



Then Who Can Be Saved?

Matthew 19:23-30

- 1. Riches make salvation difficult (verses 23-24).**
- 2. God makes salvation possible (verses 25-26).**
- 3. Rewards make salvation worth it all (verses 27-30).**

This week, we are returning to Matthew 19 after studying the story of the rich young ruler last week. This rich young ruler had everything going for him. He was wealthy, young, and had great influence in his community. The future looked bright for him. Yet, he felt like things weren't quite right with his soul. So, he came to Jesus, the God-man, and asked him, "What good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?" (Matt. 19:17). Jesus directed him to keep the commandments, hoping that this man would see his sin. Unfortunately, he claimed that he had kept them all. So, Jesus told this man, "If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (Mat. 19:21). Matthew told us that "he went away grieved" (Matt. 19:22), unwilling to part with his possessions, that he might gain life.

Jesus wasted no time in teaching His disciples about what had just taken place. The disciples had seen a man reject the opportunity to receive eternal life. This rich man loved his possessions more than he loved Jesus. He would rather have the comfort of things in this life, than give them up for the life to come. That's the basis for my first point this morning.

1. Riches make salvation difficult (verses 23-24).

In verse 23, Jesus says, "Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." Whenever Jesus says, "Truly," you should recognize that he's about to say something important. It is his way of telling his disciples, "Hey! Listen up! Because what I'm about to tell you is very, very important." So, this bears repeating, "It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven."

Last week, we evidenced how hard it is. This man coming to Jesus with riches, couldn't enter the kingdom of heaven. His riches kept him out. It's a bit like attending a public event where authorities are greatly concerned with security wearing a backpack. For example, consider a large sporting event, concert, or political rally. As you enter, they have a sign that says, "no backpacks allowed." You will experience great difficulty entering the ball park if you insist on keeping your backpack. If you try, the security personal will be there to confront you. If you attempt to ignore them by walking past them, they very well may grab you by the arm and force you out of the stadium. It's your backpack that keeps you out. If you give up your backpack, you can come in easily. If you keep your backpack, you can't enter. This rich man insisted upon keeping his riches, and thus, was denied entrance into the kingdom of heaven. If he had given his riches over to the Lordship of Christ, he would have been welcomed into the kingdom of heaven.

Why is it hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom? There are certainly many reasons. I have thought of four reasons:

1. Riches can make you proud. You can become so proud that you begin to think, "I don't need God." Rich people are tempted to think that they have achieved all things in life on their own. They think that they are the ones who worked the hardest. They think that they are the ones who have the talents. They think that they are better than others. As a result, they can easily develop a pride that causes them to think they are able to make it on their own. Proverbs 28:11 says, "The rich man is wise in his own eyes." Those who are proud cannot enter the kingdom of heaven. Remember the lesson that Jesus gave in Matthew 18? To get into the kingdom of heaven, you need to come as a child, simple and humble (Matt. 18:3-4). But, those who are rich are often the most arrogant and boastful people in this world. It's why Paul advised Timothy to "Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited" (1 Tim. 6:17). Conceit is simply an excessive appreciation of your own worth. Conceit thinks highly of self, which is the essence of pride. In 1 Timothy 6:17, Paul continues with another warning for the rich: "Instruct those who are rich in this present world not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches, but on God" (1 Tim. 6:17). If you fix your hope on riches, you are really saying, "I don't need God!"

2. Riches can distract you. When you are wealthy, there are many opportunities for you. The more you have, the more you need to manage the things you have. Those with large houses need to spend more time cleaning it than others. Those with much property need to spend more time managing it than those with little property. If you have a big lawn, you need to spend your time mowing your lawn. Those with many cars, motorcycles, tractors, go-carts, or speedboats need to spend their time keeping all those things running. They distract. How many people are distracted from placing attention on God! The weekend comes, and they are busy with their activities and possessions. In the end, they will discover that they focused on the wrong things. As the Proverb says, "Riches do not profit in the day of wrath" (Prov. 11:4). Instead, they distract you. They lure you to place your importance upon them, rather than upon the things to come. Riches can distract you so that you begin to think, "I don't have time for God."

3. Riches can satisfy you. This is what a man named Agur prayed in Proverbs 30:8-9, "Give me neither poverty nor

riches; ... Lest I be full and deny You and say, 'Who is the LORD?' Or lest I be in want and steal, and profane the name of my God." Riches can satisfy you in this life and cause you to not have to trust in God for anything. Think about the illustration that I gave of the backpack earlier. If I have riches in my backpack, I won't have much of a desire to go into stadium to see what's there. Why would you want to go and hear the concert when you have a CD player with headphones in your backpack? Why would you want to go and watch the ball game when you have a radio in your backpack? Why would you want to go and hear this big-time politician, when you can watch the political convention on television? The Psalmist wrote, "If riches increase, do not set your heart upon them" (Psalm 62:10). The rich in this world can so enjoy this life that they have little to look forward to in the life to come. But, there will be a day in which the righteous of this world will see the destruction of the wicked. On that day, they will say, "Behold, the man who would not make God his refuge, But trusted in the abundance of his riches" (Ps. 52:7). Riches can cause you to think, "What more can God give me?"

4. Riches can deceive you. Perhaps you will remember the story of the sower and the soils. When the seed was sown among the thorns, they couldn't get the nourishment to grow, because the thorns "came up and choked them out" (Matt. 13:7). Jesus describes what this means. He said, "The one on whom seed was sown among the thorns, this was the man who hears the word, and the worry of the world, and the deceitfulness of riches choke the word, and it become unfruitful" (Matt. 13:22). The riches and the things in this life are screaming to us, "Hey! Over here! Look at us. We're important!" It's the things that we see that attract us, concern us and consume us. And thus, they deceive us. Riches can deceive you and cause you to think "Is God really important?"

How hard is it for a rich man to enter the kingdom?

In verse 24, Jesus continues on to tell us exactly how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom. Jesus said, "And again I say to you." Verse 24 is simply a restatement verse 23. What Jesus has said is so important that He is going to say it again. He says that you need to learn from the example of this rich young ruler. And in order to help the disciples learn, He is going to give them an illustration. He says, "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." Even a child knows what a camel is. It is a huge animal, a little bigger than a horse. Even a child knows that a needle is. It's a skinny piece of metal, that's an inch or two long. The eye of a needle is even smaller yet. It's the teeny, weeny hole in the needle. And now, the question, "How hard is it to get a camel through a needle?" It's very hard. In fact, it can't be done. It's impossible. You can't fit a camel through the eye of a needle.

Some people have resisted the notion of the impossibility of a rich man to be saved. After all, Abraham and David were both very, very wealthy men. Yet, they were saved. So, some people believe that Jesus must have been saying something different. They have invented the idea that there was a very small "camel gate" in the wall surrounding Jerusalem. It was so small, that a camel could only get through the gate if it was carrying nothing on its back. There is no historical evidence whatsoever that such a gate existed. Some have even tried to manipulate this text to change it's meaning. Rather than reading as "camel," they have read the text as "camil," which means "cable." They have suggested that Jesus was talking about a "cable" or a "big-rope.". But, that doesn't help anything. It's just as impossible for a big cable to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.

Jesus was quite clear: "It's impossible for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God." This is exactly what Jesus says later in verse 26. That's how hard it is. I would admit that this statement is very difficult to take especially for us in America. We are all rich. When you compare each of us to each other, we don't seem too rich. But, when you compare ourselves to those in the world, you will find that all of us are very rich. There are billions of people in this world who make only a few hundred dollars a year. This means that there are many who cannot even conceive of leaving their country for a vacation. The cost of an airline ticket alone would be a year's salary. There are many who cannot even conceive of owning an automobile. It would cost them way too much. There are many who live in poverty. They eat simple meals. They sleep on simple beds. They wear simple clothes because they can't afford anything else. There are many who have no opportunity to escape the poverty into which they were born. They have little in this world. As a result, they have little to be proud of, and little to be distracted by. They have little that will give them satisfaction. They don't have many things that will deceive them. And for this reason, Jesus called the poor of this world to be "blessed" (Luke 6:20).

Our society is much different than the vast majority of the world. You are rich. Do you have a bicycle? Do you have a telephone? Do you have a stereo? Do you have a computer? Do you have a car? Do you have a house? Do you have air conditioning? There are many in this world who don't have these things. If you have them, by the world's standards, you are rich. You live in more luxury than many of the ancient kings ever lived. And Jesus' words need to come as if directed to each and every one of us: "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for you to enter the kingdom of God."

I say, "It is impossible for you to enter the kingdom of God." Why? Because riches make salvation difficult. But in verses 25-26, we find out that ...

2. God makes salvation possible (verses 25-26).

Verse 25 says, "And when the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, 'Then who can be saved?'" Now, you need to understand their words in light of their social context. The disciples, like many of the Jews of their day, believed that those who were rich were those who were righteous. In our minds today, this isn't the case. We don't drive by an upper class community with large houses and think that there must be many godly people living in those homes. But, the Jews did. The Jews thought that those who were wealthy were particularly blessed of God. They had many scriptural reasons for believing this. Consider the following verses:

Psalm 112:1-3, "Praise the LORD! How blessed is the man who fears the LORD, Who greatly delights in His commandments. His descendants will be mighty on earth; The generation of the upright will be blessed. Wealth and riches are in his house, And his righteousness endures forever."
Prov. 10:22, "It is the blessing of the LORD that makes rich."

Prov. 15:6, "Much wealth is in the house of the righteous."

1 Sam. 2:7, "The LORD makes poor and rich."

The Jews focused their attention upon these verses that they put great priority upon those who were rich. They believed that they were especially blessed of God through their riches. While there is some truth to this (certainly not in every circumstance), it is also true that God looks upon the downcast and afflicted and cares for them. We could equally cite verses that say this as well:

1 Samuel 2:8, "He raises the poor from the dust; He lifts the need from the ash heap to make them sit with nobles, and inherit a seat of honor."

Psalms 9:12, "He does not forget the cry of the afflicted."

Psalms 147:6, "The LORD supports the afflicted."

Isaiah 25:4, "You have been a defense for the helpless, a defense for the needy in distress."

And so, when this rich young ruler came to Jesus, asking how to obtain eternal life, these disciples saw this man as a godly man, whom God had blessed greatly with wealth. He was a righteous man in the synagogue. His wealth stood as a strong testimony to God's blessing upon his life. When Jesus turned this man away, the disciples were dumbfounded. They were in a daze. They didn't know what to think. And then Jesus begins to discuss how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. In their minds, these disciples were thinking, **"If the rich, the most blessed of God, can't enter, then nobody can enter."** And so the question comes, "Then who can be saved?" Jesus responds to this question in verse 26, "And looking upon them Jesus said to them, 'With men this is impossible.'" Jesus is simply saying that salvation is impossible for those who trust in themselves and in their wealth.

Hope for all of us wealthy Americans comes at the end of verse 26, "with God all things are possible." I believe that Jesus is saying that a rich man will never turn from his sin and follow Christ, apart from the sovereign working of God. Do you know why there are so few coming to Christ today in America? It's because we are wealthy and don't need God. As I speak to people that I rub shoulders with in Rockford, for the most part, I sense that they are quite satisfied with life. They have their job. They have their children. They have their favorite television shows. They have their fun-filled vacations. Everything seems to be going pretty well for them and they are quite satisfied with life. Now, why do they need Christ? They have everything that they need right here on the earth.

In China and Vietnam, there are multitudes of conversions taking place all the time. Why? They have no hope of anything in this life. Their economy is in shambles. Their working conditions are poor. They have no outlook of this improving anytime soon. But, they find in Christ a hope of a life to come that is better. They freely admit their sin. They know of the freedom that Christ has given them. Their lives are radically changed. They have a great zeal and a great love for God.

But in America, I would characterize the church as "lukewarm." I believe that many professing Christians simply flow with the tide. I believe that many professing Christians don't really want to make a stand for right and wrong. What we really want is to enjoy our easy lifestyle and throw in some religion as well to help us to feel good. Many churches across our land are like the church of Laodicea, the lukewarm church. The church in Laodicea said, "I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing" (Revelation 3:17). And when you don't need anything, you don't need Jesus. And when you don't think you need Jesus, you can't be saved. And in our wealthy society, it's impossible for many to be saved.

And so, let me ask you, "How will a rich man ever be saved?" Only when he sees and acknowledges that his wealth and riches won't be able to buy him everything. Only when he sees that before God, he is a ruined, undone sinner, who desperately needs the mercy of God in his life. Jesus told the church in Laodicea, "You do not know that you are wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked" (Rev. 3:17). They think that they have it all. They are self-sufficient. But, they don't know that they are really sinners. They don't know that before God, they are poor and needy. And since they have no clue of how "poor and blind and naked" they are, they don't seek to change anything. There is no cry for mercy. There is no cry for help. There is no salvation. The only way that such a man will ever see his need is if God changes his heart.

What Jesus teaches here about the rich man is equally true of all men. The scripture is clear. Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 2:14, "A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God; for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually appraised." A natural man cannot understand the things of the spirit of God. It is only a spiritual mind that will understand the things of God. You can talk with them. You can debate with them. You can tell them what the Scriptures teach. They will remain unconvinced. The only way that they will ever be convinced is for God to replace the natural mind with the spiritual mind. They will stay in darkness until God gives them a soft heart to accept the things of His word. And when God gives a heart to believe, the truth will be clear. And the truth will set them free from their sins.

This is sovereign grace. This is glorious grace, because it means that God has done it all. God initiates salvation. God brings salvation to pass. If it is impossible with men, but possible with God, then why are any saved? Because of what we do? No. But, because of what God does in opening our hearts to believe the glorious gospel of Christ. Consider John 1:12, "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," When people receive Jesus and His saving gospel, is this because man has initiated it? No. It is because God has first done a sovereign work in the heart. The next verse says, "who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13).

You ask any Christian why he will enjoy eternity in heaven, rather than eternity in hell, and he will respond, "because I believe in the grace of God that is in Christ Jesus." Then, if you ask, "Why do you believe, but your neighbor doesn't?" It's not because you were smarter or were less sinful or had any other benefit in you at all. It was because God opened your eyes to the truth. It isn't "the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13).

3. Rewards make salvation worth it all (verses 27-30).

Upon hearing Jesus say these things, Peter speaks out, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?" Perhaps you remember when Jesus called Peter. He and his brother Andrew were fishing. They were casting their net into the sea (Matt. 4:18). Jesus called out to them, "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Matt. 4:19). Matthew then records that they "immediately left the nets, and followed Him" (Matt. 4:20). The idea that we get is that the nets were left right there in the water. They didn't even take a few moments to pull up the nets and fold them and put them away for a later date. He left them there.

Peter literally "left everything" to follow Christ. In the gospel of John, chapter 6, we see many people who were following Christ deserting him, because He was teaching some difficult things for the crowds to swallow. Jesus was teaching the crowds that "No one can come to Me, unless the Father who sent Me draws him" (John 6:44) and the crowds hated His teaching. As a result, "Many of His disciples withdrew, and were not walking with Him anymore" (John 6:66). And so Jesus turned to His twelve disciples and said, "You do not want to go away also, do you?" (John 6:67). And Peter replied, "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life" (John 6:68). Peter was expressing his total commitment to follow Christ. Peter had no other plans. He had seen Jesus as a worthy one to be followed. He wasn't planning on turning back. He had no alternate plan. This is why the crucifixion was so difficult for these disciples: their leader had been killed!

In verse 28, Jesus tells His disciples some of the most encouraging words in all of the Bible. "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." These words describe the day in which the kingdom of heaven is fully arrived. Jesus calls this "the regeneration." I believe that He is referring to the time when everything is renewed. It is the time in which those who have trusted in Christ will be raised from the dead. Their bodies will be entirely transformed. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul speaks of how believers in Christ will receive "heavenly bodies" (1 Cor. 15:40). He calls it an "imperishable body" (1 Cor. 15:42). He calls it a "spiritual body" (1 Cor. 15:44). He is describing a total transformation of our bodies. The term "regeneration" describes this very well. But, it's not only we who are transformed. This entire earth will go through a transformation as well. The first heaven and first earth will pass away and be no longer. There will be a complete, transformed heaven and earth. Furthermore, Jesus will no longer be awaiting His future glory. Jesus, Himself, will be seated upon His glorious throne, ruling the new Jerusalem. His glory is so great, that it illumines the entire earth. There will be no more need for a sun and a moon to give light upon the earth (Rev. 21:23), because Jesus will be it's light.

In that day, all rebellion against Jesus will be done away by force. He will come and rule and reign. The ultimate cry of praise will come, "Hallelujah! For the Lord our God, the Almighty reigns!" (Rev. 19:6). When Jesus comes, riding on a white horse, He will defeat Satan and all of his followers (Rev. 19-20). They will be thrown into the lake of fire (Rev. 20:15). And the twelve disciples will find themselves seated upon twelve thrones (Matt. 19:28). Upon those thrones, Jesus said that they will be judging the twelve tribes of Israel. It's difficult to understand exactly how and what will take place as Jesus is the one who has been giving judgments. Perhaps the word "judging" here is referring to "ruling" as that word did in the book of Judges. At any rate, it's not difficult to understand the prominence that Jesus is promising to the apostles. They will have positions of leadership and authority in heaven.

These disciples will receive their rewards because they "left everything" and "followed" Jesus (Matt. 19:27). I don't believe that they will ever regret the sacrifices that they made to follow Jesus. They sacrificed everything. (1) They willingly gave up their professions. Fishermen and tax collectors became preachers. (2) They willingly gave up their reputations. The Jewish leaders excommunicated from the synagogue all who confessed Jesus to be the Christ (John 9:22). When they chose to follow Jesus, their social lives were over. They weren't welcomed into the synagogues. They weren't welcomed into the Jewish social circles. (3) They willingly gave up their lives. Of the eleven apostles that remained faithful to Jesus, ten of them were martyred. Jesus will reward them with leadership and authority in heaven.

Verse 28 is directed to His twelve disciples, who were standing before Him. Verses 29-30 are directed to all Christians. Perhaps we won't be sitting upon thrones judging Israel. But our reward will be worth it all. "And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for My name's sake, shall receive many times as much, and shall inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last; and the last, first." (Matt. 19:29-30).

Simply speaking, Jesus tells us that everything we give up will be rewarded many times. In the parallel passage in Mark, Jesus says that our reward will be "a hundred times" what we give up. If you give up a house for the sake of the kingdom, you will receive a hundred houses in heaven. If you give up a brother, you will have a hundred brothers in heaven. If you give up a sister, you will have a hundred sisters. If you give up a father, you will have a hundred fathers. If you give up a mother, you will give up a hundred mothers. If you give up a child, you will have a hundred children. If you give up two children, you will have two hundred children. If you give up a farm, you will have a hundred farms.

Of course, this is a metaphor here. It is impossible to have a hundred mothers. The point ought to be clear. Whatever blessings you forsake in this life, God will make it up to you. He will make it up to you in abundance! No one will ever get to heaven and say, "Boy, did I get cheated. I gave up my earthly family to get this awful family in heaven? I gave up my house on earth, and all I get is this tiny apartment? I give all my property to the church on earth, and I have to rent this little place here?" Nobody will ever say these things. Rather, your heart will be blown away by the wealth that will be given to you. You will receive "many times as much" of whatever you give up here on earth.

Almost throwing it in as an afterthought, Jesus says that you "shall inherit eternal life" (verse 29). And with this statement, the story of the rich young ruler comes to a close. We have come full circle. The rich young ruler came to Jesus, seeking "eternal life" (verse 16). Jesus called him to give up everything that he owned (verse 21). He refused (verse 22). But Jesus says, in verse 29, that those who do give up everything for the sake of Christ and His kingdom, will never lack in the ages to come. They will overflow with blessings. The sacrifices that they make will seem small in comparison to everything that God will give them. And God will give to them eternal life! This is life forever, enjoying God and his pleasures.

I want to finish my message this morning by relating a story that Randy Alcorn tells in his little book, "The Treasure Principle." He wrote,

The streets of Cairo were hot and dusty. Pat and Rakel Thurman took us down an alley. We drove past Arabic signs to a gate that opened to a plot of overgrown grass. It was a graveyard for American missionaries.

As my family and I followed, Pat pointed to a sun-scorched tombstone that read: "William Borden, 1887-1913."

Borden, a Yale graduate and heir to great wealth, rejected a life of ease in order to bring the gospel to Muslims. Refusing even to buy himself a car, Borden gave away hundreds of thousands of dollars to missions. After only four months of zealous ministry in Egypt, he contracted spinal meningitis and died at the age of twenty-five.

I dusted off the epitaph on Borden's grave. After describing his love and sacrifices for the kingdom of God and for Muslim people, the inscription ended with a phrase I've never forgotten: "Apart from faith in Christ, there is no explanation for such a life."

The Thurmans took us straight from Borden's grave to the Egyptian National Museum. The King Tut exhibit was mind-boggling.

Tutankhamen, the boy king, was only seventeen when he died. He was buried with solid gold chariots and thousands of golden artifacts. His gold coffin was found within gold tombs within gold tombs within gold tombs. The burial site was filled with tons of gold.

The Egyptians believed in an afterlife—one where they could take earthly treasures. But all the treasures intended for King Tut's eternal enjoyment stayed right where they were until Howard Carter discovered the burial chamber in 1922. They hadn't been touched for more than three thousand years.

I was struck by the contrast between these two graves. Borden's was obscure, dusty, and hidden off the back alley of a street littered with garbage. Tutankhamen's tomb glittered with unimaginable wealth. Yet where are these two young men now? One, who lived in opulence and called himself king, is in the misery of a Christless eternity. The other, who lived a modest life on earth in service of the one true King, is enjoying his everlasting reward in the presence of his Lord.

Tut's life was tragic because of an awful truth discovered too late—he couldn't take his treasures with him. William Borden's life was triumphant. Why? Because instead of leaving behind his treasures, he sent them on ahead." (The Treasure Principle, pp. 34-36).

Perhaps none of us in this room will have the wealth of king Tutankhamen or William Borden. But, our lives will go in one of those directions. We will either keep our wealth to ourselves. Or, we will gladly give it away for God's purposes. I guarantee you, a life in which you willingly part with your worldly wealth for the sake of Christ's kingdom, will never harm you for eternity. It will only reap eternal rewards. It will be worth it.

This sermon was delivered to Rock Valley Bible Church on September 5, 2004 by Steve Brandon.
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