

The Needle's Eye

*Money doesn't bring happiness.
But it has been known to raise the occasional smile!*

Money! Let us take a few moments to consider this topic which is close to all of our hearts... and our wallets! Let us look at the subject of wealth, prosperity, affluence and riches. And let us start off by asking a few questions on this topic:

- Is it a sin to be rich?
- Is money the root of all evil?
- Can a wealthy person's riches keep him out of God's Kingdom?

But wait! Why should these questions even concern you and me? We're not rich! Are we?

This article will answer some of these questions as we examine another "difficult scripture":

Then Jesus said to His disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And 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." (Matthew 19:23-24)

Some theologians point to these verses in an attempt to prove that it is a sin to be wealthy. They claim that these verses state that a rich man cannot enter the Kingdom of God. Upon first reading, they would appear to be correct. But, in order to find the truth of the matter, we must study a little deeper into the words Jesus said here.

Extremely difficult and humanly impossible

First, let us look at Jesus' phrase, "it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle." Most women are very adept at threading needles, whereas many men seem to have a real problem with the task. Here's how the fictional Miles Hendon dealt with this humorous problem in Mark Twain's novel, "The Prince and the Pauper":

He did as men have always done, and probably always will do, to the end of time – held the needle still, and tried to thrust the thread through the eye, which is the opposite of a woman's way. Time and time again the thread missed the mark, going sometimes on one side of the needle, sometimes on the other, sometimes doubling up against the shaft.

If it is so difficult to fit a tiny thread through the eye of a needle, it is easy to imagine the impossibility of fitting a huge camel through the same, tiny slot! Some commentators have opined that the "camel" Jesus referred to, as he taught this lesson, would be better translated as "cable rope." Others feel that "the eye of a needle" was in reality the nickname of a small gate in the wall of the city of Jerusalem. Nevertheless, our more common mental picture of the contrast between the comparative sizes of an enormous beast of burden and a microscopic needle-eye better symbolize the concept of physical impossibility.

This might, at first, seem like a silly question, but let us ask it anyway: Is it, in fact, *totally* impossible to thread a camel through the eye of a needle? Jesus intimated that it is... or, at least, that it *was* impossible during the First Century era of His human sojourn (Matthew 19:26). But is such a bizarre endeavour as this *still* impossible in this twenty-first Century, when so many other things that *were* seemingly impossible two thousand years ago are possible now?

There was another era, very well known to students of God's Word, in which everything – and certainly not excluding the extremely bizarre – almost became possible for man to do:

And the LORD said, "Indeed the people are one and they all have one language, and this is what they begin to do; now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them. (Genesis 11:6)

Back at the time of the Tower of Babel, God said that if He had not intervened, scattered the people, and confused their languages, absolutely *nothing* would have been restrained from them. Virtually all things would have been possible for them. What an amazing thought! Keeping the seriousness of our subject in mind, but with our tongues partially planted in our cheeks: let us ask, once again: Is it totally impossible in this day and age for a camel to be passed through the eye of a needle?

Scientists and inventors have actually spent time researching the possibility of breaking solid objects down from their original forms into their component molecules, atoms and electrons, transmitting the electrons through electric wires, and reconstituting them at the other end. These wires are so thin that they could easily pass through the eye of a needle. How successful these men have been, I am not certain, but some years ago, I was intrigued as my extremely intelligent and well-read brother described to me a legendary experiment performed by a very famous scientist, in which a ship, its cargo and its crew were successfully transmitted by such means... not across a scientific work-bench, but all the way from the Suez Canal to the Panama Canal. I will not go so far as to maintain that such a thing is possible, but it certainly gives one food for thought. As we look at our amazing world today, we may rightly wonder whether Babel's conditions are returning.

An alternate, not too pleasant, and admittedly somewhat ridiculous method of getting a camel to pass through the eye of a needle would be to spend the time and effort to cut the animal up into tiny pieces. However, to reconstruct the camel at the other side of the needle's eye would be virtually impossible for the vast majority of mankind and is the kind of experiment that only university engineering students would take on, perhaps as a graduation prank. Possibly a team of the world's smartest engineers, vets and surgeons could accomplish the task; but still, after all their effort, the end product would only be a lifeless, useless, patchwork, 3-D caricature of a beast of burden!

We smile at the thought of such outlandish experiments, but what can we deduce from it all? Just this: that even if either of these procedures were humanly possible, they would take a tremendous amount of expense and effort, using the very latest technologies. And more to the point, according to our Creator, who knows more than anyone else about such limitations, even these procedures would be easier than enabling a rich man to enter God's Kingdom.

Jesus did *not* say, however, that it is *totally* impossible for a rich man to enter God's Kingdom. He *did* say that it would be extremely difficult. Back in verse 23, Jesus said to His disciples, "Assuredly, I say to you that it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven." The English word "hard" (KJV: "hardly") is translated from the Greek word *duskolos*. Further research into the meaning of this word shows us that it would be very hard, difficult, impracticable, even grievous, to get a rich man into God's Kingdom. Jesus said that it is humanly impossible:

But Jesus looked at them and said to them, "With men this is impossible..." (Matthew 19:26)

We will now take a brief look at the context of these verses. What led Jesus to bring up this discussion of wealth and salvation?

Now behold, one came and said to Him, "Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?" So He said to him, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments."... The young man said to Him, "All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?" Jesus said to him, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions. (Verses 16-17, 20-22)

When He gave His word picture of passing a camel through the eye of a needle, Jesus was referring directly to this example of a rich young man who, because he did not want to give up his wealth, turned down the wonderful opportunity to become one of Jesus' disciples. In Mark's parallel account of this event, Jesus emphasized that it was not the riches themselves, but the *trusting* in riches that would keep a wealthy person out of His Kingdom:

And the disciples were astonished at His words. But Jesus answered again and said to them, "Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God! (Mark 10:24)

As always, the apostle Paul agreed with his Master. His writings show that it is not the money, but *the love of* money, that can keep a man from entering the Kingdom of God:

For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows. (I Timothy 6:10)

If we love wealth and trust in it, we will become lustful. The more we get, the more we tend to want. Then, very soon, we can become more intent on getting riches and spending too much of our precious time playing with the toys our money can buy than on striving to do our part to be able to enter the Kingdom of God. Wealth then becomes our god:

Therefore put to death your members which are on the earth: fornication, uncleanness, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry. (Colossians 3:5)

We will come back to this later in the article.

Are WE rich?

Why do I write "we," "us" and "our" instead of "they," "them" and "their"? Surely, most of God's people cannot be considered wealthy?

Take an honest look at *your* financial situation, and truthfully compare it with that of the majority of the world. Look at all the "stuff" that you own... lots of physical things which, if you don't keep a tight rein on yourself, can potentially take your time, your mind and your effort away from the true priority – seeking the Kingdom of God:

Look at the house you live in.

Look at your gardens and your furnishings.

Look at your motor vehicles.

Look at your clothing.

Look at your computers, stereos, TVs and other toys.

Consider your ability to stay warm in the winter months and reasonably cool in the summer.

Consider the fact that you have more food to eat each day than many of your human brothers and sisters eat in a month.

Look at your income and compare it with the world's average:

The world's Mr. Average makes the equivalent of \$3,534.00 [U.S. dollars throughout] per year. Could you survive on so little? On \$295.00 per month? On \$68.00 per week? These figures are from a report entitled "World GDP and Population Data," which continues:

The gap between the richest and poorest [nations] is represented by the rich Switzerland with a per capita income of \$26,716.00 (7.56 times the weighted world average) and the poor Mozambique with an income of \$95.00 (0.027 times the world average). The ratio between these extremes is 275 times.

What if you lived in Mozambique? Could you survive on \$7.91 per month? On \$1.82 per week? When we honestly compare our lot to that of the *real* poor, or even to that of the world's Mr. Average, we will see that most of us are, in fact, truly rich, by comparison.

Should we feel guilty because our nations have been singled out and blessed by our great, beneficent God in fulfillment to His promises to the faithful Abraham? No. Of course not. These great blessings, however, certainly should make us stop, think, and greatly appreciate the One who has given them to us.

Are riches wrong or sinful in themselves? No again. But, as we have seen, making gods out of them by putting them and their use before God *is* a sin. A major sin. A sin which, if not repented of, will keep us out of God's Kingdom.

Flee lust of wealth

Christians are to flee – not wealth itself – but the lust of wealth. We must concentrate on living a godly life now during this temporary chemical existence, and we must be striving to lay hold on "the real thing." The permanent things. The real treasure:

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:21)

Our treasure must not be of the impermanent, physical kind. Why would any truly intelligent person put his trust in dumb physical objects... things that are subject to obsolescence and decay, and which he cannot "take with him" anyway? Our treasure must be the things of God and, of course, God Himself.

We must make absolutely sure that our physical riches do not become a higher priority than our real treasure. It is so easy to allow ourselves to get busy every day with the physical things and to put off communication with God, until we are either too tired to pray and study at all, or our two-way communication with God is left until the very end of the day when, due to a guilty conscience, we try to cram it in. Should our great, sovereign God – the most important Person in the whole universe – receive the mere dregs of our time each day? The lust of wealth is tantamount to idolatry, and we very well know that we are to have no other gods! Jesus tells us that a Christian cannot serve both God and mammon:

No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will be loyal to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon. (Matthew 6:24)

Strong tells us that the word "mammon" comes from "mammonas," a noun of Aramaic origin, which means "wealth personified" or "avarice deified." Avarice deified! What a wonderful choice of words! But what do they mean? They refer to greed, materialism, covetousness, acquisitiveness, cupidity, Satan's way of get... all made into and worshipped as a god. This is what we must flee.

God not opposed to wealth

However, we should not take this concept too far. Let us not throw the baby out with the bathwater! Our great God is not opposed to wealth itself. It was He who created the raw materials from which all of man's "stuff" is constructed. It was He who made it all for the happiness and for the testing of His children. It was He who created the seven laws of success, and He greatly desires that His people should be thriving in the appropriate and balanced use of whatever physical riches He has blessed us with:

Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers. (III John 2)

If we look further back in God's Word, we will see that some of His servants were marvelously wealthy, powerful and influential. For example, Abram was very rich:

Abram was very rich in livestock, in silver, and in gold. (Genesis 13:2)

While still very young, Abram's great-grandson, Joseph became an extremely prosperous man:

The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man; and he was in the house of his master the Egyptian. (Genesis 39:2)

Then Pharaoh said to Joseph, "Inasmuch as God has shown you all this, there is no one as discerning and wise as you. You shall be over my house, and all my people shall be ruled according to your word; only in regard to the throne will I be greater than you." And Pharaoh said to Joseph, "See, I have set you over all the land of Egypt." Then Pharaoh took his signet ring off his hand and put it on Joseph's hand; and he clothed him in garments of fine linen and put a gold chain around his neck. And he had him ride in the second chariot which he had; and they cried out before him, "Bow the knee!" So he set him over all the land of Egypt. Pharaoh also said to Joseph, "I am Pharaoh, and without your consent no man may lift his hand or foot in all the land of Egypt." And Pharaoh called Joseph's name Zaphnath-Paaneah. And he gave him as a wife Asenath, the daughter of Poti-Pherah priest of On. So Joseph went out over all the land

of Egypt. Joseph was thirty years old when he stood before Pharaoh king of Egypt. And Joseph went out from the presence of Pharaoh, and went throughout all the land of Egypt. (Genesis 41:39-46)

And Job, with all of his "substance," (KJV) was the greatest man of his time in the east:

Also, his possessions were seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred female donkeys, and a very large household, so that this man was the greatest of all the people of the East... "You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land." (Job 1:3, 10)

And the LORD restored Job's losses when he prayed for his friends. Indeed the LORD gave Job twice as much as he had before... Now the LORD blessed the latter days of Job more than his beginning; for he had fourteen thousand sheep, six thousand camels, one thousand yoke of oxen, and one thousand female donkeys. (Job 42:10, 12)

Although our three examples were very wealthy, they did not put their trust in their physical riches, nor did they seek their own blessings. They obeyed God and were blessed materially by Him, and we can be pretty sure that all three will be in God's Kingdom.

All things possible with God

As we discussed earlier, it would be very, *very*, *VERY* difficult – if not downright physically impossible – for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, and Jesus' own words have shown us that it is physically impossible for a rich man to enter God's Kingdom. But here is the conclusion of the whole matter – the solution to the whole problem – right back where we started, in the nineteenth chapter of Matthew:

But with God all things are possible. (Matthew 19:26).

If and when it is His will, God can do anything! He can perform the impossible. He can make a dry road through the middle of a raging ocean. He can raise the dead. He can even make time go backwards! Could he cause a camel to pass through the eye of a needle, if He so willed? We know that He could. Likewise, it is only through God's miraculous help that a rich man can enter God's Kingdom.

But let us not stop there. The miracles necessary for salvation are not restricted to the rich. No matter whether we are rich, middle income, or downright poor, the same astounding miracles are necessary for *anyone* to enter God's Kingdom. God performed huge and marvellous miracles when He first called you and me – even in our comparative riches – out of this world and into His church. He performed more, astounding miracles back in the nineties when He allowed so many of our former brethren to be blinded and to be taken back into the world, but He mercifully kept our spiritual eyes open.

Let us be very thankful to our Creator every day for all the physical riches He has given us. But let us be vigilant never to make gods out of these riches. Let us never put those riches before our great God, and let us continually be ever so thankful for the miracle of our calling.

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