in Matthew, Mark and Luke.

The Ruler's Question

Luke 18:18 And a certain ruler asked him, saying, Good Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?

The question sounds earnest and respectable. The ruler approaches Jesus with moral seriousness. He is not asking how to commit a sin without consequence. He wants eternal life. Yet his wording already carries a tension. An inheritance is received because of relationship, but he asks what deed he can perform to secure it.

Jesus does not rebuke the desire for life. He exposes the assumptions beneath the question. The ruler calls Him Good Master, so Jesus asks why he uses the word good and reminds him that none is good save one, that is, God. The statement is not a denial of Christ's deity. It presses the ruler to consider whether he understands the goodness he attributes to Jesus and the goodness he assumes in himself.

Religious people often frame salvation as the completion of one missing task. They believe most of the account has already been settled through decency, discipline or respectability. Jesus does not supply a final merit badge. He brings the man before the holiness of God and then exposes the allegiance that his morality has concealed.

DIAGNOSTIC QUESTION: The ruler asks what he can do. Jesus reveals what he cannot surrender.

Why Jesus Named the Commandments

Matthew 19:17-19 If thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments. He saith unto him, Which? Jesus said, Thou shalt do no murder, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not bear false witness, Honour thy father and thy mother: and, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.

Jesus names commandments that govern human relationships. He is not teaching that flawless law keeping is an alternative route to salvation. He is allowing the law to perform its revealing work. The ruler hears the commandments as a record of achievement. Jesus uses them as a mirror that will uncover the ruler's failure to love his neighbor as himself.

The ruler replies that he has observed these things from his youth. His answer may describe sincere outward conduct. The narrative gives no reason to picture him as a public criminal or obvious fraud. His tragedy is more searching. A respectable life can coexist with a ruling idol. He has kept enough commandments to admire himself but not enough to see his need.

The command to give to the poor brings the second table of the law into the realm of costly love. It also exposes the first table because wealth has become the man's functional god. Jesus does not change subjects from morality to money. He shows that the ruler's relationship to money reveals his relationship to God and neighbor.

THE LAW'S WORK: Jesus did not show the ruler how good he was. He showed him where his goodness ended.

‘One Thing Thou Lackest’

Mark 10:21 Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, One thing thou lackest: go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast, and give to the poor ... and come, take up the cross, and follow me.

Mark places love at the center of the confrontation. Jesus looks upon the man and loves him before naming the demand that sends him away grieving. Biblical love does not flatter a destructive allegiance. It tells the truth required for freedom. The severity of the command is an expression of Christ’s love, not a contradiction of it.

The phrase one thing thou lackest does not mean that the ruler needs one additional good work to complete an otherwise sufficient righteousness. The one thing exposes everything. He lacks the undivided allegiance that would receive Jesus as Lord. His treasures are not merely in his house. They are in the place from which his heart receives identity, security and control.

Jesus promises treasure in heaven and calls the ruler to follow Him. The command is therefore not bare loss. It is an exchange of masters and treasures. The man is invited to release what cannot save him and follow the One who can. He chooses the visible abundance he already owns over the heavenly treasure Christ offers.

LOVE SPEAKS: Jesus loved the ruler too much to leave his idol unnamed.

A Command for One Man and a Test for Every Disciple

Luke 18:22 Yet lackest thou one thing: sell all that thou hast, and distribute unto the poor ... and come, follow me.

Scripture does not record Jesus commanding every believer to sell every possession. Zacchaeus gives half of his goods to the poor. Joseph of Arimathaea owns a tomb. Lydia maintains a household. Peter tells Ananias that property remained under his authority before it was sold. Paul instructs wealthy believers to be generous rather than declaring that possession itself proves unbelief.

The ruler’s command is personal, but its authority is universal. Christ has the right to identify whatever competes with His lordship. For one person the revealing demand may concern money. For another it may concern reputation, family approval, political power, comfort or control. Every disciple must hold every possession beneath the authority of Jesus.

The passage therefore must not be weakened into a general suggestion about generosity. Jesus gives this man a concrete command. The man refuses it. Neither should the passage be turned into a simplistic rule by which poverty automatically proves holiness. The issue is not how little a person owns. The issue is whether Christ owns the person.

DISCIPLESHIP: Not every believer receives the ruler’s exact command, but every believer receives the ruler’s exact Lord.

The Ruler Went Away Sorrowful

Matthew 19:22 But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful: for he had great possessions.

The ruler's sorrow reveals that he understands the cost. He does not debate, bargain or ask for time. He walks away. The possessions that appeared to make his life full now prevent him from receiving the life he requested. His wealth gives him the freedom to purchase many things but not the freedom to follow Christ.

Sorrow is not the same as repentance. A person may feel the pain of Christ's demand while still choosing the idol. The ruler grieves because he wants eternal life without losing his controlling treasure. His response warns against confusing emotional disturbance with saving surrender.

The text also refuses an easy caricature. The man is not described as cruel, dishonest or vulgar. Mark says Jesus loved him. He is morally serious and spiritually interested. That makes his departure more sobering. The heart can be near the kingdom in conversation while remaining unwilling to enter under the reign of the King.

TRAGIC IRONY: The ruler owned many possessions, but one possession owned the ruler.

How Hardly Shall the Rich Enter

Mark 10:23 And Jesus looked round about, and saith unto his disciples, How hardly shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God!

Jesus does not say that wealth is morally neutral in every practical sense. Riches create particular spiritual dangers. They can imitate providence by appearing to guarantee tomorrow. They can imitate identity by assigning importance. They can imitate righteousness by attracting honor and they can imitate freedom while fastening the heart to maintenance, fear and appetite.

The disciples are astonished at the statement. Their reaction makes sense in a world where prosperity could be read as a sign of divine favor. The Old Testament does contain examples of God blessing faithful people with material abundance. Abraham, Job and Solomon cannot simply be erased. Yet Scripture also condemns wealth gained unjustly, confidence placed in riches and neglect of the poor.

Jesus is not contradicting every biblical statement about material blessing. He is correcting the assumption that visible blessing proves spiritual safety. The ruler's abundance cannot open the kingdom. It can make his bondage harder to recognize because the idol has produced admired results.

FALSE SECURITY: Wealth is dangerous because it can feel like salvation before death proves that it never was.

What Is the Eye of a Needle?

Luke 18:25 For it is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.

The ordinary meaning is the small opening in a sewing needle through which thread passes. Matthew uses language for the opening of a needle. Mark uses a similar expression and Luke, whose vocabulary often differs, speaks of a needle's opening. None of the three explains a place name, gate or local structure. Their wording reads as a common object, not a Jerusalem landmark.

The image joins the largest familiar land animal in Jewish life with one of the smallest familiar openings. Jesus uses deliberate hyperbole. He does not ask hearers to imagine a specially trained camel completing a difficult maneuver. The humor and shock depend upon recognizing that the proposed passage cannot happen.

The three Gospel forms vary slightly in their words for the opening and needle. That variation is natural when describing an ordinary object. It is difficult to reconcile with the claim that all three are preserving the formal name of one known gate. The text itself directs the reader toward a needle, not architecture.

READ THE IMAGE: Do not rescue the camel from the comparison. Its impossibility is the point.

Was There a Needle Gate in Jerusalem?

No dependable first-century evidence identifies a Jerusalem gate called the Eye of the Needle. The known gates of Jerusalem in biblical, Jewish and early historical sources do not establish the popular sermon story. Small postern gates existed in ancient cities, but the existence of small gates does not prove that Jesus referred to one with this name.

The gate explanation appears in medieval Christian interpretation, many centuries after Jesus. A gloss later associated with Anselm describes a narrow gate through which a camel could pass only after stooping. Modern research has traced the story's transmission and distinguished it from Theophylact's separate discussion of a cable or rope. The distance from the first century matters.

The lesson is not that every preacher who repeated the story intended deception. Many inherited it from trusted teachers or study notes. The proper response is humble correction. A beautiful illustration does not become history simply because it has been preached for generations. The authority of the sermon rests upon Scripture, so Scripture must be allowed to correct the illustration.

HISTORICAL VERDICT: The famous gate story is not supported by dependable evidence from the time of Jesus.

The Camel or the Cable?

Another proposal replaces camel with cable or thick rope. The Greek words *kamelos*, camel, and *kamilos*, cable, can appear similar, especially in later pronunciation and manuscript transmission.

Some later witnesses and interpreters mention the rope reading. The image of a rope entering a needle may feel more internally matched because both belong to sewing or cordage.

The stronger and earlier textual support favors camel. Matthew, Mark and Luke are best read with the ordinary Greek word for the animal. The camel also fits a recognized Jewish style of impossible contrast. Later rabbinic texts speak of an elephant passing through a needle's eye to describe what cannot be imagined. These writings are later than the Gospels, so they do not prove a direct source, but they show that large-animal and tiny-opening imagery was intelligible.

Even if one adopted the weaker cable reading, the theological force would not become a manageable task. A thick rope cannot pass through the opening of a sewing needle. The variant does not support the gate story and does not remove the impossibility declared by Jesus.

TEXTUAL JUDGMENT: Camel has the better claim, and both proposed readings describe impossibility rather than strenuous effort.

A Jewish Idiom of Impossibility

Matthew 23:24 Ye blind guides, which strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel.

Jesus elsewhere uses a camel in an intentionally exaggerated image. Religious leaders carefully strain a tiny gnat from a drink while swallowing a camel. No hearer needs instructions about the digestive process. The disproportion reveals hypocrisy. The camel and needle saying works through the same arresting scale.

The Babylonian Talmud preserves sayings about an elephant passing through the eye of a needle. In Berakhot the phrase describes something not shown even in a dream. In Bava Metzia it describes an implausible argument. These traditions were compiled later than the New Testament and must not be treated as proof of Jesus' source. They are useful as cultural parallels for an impossible image.

The point of hyperbole is not falsehood. It is truth expressed through deliberate enlargement or compression. Jesus' hearers knew that camels do not pass through needle openings. The absurdity makes the spiritual diagnosis unforgettable.

RHETORICAL FORCE: The image is exaggerated because the truth must not be reduced.

Why the Disciples Were Exceedingly Amazed

Matthew 19:25 When his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed, saying, Who then can be saved?

The disciples do not respond, 'Then only poor people can be saved.' They ask, 'Who then can be saved?' Their question broadens the crisis beyond one economic class. If a morally serious, visibly blessed and socially respected man cannot enter by his advantages, what human resource remains?

Their astonishment also shows that they heard the camel saying as impossible. A known gate requiring humility would not naturally produce the question, 'Who then can be saved?' The procedure would already supply the answer: unload the camel and make it kneel. Jesus instead confirms the crisis by using the word impossible.

The disciples have not yet fully escaped the human measurement of worth. They can still associate status, resources or visible blessing with fitness for the kingdom. Jesus removes every earthly credential. The ruler cannot purchase entrance. The disciples cannot earn it through sacrifice. No one can produce the new birth required to enter God's reign.

THE DISCIPLES HEARD CORRECTLY: If salvation depends upon human ability, no one can be saved.

With Men This Is Impossible

Mark 10:27 And Jesus looking upon them saith, With men it is impossible, but not with God: for with God all things are possible.

Jesus gives the controlling interpretation of His metaphor. Salvation is impossible with men. The word does not mean inconvenient, rare or demanding. It means beyond human power. No amount of kneeling, unloading or moral improvement can make a sinner generate reconciliation with a holy God.

The impossibility includes the rich, but it is not confined to them. Financial riches say, 'I have enough.' Moral riches say, 'I have done enough.' Intellectual riches say, 'I know enough.' Religious riches say, 'I have served enough.' Each form of self-sufficiency resists the confession that salvation must be received as mercy.

This does not make repentance or faith unnecessary. It explains why neither can be treated as a human payment. God awakens, convicts, draws and saves. The sinner truly turns and believes, but salvation begins and ends in the grace of God rather than the adequacy of the sinner.

THE STRONGER SERMON: The gate makes salvation difficult. Jesus said that with man salvation is impossible.

With God All Things Are Possible

Ephesians 2:8-9 For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast.

The saying does not end with impossibility. God can do what man cannot. He can release the hand closed around treasure. He can raise the spiritually dead. He can justify the ungodly through the finished work of Christ. The impossibility of self-salvation becomes the setting for the possibility of grace.

God's possibility must not be reduced to helping a determined sinner complete the final stage. The rich ruler does not need divine assistance to squeeze through a narrow gate. He needs a transformed heart and a righteousness he does not possess. Salvation is possible because God provides the Savior, the sacrifice and the life.

The answer to the disciples' question was standing before them and walking toward Jerusalem. Jesus would give His life a ransom for many. He would bear sin, die and rise again. The cross does not make human merit more effective. It accomplishes what human merit could never accomplish.

GOSPEL ANSWER: The sinner's impossibility is not greater than the Savior's sufficiency.

Are Rich People Unable to Be Saved?

1 Timothy 6:17 Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God.

Jesus does not teach that God refuses every person who has wealth. Abraham was rich. Job possessed much and remained God's servant. Wealthy women supported Jesus' ministry. Joseph of Arimathaea used his own tomb for the burial of Christ. The early church included people with homes large enough to receive congregations.

Rich people are saved in the same way poor people are saved: by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Wealth adds no merit and poverty adds no merit. Yet riches carry special temptations, so Scripture gives special warnings. The wealthy must not be proud or trust uncertain riches. They are to do good, be rich in good works and be ready to distribute.

The church should avoid two errors. Prosperity preaching treats wealth as reliable evidence of faith. Romanticized poverty treats lack as reliable evidence of holiness. Scripture does neither. It asks where trust rests, how resources were gained and whether possessions are governed by love of God and neighbor.

BALANCED CONCLUSION: Wealth cannot exclude a person whom God saves, but wealth can conceal the need to be saved.

Zacchaeus: Luke's Narrative Answer

Luke 19:8-9 Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor ... And Jesus said unto him, This day is salvation come to this house.

Luke places Zacchaeus soon after the rich ruler. He is not merely rich but a chief publican whose wealth is associated with an oppressive system. If the ruler appears respectable, Zacchaeus appears compromised. Yet the respectable man walks away from Jesus while the publican receives Him joyfully.

Zacchaeus does not purchase salvation by giving. Jesus declares that salvation has come to his house and his generosity displays the change. He gives half his goods to the poor and promises fourfold restitution where he has defrauded anyone. The money that once expressed exploitation now becomes evidence of repentance and mercy.

This sequence is Luke's vivid answer to 'Who then can be saved?' God can save a rich man. He does not accomplish it by discovering a gate through which the man can force himself. He enters the man's house, calls him by name and produces a changed relationship to possessions.

NARRATIVE ANSWER: The camel did not learn to pass through the needle. God changed the man.

Peter's Question About Sacrifice

Matthew 19:27 Then answered Peter and said unto him, Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed thee; what shall we have therefore?

Peter contrasts the disciples with the ruler. The ruler would not leave his possessions, but the disciples have left homes, occupations and ordinary securities to follow Jesus. Peter's statement

contains truth, yet his question may also reveal the accounting spirit that has not disappeared. Sacrifice can become another form of spiritual wealth if the disciple treats it as a claim upon God.

Jesus does not deny that discipleship costs something or that God rewards faithfulness. He promises a place in the renewal and speaks of receiving an hundredfold with everlasting life. Mark also includes persecutions, preventing the promise from becoming a prosperity guarantee. Kingdom reward comes with kingdom suffering.

The warning that many first shall be last and the last first guards the promise. The ruler appears first by worldly measures. The disciples may imagine that sacrifice has moved them to the front by spiritual measures. Grace overturns both rankings. The kingdom is gift before it is reward and its rewards never place God in the debtor's seat.

DISCIPLESHIP WARNING: A person may surrender possessions and then begin trusting the surrender.

The Children and the Kingdom

Luke 18:16-17 Suffer little children to come unto me ... Whosoever shall not receive the kingdom of God as a little child shall in no wise enter therein.

In all three Gospels the account of Jesus receiving children stands immediately before the rich ruler. The placement supplies a contrast. The kingdom must be received as a child receives. The ruler asks what he must do and approaches with a record of accomplishment. The child brings no status, wealth or moral resume.

Childlikeness does not mean innocence in every theological sense, intellectual carelessness or emotional immaturity. In the scene children are dependent recipients. Others must bring them. Jesus must receive and bless them. Their place in the kingdom rests upon His welcome rather than their achievements.

The ruler has resources that children lack, yet those resources do not make him more able to enter. They strengthen his illusion of independence. The narrative order therefore interprets the camel saying. The kingdom is not forced open by power. It is received by those who know they must be received.

KINGDOM POSTURE: The child receives what the ruler tries to achieve.

The Pharisee, the Publican and the Ruler

Luke 18:13-14 God be merciful to me a sinner ... every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

Luke's wider sequence begins with a Pharisee who is rich in moral comparison and a publican who pleads for mercy. The publican goes home justified. Children then receive the kingdom. The rich ruler arrives with commandments kept from youth but cannot release his treasure. The arrangement repeatedly contrasts reception with self-confidence.

The Pharisee's wealth is moral. The ruler's wealth is moral and material. Both speak from sufficiency. The publican has only a plea and the children have only dependence. Jesus is not

praising ignorance or irresponsibility. He is identifying the posture in which grace can be received rather than resisted.

This context prevents the passage from becoming merely a sermon about budgeting. Money is the ruler's revealed idol, but self-salvation is the larger disease. A poor person may trust sacrifice, suffering or moral comparison. A rich person may be brought to humble faith. The kingdom admits neither by personal assets.

CONTEXTUAL INSIGHT: Financial riches say, 'I have enough.' Moral riches say, 'I have done enough.' The Gospel says, 'Christ is enough.'

The Blind Beggar Sees What the Ruler Misses

Luke 18:38-42 Jesus, thou Son of David, have mercy on me ... Receive thy sight: thy faith hath saved thee.

After predicting His death and resurrection, Jesus approaches Jericho and meets a blind beggar. The disciples do not understand the passion prediction. The beggar cannot see physically, yet he recognizes Jesus as the Son of David and cries for mercy. He possesses no visible advantage, but he comes with the right plea.

The ruler asks what he can do. The beggar asks for mercy. The ruler is invited to follow and walks away. The beggar receives sight and follows Jesus, glorifying God. Luke does not teach that material poverty automatically saves, but he uses the contrast to expose the spiritual danger of self-sufficiency.

The beggar also prepares for Zacchaeus. Mercy opens blind eyes and enters a rich man's house. Both stories show God doing what human rank cannot do. The path into the kingdom is not reserved for one economic class. It belongs to those whom Christ mercifully calls and saves.

MERCY'S PATH: The man who could not see recognized his need more clearly than the man who possessed almost everything.

Old Testament Wisdom About Riches

Proverbs 11:28 He that trusteth in his riches shall fall: but the righteous shall flourish as a branch.

The warning of Jesus grows from soil already prepared in the Old Testament. The law forbids forgetting God when houses, herds and silver multiply. The Psalms warn that wealth cannot redeem a brother from death. Proverbs condemns trust in riches and dishonest gain. The prophets denounce luxury built upon oppression and worship that ignores the poor.

The Old Testament also recognizes wealth as a gift that can be used faithfully. Abraham receives abundance. Boaz uses his field to protect Ruth. David gathers resources for the temple. The issue is never solved by declaring matter evil. Creation belongs to God, and human beings are stewards under His authority.

Jesus intensifies the wisdom tradition by placing the kingdom and His own call at the center. Possessions become spiritually fatal when they prevent obedience to Him. The ruler's goods are not accused of committing sins. His trust and refusal reveal the sin.

BIBLICAL CONTINUITY: Scripture does not condemn possession as such. It condemns the heart that makes possession its refuge.

Early Christian Witnesses

Clement of Alexandria wrote an early work commonly called *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?* He treated Mark 10 at length and resisted the idea that outward dispossession alone fulfills Jesus' demand. His interpretation is not inspired and should not control the text, but it shows that early Christians wrestled with the relation between wealth, desire and discipleship.

The Shepherd of Hermas uses rich believers as stones that must be trimmed before fitting into a tower. Another image joins an elm and a vine to portray mutual service between rich and poor. The Didache commands openhanded giving and warns against turning away the needy. These writings reflect the seriousness with which early Christians heard biblical commands concerning possessions.

Noncanonical sources can illuminate the history of interpretation, but they must remain subordinate to Scripture. They are most useful when they show questions, pastoral pressures and habits of reading. They cannot establish a gate in first-century Jerusalem or overturn the Gospel writers' plain words.

ORDER OF AUTHORITY: Ancient witnesses may help us hear the conversation, but only Scripture governs the conclusion.

A Pastoral Word to the Wealthy

1 Timothy 6:18-19 That they do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come.

Those with significant resources should not hear this passage only as an accusation against someone richer. Wealth is always relative enough to permit comparison. The proper response is personal examination. Where does fear arise when Jesus claims authority over spending, saving, giving and security? What loss feels impossible to accept?

The New Testament calls wealthy believers to humility, trust in the living God and active generosity. Giving is not a fee paid to obtain salvation. It is fruit that demonstrates a changed allegiance. A disciple may save wisely, provide for family and steward property while refusing to let any of these goods occupy the place of God.

Christian generosity should be thoughtful as well as emotional. It seeks the good of the recipient, avoids exploitation and recognizes the dignity of work. The ruler's story does not authorize manipulation by religious leaders. Jesus directs treasure toward the poor and calls the man to follow Christ, not to finance a preacher's luxury.

PASTORAL TEST: The question is not only what you possess. It is whether you can obey when Christ touches it.

A Pastoral Word to Those Without Wealth

James 2:5 Hath not God chosen the poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he hath promised to them that love him?

Those who lack money should not conclude that need itself has saved them. Poverty can expose dependence, but it can also produce envy, bitterness, fear or devotion to the dream of wealth. A poor heart can worship money it does not possess as surely as a rich heart can worship money it possesses.

The church must never use the camel saying to romanticize deprivation or excuse neglect of the poor. Jesus repeatedly commands mercy. James condemns partiality toward the rich and indifference to believers without food or clothing. Material assistance cannot replace the Gospel, but a Gospel that never opens the hand has not been understood well.

Rich and poor meet at the same cross. One must release confidence in abundance. The other must release confidence that suffering creates a claim upon God. Both receive eternal life as undeserved mercy and both become stewards of whatever God places in their hands.

COMMON GROUND: Neither a full purse nor an empty purse can purchase the kingdom.

Teaching the Passage Without the Gate Story

Teachers need not fear that removing the gate illustration will make the sermon less vivid. Jesus' own image is stronger. Place a camel beside a needle. Let the congregation feel the absurd scale. Then allow the disciples to ask the right question and allow Jesus to give the inspired answer.

Correction should be gracious. Many faithful pastors repeated the gate story because it appeared in respected books or was passed down by trusted mentors. The aim is not to embarrass them. It is to recover the force of Christ's words. We honor preaching tradition best when we submit it to Scripture.

Avoid replacing one unsupported certainty with another. We can say confidently that the Gospel words describe a camel and a sewing needle and that Jesus interprets the image as impossible with men. We can also say that dependable first-century evidence for the named gate is lacking. That is sufficient for faithful exposition.

TEACHING PRINCIPLE: Do not make an uncertain history carry a sermon when the certain text already carries it better.

Commentary Summary

The rich ruler approaches Jesus with moral seriousness and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus uses the commandments to reveal rather than certify him. The command to sell, give and follow exposes the allegiance beneath his respectable life. He goes away sorrowful because his possessions hold the place that belongs to Christ.

Jesus then compares the entrance of a rich man into the kingdom with a camel passing through a needle's eye. The words refer naturally to an ordinary camel and sewing needle. The popular Jerusalem gate story lacks dependable first-century evidence and appears in medieval

interpretation. The later cable proposal has weaker textual support and does not remove the impossibility.

The disciples understand the crisis and ask who can be saved. Jesus answers that salvation is impossible with men but possible with God. Luke displays that possibility when Zacchaeus is saved and his relationship to money changes. Rich and poor therefore come on the same terms: not by assets, sacrifice or achievement but by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ.

FINAL ANSWER: The eye of the needle means the opening of a literal sewing needle. Jesus was not explaining how a determined camel might enter. He was declaring that sinners cannot save themselves and that God alone can do the impossible.

A Final Word

Mark 8:36 For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?

The ruler comes with everything that appears to make a person secure. He has youth, status, morality and wealth. He leaves without the eternal life he requested because he cannot release the treasure that cannot keep him alive. His story asks every reader to name the confidence that would make obedience to Christ feel like ruin.

Jesus does not stand on the other side of an architectural puzzle calling strong people to squeeze through. He stands before helpless sinners as the Savior who will go to the cross. He does not teach the camel to become small enough. He does what no camel and no sinner can do. He makes entrance possible through His own death and resurrection.

Bring the possessions, achievements, wounds and pretensions that have become your refuge. Confess that they cannot redeem you. Trust the Lord Jesus Christ. The eye of the needle closes every road of self-salvation, but the words of Jesus open the only road of hope: ‘With God all things are possible.’

CLOSING AFFIRMATION: Human impossibility is not the end of the Gospel. It is the place where the saving power of God becomes our only hope.

Selected Sources for Further Study

Primary biblical texts: Matthew 19:16-30, Mark 10:17-31 and Luke 18:18-30. Related passages include Matthew 6:19-34, Matthew 23:24, Mark 8:34-37, Luke 12:13-34, Luke 16:1-31, Luke 18:9-17, Luke 18:31-43, Luke 19:1-10, Acts 5:1-4, 1 Timothy 6:6-19 and James 2:1-17.

Agnieszka Ziemska, ‘The Origin of the Needle’s Eye Gate Myth: Theophylact or Anselm?’ *New Testament Studies* 68, no. 3 (2022): 358-361. DOI: 10.1017/S0028688521000448. This study traces the medieval gate explanation and distinguishes it from the cable interpretation associated with Theophylact.

Clement of Alexandria, *Who Is the Rich Man That Shall Be Saved?*; *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Vision 3 and Similitude 2; *The Didache*, chapters 1 and 4; *Babylonian Talmud*, Berakhot 55b and Bava Metzia 38b. These works are historical witnesses, not inspired authorities. Consult them to understand reception and parallels, then test every conclusion by the canonical text.