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David O. Dykes
Pastor, Green Acres Baptist Church
Tyler, Texas

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes

INTRODUCTION

What do you think this red paperclip is worth? Do you think I could trade this red paperclip to someone for a house? You say, "Impossible!" What if I told you someone actually traded a red paperclip for a house? I'm not making this up. In 2005, a Canadian named Kyle McDonald was stuck in a dead-end job and had very little money. He decided to go online and see what he could trade for the paperclip. First, he traded it for a fish-shaped ink pen, which he then traded for doorknob, which he traded for a Coleman stove. He traded the Coleman stove for a Honda generator, which he traded for a keg of beer and an electric Budweiser sign. He traded the keg and the sign for a snowmobile, and so it continued. Exactly one year and 14 trades later he exchanged an acting part in a movie for a two-story farmhouse in Kipling, Saskatchewan.

You can find the story by Googling *One Red Paperclip*, which is the title of a book Kyle wrote. From a red paperclip to a two-story house, you say, "Impossible!" Nope, that's just an example of what human imagination, ingenuity and persistence can do. People can do a lot of things that seem impossible. For most of the centuries of human history the idea of man flying seemed impossible, but now it's ordinary. But in our passage today, Jesus employed a humorous one-sentence parable to tell us there is something that really IS impossible for a person.

Matthew 19:16-26. "Now a man came up to Jesus and asked, 'Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?' 'Why do you ask me about what is good?' Jesus replied. 'There is only One who is good. If you want to enter life, obey the commandments.' 'Which ones?' the man inquired. Jesus replied, 'Do not murder, do not commit adultery, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother,' and 'love your neighbor as yourself.'" 'All these I have kept,' the young man said. 'What do I still lack?' Jesus answered, 'If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.' When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. Then Jesus said to his disciples, 'I tell you the truth, it is hard for a rich man to 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 man to enter the kingdom of God.' When the disciples heard this, they were greatly astonished and asked, 'Who then can be saved?' Jesus looked at them and said, 'With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible.'"

I've mentioned before that Jesus often employed humor in his teaching. He would have never made the cast of Saturday Night Live, because we don't appreciate 1st century Jewish humor. Jesus used hyperbole and irony. Hey, did you hear the one about the camel? Stop me if you've heard it. Jesus said it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter heaven. Ha! That's a good one. I think Jesus must have liked camel jokes. In Matthew 23 He said that the Pharisees strain out a gnat and swallow a camel. What a funny picture! That's actually an Aramaic pun, because the word "gnat" is *galma*, and the word "camel" is *gamal* – they sound alike. Jesus said, "You guys strain out galmas and swallow gamals!" Hoo! That's a great pun! That ranks right up there with the one about the cross-eyed teacher who got fired because she couldn't keep her pupils straight. See you got that one!

As we unpack this parable of impossibility, let's notice four truths about this passage:

1. EVERYONE IS ON A QUEST TO FIND REAL LIFE

This young man ran up to Jesus and asked, "Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?" Matthew, Mark, and Luke record this encounter. He is often called the rich young ruler because Mark tells us he was young, Luke tells us he was a ruler, and all three mention he was rich; in fact we are told that he had *great* wealth. He would have been on the *Forbes Magazine* list of the richest men in Israel. He was the Bill Gates of his time.

Yet, he wasn't satisfied with wealth and power. He realized something was missing, so he asked Jesus how he could get eternal life. This young man was sincere in his request. Mark tells us he ran up to Jesus and knelt before Him. He was obsessed with finding an answer to his quest for real life.

In order to understand the meaning of "eternal life" it's important to know we really don't have a good English word to translate "eternal life." In the New Testament, there are two different words that are translated "life." The word *bios* signified physical life; we get our word "biology" from that. The word used here, and 134 times in the New Testament, is *zoë*. The best translation would be "abundant life" or "vitality." When someone is enjoying an experience they may say, "Man this is the life." They aren't talking about biological life, but enjoyable life.

This is the quest everyone is on. They are searching for something meaningful, and few people find it. They are looking for it in drugs, booze, illicit sex, or thrills. In 1983, Bono, lead singer for U2, expressed the frustration of a generation when he sang about different experiences, even about Jesus, and yet the song ends, "But I still haven't found what I'm lookin' for."

I was channel surfing on XM radio the other day and I heard the haunting sounds of a Scottish singer named Amy McDonald. She was singing about how young people are searching for something that allows them to say, "This is the Life." The song says, "Oh the wind whistles down; The cold dark street tonight; And the people they were dancing; To the music vibe; And the boys chase the girls, with curls in their hair; While the shy tormented youth sit way over there; And the songs get louder each one better than before. And you're singing the song thinking THIS IS THE LIFE; And you wake up in the morning; and your head feels twice the size; Where you gonna go? Where you gonna go? Where you gonna sleep tonight?" She repeats that chorus over and over again as she hammers home the idea that the party lifestyle doesn't satisfy.

Maybe you've heard the joke about the Texas millionaire who requested to be buried in his snakeskin boots sitting in his Cadillac. As the crane was lowering the Cadillac casket into the ground, one of the bystanders said, "Man, that's really living!"

This wealthy, young man had everything he wanted in terms of money and position, but he knew there was MORE. He asked for "eternal life." The literal translation of eternal life is "abundant living into the ages."

Many Christians misunderstand the term "eternal life." If you ask the average Christian to define "eternal life" they will say something like, "living forever." In other words, they define it in

terms of a quantity—living forever. And if you ask them, “*When* does eternal life begin? Some would say, “When you die,” that’s *bios*. But eternal life is a quality of life: It is real life, abundant life, enjoyable life, and it begins when you meet Jesus. Jesus said, “I have come that they may have life [*zoë*], and have it to the full.” (John 10:10)

This young man did so many things right. He came at the right time, when he was young. He came in the right attitude, running and kneeling, sincere in his request. He was seeking the right thing, eternal life. And mainly, he came to the right source: Jesus. But he ended up walking away. Why? That’s our next point.

2. THERE IS ROOM FOR ONLY ONE GOD IN YOUR LIFE

After Jesus spoke to the man, we read, “When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth.” Are you surprised by Jesus’ reply to this sincere question? He said, “Keep the commandments.” Is that the way to get to heaven? Of course not, the Great Physician answered that way because He was simply diagnosing the young man’s problem.

If you go to the doctor complaining with pain in your lower right abdomen, he or she might press there, and if your appendix is inflamed, you will express that in a very demonstrative way. If you go to the dentist complaining of a toothache, he or she will take an instrument of medieval torture called a probe and the dentist will touch the bad tooth. The dentist can tell by how high you jump that’s they’ve found the problem tooth.

With a twinkle in His eye, the Great Physician said, “Keep the Commandments.” Then Jesus quoted the second tablet of the Ten Commandments. The first four Commandments: No other gods, don’t take the Lord’s name in vain, make no graven images, and keep the Sabbath deal with our relationship with God. The last six commandments deal with our relationship with others. All ten of the Commandments can be summarized in two commands Jesus gave: “Love God with all your being” (that’s the first table) and “love your neighbor as yourself.” (That’s the second table).

As Jesus quoted this second tablet, He said, “Honor your parents, don’t kill, don’t commit adultery, don’t lie, and don’t steal.” The young man said, “Check! I’ve kept all of those commandments since the time of my Bar mitzvah!” But there was one commandment Jesus intentionally skipped: Do not covet. He omitted it He knew coveting was the one thing preventing the young man from experiencing eternal life. He already had a god in his life—wealth. And there’s only room for one God in your life.

Every Jewish boy knew the Ten Commandments as well as we have memorized the alphabet. As Jesus quoted the last six Commandments, He intentionally omitted one. It would be like me telling you was I was going to say my ABCs and I said, “A-B-C-D-F-G.” You would recognize immediately I omitted the letter “E.” Everyone listening to Jesus that day would have recognized that He omitted the tenth Commandment.

So Jesus said, “Okay, great. Then here’s what you do. Go sell all you have and give it to the poor, and then come and follow me.” That verse has caused more misery and consternation than

just about anything Jesus ever said. Many people have read that verse and interpreted it to mean that all of us should live a life of poverty if we're going to be the follower of Jesus.

Jesus didn't command every rich person to sell all their possessions and give to the poor. Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea were both wealthy men, and Jesus didn't direct them to sell all their goods, because He knew they weren't obsessed by their possessions. Jesus isn't telling you to sell all your goods and give to the poor, unless your money has become your god.

Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."
(Matthew 6:24)

Jesus wasn't playing mind games with this young man. In fact, Mark tells us plainly that Jesus looked at the young man and LOVED him. (Mark 10:21) Jesus was sincere in his invitation to come and follow Him. Let's freeze-frame this conversation and look into the face of that young man as he decides what he will do. "Money, or Jesus? Money or Jesus? Money or Jesus?" He makes the fatal decision. Mark says his face fell, Matthew said he went away sad. Can't you see the expression of hope and enthusiasm as he ran up to Jesus and knelt before him? Now, this expression melts away and hangs his head, turns and shuffles away, back to his money. And Jesus chased after him and said, "Don't you realize the mistake you're making?" No, Jesus didn't do that. He made the offer and waited for a decision. My friend, God will never force you to love Him or follow Him. He looks at you and loves you and He offers you eternal life. He wants you to say yes, and choose to follow Him. But Jesus is a gentleman; He won't force His way into your heart. There is only room for one god in your life, so choose very carefully.

3. IT'S NOT HARD—IT'S IMPOSSIBLE FOR A RICH PERSON (OR ANY PERSON) TO EARN SALVATION

As Jesus watched the young man turn and walk away, He turned to His disciples and said, "I tell you a truth, it is hard for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of heaven. Again I say to you, 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God.'"

Somewhere along the way you might have heard that Jesus wasn't talking about a real sewing needle. Instead he was referring to a small doorway in a city wall through which a man could enter. Tour guides in Israel still say that, and some commentaries agree. But it spoils the parable. The idea of the door means a camel didn't fit unless you unloaded the camel and it knelt down and squeezed through. That's hard, but not impossible. There's only one thing wrong with that interpretation: It's wrong.

The respected New Testament scholar Dr. Hugh Nibley writes: "The needle in Matthew and Mark is a *raphis*, while in Luke it is a *belone*. Both refer to needles used for sewing. There is absolutely no evidence that there was a gate called the eye of a needle. The 'gate idea' was probably invented by some unknown nineteenth-century minister for the comfort of his wealthy congregation."

The whole point of this parable is that it is IMPOSSIBLE. It's a parable of impossibility. A camel was the largest living creature indigenous to Israel and the eye of a needle was the smallest manmade opening. Jesus is employing hyperbole. It's impossible.

Years ago when I taught on this parable, a friend with a chemistry background said all you have to do is to put a camel in a vat of sulfuric acid until the camel is dissolved and then use a syringe to squirt the camel remains through the eye of a needle. And I said, "Thanks for spoiling my message, you little squirt!" I didn't really say that. I wish I had. The point Jesus was making is that it is impossible for a rich person—or anyone for that matter—to earn salvation on the basis of their wealth or morality. You can't get into heaven on your own whether you're a rich man, poor man, beggar, thief, doctor, lawyer, or Native American mayor. That doesn't rhyme, but you get the point.

Whenever people read about this rich man, they seldom see themselves. They think, "I'm not rich." Well, if you are an American, chances are that you're wealthier than most of the world's population. In 2008 the per capita income for people in Texas was about \$38,000. There's a website called "the global rich list" where you can insert your annual income in a search field and it tells you how rich you are compared to the rest of the world. If you made \$38,000 last year you are richer than 96% of the world's population. Many of you made more than that. If you made \$50,000 last year you are wealthier than 99% of the world's population.

Dwight L. Moody was the Billy Graham of the 19th century. He was never ordained, but he was a great student of human nature. He led hundreds of thousands of people to faith in Christ. And he once observed: "Christian men often become rich; but rich men seldom become Christians." I agree. Through the years I've observed that it is easier for poor people to follow Jesus than for rich people. The reason is simple. A rich person has something they think they can trust to provide all their needs: Money. It is harder for them to stop trusting money and start trusting God.

4. WE HAVE HOPE BECAUSE GOD SPECIALIZES IN THE IMPOSSIBLE!

The disciples were astonished by this parable and they asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus said, "With man, this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." The reason they were astonished was because they believed wealth was God's reward for righteousness. They were thinking, "If a good man who is rich, young, and a leader can't get into heaven, then who has a chance?" Jesus said, "Now you get it. It's impossible for man, but it's possible for God."

When Moses faced the Red Sea in front of him and an army chasing him, he faced an impossible situation, but God specializes in the impossible and He made a twelve-lane express highway in the middle of the sea. When Joshua faced the flood-swollen Jordan River, there was no way to cross, but God told the priests to step into the water by faith, and He stopped the river. Impossible? But God did it. When little David faced a nine-foot monster with only a slingshot, victory was impossible by human standards. But the God of the impossible directed the stone to strike Goliath right between the eyes. When Gabriel visited a teenager named Mary he announced she would give birth to a son who would be the Son of God, the Savior of the world. Mary said, "How can this be, since I'm a virgin?" Gabriel said, "Nothing is impossible with

God." (Luke 1:34, 37)

Are you facing an impossible situation? In 1942, Oscar Eliason wrote a little praise chorus, long before praises choruses became popular. The title was "Got Any Rivers to Cross?" and it went: Got any rivers you think are uncrossable? Got any mountains you can't tunnel through? God specializes in things thought impossible; And He does the things no other one can do!

The point of the camel through the needle parable is that it is impossible for anyone to earn salvation. What we couldn't do for ourselves, God did for us. When Jesus died on the cross He was taking my sin and failures upon Himself. I'm the one who should have been tortured and crucified—I'm guilty of sin. But the only sinless One who ever walked this planet took my place.

CONCLUSION

Some of you who are involved in politics might remember Lee Atwater. At one time he was Chairman of the Republican National Committee and was an adviser to Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush. He was a rising star, and had accumulated a lot of money and enemies on his rise to the top. He was a lot like the rich young ruler in this passage. When he was 39, he was at a fundraising breakfast for Senator Phil Gramm when he collapsed. Doctors discovered he had a brain tumor, which ended his life a year later.

Before he died, Atwater turned to Christ, and sent letters to his political enemies asking their forgiveness. In one of his last public statements in *Life Magazine* he said, "My illness helped me see what was missing in society is what was missing in me: a little heart, a lot of brotherhood. The 80s were about acquiring. I know because I acquired more wealth, power, and prestige than most. But you can still acquire all that and still feel empty. It took a deadly illness to put me eye to eye with that truth, but it is a truth that the country, caught up in its ruthless ambitions and moral decay, can learn on my dime. Our future leaders must be made to speak to this spiritual vacuum at the heart of American society, this tumor of the soul." (*Life Magazine*, Feb. 1991, p. 67)

The rich young ruler asked the right question, but he didn't like the answer. Do you recall someone else in the Bible who asked a similar question about eternal life? In Acts 16, Paul and Silas are in prison and God sent an earthquake to set them free from their chains. The Roman soldier on guard drew his sword to kill himself, because he knew he would be executed because the prisoners escaped. Paul rushed up and said, "Stop! We're all here." The soldier fell on his knees and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" Paul didn't say, "Go sell all you have and give it to the poor." He said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved—you and your household." (Acts 16:31) The Roman soldier gave his heart to Jesus that night and he found eternal life, real life for the first time.

Are you really living? Can you say, "This is the life!"? You won't find it in wealth, morality, or religion. The only place you'll find eternal life is in a personal relationship with Jesus. The Bible says in Romans 6:23, "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life IN Christ Jesus our Lord." Let me illustrate that in a simple way. Remember our red paperclip? We'll let it represent eternal life. We'll let my Bible represent Jesus. It's very simple. I'll place this paper

clip inside my Bible, because eternal life is IN Jesus Christ. If you want to receive the paper clip, you've got to receive the Bible. And if you want to receive the free gift of eternal life, you have to receive Jesus.

It's impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, but it's a miracle for God to take you through the door of salvation!

OUTLINE

1. EVERYONE IS ON A QUEST TO FIND REAL LIFE

"Teacher, what good thing must I do to get eternal life?"

Two words for "life" in the New Testament:

- A. *Bios* physical life
- B. *Zoë* abundant life

2. THERE IS ROOM FOR ONLY ONE GOD IN YOUR LIFE

"When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth."

Jesus said, "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money."
Matthew 6:24

3. IT'S NOT HARD—IT'S IMPOSSIBLE FOR A RICH PERSON (OR ANY PERSON) TO EARN SALVATION

"It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God."

4. WE HAVE HOPE BECAUSE GOD SPECIALIZES IN THE IMPOSSIBLE!

"Who then can be saved?" Jesus said, "With man, this is impossible, but with God all things are possible."