

Chapter 79: With God All Things are Possible

Matthew 19:23–30

As the rich young man walks away from Jesus' invitation to follow him, Jesus must help his disciples understand what they are seeing. Why would someone walk away from the prospect of following Jesus into eternal life? In Matthew 19:23–30, Jesus explains that covetousness can choke out our faith as we begin to trust in our wealth in two ways: (1) as a source of comfort, protection, and safety in this world, and (2) as a sign of our assurance of God's love for us. Jesus cuts across these ideas by insisting that money does not function the way that they think it does, since money actually makes saving faith harder to cultivate. While it may be impossible for us to avoid the ensnaring love of money, Jesus also offers an important promise: *with God all things are possible*.

The Powerlessness of Man (Matt. 19:23–24)

This section follows immediately after the previous story of the rich young man. Here, we have Jesus' reflections on the tragedy that "the young man...went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions" (Matt. 19:22). As Jesus and his disciples watch the man leave, the Lord instructs his disciples on the dangers of the love of money. First, Jesus makes an observation to his disciples to argue that this rich man's actions are not the exception, but the norm: "Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 19:23). To be fair, Morris is right that when Jesus says that it will only be "with difficulty" that a rich person will enter the kingdom of heaven, Jesus "does not mean that [the rich person] will not enter at all."¹ Wealth is not a disqualification from the kingdom, *per se*. Nevertheless, we should not downplay the severity of the warning that Jesus gives. As Calvin writes, "It is true indeed, that riches do not, in their own nature, hinder us from following God; but, in consequence of the depravity of the human mind, it is scarcely possible for those who have a great abundance to avoid being intoxicated by them."²

To underscore this point further,³ Jesus says, "Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God" (v. 24). There have been many attempts to give some alternative explanation than the straightforward idea of what Jesus means by describing a camel going through the eye of a needle. Osborne gives a good summary of the various suggestions and why they ultimately are implausible and unnecessary:

¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 492.

² Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:401.

³ "Matthew uses 'again' reasonably often (17 times), but this is one of only two places where he has it with 'I say to you'; it has a meaning of 'furthermore' and builds on the preceding statement, while giving the new words a certain emphasis." (Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 493.)

Jesus' analogy for the degree of difficulty has long been misunderstood. Many still say that it refers to the Needle's Eye Gate in Jerusalem, a low opening that would be hard for a camel to get through. However, no such gate existed in Jesus' time! Others have said "needle" simply refers to a low opening like the narrow door of 7:13–14 or they see it as a "rope" (κάμιλον [*kamilon*] as opposed to "camel" [κάμηλον (*kamēlon*)] in the text). Such attempts to water down the imagery are unnecessary; this is rabbinic hyperbole (e.g., "straining the gnat but swallowing the camel" in 23:24), a stylistic device Jesus uses often. It depicts the largest animal in Palestine (a camel) going through the smallest hole (the eye of a needle) to illustrate how "difficult" it is for the wealthy to know God.⁴

Thus, Jesus intends to give to us a ridiculous image because he wants us to know that the "difficulty" of a rich man is serious and significant. We minimize Jesus' words hear at our own peril.

In these words, we should also note that Jesus surprisingly refers to "the kingdom of God," rather than "the kingdom of heaven" as he normally does—as, for example, immediately before in v. 23. While it is possible that this change is merely "for literary variation," France suggests that "the more personal expression 'kingdom of God' is chosen to emphasize the opposition between the two 'kings,' God and Mammon."⁵ Along these lines, one may think of the observation in the *Westminster Larger Catechism* that the First Commandment's prohibition against having any other gods "before me" (lit., "before my face") suggest that the idolatrous worship of other gods is something God takes personally, as "a most impudent provocation."⁶ As we observed in the previous passage, Jesus omitted all of the commandments from the First Table of the Law as well as the Tenth Commandment against covetousness. This is more than a coincidence, since the Scriptures elsewhere teach that covetousness *is* idolatry (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5).

The Power of God (Matt. 19:25–26)

Matthew then tells us that, "When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished..." (v. 25a). Jesus had not merely expressed an opinion that was new, but one that stood against popular understanding altogether. This had also happened to some degree in the previous section, where the rich young man thought that he was "good" by his external keeping of (most of) the commandments from the Second Table of the Law. Jesus showed that even while his sin might not have been visible, neither his hands nor his heart was clean. Here again, Jesus confronts another popular idea about how to know whether someone is good or not. As Hagner explains, the disciples "shared the common view of the time that riches were a sign of God's blessing (together with the righteousness of the blessed; cf. Deut. 28:1–14) and provided the possibility of both deeds of charity (almsgiving)

⁴ Osborne, *Matthew*, 719–20.

⁵ France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 737.

⁶ "These words, *before me*, or *before my face*, in the first commandment, teach us, that God, who seeth all things, taketh special notice of, and is much displeased with, the sin of having any other God: that so it may be an argument to dissuade from it, and to aggravate it as a most impudent provocation: as also to persuade us to do as in his sight, whatever we do in his service." (*Westminster Larger Catechism*, #106)

and leisure for the study of Torah and the pursuit of righteousness.”⁷ Lenski is probably right that the disciples’ surprise is not a theoretical or theological concern for the rich, but with what this idea conveys about “themselves” and “all men generally.”⁸ At the same time, Calvin makes an important pastoral observation here: “let us observe that, while they were struck with astonishment, they did not shrink from the doctrines of Christ....Thus it will be of service to us to tremble at the threatenings of God: whenever he denounces any thing that is gloomy or dreadful, provided that our minds are not discouraged, but rather aroused.”⁹

While the disciples *heard* and responded with astonishment in v. 25, we now see Jesus *looking* at them and responding with mercy and compassion in v. 26: “But Jesus looked at them and said, ‘With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible’” (v. 26). The idea communicated by the word “looked” is emphatic and intense.¹⁰ Moreover, it suggests that what Jesus saw gave him a pastoral understanding of the difficulty that his disciples were having, which leads directly into Jesus’ promise that God could accomplish what human beings cannot.¹¹ We see something similar in the book of Exodus, when God hears the outcry of the people of Israel against the oppression of the Egyptians: “And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. *God saw the people of Israel—and God knew*” (Ex. 2:24–25). God sees the the blindness, helplessness, and powerlessness of his people, and he knows exactly what they need. Namely, they need to hear the word of his promise, which leads them out of the darkness of their greed and covetousness, and into the light of his salvation.

The Positions Reversed (Matt. 19:27–30)

In light of what Jesus *saw* in his disciples, it is interesting that Peter responds to Jesus’ gracious promise by making sure that Jesus *sees* everything that the disciples have sacrificed for him: “See, we have left everything and followed you. What then will we have?” (v. 27). The word for “see” is the same word that was translated as “behold” when the rich young man came up to Jesus (Matt. 19:16). It is a word that seeks to draw attention to somewhere—in this case, to all that the disciples have “left” for Jesus. Hagner writes that this “emphatic ἰδοὺ ἡμεῖς [*idou hēmeis*], “look, we,” betrays a certain self-satisfaction, for example, in comparison to the rich man, to which v 30 (and 20:16) as well as the parable of the workers in the vineyard may be directed.”¹²

While there is some truth in Hagner’s observation, I suspect that it is too harsh here. Carson seems much closer in his interpretation when he observes that “Yet Jesus does not castigate his disciples for being mercenary. They have made sacrifices and deserve an answer. But what he says... implies that it is a gentle rebuke.”¹³ In other words, Jesus fully understands and appreciates the question his disciples are asking him—probably by what he has *seen* in their souls. Yet, while he is

⁷ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 561.

⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 756.

⁹ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:402.

¹⁰ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 561.

¹¹ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 494.

¹² Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 564.

¹³ Carson, “Matthew,” 480–81.

not angry that they asked him this question, he nevertheless must reveal to them that their question is altogether misguided. They stand to inherit all of heaven and earth, and they are worried about the itemized list of a few paltry possessions that they have left behind. To get at this idea, I have a friend who often asks whether you would stop to take an inventory of the possessions in your house if someone offered you one billion dollars in cash for it. Whatever you are leaving behind, one billion dollars can buy those things for you again—and vastly more as well!

Jesus begins, then, by fast-forwarding to the special place of the disciples at the final judgment: “Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel” (v. 28). While the details of this scene are not entirely spelled out, Jesus’ meaning is clear enough: the disciples will sit with Jesus when the Son of Man judges the twelve tribes of Israel. The language of “the Son of Man” here makes a clear allusion to the promise of Daniel 7, where the judgment of the Ancient of Days is entrusted to “one like a son of man” (Dan. 7:10, 14). Even there, the chapter closes with the promise that “the court shall sit in judgment, and his [the fourth beast’s] dominion shall be taken away, to be consumed and destroyed to the end. And the kingdom and the dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven *shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High*” (Dan. 7:26–27). Thus, in Daniel there is ambiguity about the relationship between the judgment of the Son of Man (Jesus) and his people (“the court...the people of the saints of the Most High”). How, then, does Jesus apply this to the future state of his followers?

Hagner summarizes Jesus’ meaning well: “The twelve disciples, representing the true Israel, will thus be vindicated before unbelieving Israel by assuming authority over them—an authority to judge or rule over them delegated to the twelve by the Son of Man himself (cf. Rev 21:12, 14; see Baumgarten). The disciples, who have given up everything now and appear insignificant, can expect in the future to become powerful figures of rule and authority.”¹⁴ What an extraordinary privilege! The generosity of this promise is all the more apparent when we realize that even the sacrifices the disciples have made did not merit such standing. As Lenski writes, “The generosity and the magnanimity of God are so great that he accepts nothing from us without rewarding it beyond all computation (25:21, 23; Luke 19:17, 19). The vast disproportion existing between our work and God’s reward of it already displays his boundless grace, to say nothing of the gift of salvation which is made before we have even begun to do any work.”¹⁵

Next, Jesus explains that all that has been lost will be restored lavishly: “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or lands, for my name’s sake, will receive a hundredfold and will inherit eternal life” (v. 29). Whereas Job’s property was restored to him at a rate of double of what he lost (Job 1:3; 42:12), Jesus promises his own followers a hundredfold return. This is not a crassly materialistic, *quid pro quo* arrangement, and if disciples seek to serve Jesus only for the wealth that he will give to them, then “they have not escaped the worldliness he calls them to abandon.”¹⁶ Jesus does promise material blessings, but he promises them in such a way that the good represented by those blessings fade into the background of the “eternal life” that we stand to inherit. To be with Jesus for all eternity with no material possessions would be

¹⁴ Hagner, *Matthew 14 - 28*, 565.

¹⁵ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 758.

¹⁶ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 496.

infinitely good, while having all material possessions yet still lacking Jesus would hell. Calvin writes this, then: “The substance of it is this: Those who shall willingly *lose all* for the sake of Christ, will be more happy even in this life than if they had retained the full possession of them; but the chief reward is laid up for them in heaven.”¹⁷

Jesus then closes this teaching with one of his paradoxical axioms: “But many who are first will be last, and the last first” (v. 30). What does Jesus mean by this? To begin, we should recognize that Jesus’ somber words here do not speak of a marginal demotion in the ranks of heaven, but exclusion from the kingdom altogether.¹⁸ While the disciples are worried about whether their investment will pay off, Jesus reminds them of the horrifying fate that awaits many who are first (in this context, especially those who have been rich in this life) who will be excluded from the kingdom. Still, this is not an absolute repudiation of the rich, any more than the “difficulty” that Jesus speaks of earlier is without remedy. What is impossible with man is possible for God.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does wealth cause such a great “difficulty” for entering the kingdom of heaven (v. 23)? Does this mean that wealth is, in itself, a disqualification from the kingdom? How great is the difficulty, then, in light of Jesus’ comparison to the relative ease by which a camel may pass through the eye of a needle (v. 24a)? How might Jesus’ reference to the “kingdom of God” suggest something about how offensive idolatry to money is (v. 24b)?
2. Why do you think that the disciples might have thought that rich people were more likely to be saved (v. 25)? In what ways do we similarly see riches as a sign of God’s favor today? In what ways, though, do we see different ideas in our culture in ways that distrust wealth? How does our culture influence the way that you think about wealth? What does Jesus see as he “looks” at your heart regarding wealth (v. 26)?
3. What do you think Peter’s heart and intentions were when he asked Jesus what the disciples will have after having left everything to follow Jesus (v. 27)? What does Jesus promise about the wealth and power of the disciples in the future (vv. 28–29)? What kind of reversal does Jesus suggest in v. 30? Who are the first? Who are the last? How do these promises shape the way that we evaluate the standing of ourselves and others?
4. Where do you struggle most in regard to your wealth and material possessions? Do you crave what you do not have? Do you fear to lose what you do have? What has confronted you most about wealth from Jesus’ teaching in this section and the previous section? How might your giving become a practical way to fight the temptation to covetousness? How do material sacrifices require you to trust God to provide for your needs?

¹⁷ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:407.

¹⁸ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 762–63.