

“The Camel’s Eye”

A Sermon on Downward Mobility for Lent 2026

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As we continue our Lenten sermon series focusing on “Downward Mobility,” let me briefly remind you of the ground we’ve already covered. You’ll remember we started with the *strangeness* of Jesus’ command to counter the world’s status games by seeking to become like the least of your brothers. Last week, we talked about the false assumptions of our age regarding power—that power is not the central driver of human motivation, but rather belonging and empathy—and we wondered what a world might look like founded on belonging rather than wrangling for power.

Today’s text is the Rich Young Ruler and putting a camel through the eye of a needle. Our relationship with things affects our worldly status, but also how we relate to stuff impacts our eternal souls.

Hear now the Word from **Matthew 19: 19-26** [**Read the text**].

What Good Deed?

The man comes to Jesus with a question that has crossed every pious mind—and perhaps every mind—what good must I do to make it into Heaven? The text says “what good *deed*,” as if there is one thing someone can do to have eternal life.

The first thing Jesus says is, “**Why are you asking *me* about what is good? Only God is good.**” Most teachers and rabbis of Jesus’ day wouldn’t have answered with such humility. Most would have been more than happy to pontificate over their years of study and arguments on the question. But Jesus defers all goodness to God and God alone. This is the necessary starting point for all our faithful thinking: God alone is good, and He is nothing but good. All goodness is found in Him and Him alone.

Next, Jesus defers to Scripture. *Do you want to know what is good? You should know already! Keep God’s commandments!*

“Which ones?” says the man. Isn’t this a *nervy* question? Why not simply assume *all of them*?

Jesus runs through the basic list, but the sixth is the aggregate, cumulative one as Jesus teaches elsewhere—*You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

One More Thing

The man says to Jesus, “Good! Yeah, I’ve kept all of these.”

But what would Christ’s Disciples have said, even after a short while of walking with Jesus? Any one of them would have said, *“I have broken these things from my earliest days.”* Legalists always find a way to obey the letter of the law without minding the spirit of the law. Jesus teaches His disciples the difference. You and I know that difference. Who among us would dare to say, “I have kept every commandment!” Legalism—wrangling with the words—fudging here and there—enables people to be prideful in their walk and negligent in their fuller spirituality.

Jesus tells him,

“If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”

The word for perfect is *teleos*, which literally means ends or ending—the finish—so Jesus is saying, if you would be *finished*, *complete*, and *whole* as a person and disciple, then divest of all you have and follow me.

There certainly had to have been a pregnant pause—or an awkward silence—at this point. Perhaps both. Do we see the man knit his brow? Does he break eye contact, throw up his hands and say, “Well, yeah—that ain’t gonna happen!”?

This invitation—to leave everything and follow Jesus—is the same invitation he made to each of the Apostles, and it is the same invitation today that he makes to all people.

Do you want eternal life? One thing is required: *everything*.

It’s simple math: *There is no way to invest yourself in this world and reap eternal life.* .

Camels

And Jesus said to his disciples,

“Truly, I say to you, only with difficulty will a rich person enter the kingdom of heaven. 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.”

Very odd image, isn’t it?

Now first, I need to clear something up. You may have heard a story from good preachers about this image of the camel and the eye of the needle. It became popular years ago to talk about the Eye of the Needle Gate in Jerusalem, one of the seven ancient gates. As the story goes, the Eye of the Needle Gate was the only one open at night, and it was low—only half the height of a normal gate—so that marauders on horseback could not charge into the city. But imagine you lived in Jerusalem and came home a bit late. The gate-keepers know you and recognize you, but you have to get your camel in as well. To get your camel through the eye of the needle requires a painstaking—perhaps humorous—ordeals of getting the stubborn camel down on all four knees to duck down and shimmy through.

It’s a good story and a famous old sermon illustration, because it makes fun of the rich man who must wrestle against his own nature to find humility sufficient to make his way into the kingdom. Just one problem: it’s not real. Yes, there is a gate in Jerusalem today called the Eye of the Needle, but it wasn’t named that until the sixth or seventh century.

People feel the need to make sense of the odd image, and this one fit nicely.

A bible scholar many years ago noted that the greek word for camel was one letter off of the word for a huge, thick rope—the very kind used to moor large ships at harbor—and so he suggested that this was a textual error, and perhaps Jesus really meant it is easier for a *gamel* [as if] to pass through the eye of a needle than a rich man to enter Heaven. However, there is not much historical textual support for this argument, so although it makes good sense, it falls to the level of speculation.

The top Bible scholars agree: Jesus meant a *camel*—the big stubborn beast—through the tiny eye of a normal knitting needle. It’s an unmistakable image. Even if you think of a relatively large, ancient needle

with a fairly big eye and a relatively small camel, the image remains powerful. Jesus is describing what looks to all reason and common sense to be utterly impossible.

Who Then Can Be Saved?

So the Disciples ask: “Who then can be saved?”

Why would they ask this? Because in that day, people presupposed the connection between God's favor and wealth. If God likes you, why would you be poor? Wealth was considered a sign of Divine favor—in Judaism no less than Paganism. If you are good and virtuous, you will flourish and be okay—protected and prosperous. Some people still think that way. They expect to see the benefits of God's favor in one's earthly life. There are still wicked preachers all over the world promising earthly riches to followers—the Prosperity Gospel—it is absolute heresy in any form.

Not About Money

To put it quite bluntly, Jesus never condemns money, or capitalism, or Roman colonialism, or militarism. He only gets angry at his own Covenant people for being too invested in this world and not nearly invested enough in the Kingdom of God. It is the obsession with this world that is the downfall of so many.

What is *This World*? I mean, what is it, really? This world, this *life*, is SOUL SCHOOL—a preparation for those who will live with God eternally. This world is finite and temporary. We might think of it—as many have—as a simulation of Heaven wherein we are tested and from which God shall weed out those unworthy of eternal life.

Who is unworthy? That is the Disciples' question: *Who then can be saved*? There are those who are *so* invested in the simulation—this *here and now*—that they will never invest in the eternal reality. They are so heavily invested in this world and its pleasures, pursuits, and triumphs that they utterly disregard the calling to seek first the Kingdom of God and its righteousness.

Think of it this way: this life is but a bridge between nonbeing (the time before we were born) and eternity. We are in this world to cross over the bridge and arrive at eternal life. There is a caveat: *Those who park themselves upon the bridge will never see the far side.*

We battle two enemies (at least): one is love of the flesh; the other is Satan.

Satan is the earthly spiritual force determined to keep people blind to God so that they invest their all in the Here and Now. Satan wants no one crossing over the bridge, but camping upon it. Satan wants to stop our progress toward God.

That is why it is so hard for the worldly wealthy to enter eternal life; it is just too easy and cushy here on the bridge—they love the simulation of life more than the reality. It's like the screen addicted video junkie—can we call them *Vidiots*?—who spend their entire heart on their second life in simulated reality. The result? In online Videoland, they are princely warriors—tall, fit, courageous, and noble with dozens of trusted allies and friends. But *here*, in the real world, they are reclusive, cut off, overweight and under-exercised, friendless basement-dwellers. I know that sounds harsh, but this is an image of the rich man who cannot disconnect himself from the simulated life enough to find reality and the real life in Christ, which is eternal.

Be clear, I'm not down on this world—Yes, God made the cosmos for us, and it is a blessing precisely because it points us toward Heaven and God's eternal intentions for us. I believe there will be flowers,

trees, grass, and streams of crystal clear water in Heaven—I believe that because I see Heaven's reflection within this simulation.

God may yet make this cosmos eternal (which, I remind you, it is not at present), but God could throw that switch.

Remember as well, the promise to us is of a new HEAVEN as well as a new Earth. This is the promise of Divine renewal.

Until then, evil is at work all around us to keep us focused on the earthly here and now rather than the eternal life to come. And I tell you, focusing too much on the here and now plays straight into Satan's hands.

Two Images

I'd like to offer two images of this world for our Lenten meditation. The first is King of the Hill, where we see throngs of humanity desperately climbing over one another to make it to the top of the heap. People clawing, crawling, fighting to make it upward, level after level, to get to the top of the worldly pyramid.

Jesus invites the rich man to quit playing King of the Hill. Just stop and walk away.

That life is the world of status seeking, prestige hunting—of covetousness and unending envy. We all know it: comparing your car to your neighbor's, making a big deal out of clothes, good shoes, and impressing others. Jesus says, "Don't play that stupid game."

The other image is the Rat Race—just rats, running against each other, biting, clawing, and doing anything to win. Again, Jesus calls us away from that. He calls us to something infinitely better than being rats.

These are negative—but appropriate—images of investing in this world; Serving Mammon instead of God.

Jesus offers the rich ruler an invitation to eternal life. He tells him two things:

1. Quit playing King of the Hill—just desist.
2. Quit the Rat Race. Don't participate.

This is Christian spirituality in two simple images.

But, because most people have wealth or love it more than eternity, we see the endless swarm, the pushing, teeming throng of sniping, back-biting, running people over, pushing others down, and never-ending turmoil. People turn into constant scoffers and haters. This is Hell-bound behavior, and no Christian should participate.

The Poor of This World

If you're not rich and self-satisfied, life is still full of hardship. Do you feel it?

Ever felt like you were left out of the party? Like everyone else has got more—more love, more power, and better lives?

Do you ever look around at your own life and think Where is all of that Divine Love?

Who's getting all the love? It often looks like the rich, doesn't it?

Some people feel buried by all the King of the Hill/Rat Race, Hellish behavior in this life. They feel passed up, passed by, disrespected, undervalued, or altogether unvalued. *These* are the poor of the world—their economic status doesn't matter.

But to you—those poor—Jesus is your good news—God entered the flesh, this world, this simulation for YOU—so that YOU would know that His love and grace are not defined by the parameters of this world and its King of the Hill Rat Race mechanisms.

Holy Abandonment

There is no more important spiritual discipline than letting go of this world, falling into complete trust in God's salvation, and living life on the path of perfect love toward Heaven.

We are to cross this bridge toward Christ, who waits on the other side to reward us with absolute immortality.

Some people don't get it. Some people will never get it.

But Jesus invites us to BE ONE WHO GETS IT.

As a church body, we must renounce all the ways of sin that separate us from the love of God.

We must fix our minds on being against all anti-salvational attitudes.

That means we fix our minds on all things Heavenly and leave Hellish stuff to those who choose to go there.

We can pray that God might save all, but we have to leave it up to Him—which is what we should do anyway.

Lastly, you and I are not responsible for anyone's salvation, despite what they told you at Baptist church camp. We are accountable for following Christ, saying what He said, and trying hard to love what He loves while letting all else go.

Those who love freely and broadly are on the right path—the path of salvation—they are the ones crossing the bridge toward Christ with the far side in view.

One final image. Sometimes the most faithful Christians find themselves striving, crawling, seeking with their whole hearts to make it up to Jesus. We need Him and want Him. But instead of all that trying and striving, why not just let go of it all and fall back into his care? Like a trust fall—let yourself drop back into His catching embrace. Do you think He needs you to be racked with anxious toil? Does all that anxious toil even work?

No. Instead, relax, fall back, surrender, and let Him catch you. Fall back into His arms and let him hold you like a baby. You need Him. He loves you.

As Luther wrote in the lyrics of A Mighty Fortress:

Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also.

Luther *gets it*. There is a time to just let it go.

And this is the Gospel of Jesus Christ boiled down to its simple good news:

Relax. He's *got you*. †