



## BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Gospel of Matthew

TRANSCRIPT

“The Rich Young Ruler, or Salvation: the Gift of God,” Matthew 19:16-26

This morning for our Scripture reading, since the passage that we are expounding in the Gospel of Matthew is also found in both Mark and Luke, and since the account in Mark, particularly, adds a point or two that are not found in the Gospel of Matthew, I would like to read for the Scripture reading Mark 10:17 through 22, and then we shall attempt to expound the passage from Matthew 19:16 through 26. So turn in your Bibles Mark 10:17 through 22. It is our Lord's encounter with a rich young ruler. Mark 10:17 through 22,

“And when he was gone forth into the way, there came one running and kneeled to him, and asked him, ‘Good master what shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?’ And Jesus said unto him, ‘Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God. Thou knowest the commandments do not commit adultery, do not kill, do not steal, do not bear false witness, defraud not, honor thy father and mother.’ And he answered and said unto him, ‘Master all these have I observed from my youth.’ Then Jesus beholding him loved him, and said unto him, ‘One thing thou lackest, go thy way, sell whatsoever thou hast and

“The Rich Young Ruler, or Salvation: the Gift of God” by S. Lewis Johnson  
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give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasures in heaven: and come, take up the cross, and follow me.’ And he was sad at that saying and went away grieved for he had great possessions.”

I think I want to read on through verse 27.

“And Jesus looked round about, and saith unto his disciples, ‘With what difficulty shall they that have riches enter into the kingdom of God. And the disciples were astonished at his words, but Jesus answered again, and saith unto them, ‘Children how hard it is for them that trust in riches to 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.’ And they were astonished out of measure saying among themselves, ‘Who then can be saved?’ and Jesus looking upon them saith, with men it is impossible but not with God: for with God all things are possible even the salvation of wicked men.”

The passage that we are looking at for the message this morning is a passage that has been greatly misunderstood by a number of different people. It has been misunderstood by the legalists who have taken some comfort from the fact that the Lord Jesus, in answer to the question, good master what good things shall I do to inherit eternal life, said, if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments. And since legalists have generally thought that the cross of Jesus Christ is not sufficient for salvation, but that one must keep the law in order to be saved, this has given them a great deal of comfort and has enabled them to find some words from our Lord Jesus that seem to support the idea that a man gets to heaven by the good works that he does.

It has been misunderstood also by the Unitarians that have thought that in our Lord’s answer, which he gave to the rich young ruler, that there is an indication of the fact that he did not consider himself to be good. Did he not say there is none good but one, that is God, and does not that seem to clearly say the Lord Jesus himself confessed that he was not God, and if he confessed that, how is it possible for Christians to believe that he is God? And so they hope by that means to come to the doctrine of Unitarian-type of Christianity.

The communists have misunderstood it too, though I don’t think that communists generally like to ground their doctrine in holy Scripture, but they rather like the fact in the 21<sup>st</sup> verse that the Lord Jesus said to the rich young ruler, when he asked what lack I yet, if thou wilt be perfect, go and sell what thou hast and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven and come follow me. Since communists, at least popularly, are thought to rejoice in the doctrine of dividing the wealth, that would seem to be in accord with their doctrine. Of course, incidentally, they always believe in dividing another’s wealth, not their own, but nevertheless this doctrine, or this statement of our Lord, would seem to be some manner of support for them.

I think this passage has also been misunderstood by many Christians who have failed to understand the answer that the Lord Jesus gave to the rich young ruler: if thou wilt enter into life keep the commandments. In some ways that is the strangest answer that the Lord Jesus ever gave, because it seems to be so out of harmony with the remainder of the word of God.

I listen, well, in fact, I have a friend who was president of a theological seminary in another state than Texas, and I was with him in a conference one time many years ago, and he spoke on this passage, and he said in his introduction in the passage he had found great difficulty in this passage in the past and I used to hurry past it, he said, as one does past a graveyard. And I do think there are some believers who, in reading the New

Testament, come to this passage and simply read through it, so puzzled over what our Lord Jesus has said that they move quickly on to something else.

Campbell Morgan, one of the outstanding expositors of the past generation, used to say that this passage contains three surprises. First of all, it is a surprise that there could be a man who lacked only one thing. It would seem very strange that the Lord Jesus could say, one thing thou lackest—could there possibly be one individual who lacked one thing? Well that is surprising that the Lord Jesus said one thing thou lackest.

The second surprise, Mr. Morgan used to say, is that he lacked anything. Because as you look at this man, he was a most unusual man. He had everything, and in a moment we will talk a little more about it, but the account does seem to suggest that he had everything. Someone has written a little stanza about this man, that he was rich, young and prominent, clean, keen and reverent. He does seem to be a man who has everything, so far as human standards go, and that was the second surprise.

And then Dr. Morgan said that the third surprise was that he was ever surprised after having studied the passage. So it is an interesting passage, and it is one that I think causes us a great deal of difficulty and is nevertheless one of a great deal of interest. Now we are going to look at this passage from the Matthean account, and so I would like for you to take your Bibles and turn to Matthew 19:16 through 26. And we look first at the conversation the Lord Jesus had with the rich young ruler, then we look secondly at the application that one draws from this encounter, and finally at the interrogation of the disciples when they ask the Lord Jesus who then can be saved. The Matthean text begins in verse 16 with the words:

“Behold one came and said unto him good master what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life? And he said unto him, why callest me good, or why does thou question me concerning that which is good, there is none good but one, that is God, but if thou wilt enter

into life keep the commandments.”

Now we are not told in this account in the Gospel of Matthew that this man who came to the Lord Jesus was a ruler, it is in the Lukan account that we find that he was a ruler.

Whether he was a religious ruler or a civil ruler, the Bible does not say. We will say that he probably was a religious ruler; he certainly was interested in spiritual things. He was a young man, Matthew tells us in one of the later verses of this account.

Now if he were a ruler and if he were young and if he were rich, he was influential. It is evident too that he was a very upright young man. He was just the kind of man you would want to marry your daughter, the kind of man that we all would admire, the kind of man who if he came into our midst we would sooner or later notice him particularly.

He also seems to be the kind of man who has everything under control. As someone put it; he has all the keys of life hanging at his girdle. It is this young man who comes up to the Lord Jesus, the text of Mark says that he ran up to him, he falls down onto his knees before him and in reference asks the fundamental question of life, what shall I do that I may have eternal life?

Now of course this first request is a request that suggests that he is a person who is afflicted with a form of Pelegian legalism. He does say, good master, what good things shall I do that I may inherit eternal life or get eternal life? Now that in itself lets us know that he is a kind of person who thinks that life comes by the things that we do. There is in human nature, by reason of the fall of man, this fundamental string that we all think that we get to heaven by the things that we do. It is part of our fallenness; it is part of what has happened as a result of Adam’s sin in the Garden of Eden.

Now today, as we think of the people with whom we do business, day by day, or with whom we have relationships day by day, I don’t have to tell you that the world thinks we get to heaven by the things that we do. There are great numbers of citizens

who think that you get to heaven by good citizenship, they think if you are a member of the Rotary or Kiwanis, or the League of Women Voters, of the John Birch Society, or some other significant human work, that that in itself gets you membership into the kingdom of God. And if you are a member of the American Civil Liberties Union, that means that you form part of the nobility in heaven.

Then there are those that think you get to heaven by virtue of your morality, that is, by hard work. You are kind, you do not cheat on your income tax, you give to the cancer fund and other types of endeavors such as that, and you will get to heaven.

And then of course there are the great numbers of people who think you get to heaven by religion. They think that church membership means that you are a member of the heavenly citizenship. That if, furthermore, you learn the catechism or you have been baptized and attend regularly Sunday school, if you have signed the pledge card and if you have become a part of the every members canvass, that surely you will get to heaven. And if you do not do something during the season of lent and have a St. Christopher’s medal in your automobile, everything is sure to be alright.

There are even those that think that one gets to heaven by virtue of culture. You have attended a university, even an Ivy League university, or perhaps you are a member of the Junior League, or at least you have been a member of the Junior League, maybe even some think that because you are a member of the historical society of the Panhandle, you are sure to get to heaven. Or you are a member of the local country club. You are just a general good person who has been brought up in good Texas culture.

Well I know that these may seem ridiculous to you, but I am sure that there are a lot of people who just under the skin really feel like this. I imagine there are even some that say that we get to heaven because we are good and gentle, we wouldn’t even squash a rollie pollie bug, as one of my friends likes to say.

You see we have all of these concepts of relative human righteousness by which we think that we shall get into heaven, failing to realize that the Scripture set forth for us an absolute righteousness, and we must possess this absolute righteousness if we are to ever enter into heaven. It is not sufficient to have human righteousness, it is not sufficient to be admired by human beings. God demands a perfect righteousness before we shall enter into heaven. We have to present him with a righteousness which he approves and the only righteousness which he approves is a perfect righteousness. And if we do not have that perfect righteousness, *homo sapiens* shall not enter into the kingdom of God.

The Lord Jesus Christ’s first response to this man who thinks he gets to heaven by something that he does is, if thou enter into life keep the commandments. But he has preceded that with these opening words: there is none good but one, that is God, so why do you call me good? That is a very interesting statement, because it does seem to suggest that the Lord Jesus confesses sin. Why callest thou me good? Does that not seem to say that the Lord Jesus himself has confessed to sin? It is a mistake to ask me about goodness, there is only one person who is good and that is God.

Now of course we need to remember that there are three persons that may be called God, there is God the Father, there is God the Son, there is God the Holy Spirit. So we need to remember that the Scriptures are trinitarian. But what does our Lord mean when he says, why callest thou me good? Well if you look carefully at the address that the rich young ruler gave our Lord Jesus, it may give you a clue. He has called him master and he has attached to the term master the adjective good, good master. Well now master does not necessarily suggest deity; good does.

So that raises the question in our mind of our Lord, speaking humanly. Here is a man who has addressed me as master, master may refer to just a man because master means simply, teacher, but he has attached an adjective that belongs to God. Now it is wrong to attach an adjective that belongs to God to a term that may refer simply to a man if we do not understand that the Lord Jesus is God.

Let me illustrate. The emperor Joseph II used to travel incognito on extensive tours through Hungary, Bohemia, France, Spain and Holland. These were his territories; he traveled incognito and men did not understand, could not see that he really was the ruler. His purpose of doing this was to find out how conditions really were in his kingdom, and so he would travel among the common people and ask questions and try to learn the things they thought about him. Now in those days if anyone rendered homage to a ruler, to a human person who was not the ruler, that of course was the same as treachery, that is the same as being traitorous to a country today.

So for the king to have accepted homage from someone who did not know he was the king, the kind of homage that belonged only to a king, would mean that that person was a traitor to the king. So you see it is of the essence that a person understand who he is, to whom he renders divine worship, homage or regard. So when the Lord Jesus said, callest thou me good, he thought to evoke from the rich young ruler the confession that good did belong to him, because while he was teacher he was the divine teacher.

Let me illustrate it in another way. Let’s suppose that I am an engineer working for one of our corporations involved in highly secret business, and let’s suppose I am a person who is not very well acquainted with what is going on in the world, and that so involved and interested in the things that I am doing technically that I do not even know the name of the president and not knowing who he is, never having seen him.

So the time comes for my vacation. I decide I will go to Palm Springs in order to play a little golf, since I haven’t played in a long time. So I travel out to Palm Springs, and it just so happens that the president is there for some golf also. Well I go out to the country club, it happens to be the same one that he is going to play that day, and I walk up to the first tee, and I don’t have a partner, and I notice that there is a man over there that seems a little backward with the clubs, but nevertheless, he doesn’t seem to have

anybody playing with him, although he is accompanied by a lot of men dressed in plain clothes, so I go over to him not knowing who he is, never having seen him.

I am an engineer remember, and I walk up to him and I say, “Sir do you have a game today?” And he says, no, as a matter of fact I don’t, would you like to play along with me, and I say yes I certainly would. And he asks me to play first giving me the honor and so I stand up and hit one down the middle 250 yards straight away, and then he stands up and sprays one off to the right about 150 yards off the way.

Now I notice that he has a good many more people interested in him in spite of the fact that I have hit mine right down the middle like a professional, but as we walk down the way we begin to talk. He said what do you do, and I said, I am an engineer. Well what kind of engineering are you doing? I say, well, I am with such and such corporation, we are involved in highly secret government work, but since we are out here on the golf course and there is nobody around, I think I will tell you what I do. And so I proceed to unfold to him all the highly secret work that I am engaged.

Now not knowing that he is the president, though of course of all the people who could know that and should know it is the president, but if I do not know that he is the president and divulge this information to him, I am a traitor to our country.

Now you see here is a man who has said good master, an adjective that belongs only to God, but he has attached it to the term, teacher, and he has spoken to this person who appears to other men simply as a man and it is only natural, then, that the Lord Jesus should say, why callest thou me good. He is trying to evoke from him the confession, why, Lord, the adjective “good” belongs to you because you are God. So why callest thou me good?

Now his answer is even more startling, however, when he says if you want to enter into life keep the commandments. Now we have been taught that if we are to enter into life, we should believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shall be saved. The Lord Jesus answered this man who asks what shall I do that I may have eternal life, keep the

commandments. Does not that seem strange that the Lord Jesus would suggest to this man that a man could get to heaven by the things that he does?

Well now let me say this, a man could get to heaven by the things that he does if he could do his things perfectly, if it were possible for a man to live a perfect life, if it were possible for him to have all of his action have divine approval, all of his thoughts have divine approval and everything that he has ever done be in accordance in the perceptive will of God found in the word of God. That man would get to heaven.

There was such a man who lived a perfect life, our Lord Jesus Christ, and so as far as he was concerned he earned eternal life as far as his actions were concerned, and so theoretically, hypothetically, it is possible for us to think about earning eternal life, but unfortunately all of us have already sinned in our representative Adam, and therefore we have failed and we have confirmed that original imputation of sin by virtue of the life that we have lived thereafter.

The Apostle Paul, writing in the Epistle to the Galatians says, “For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse, for it is written cursed is everyone that continuith not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them.” So if a man is going to get to heaven by the works route, he must begin the first moment he breathes a breath, and he can never stop until finally he has breathed his last, and throughout all of his life it must be a perfect keeping of the law.

Would you like to try to get to heaven then by good works? Cursed is the man that continuith not in things, which are written in the book of the law to do them. So if we start out by trying to get to heaven on the works route, it means absolute perfection, past, present and future. Incidentally, that is why people who believe that we do get to heaven by the things that we do never have any assurance of salvation. It is right that they shall have no assurance, because their work if never done until they have breathed their last.

So when the Lord Jesus said to this man, but if thou wilt enter into life keep the commandments, what was he trying to do? Why it is very obvious, he was trying to point this man to the one fact that he must come to reckon with if he is ever to come to know Jesus Christ as Savior and that is his sin. He has sought to bring him face to face to the fact that he cannot live this life that he thinks that he shall gain eternal life by accomplishing. So the reason the Lord Jesus said, if thou shalt enter into life keep the commandments, is to bring this man to the knowledge of his sin.

As a matter of fact, that is the purpose of the law doesn’t he, by the law is the full knowledge of sin. So the Ten Commandments were given in the Old Testament to tell Israel to show Israel that they could not gain life by the things that they do. That is a strange answer, keep the commandments, and incidentally in some of our editions, the present tense is used, and in some of our manuscripts the aorist tense is used.

And our Lord Jesus said, go on keeping the commandments, you think that getting to heaven is by doing some outstanding act, what good thing shall I do, some great work of philanthropy. No it is not that, it’s going on doing the commandments one after the other forever. Or whether he means simply keep the commandments in the sense to do the responsible to do the whole of the law, the sense is the same.

Now this young man has prodigious, incredible self-confidence, and so we read in the 18<sup>th</sup> verse in his second response to the law or however in his second request that he makes, which commandments, which ones? It is almost as if he said, you name them, I have kept them, or else he was an exceedingly guile young man. Here is the Lord Jesus saying to him, if you want to enter into life keep the commandments, keep the law of God, and he says which ones?

Now the Lord Jesus replies, and if you are familiar with the Ten Commandments— incidentally, all evangelicals should be familiar with the Ten Commandments; you should have memorized the Ten Commandments. I know when I first came to be a Christian, I thought afterwards, why did I memorize the Ten Commandments? The Ten

Commandments can never give me life; why should I memorize them? And unfortunately in evangelicalism there is a tendency to feel that those commandments are not importance for us.

I somehow have a feeling that the air conditioning has gone out again. [Laughter]

But it is important for us to keep, to remember, the Ten Commandments because much of the gospels [are] built around the knowledge of them. For example, right here, when the Lord Jesus said, keep the commandments, and he said, which ones, then the Lord Jesus said, thou shalt do not murder, thou shalt not commit adultery, thou shalt not steal, thou shalt not bear false witness, honor thy father and mother.

Now the commandments were divided, remember, in two tables. The first table had to do with our responsibility to God, the second table is primarily to do with our responsibility to man. So that in the first part of the Ten Commandments, we are told we must love the Lord our God with all our hearts, with all our soul, with all our minds. We shall have no other God before us, summarized in those words that I have just given.

In the second commandments we have things that pertain to men, so there are things that in a sense evidence the truth of fulfillment of the first table of the law. When we are told not to have any other God before us, the evidence that we do not is that we keep all of these other things. So the relationship to God is set first, the relationship to man second. Now you will notice the Lord Jesus did not cite any of the first commandments, the first table of the law. Why did he not do that? Well because he wanted to bring this man to something that he could see which would show him that he was really not keeping the law. He thought he was keeping the law, but he was not keeping the law, and by quoting the second tables of the law and the commandments that have to do with them, it show his own self deception. Because he could see more concretely that he was not really the person who had no other God before him than the true God Jehovah.

So the Lord Jesus then gives him citations from the second table of the law. Now this is I think also a rather striking thing, too. He has in a sense sought to show him in concrete actions that he is not fulfilling the law, hoping to remove this façade that this respectable man was going to get to heaven on the basis of his respectability. Hell will be loaded with respectable people, who think that by their culture and by their human attainments they shall get to heaven.

And you know it is the most difficult thing to get men to believe that we get to heaven on the basis of grace. Men think that they get to heaven by virtue of what they do, but God saves men for nothing.

There was a famous violinist who played on Chicago streets once. He wanted to prove that men judge music by the price of the seats in the theatre rather than the excellency of the music. And so he put on an old suit, he put on smoked glasses on, or dark glasses on, and he had a sign which he hung over the front of his chest which said, “I am blind,” and then he played several concerts on the street, and at the end of the day he had a dollar and sixty-nine cents in his cup, and he thought he had proved his point that men really judged music by the price of the seats that they pay for the price of the concert.

The Lord Jesus, then, having responded by giving the second table of the law, in essence, the young man responded to him for the third time in verse 20 by saying, “All these things have I kept from my youth up, what lack I yet?” Now it is evident that this man has looked at things from the holy outward viewpoint, because of course he has not kept all of these things, he has not kept all of the commandments, but unfortunately we think that we can pick and chose if we are on the legalistic road to salvation. We think that, after all, we may not be so very good on one part of these commandments, but others we keep quite well, like the person who read the sermon on the Ten Commandments and left the auditorium that morning by saying, “Thank God I have

never made a graven image.” He may have broken every other one, but he was taking pride in the fact that he had kept one of them.

The very fact that this young man says all these things have I kept from youth up, what lack I yet, is an indication of the fact that he did not have any peace in his heart. He said what lack I yet? So even though he thought that he had kept all of these commandments, he had fooled himself to some extent. The fact that he used the little word yet showed that he did not really have any peace.

Now our Lord’s third response to him might well have been you are just a liar, but he graciously takes him at his word, still hoping by means of the things that he says to bring him to the conviction of his sin, and so in the 21<sup>st</sup> verse we read, Jesus said unto him, if thou wilt be perfect, go and sell what thou hast and give to the poor and thou shalt have treasure in heaven and come follow me.

Why did he say to this rich young man, go and sell what you have and give to the poor? Is this our Lord’s prescription for everyone? No it is not his prescription for everyone. It is a kind of ad hoc suggestion for this man in order to show him that the thing that is really keeping him from knowing himself is his riches. These are the things he has made his God. In fact, Paul’s words, “covetousness, which is idolatry,” really belonged to this young man, because he has made his riches his god. And so the words of our Lord Jesus that he should sell what he has is designed to bring him to the realization that it is his trust in riches that is hindering his riches into the kingdom of heaven.

Many of you know that the church of Rome has contended that this is an extra suggestion that the Lord Jesus has given in order that we may obtain a supererogatory form of goodness—that is, goodness beyond that which is required. And when individuals do this by taking upon themselves voluntary poverty, they gain certain merits which fall into the treasury of the merits of the saints which may be reckoned to others upon payment of certain funds at certain times.

The Lord Jesus had nothing of that in mind. This was for this young man only. As a matter of fact, if everybody sold everything that they had, who would be buyers” [Laughter] So you can see that this is not something addressed to everyone. It was addressed to this man whose real problem was his riches. And then he adds, come and follow me, and he would have come and he would have followed him if he had truly been perfect.

Well, the final reaction of the young man is, and when the young man heard this, saying his face fell. Matthew doesn’t tell us that. It is Mark who tells us that his face fell, and he went away, for he had great possessions. From the eagerness which he ran into the presence of the Lord Jesus and knelt before him, he has moved to sorrow convicted by his own actions putting money before God. He not only had money—there is nothing wrong with having money—but he loved it, and he loved it so much that it prevented him, at least at this moment, from entering into the kingdom of the heavens.

Someone has said that the rich young ruler came to the right person, asked the right question, got the right answer, but made the wrong decision. That is true. It is sometimes said by young men, even in theological seminaries, that when love is felt the message is heard. We often hear people make a stupid comment that if we really love people they will respond to the ministry of the word of God. That is not true. No one ever loved more than Jesus Christ, and yet this man did not come. No one ever loved more than the Apostle Paul who was human, and yet men did not always respond to the apostle’s messages. As a matter of fact they did not generally respond. The Lord Jesus loved perfectly and only a small remnant of men responded. When love is felt the message may be heard or the message may not be heard.

You see, there is something more fundamental than the love of the messenger; it is the work of the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit works in the heart of men, they do respond. When the Holy Spirit does not work in the heart of men they do not respond, because men are sinners. And so the rich young ruler, so loved by the Lord Jesus, turns

and with a crestfallen countenance—that is the meaning of the word used in Mark to describe it; it is the work used of a cloudy day—downcast he turned and left because he had great possessions.

Well now at this point, the Lord Jesus offers a few words by way of application. He says, verily I say unto you that a rich man shalt with difficulty enter into the kingdom of heaven. Why is that so? Well it is so because the ideal tool for resistance is self-sufficiency, cash wise. We all know that if we could have sufficient funds, we think we can pretty well withstand all of the crises that may face us, and I think it is a fact of human experience that it is most easy for a rich man to resist the dependence that he should show with relationship to God, for he has so much upon which to rely.

Now as if to stress that the Lord Jesus said in verse 24, “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.” There is an old story which is traceable to only Christian tradition that there was such a gate in Jerusalem that was known as the needle gate, a kind of postern gate which was so small that when a camel came to that postern gate, loaded down with the baggage that was upon the camel, it was necessary for those who owned the camel to take the baggage off of the camel, and put the baggage on the side in order for the camel to get through, and the camel was supposed to have had to kneel in order to get through this gate. And if you go to Jerusalem you might find some tourist guides who might tell you about that particular tradition as they show you one of the small gates, but unfortunately it is a Christian *midrash*; it doesn’t have any basis in history.

So when the Lord Jesus said, I tell you it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, well it would be very suggestive that a person has to kneel down and take off all of the things that are baggage for him and nakedly pass through the gate into the kingdom of heaven, well that makes excellent expository sense, it is just not grounded in historical fact. What is our Lord trying to say? He is not trying to say that you can

enter into the kingdom of heaven in this manner, what he is trying to say is that it is impossible for men to enter into the kingdom of heaven.

Luke makes it very plain that that is so, because when Luke uses the term for needle, he uses the term that refers to a surgical needle, so he is talking about something that is impossible. One cannot by any manner of means go through a surgical needle. Now I know there was a chemist friend who once said why it is easy to get a camel through the eye of a needle, all you have to do is to dissolve it in sulfuric acid and squirt it through, but that of course is not what is suggested by the text here. The Lord Jesus is saying 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.

Now Mark tells us, and now there is some question about the text here, he says that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for those who trust in riches to go through the eye of a needle. Whether that text in Mark is genuine or not, and it is a question, the facts are that that is the meaning of these words. Our Lord is not talking about a rich man being impossibly in the kingdom of heaven—we have Joseph of Arimathea of the New Testament for example—but what he is talking about is a rich man who trusts in his riches. That man cannot enter into the kingdom of heaven. It is impossible for such to enter into the kingdom of the heavens.

Now if you had been standing by the Lord Jesus what would you have said by this point, I think that probably you would have said the same thing the disciples said. Here is a man, a lovely young man, undoubtedly handsome, rich, all the keys of life hanging at his girdle, influential religious, honest, sincere. They replied, who then can be saved? If this man cannot be saved, who can possibly be saved? Now you can see these same men do not understand all of the bases of their salvation.

Now Jesus replies in words in which I think show most effectively the truth that the apostle Paul expands and expresses in Ephesians 2:8 and 9. “Jesus beheld them and said unto them with man this is impossible.” Who then can be saved? Why with a man,

it is an impossible thing: no man can be saved by virtue of what he does, for by grace are ye saved through faith and that not of yourselves. With men it is impossible.

Ah, but he adds, “But with God all things are possible.” Or, as Paul says, for thy 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. You see what we have here really is a kind of a pre-Pauline Ephesians 2: 8 and 9, so while he has told this man, keep the commandments if you wish to enter into life, he wants to show him that what he really needs is a grace salvation, not a works salvation, because a man who trusts in anything other than Jesus Christ cannot possibly obtain the eternal life.

May I conclude then by mentioning this? Here is a man whose character was outstanding. He did not lack morality, all of these things have I kept from youth. He did not lack religion; he was interested in the fundamental ultimate question, eternal life. He was interested in being saved and entering into the kingdom of the heavens. He was orthodox. He was no Sadducean; he was a man who believed that these things existed. He was a man who did not lack humility; he came to Jesus Christ and knelt down before him. He did not lack sincerity, Jesus loved him. He didn’t lack courage, he was a rich young man who was a ruler and came to this despised Nazarean carpenter and knelt before him. He was a man who did not lack desire: he ran to him and said, what good things shall I do to have eternal life, and yet in spite of this, Mr. Lovely-but-lacking, lacked one thing.

And I want to tell you that if you are in the audience and it is true that you lack only one thing, I congratulate you, but nevertheless if you lack one thing, I warn you that if you lack one thing you shall not enter into the kingdom of heaven, for if a man enters into the kingdom of heavens he must have all things that God requires, and these things are that we have a righteousness that is acceptable to him. It can only come through the recognition of our inability.

You see, the Lord Jesus has really answered the question of the rich young ruler who asked what good things shall I do that I might have eternal life. Jesus said, “With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.” Verse 26 is the answer to verse 16. What was the cause of his failure? Was it in the Lord Jesus? No, the text of Scripture says he loved him. The cause of failure was his only failure to recognize that in himself he had nothing of which to commend himself to God. What has pictured the rich young ruler, painted him beatifically, painted him as the back of a man who has turned from the Lord Jesus.

So I say unto you this morning, if you are in this audience and you have for one moment thought that you get to heaven by the things that you do, to take a look at this account of this rich young ruler and his encounter with the Lord Jesus. No man can get to heaven by the things that he does. All must come and acknowledge their own sinfulness and dependence and receive as a free gift the salvation that comes by virtue of the atoning work that the Lord Jesus accomplished on the cross at Calvary.

If you are here this morning and you have never believed in him, if you have never before him acknowledged your need and turned to the one who died for sinners, we invite you to do it, and to do it now, for it is of the greatest importance of the most solemn significance that you turn to him now. Let’s stand for the benediction.

[Prayer] Father, we thank Thee for the word of God. O Father enable us, amid the darkening days in which we live, to show the light of the word of God. Help us to think right, Lord, about men, what we are apart from Thee, and most of all, about Jesus Christ, who loved us and gave himself for us, and who has made it possible through the sacrifice for sin for us to have life.

May Thy blessing go with us, as we part.

For his sake. Amen.

“The Rich Young Ruler, or Salvation: the Gift of God” by S. Lewis Johnson  
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