

Jesus Teaches About Riches
Matthew 19:23-30
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Matthew 19:23-30 is the follow up to the account of the rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16-22. This young man asked Jesus, *“Teacher, what good thing shall I do to inherit eternal life?”* Jesus replied by leading the man toward an understanding of his inability to keep the commandments, validating the man’s sense that he needed to be delivered out of death and into life. By stating *“there is only One who is good,”* Jesus taught that it is impossible for anyone to be perfect in their obedience to God.

Jesus reiterates this in Matthew 19:21, *“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.”* To be complete, or perfect, requires one to follow Jesus. It was impossible for this man to follow Jesus because *“he was one who owned much property”* (19:22). His attachment to what he owned was an impediment to the faith in God that manifested itself in following Jesus.

This dichotomy between love of possessions and love of God was taught by Jesus in Matthew 6:24, *“No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”* Neither this young man, nor any of us, are able to serve money and follow Jesus. We must decide whether we will worship God alone, above all else. To hold on to our attachment to our possessions will result in our eternal destruction. *“For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”* (Matthew 16:26).

The disciples’ question (19:23-26)

Matthew 16:23 begins with a conjunction, “and,” which connects this verse to the previous story of the rich young ruler. Therefore, we can conclude that these words that Jesus spoke to His disciples came soon after the encounter with the rich young ruler. Therefore, the disciples were present when Jesus spoke with the young man.

Because the young man did not follow Jesus because he owned much property, Jesus told His disciples, *“Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.”* This statement runs counter to the conventional wisdom for

most people, then and now, consider wealth to be a sign of God's favor. This is why Jesus needed to capture their attention with *"truly I say to you."*

Jesus does not say it is impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven, but that it is *"hard."* It is hard because the rich are greatly tempted to not perceive their need for deliverance. It is also hard because, as Jesus taught in the parable of the sower, the entanglement of riches can lead to only a temporary response to the word of God. *"And the one sown with seed among the thorns, this is the one who hears the word, and the anxiety of the world and the deceitfulness of wealth choke the word, and it becomes unfruitful"* (Matthew 13:22). Wealth can be a distraction and an impediment to true saving faith.

Jesus follows His declarative statement about the rich man entering the kingdom of heaven with a hyperbolic analogy, *"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."* Jesus used the largest animal in the land of Israel in comparison with the smallest opening imaginable to the disciples. Jesus would later employ hyperbole in the illustration of a camel when denouncing the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23:24.

Some have suggested that Jesus was referring to a very small gate in Jerusalem called The Needle's Eye. However, there is no historical evidence to support this and it arose out of medieval tradition from a likely motivation to weaken these words of Jesus. As the church became an institution and bishops amassed wealth, the natural desire would be to interpret these words as something that would be hard, but not impossible. Jesus was using the hyperbole of a literal camel and needle to communicate the impossibility of a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God, apart from God's powerful work of grace.

Also, the phrase *"The kingdom of God"* (19:24) is synonymous with *"the kingdom of heaven"* (19:23). Some have sought to make a distinction, but these two verses counter this idea. Several other phrases are used in this chapter as synonyms for the kingdom of God, such as *"obtain eternal life"* (19:16), *"wish to be complete"* (19:21), and *"saved"* (19:25). These are different ways to describe certain aspects of the same thing, dwelling with God in His kingdom forever.

The disciples responded to these words of Jesus by being *"very astonished."* They would be shocked by Jesus' teaching because they held to the common Jewish belief that riches were evidence of God's blessing and thus were divine approval of the rich. If those whom God richly blessed with material possessions were not able to enter the kingdom of God, *"then who can be saved?"*

This Jewish belief may have been rooted in confusion over the promises of blessing and cursing in Deuteronomy. *“Then it shall come about, because you listen to these judgments and keep and do them, that the LORD your God will keep with you His covenant and His lovingkindness which He swore to your forefathers. He will love you and bless you and multiply you; He will also bless the fruit of your womb and the fruit of your ground, your grain and your new wine and your oil, the increase of your herd and the young of your flock, in the land which He swore to your forefathers to give you”* (Deuteronomy 7:12-13, cf. Deuteronomy 28:1-14).

It is not uncommon for people to consider those who are blessed with wealth to be the recipients of God's favor. For example, this is the basis of modern prosperity theology, where if we have faith, God will provide for us an abundance. Therefore, when people have an abundance of riches, they are blessed by God based upon their faith. This is a corruption of the Gospel, as Matthew 19:23-30 makes clear.

It is rather the poor that receive God's favor, not the rich. *“Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied...But woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full. Woe to you who are well-fed now, for you shall be hungry”* (Luke 6:20-21, 24-25).

It is the poor that will be disproportionately represented in the kingdom of God. *“Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?”* (James 2:5).

As we covered in Matthew 19:16-22, the issue is not riches per se, but rather the idolatrous coveting of riches. We find wealthy believers in Jesus in the Gospels. Joanna, the wife of Chuza, Herod's steward, and Joseph of Arimathea used their wealth in service to Jesus (Luke 8:3; Matthew 27:57). In Acts 4:32-37, we find believers who continued to own property that they subsequently used to serve the church, under the leadership of the apostles. Therefore, wealth does not eliminate you from the kingdom of God, but rather your attitude toward wealth in the context of faith in God (cf. Matthew 6:24).

Jesus answered this question of who can be saved by stating *“With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”* This is a direct statement against the notion that any work of man, including the accumulation of assets, can deliver anyone's soul to salvation in the kingdom of God. It is only by God's sovereign exercise of His grace alone, apart from man's efforts, that will deliver the rich from their idolatry. God can do what is impossible for man.

Peter's question (19:27-30)

The disciples apparently accept Jesus' statements about the rich as Peter moves to a question about their own lack of wealth. Since the disciples were not men of wealth, they would not be opposed to the idea that wealth is not evidence of salvation. They were only learning the full essence of Jesus' words, *"With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."* We know this from Peter's question, *"Behold, we have left everything and followed You, what then will there be for us?"* Peter spoke on behalf of the rest of the apostles, as we see by his use of the first person plural pronoun, "we."

If Peter truly understood the meaning of *"with God all things are possible,"* he would not have been concerned about what there would be for the disciples who left everything to follow Him. He would see that God was fully able to supply for him abundantly, regardless of his efforts, for *"with people this is impossible."*

Peter also knew that the rich young ruler was unwilling to leave all his wealth in order to follow Jesus. The disciples had left what they had to follow Jesus. Yet while Peter described them as having *"left everything and followed,"* they did not sell all their possessions to give to the poor (Matthew 4:18-20). We even see Peter fishing once again on the Sea of Galilee after Christ's resurrection in John 21:1-3.

Nevertheless, if the rich young ruler would have received *"treasure in heaven"* (19:21) by selling his property and following Jesus, surely Peter would have expected to receive even more than that man. The disciples had left everything and had been following. Even though this was the crux of his question, Jesus does not rebuke the disciples for having what could be seen as self-oriented motives. Rather, Jesus actually validates their expectations.

"Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life" (Matthew 19:28-29).

Jesus validates Peter's interest by promising that the disciples would reign with Him in the kingdom of God, *"you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."* Those whom Jesus had specifically chosen to be His closest disciples would be rewarded in the kingdom of God. They, with Judas Iscariot the obvious exception, will hold a permanent place of honor and authority into eternity.

We see that Jesus did not view the prospect of eternal reward to be an improper motive in the service of God. Instead, He encouraged the disciples with the reward that is reserved for them. Earlier, Jesus encouraged them to *“not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also”* (Matthew 6:19-21). Paul also taught the value of future reward, *“Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own reward according to his own labor”* (1 Corinthians 3:8ff.).

Jesus refers to the timing of this reward as *“in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne.”* This present world will pass away (Matthew 5:18; 24:35) at the end of this age (Matthew 28:20) as part of the redemption of Jesus Christ. We see the word “regeneration” (PALIGGENESIA) also in Titus 3:5, *“He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit.”* Therefore, the regeneration is both individual, to those who have faith, and earthly, with Christ reigning on His throne.

The sense of a literal, earthly kingdom that will be established when Christ returns is unmistakable in Matthew 19:28-29, as promised in the Old Testament (Isaiah 2:2-4; 4:2-6; 11:1-11; 32:16-18; 35:1-2; 65:17; 66:22). The disciples will serve by *“judging the twelve tribes of Israel.”* Israel means the nation that God chose in the Old Testament, that is the physical descendants of Jacob, and this is the consistent usage of this word in the New Testament. The glorious rule of the enthroned Messiah in the kingdom will be with the twelve disciples, who will judge (govern) the true Israel, who have saving faith.

Matthew's account is the only Gospel to include the words from Matthew 19:28. Luke and Mark only include Matthew 19:29 as they wrote about Jesus' words to the disciples. This is unsurprising, for Matthew wrote for a Jewish audience, while Mark and Luke wrote for a Gentile audience too. Matthew was particularly interested in how the regeneration of all things would relate to the twelve tribes of Israel.

Jesus then moves from the reward for the disciples to the reward of the rest of His true followers in Matthew 19:29, *“And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, will receive many times as much, and will inherit eternal life.”* Peter only asked about the disciples but Jesus expanded His answer to include everyone who has sacrificed to follow Him.

These words of Jesus are meant to communicate the abundance of God's reward to His followers. This is not a specific formula, such as sacrificing one house brings a hundred houses or sacrificing one father or mother brings a hundred fathers and mothers. The Lord will generously provide far more than we ever could have accumulated ourselves in this present life.

The Lord cares for His children in this life as Jesus promised in Matthew 6:32-33, *"For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you"* We can trust God to provide according to our present needs.

Yet in the future, the Lord has promised to reward us many times over what we have sacrificed for His sake. This reward awaits the kingdom of God. The exact nature of this abundance of treasure in heaven stored up for us is unknown, but it is designed to encourage our perseverance. *"Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary"* (Galatians 6:9).

Beyond this, the true followers of Jesus *"will inherit eternal life."* This is the essence of salvation and does not mean simply existing forever, for unbelievers will exist forever, *"These will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power"* (2 Thessalonians 1:9). Rather this is as we live eternally in true life with our Savior, *"This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent"* (John 17:3).

Matthew 19 concludes with *"But many who are first will be last; and the last, first."* This principle will be developed in Matthew 20:1-16 in the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, which concludes with a restatement of this principle, *"So the last shall be first, and the first last."*

First and last are positional, comparing greatness and lowliness. This can be seen from the context of Matthew 19, where the rich ruler did not inherit eternal life and the disciples who left everything will sit upon the twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel. Also, in Matthew 19:14, Jesus exalts the position of the humble children who come to him for blessing, *"But 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.'"* Man's notion of greatness derived from wealth, fame, power, and ability is vastly different from the humble whom Jesus says will be exalted. *"Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted"* (Matthew 23:12; cf. 1 Corinthians 1:26-31).

Conclusion

Just as the story of the rich young ruler teaches us attachment to wealth is a stumbling block to following Jesus, so the words of Jesus to His disciples about riches teaches us that sacrifice of wealth in service to the Lord is a means of great gain. Wealth cannot deliver true eternal life, for *“with people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”*

We obtain eternal life through the power of God alone. The results of the grace of God at work in our redemption are good deeds in service to the Lord. We never obtain salvation through our sacrifice, but we will be rewarded for how we have responded to God by faith.

If we humbly leave property, relationships, or prominence in following Christ, we will be exalted into eternity. If we seek to be first, we will be last, but if we humbly seek the place of service to Christ we will be rewarded many times over, and inherit eternal life.

The challenge of this life is that it is based upon faith. If we truly believe that we will be rewarded many times over our sacrifice in following Jesus, we will gladly prioritize the storing up of our treasure in heaven (Matthew 6:19-20). This requires a willingness to delay our benefit temporarily in order to gain in eternity. Delayed gratification is a great challenge for the people of this world.

If we truly believe that the first will be last, and the last will be first, we will seek to be the servant of all rather than the leader of all. We will follow Christ for the sake of His glory, rather than our glory. The Christian life is a life of humility, and this delayed gratification is only possible through faith in Christ. *“Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted”* (Matthew 23:12).