

Jesus and the Rich Young Ruler

LUKE 18v18-30

¹⁸ A Jewish ruler asked Jesus, "Good Teacher, what must I do to receive eternal life?" ¹⁹ "Why do you call me good?" Jesus asked him. "No one is good except God alone. ²⁰ You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery; do not commit murder; do not steal; do not accuse anyone falsely; respect your father and your mother.'" ²¹ The man replied, "Ever since I was young, I have obeyed all these commandments." ²² When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "There is still one more thing you need to do. Sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow me." ²³ But when the man heard this, he became very sad, because he was very rich. ²⁴ Jesus saw that he was sad and said, "How hard it is for rich people to enter the Kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is much harder for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle." ²⁶ The people who heard him asked, "Who, then, can be saved?" ²⁷ Jesus answered, "What is humanly impossible is possible for God." ²⁸ Then Peter said, "Look! We have left our homes to follow you." ²⁹ "Yes," Jesus said to them, "truly I say to you, that anyone who leaves home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the Kingdom of God ³⁰ will receive much more in this present age and eternal life in the age to come."

CF Matthew 19v16-28

¹⁶ Once a man came to Jesus. "Teacher," he asked, "what good thing must I do to receive eternal life?" ¹⁷ "Why do you ask me concerning what is good?" answered Jesus. "There is only One who is good. Keep the commandments if you want to enter life." ¹⁸ "What commandments?" he asked. Jesus answered, "Do not commit murder; do not commit adultery; do not steal; do not accuse anyone falsely; ¹⁹ respect your father and your mother; and love your neighbour as you love yourself." ²⁰ "I have obeyed all these commandments," the young man replied. "What else do I need to do?" ²¹ Jesus said to him, "If you want to be perfect, go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow me." ²² When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he was very rich. ²³ Jesus then said to his disciples, "I assure you: it will be very hard for rich people to enter the Kingdom of heaven. ²⁴ I repeat: it is much harder for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle." ²⁵ When the disciples heard this, they were completely amazed. "Who, then, can be saved?" they asked. ²⁶ Jesus looked straight at them and answered, "This is impossible for human beings, but for God everything is possible." ²⁷ Then Peter spoke up. "Look," he said, "we have left everything and followed you. What will we have?" ²⁸ Jesus said to them, "You can be sure that when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne in the New Age, then you twelve followers of mine will also sit on thrones, to rule the twelve tribes of Israel. ²⁹ And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or fields for my sake, will receive a hundred times more and will be given eternal life. ³⁰ But many who now are first will be last, and many who now are last will be first

Extracts from 'Blessed be your name' by Matt & Beth Redman

In the land that is plentiful, Where your streams of abundance flow, Blessed be Your name
When the sun's shining down on me. When the world's 'all as it should be', Blessed be Your name
When I'm found in the desert place, Though I walk through the wilderness, Blessed be Your name
On the road marked with suffering, Though there's pain in the offering, Blessed be Your name
Every blessing You pour out I'll turn back to praise.
When the darkness closes in, Lord Still I will say, Blessed be the name of the Lord
You give and take away, You give and take away.
My heart will choose to say Lord, blessed be Your name

The 'has-it-all'

Did you have some-one at your school, who was wealthy, good-looking, intelligent and great at sports. You probably hated that person whilst at the same time desperately wanted to be him or her. The trouble was you couldn't even hate him because he was a really nice person too! We had one lad like that who came into school wearing a watch, but this was no normal watch, it was an L.E.D. The first one that any of us had ever seen. It had a blank screen, and you pressed a button and a red digital display of the time came up. I remember him outside the changing rooms swamped by girls all wanted to press his button. I don't know what became of him, but he was destined to be very successful and very well off. Jesus once met a young man like that, he is usually referred to as the Rich young ruler.

Who was he? In Matthews account we are told that he is young, so he is not likely to be a religious ruler in the synagogue or temple. The term 'ruler' was quite a general one though, and he may have had some official role, but he would have been regarded as one of the ruling classes, distinct from elders, scribes, Pharisees and priests.

Good Teacher

He asks Jesus the question - *"Good Teacher – what I must do to receive eternal life?"*

It seems like a fair question, and politely put, but it isn't.

The Jewish concept is that God is good, by good 100% goodness is implied, rather than I am quite good some of the time. None can compare their own goodness, with the perfect goodness of God. So you would not address a Rabbi as good because this was an attribute associated with God. In the all of the Jewish Rabbi writings (the Talmud) no Rabbi is addressed as Good. So It was a moment poorly thought through flattery. To use the word 'Good' as an adjective in a title, would have been regarded as 'over the top' or excessive. Just Rabbi or Teacher would have been the right approach. He may have been fishing for some recognition. If you gave a compliment you would normally receive one back – that was how it was supposed to work, so he may have been inviting high recognition himself 'Good Teacher' – 'Yes Noble Ruler'.

Jesus seems to jump down his throat, as he retorts quickly "Why do you call me good- no-one is good except God". Is Jesus really saying that he is not good? Is he saying that compared to God the Father he's not good? No and No. He is God and he is good, but he is testing the seriousness of the enquirers intentions. But Jesus is saying – you call me Good, only God is good, in other words if you are wanting to give me that title then you must be ready to recognise me as God, for only he is good. If I am good, then I am God. Jesus is not putting himself beneath God, because if he had been then he would have encouraged the young man to follow in the Ways of God, but he continues the conversation later by saying 'follow me'.

He goes on to ask if there is something that he currently does not do, that he would need to, in order to earn and receive eternal life- perhaps fund the building of a new synagogue.

The old requirements

Jesus answers his question, by testing him on the Old Testament stuff, and he reels off 5 of the 10 commandments, but not in the order that they are normally given.

v20 *You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery; do not commit murder; do not steal; do not accuse anyone falsely; respect your father and your mother.'*

The literary form used places the emphasis first on the middle command, then on the first and last, before 2nd & 4th. So the emphasis is first on respecting property (don't steal) then respecting family (honouring wife, father and mother).

He replied (v21) *"Ever since I was young, I have obeyed all these commandments."* So to his best knowledge he had kept all these commandments since very young at least so far as his own superficial interpretation of what was required, but not clearly not by the matchless standard that God sets. Rabbis of the day, claimed that the Law could be kept in its entirety, so it was not an outlandish claim, although the Talmud did say that Abraham, Moses, and Aaron kept the whole law, so you would be elevating yourself up to the very high standard of an Abraham!

Sell and follow

Jesus heard the impressive claim from the rich young ruler then answered his question directly :-
v22 *There is still one more thing you need to do. **Sell** all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come and **follow** me*

The riches in heaven is the eternal life that he is after. If he wants to **earn it** then here is the formula to follow. Sell your riches; distribute it to poor people, then as a poor person yourself, leave everything behind and follow Jesus.

This demand to sell and follow affects the two primary values which were suggested by the rearranged commandments i.e. property and family. Sell your property and leave your family. The family estate is of supreme importance in the Middle East because it is a symbol of the cohesiveness of the extended family. A Middle Eastern family will go to great lengths to keep part of the extended family in their ancestral home. However the young ruler is asked to place loyalty to Jesus higher than the loyalty to his family and his family estate (which is a sense the two are one). A confident and capable young man is being faced with the radical demands of obedience to Jesus. How could any young man agree to such a thing it? – it would be impossible for him to break such strong cultural bonds. His patriarch Abraham though had done this and left his ancestral home (i.e. his property) in Ur for God, and then when prompted by God to do so, had been prepared to sacrifice his son Isaac (i.e. family).

Can't be earned

In his culture, with his wealth and with the love of both his family and family estate, what was being asked for by Jesus was not just difficult it was seemingly impossible. i.e. ²³ *when the man heard this, he became very sad, because he was very rich.* He grieved deeply over this. Why? Perhaps because he had to now choose between eternal life or family and wealth. Or perhaps it was because he realised now that he could not earn eternal life by his own efforts. So despite all his wealth, and good works and good connections he could not buy or earn his way into the kingdom. There was no way to do this under his own strength, which is what he had always relied upon. Status in God's presence cannot be earned. The ruler grieves with his brash self-confidence now in tatters.

The Parable

This has set Jesus up nicely for this famous short parable..

"How hard it is for rich people to enter the Kingdom of God! ²⁵ It is much harder for a rich person to enter the Kingdom of God than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle."

Ever since these words were said, people have looked for interpretations of this passage which dilute it. They want it to say, that it is very difficult indeed, but still possible. For example, the change of one small greek vowel changes the word from camel to rope (as some ancient manuscripts have) which one strand at a time could be fed through the eye of a needle! Another more common one, is the small door. Some peasant village homes had very large heavy double doors which if opened would allow a fully laden camel into the

courtyard, but at 12 feet tall, these took much effort and manpower to open and close. For ordinary movement by people into the courtyard, there was a smaller door cut into these large doors. Some people if you took everything off the camel you could squeeze it through the door. That might be true. But they also say that this door was referred to as the 'needles eye', but there is no written evidence to support this claim. However in the Jewish Talmud, the book of Rabbinic teachings, we hear from Rabbi Nahmani we do not dream things that are clearly impossible such as a date palm made of gold or an elephant going through the eye of the needle. He was in Mesopotamia where the largest animal was an elephant. Jesus was in Palestine where the largest animal was a camel. That's why Jesus uses it, the camel was the biggest animal he could relate to, and the eye of the needle was the smallest orifice. It is meant to be impossible.

Due to his wealth, his power and his confidence, the young man wanted to inherit eternal life on his own merit, but he can't. Obedience to Jesus, appears too costly. It might be that if he had been prepared to give it all up, Jesus may have given it back to him, like Abraham with his son Isaac. We'll never know. He went away sad on this occasion, and we must assume that he never followed Jesus.

Impact of Jesus' words

We need to understand the hearts and minds of the crowd listening to Jesus. Making more and more money and accumulating possessions was not the way of things back then, as it may be for many in today's Western culture. What was valued most was the family estate, which was of supreme value in the Middle Eastern society. I was talking recently to an Egyptian who underlined this for me, He said family is everything, I have 57 cousins, and my Mum still tells me what to do. He was 43, and own successful café/bar in Bristol! The family estate is of supreme value in the Middle East, because it represents the security of the extended family. This is where your loyalty lies, also to your parents. You do not leave the family estate whilst your parents are still alive, You are duty bound by your culture, to being there to support them in their old age, to be their security as your children will be for you. Whilst many adults died young, if a parent of yours did live to old age, you could only leave after their death. So for both rich and poor folk, the demands of obedience to Jesus were an impossible ask. The parable of the camel and the needle must be taken literally – i.e. It is impossible.

v26 The people who heard him asked, "Who, then, can be saved?"

The poor people listening in the crowd are at this point feeling lost themselves. They would be thinking—these rich people can build synagogues, help orphanages, give alms to the poor, help towards temple refurbishments, and do other honourable and worthwhile projects. If anyone is to be saved, surely it is them. If they cannot get into the Kingdom of God, then there is not hope in the rest of us earning eternal life. It is impossible. If this is true – then Who **can** be saved?

So up to this point in the passage, we have to share the sentiments of Private Fraser from the TV sitcom Dads Army. We're doomed. There is no hope. We must all come at one point in our lives to this realisation. In our own strength, we are doomed.

New Hope

There is hope because of what Jesus said next. These are words that should be written on our hearts..

v27 *"What is humanly impossible is possible for God."* **[Repeat it out aloud together]**

Jesus is Lord over the impossible. Nothing is impossible through Him. It is something we say, but we find extremely difficult to believe in our hearts when we are praying. We have dreams and visions and prayers about what we want to see that is possible, but just not happening. We even believe for things that are very difficult and unlikely, but we often hold back from praying for the impossible. But Jesus wants to birth the miraculous in us. That is the point of the parable. Yes it is impossible for us to get a camel through the eye of the needle. But not for Jesus.

Eternal life starts now

Jesus told a Pharisee called Nicodemus that he must be 'born again', but how long does it take to give birth to new life. When you accept Jesus into your life, then we expect salvation to be instantaneous, we are now saved by his Grace and enter into his family. That is true. In some real sense we are on day 1 of our eternal life. But this new life in Christ is not birthed in a single day. You could argue you are trying to give birth to it for your entire lifetime. A new life fully committed to Jesus for us too, in our day and age, with our own equally impressive cultural burdens and expectations, is impossible as it was for the first followers of Jesus. To see this transformation in our lives, we need to team up with God to give birth to the miraculous.

This parable is not just about how difficult it is to give up riches and treasure. It is not saying that poor people have it easier, because they can follow Jesus without having much to give up, and perhaps could in their own strength get eternal life. Not going to happen. Many of us live in a 'must-have-more' culture, with a good career, own our own house and have savings. These things can indeed be a distraction, but we might feel that the equation is much more suited to poor people. It could seem a bit unfair on us especially if we have been very thrifty and careful with our money whilst we see others squander their own on reckless living. You can argue as the Rich young ruler may have done, that it is not just hard, it is an impossible ask to give complete obedience to Jesus.

Jesus does not say anywhere that a pre-requisite of being his follower, i.e. becoming a Christian, is to give everything away first. If that was the case then our churches would be very small. However from day 1 the miracle of new life is at work in us, and as we allow more of the miraculous transformation to take place in us, then we open ourselves up to giving more aspects of our lives, and more of our former treasures and distractions over to him. You may want to give everything over to Jesus, you want to be in that place where you can make those sacrifices, but at the moment it is too difficult for you to do.

We could say... I believe in you Jesus – help me in my unbelief

I will obey you Jesus – help me obey you

As you push into God, as you pray into your future, you become more Christ-like, more obedient and more self-sacrificing, because the miracle of new life is gradually being birthed in you.

Giving Birth

Take a small child's football and try and get it through the hole in a polo mint. The ball has a diameter of 120mm and the polo mint hole is 7mm. Is it possible to get something of this larger size through such a small hole. Is it possible? If you say no, why, because what is impossible by man, is possible by God. So it is possible, it just needs a miracle. There seems to me that there are two common ingredients with miracles – i) something has to change, ii) there is pain.

Actually, you have all done it before. This miracle has happened in your life.

The ball is the size of a baby's head and the hole in the polo mint, or a small cheerio is the normal diameter of the cervix through which the baby must pass. So on the day you were born you had this challenge to face.

As it is, it is impossible, a miracle is needed. In order for this miracle to take place, two things are required. The first is 'something has to change', and the second is 'pain'. If you have been the Mother and had a child

you will certainly know all about birth pains, and its not just the pains during labour, it is the weight and discomfort of carrying the promise of new life for months. It messes up your hormones, your eating and sleeping and pee-ing habits. You even lose some of your dignity especially in the latter stages... and yet you did it. You accepted the pain (not that you had much choice at that stage), and something changed. The maximum width of a normal ladies cervix is about 7mm at its widest part. The hole in the polo is 8mm in diameter, whereas the width of the baby's head is say 120mm. So Its is at least 15 times bigger than the hole it has got to get through. Even if it was twice as big you had normally have no chance, so something has got to change and it does. In labour, the cervix dilates, i.e. softens and gets bigger until the opening is 100mm and full dilation. The baby's head is still a bit too big but at this stage of life, is skull can flex and overlap enough to be pushed through the opening – ouch. That was a real effort, that hurt, but after all these months of holding the promise within, you have delivered a wonderful baby. Well done! Did you have to go through the pain barrier if you wanted a natural birth. Yes! What if you had been extremely wealthy, and you could afford personal birthing pools and all sorts of help, could you have avoided the labour pains. No.

Mary and Jesus

Mary went through the pain for Jesus, she carried the promised saviour inside her, nurtured the promise, had the pregnancy pains and labour pains, but delivered the promise. When the baby was born, he did not come out with all the knowledge of God, memories of the splendour of heaven, of speech, of healing and prophecy. He did not look up as a new-born infant into the face of his mother, and say “Okay lets get started, where are the Pharisees, I've got a few words I want to say to those vipers!”. To come down to earth, as a baby the 'Son of God', or as John describes him 'the Word of God (who was there from the beginning)', it was necessary for him to empty himself of that Glory, of heaven, of memory, of power and come as a vulnerable baby dependant on others. That was how he chose to come, he had to empty himself, and rely on his Father God, before the miracle of his birth could happen.

We are not too young or too old to birth the miraculous. Mary may have been as young as 13, whilst her cousin Elizabeth was an old lady who had been unable to have children all her life, and then she became pregnant with John the Baptist.

Pain in the Offering

The nineties in Britain was the decade of dance music, clubs, illegal raves etc, and I was looking with a couple of friends to use this music style in a dance worship album. We were three lads, needing some female vocals, and I heard this lovely voice on a music tract from a Youth for Christ Vocal Band, contacted the young lady, and she agreed to sing for us. She was marvellous. At the time though she had the hots for a young worship leader at her Church in Chorleywood. She pursued her interest well and later married him. He has since become one of the world's most successful and well-known worship leaders, and whilst you might argue she could have had a great solo career, she has dedicated her life to supporting her husband's ministry and providing a family for him. But despite the popularity and high-profile of the Redmans, it has not been all easy. Matt & Beth , now with 3 children , at one stage had the pain of four consecutive miscarriages. She is joint credited with Matt on one of my favourite worship songs, Blessed be your name. In this song are the words:-

When the sun's shining down on me. When the world's 'all as it should be', Blessed be Your name.

These are the good times, but it is balanced out by the following words .

On the road marked with suffering, Though there's pain in the offering, Blessed be Your name

The message is that we give praise to God not just in the good times, but in the bad times too. As we offer our lives up to Jesus, there is pain in the offering. As we birth this miraculous new life, we are stretched in places we don't want to be stretched, and it can be painful, just like having a real baby. Out of that experience of miscarriages they wrote the worship song Never Let Go'. Listen to some of the lyrics and feel the hope and pain mixed in together.

And even when I'm caught in the middle of the storms of this life, I won't turn back, I know You are near. And I will fear no evil For my God is with me. And I can see a light that is coming for the heart that holds on, a glorious light beyond all compare. And there will be an end to these troubles. But until that day comes we'll live to know You here on the earth. Oh no, You never let go, through the calm and through the storm, you never let go of me.

We will be stretched as we give birth to the miraculous, and we will feel the pains of birthing the gifts and promises that God has put in us. This will happen as we become more obedient to his purposes in his life, and become more Christ-like, as we allow the miracle to work within us.

Peters concern

The Rich young ruler had gone away sad, and the crowd of poor peasants were worried that no-one could be saved. It is now Peters turn, as spokesman for the disciples to voice concerns over what Jesus has just said.

*v28 Then Peter said, "Look! **We** have left our homes to follow you*

Jesus had told the Rich young ruler to sell everything he had then follow him. Peter says we **have** left what is ours and followed you. The disciples seemed worried that no-one is going to get into the kingdom of God at this rate, even them. He appeals to Jesus, we have left our property and family to follow you. He had fishing boats in Capernaum with his ex-partners now fellow disciples, the brothers James & John. Their Dad Zebedee was left to pick up the pieces of their business. Their homesteads were now missing them. It would not have been easy for them either. But they did it, they are living proof of the miracle. They were also Middle Easterners with the same cultural pressures, but somehow by the miracle that God brought about in their hearts, they were able to pay the price and offer up themselves in obedience to Jesus. Even with the miracle, it doesn't make it easy. They would have missed their boats and missed their families too. There was pain in the offering.

Jesus affirms

What is impossible for Man is possible for God, and Jesus confirms to the disciples the price they have paid, will be rewarded with treasures in heaven, which includes eternal life.

v29-30²⁹ "Yes," Jesus said to them, "and I assure you that anyone who leaves home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the Kingdom of God³⁰ will receive much more in this present age and eternal life in the age to come."

In Matthews version, the list includes fields. Basically its property and family again.

For us, our obedience to Jesus in many cases is unlikely to call us away from our homesteads and family, but it might do. In some countries where other faiths are dominant that there may be no choice as a Christian but to leave homestead and family due to persecution. In at least 50 countries in the world today Christians face persecution for their faith. Jesus is not saying that we will all need to leave our homes and families, but is saying that when this happens we will be rewarded on earth and heaven. It's a wonderful promise.

To match the 5 commandments of the old requirements that Jesus asked of the young ruler. He points out five possible new requirements that may be needed from us. They do not replace the old, but add to it.

In the old- do not steal another's property

In the new – one's own property may need to be left behind.

In the old – leave your neighbours wife alone

In the new – you may need to leave your own wife alone, at least for periods of time.

In the old – honour your father & mother i.e. stay home and take care of them until they have died.

In the new – You may need to leave your parents in response to a higher loyalty.

Seeking Jesus

We start the story with the rich young ruler seeking the reward of eternal life by trying to earn it in his own strength. The standard he must reach is set before him and he fails to meet it, because it is impossible. Salvation, which leads to the eternal life he sought, is a work of God, not an achievement of people. Jesus gave grace to the disciples to be able to respond to the new pattern of obedience, one where they left property and family, breaking with their cultural demands, in obedience to the call of Jesus. Come from now on you will be Fishers of Men. Jesus makes it clear that for those that make this sacrifice without thought of the rewards, they will be rewarded in this life, but will also receive eternal life. If the rich young ruler, and had believed that Jesus truly was good and was God, he may have put his trust in him and received the grace he needed to be obedient to his call. Then he may have received more than he had sacrificed, and at the same time received the eternal life he wanted. So by seeking in his own strength after eternal life and making that the focus, he lost it. If instead he had sought to be in step with God, by following Jesus, making him the focus, then he would have received eternal life. So we see that eternal life is not inherited by good works, but is received by those who allow God to work the impossible within them. His ability to do good things because of his wealth actually becomes a barrier to him accepting the simple gift of Grace, that would have enabled him to respond to the radical obedience that Jesus demanded.

Seek first, the kingdom of God, (seek Jesus) and then all these things will be added to you.

Conclusions

It is impossible for a camel to go through the eye of the needle.

It is impossible for us to earn our way into eternal life, by generosity, righteous living or hard work,

It is impossible for us to change ourselves so that we can be completely obedient to Jesus.

But what is impossible for Man is possible for God. He can do that miracle in us, through his simple gift of Grace.

As we put Jesus first and seek him, we will be stretched and challenged.

As we put Jesus first in radical obedience, there will be pain in the offering,

As we put Jesus first over loyalty to family and property, we will receive our rewards

In short, we will give birth to a miraculous new life. One full of his salvation and deliverance; his forgiveness and his patience; his guidance and protection, his provision and his blessings; his love and his joy...

And finally of course - the promise of eternal life. Amen.