

INTRODUCTION

During this Christmas season, there are plenty of Scrooges out there. I heard about one lady who was fumbling in her purse to get her credit card to pay for a purchase. The cashier noticed she had a television remote control in her purse. She asked the shopper, "Do you always carry a remote control?" The shopper replied, "No, but my husband refused to come shopping with me, so I figured taking the remote control was the meanest thing I could do to him!"

In our passage of scripture today, two different kinds of people approached Jesus. First, Jesus welcomed a group of little children; then He invited a rich, successful leader to follow Him. Let's begin reading in Luke 18:15: People were also bringing babies to Jesus to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. 16 But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. 17 I tell you the truth, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it."

I won't go into detail about that passage because on April 28 this year I taught from this passage when we were launching Share the Joy with the Children. The message was entitled, "Jesus loves the little children." If you want the message you can order tape or CD of program #927 or you can access the full manuscript on our website www.gabc.org.

I wanted to read about the children who came to Jesus because they stand in such contrast to the next character in the passage. Children have such a simple, refreshing approach to God. Jesus said we must receive the kingdom of God in the same simple, trusting fashion.

A father in our church told me as they were driving home from church one Sunday, his five-year-old son was drawing a picture in the back seat. He said, "Dad, how do you spell God?" The father was very proud that his son was interested in God, so he spelled out G-O-D. Then his son said, "Thanks, now how do you spell 'zilla?"

We should all maintain the gentle, fun-loving spirit of a child. But as we grow up, life gets more complicated. There are things to do and bills to pay. In contrast to the children, in verse 18 Jesus encountered a man who is lot like many of us:

A certain ruler asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?" "Why do you call me good?" Jesus answered. "No one is good—except God alone. You know the commandments: 'Do not commit adultery, do not murder, do not steal, do not give false testimony, honor your father and mother.'" "All these I have kept since I was a boy," he said. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, "you still lack one thing. Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me." When he heard this, he became very sad, because he was a man of great wealth. Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God! Indeed, 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." Those who heard this asked, "Who then can be saved?" Jesus replied, "What is impossible with men is possible with God." Peter said to him, "We have left all we had to follow you!" "I tell you the truth," Jesus said to them,

“no one who has left home or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God will fail to receive many times as much in this age and, in the age to come, eternal life.”

This encounter is mentioned in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Matthew tells us he was a young man, Luke tells us he is a ruler, and all three writers relate he was rich. He’s usually called the Rich Young Ruler. I prefer to call him the “Rich Young Fooler” because, like many people, he was fooling himself about what it takes to have eternal life. Let’s consider five important lessons:

1. WORLDLY SUCCESS CANNOT SATISFY YOUR DEEPEST NEED

Rather than calling this guy the Rich Young Ruler all the time, let’s call him Benjamin or Ben for short. In verse 23 we gather that Ben wasn’t merely financially independent—he had great wealth. He was the Bill Gates of his generation. He would have been on the *Forbes Magazine* list of the wealthiest men in Judea. He was also a “ruler.” Among his Jewish peers, he had been elevated to a position of authority and influence. Leaders were generally elderly Jewish men, but Ben was the exception. Look up the word “success” in the dictionary, and you’d find Ben’s picture.

But in spite of all his wealth, success, and influence, there was a hunger in his life riches and success couldn’t fill. He had an itch in the bottom of his heart all his money couldn’t scratch. When he heard Jesus would be coming through his area, he ran to meet him in hopes Jesus could help him experience real life.

He was rich, but he wasn’t really happy. Some of you have accumulated a great deal of wealth in your lifetime. You kept thinking when you finally got enough money, or finally retired, you’d be happy. But instead you’ve discovered worldly wealth and success can’t purchase peace or happiness for you. You’ve worked to buy that dream house, or that vacation home, or that Harley—and you thought once you had those “things” you’d be satisfied. But you can always find somebody with a bigger house and a nicer car than you. The Bible teaches there is nothing wrong with money—in fact, wealth is a gift from God. But when your possessions start possessing you, you’re in trouble. Money is a great servant, but it’s a lousy master. The Bible says the *love* of money is the root of all kinds of evil. It never fully satisfies. It’s like drinking seawater—it only makes you thirstier for more.

You want to achieve financial independence but you find yourself in financial bondage. I’ve read the people in South America have learned a simple way to catch monkeys. They tie a hollow coconut shell to a tree. Then they drill a small hole in the top of the coconut just large enough for a monkey to slip his hand inside. They put some trinket, toy, or food inside the coconut and then they wait. When a monkey comes along, he sticks his hand in the coconut shell to grab the goody. When he makes a fist to grab the toy or food, he is unable to remove his fist from the shell. If he would only release his prize, he could escape—but monkeys are greedy. He will stubbornly refuse to let go and can be easily captured. Many Americans are caught in the money trap. They grabbed for the golden ring hoping to earn enough money to be free—and instead they find themselves enslaved by their own greed.

The little book of Haggai is hidden among the Minor Prophets and you may wonder if there is anything in that message that speaks to you today. In Haggai 1:5-6 there is a powerful statement about how material things can never satisfy you: God says “Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages only to put them in a purse with holes in it.” (Haggai 1:5-6) Does that seem to describe your life? You work hard, but you never seem to be satisfied? You earn wages but there seems to be a hole in your purse and you just don’t know where all the money goes? Take it from Ben, wealth and success will never purchase happiness and significance in life.

2. IT’S GOOD TO SEEK JESUS FOR ETERNAL LIFE

There is so much to admire about Ben. He’s a great example of a person who did *almost* everything right—but as you know, “almost only counts in horseshoes and grenade throwing.” He came to the right source—Jesus. He came at the right time—when he was young. He came with the right attitude—Mark tells us he came running to Jesus and knelt before Him. He came with the right question. He said, “Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” In his question, he made two correct statements and two flawed statements. First, He called Jesus “good.” Jesus recognized this was more than a mere compliment. Jesus replied by saying, “Only God is good.” He wasn’t denying he was good—He just wanted Ben to realize he was calling Jesus good because He was God. It’s hard to improve on one of the first prayers you ever learn, “God is great. God is good. Let us thank Him for our food.” Only God is good. Jesus possessed too much humility to openly assert He was God in the flesh. He didn’t deny He was good—He just wanted Ben to understand His character. The cornerstone of our faith is that Jesus is not just some great teacher—He is God. He is good because He is God.

Ben even asked for the right thing—eternal life. Eternal life is not merely living forever. It means to enjoy a personal relationship with your Creator. In the New Testament, there are two words for “life.” The word *bios* refers to physical life; it’s where we get our word biology. Every person who is breathing at this moment is experiencing bios. But Jesus spoke of another kind of life. In John 10:10 He said, “I’ve come that they might have life and live it to the fullest.” He used the word *zoe* instead of bios. *Zoe* is a quality of life. It’s like when someone says, “Man, that’s really living.” You can have *bios* without having *zoe*. You can be physically alive, and still be missing out on real life, eternal life.

Two words Ben used in his questioned revealed he didn’t understand eternal life. He asked, “What must I *do* to inherit eternal life.” You can’t *do* anything to obtain eternal life. Young Ben was a “can do” kind of person. He was accustomed to setting a goal, then formulating an action plan to achieve his goal.

In all the world, there are only two ways people try to spell salvation. Like Ben, some people spell salvation “DO.” They believe salvation can be earned by doing things such as taking communion, being baptized, attending church, praying, or some other religious act. They believe you will go to heaven if you do enough good deeds. The other way to spell salvation is “DONE.” In other words, God has already *done* everything necessary for us to be saved—and we can only accept or reject His free offer.

The second mistake revealed in his question was seen in the word “inherit.” Perhaps this young man accumulated much of his wealth through an inheritance from his father. He was familiar with the word “inherit.” But eternal life cannot be inherited from our parents or grandparents. God has no grandchildren, only children.

The only way to experience eternal life is to receive Jesus. The Apostle John wrote: “This is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.” (1 John 5:11-12)

The Bible says, “The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.” (Romans 3:23). You can’t earn it—it’s a gift. Let’s imagine this pen represents eternal life. Let my Bible represent Jesus Christ. Eternal life is *in* Jesus. If I place this pen in the Bible and you want receive this pen, you have to receive the Bible. The only way to receive eternal life is to receive Jesus.

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

It may seem Jesus was teaching the way to have eternal life is to keep the commandments. But Jesus knows the heart of every person, and He recognized Ben already had a god in his life—he loved riches. Jesus’ reply was designed to probe into Ben’s heart to reveal the problem. If you go to the doctor complaining about sharp pain in the lower right side of your abdomen, he’ll probably press down in the area of your appendix. If your appendix is inflamed, you’ll let him know in a very loud way. He’s not trying to hurt you; he’s just diagnosing your problem. If you go to the dentist complaining about a toothache, he’ll take an instrument of torture called a probe and begin to feel around in your mouth. When he touches the sore tooth, you’re going to jump and say, “At’ he un!” That’s what Jesus was doing with Ben. As the Great Physician, He was probing to diagnose Ben’s problem.

Jesus quoted the second table of the Ten Commandments. The first four commandments deal with our relationship with God: Have no other Gods, don’t make any idols, don’t take God’s name in vain, and keep the Sabbath. The last six pertain to 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)

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 ABC’s and I said, “A-B-C-D-F-G.” You would recognize immediately I omitted the letter “E.”

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!” Jesus said, “Great, but there is one thing you lack.” The one thing Ben lacked was found in the one commandment Jesus left out. Jesus omitted the Tenth Commandment, which says, “Do not covet.” He left it out because He knew it was the one thing preventing Ben experiencing eternal life.

Jesus always specialized His approach to fit the individual’s need. In John 4 Jesus was speaking to a Samaritan woman. He spoke to her about living water that could produce eternal life. She said, “I want some of the living water you’re speaking about.” She was also asking, “How can I experience eternal life?” Jesus didn’t say, “Keep the commandments.” He said, “Go call your husband.” Why? Because He could look into her heart and see she had a problem with lust in her life. She had gone through five husbands and was living with a man who wasn’t her husband at the moment.

Through the years, I’ve had many people ask me how to receive eternal life. I’ve never once said, “Obey the commandments and sell all you have and give to the poor.” Neither have I said, “Go call your husband.” Jesus customized those words to those two people because He could see that they already had a god in their lives.

In Exodus 20:3 God said, “You shall have no other gods before (besides) me.” There is room for only *one* god in your heart. If you want to know if you have a god in your life, take the “4T Test.” Who or what do you *think* about or *talk* about the most? Where do you spend the majority of your *time* and *treasure*? There’s your god.

Meanwhile, back to the story...The rich young ruler said, “Great! I haven’t committed adultery, I haven’t dishonored my parents; I haven’t killed, lied, or stolen!” Jesus said, “Well there is just this one little thing. Go sell all your possessions, give all your money to the poor and follow me.”

By the way, 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 were possessed 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.



Take a look at this painting by the German artist Heinrich Hoffman. In this frozen scene, Hoffman captured the divine drama of the moment. The Rich Young Ruler is seen wearing his fancy clothes and hat. Jesus is inviting him to give his money to the poor people in the background and then to follow Him. The Rich Young Ruler looks down as he ponders the most important decision he would ever make. The angels in heaven are poised to rejoice over this one sinner who would repent. The demons of hell are doing their best to confuse and intimidate him. He considers the cost. Give away all his money and follow Jesus? But he has so much! And in that moment he sadly shakes his head and says, “No. The price is too high.” And he walked away. Not all stories end, “and they lived happily ever after.” This is a tragic story of a young man who committed spiritual suicide.

4. IT’S NOT HARD TO BE GOOD ENOUGH–IT’S IMPOSSIBLE!

According to Mark’s account, it says Jesus looked at the young man and loved him. He saw such wonderful potential in this young man. When he walked away, Jesus made the famous statement. “How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.”

That’s another example of the sly humor of Jesus. Jewish humor employed hyperbole to describe a picture so impossible it appeared comical. Jesus was using humor when he said of the Pharisees, “You strain out a gnat and swallow a camel.” (He must have liked camel jokes)

Now how many of you have ever read or heard that the “eye of a needle” was a small doorway into the city wall that was so small that only a man could enter? It was really hard for a camel to stoop down and enter, but not totally impossible. That sounds good, but there’s only one thing wrong with that—it’s wrong. There’s no linguistic or historical evidence there was ever a doorway called the eye of a needle.

The respected New Testament scholar 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 well-heeled congregation. This is a prime example of a ‘para-scripture’- an interpretation that is wrongly circulated as scriptural.”

To try to explain it away as a doorway completely ruins the point. It’s not hard for a camel to go through the eye of a needle—it’s impossible. A camel was the largest creature indigenous to Israel and the eye of a needle was the smallest opening possible. To answer the question posed by the title of this message: How can a camel pass through the eye of a needle? It can’t. It’s totally and completely impossible.

It’s impossible for a rich man to get into heaven on his own. It’s the same for a rich man, poor man, beggar, thief, doctor, lawyer, Indian chief. Keeping all of God’s commandments is totally impossible. God gave the Old Testament law as a moral guide, but He also gave it to prove

nobody could ever keep all of it. If anyone claims to be good, the law basically says, “Shut your mouth!” That’s exactly what the Bible says in Romans 3:19-20: “The law speaks so that every mouth may be silenced (if you claim to be good the law says, “shut up!”) and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore NO ONE will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become CONSCIOUS of sin.” How many people will be declared righteous by obeying the law? Zero. When Ben walked up to Jesus he thought he was a pretty righteous guy but Jesus showed him he missed it on at least one point. And if you miss it on *one* point you miss *all* of it. James 2:10 says, “If you keep the entire law and yet offend it in one point, you are guilty of it all.” What chance do I have of getting into heaven on my own? Zilch. It would be easier to get a camel through the eye of needle than for me to enter the kingdom of heaven based on my own righteousness.

5. WHAT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR US—GOD DID FOR US!

The disciples understood Jesus was talking about something totally impossible. They had never heard of a gate called a needle’s eye. If they had, then Peter would have said, “Okay, Lord, you’re right, getting a camel through a small gate is pretty tough, but not impossible.” But when Peter heard what Jesus said about a camel passing through the eye of a needle, he was incredulous. He said, “Who then can be saved?” He was saying, “If a good man, who is rich, young, handsome, and a leader can’t get into heaven what chance do the rest of us have?” Jesus said, “You got it Peter. It IS impossible. But what is impossible for man (salvation) is possible for God.” God specializes in the impossible.

When Moses had an ocean 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 ocean. When Joshua faced an impregnable walled city God directed him to just march around it a few times. Impossible! But the God of the impossible made the walls crumble. 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, then David used Goliath’s own sword to decapitate his fallen foe—he showed everyone there he was someone who knew how to get ahead! 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 for God.” (Luke 1:37)

The point of the encounter with the Rich Young Ruler is that *none* of us are able to merit salvation. What we couldn’t do for ourselves, God did for us. The Bible says:

“Since we’ve compiled this long and sorry record as sinners and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, God did it for us. Out of sheer generosity he puts us in right standing with himself...In his son, Jesus, he personally took on the human condition, entered the disordered mess of struggling humanity to set it right once and for all...God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of this world to clear that world of sin. Having faith in him sets us in the clear.” (Romans 3:23; 8:3, *The Message*)

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. What is impossible for me—to attain righteousness—God made possible when He placed my sins on Jesus. 2 Corinthians 5:21 says, “And God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

CONCLUSION

To me this is one of the saddest stories in the Bible. Jesus didn’t ask everyone He met to follow Him. He said that to the original twelve disciples—and He invited the Rich Young Ruler to follow Him. Who knows what might have been? He could have become the 13th disciple. If he had only followed Jesus today, we might be studying the gospel according to Benjamin! There was only one thing he lacked, but it was a big obstacle. Would you buy a car if the salesman said, “It’s a good car, only one thing is missing—the engine.” What is the one thing in your life that may be preventing you from following Jesus? “The saddest words of tongue or pen are these four words: What might have been?”

Theoretically, there are three ways to get into heaven when you die: First, if you die as a child before you have a sense of accountability of your sins, you’ll be gathered safely into the arms of Jesus just as He welcomed the little children in this passage. The second theoretical way to go to heaven when you die is to live a perfect life. From the moment you are born until the moment you die, never have an evil or unkind thought; never tell even a tiny fib, or commit one sin of thought or deed. If you don’t qualify for the first two, there’s only one way. Place your faith and trust in Jesus Christ and His finished work on the cross for your salvation.

OUTLINE

1. WORLDLY SUCCESS CANNOT SATISFY YOUR DEEPEST NEED

God says, "Give careful thought to your ways. You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages only to put them in a purse with holes in it." *Haggai 1:5-6*

2. IT IS GOOD TO SEEK JESUS FOR ETERNAL LIFE

"This is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life." *1 John 5:11-12*

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

God said, "You shall have no other gods before (besides) me." *Exodus 20:3*

4. IT'S NOT HARD TO BE GOOD ENOUGH—IT'S IMPOSSIBLE!

"The law speaks so that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God. Therefore NO ONE will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become CONSCIOUS of sin." *Romans 3:19-20*

5. WHAT IS IMPOSSIBLE FOR US—GOD DID FOR US!

"Since we've compiled this long and sorry record as sinners and proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us, GOD DID IT FOR US. Out of sheer generosity he puts us in right standing with himself...In his son, Jesus, he personally took on the human condition, entered the disordered mess of struggling humanity to set it right once and for all...God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of this world to clear that world of sin. Having faith in him sets us in the clear." *Romans 3:23; 8:3 The Message*



DISCLAIMER: These messages are offered for your personal edification and enrichment. There is no legal copyright on this material. I have used many sources, and I have always attempted to cite any exact quotations. Any failure to cite a quote is simply an oversight on my part.

If you are a preacher or teacher, I encourage you to use this material to stimulate your own Spirit-driven imagination. Additional study beyond this material will benefit both you and your listeners. You have my full permission to use any of this material as long as you cite the source for any substantial amount used in your message.

If you borrow the majority of a message or outline, I encourage you to simply preface your remarks by saying something like: ***“Some (or “much” as the case may be) of the ideas I’m sharing in this message came from a message by Pastor David Dykes in Texas.”*** This simple citation may prevent any criticism that may be directed toward you.

To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes