

Article of the Month
September, 2020

***The (Possible) Allegory of the
Rich Man***

In Matthew 19:23, 24, we have words so often quoted about how difficult it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom — harder than for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.

Bible students have dealt effectively with the “camel’s eye” analogy. It seems correct that this is a reference to a small door in the gate of the city. This door is called “The Needle’s Eye.” When the gate is locked, the only access to the city is through the small door; and a camel carrying a load — or even just standing without a load and without bowing down — would find it quite impossible to enter.

We generally apply this story to how earthly riches make difficult a willing service to the Lord. There is no impropriety in this application. It is likely that this is ONE of the Lord’s lessons in this passage. However, since we have all learned the importance of *context* in our studies, we can likely profit from looking at these verses in their larger context. That is the purpose of this article.

It seems likely that there is a deeper meaning to this passage. After all, on the surface, this statement seems functionally to deny entrance into the kingdom to the rich!

If we consider the context of at least 19:16-30, we find what surely has all the makings of an allegorical lesson. The context, and cross-reference texts which it brings to mind, suggest the following:

Just as the “Rich Man” in Jesus’ parable of “The Rich Man and Lazarus” (Luke 16) represents the Jewish nation, the rich man here also seems to do the same. The riches here seem to represent the riches of the Law Covenant — “the oracles of God” (Romans 3:2) — which Israel had. In the Rich Man & Lazarus parable, this wealth is portrayed by the rich man’s food and raiment. But here (in Matthew 19) the “Rich Man” must abandon these things at the first advent if he wishes to inherit the kingdom and its promises. Realizing these two primary elements in the context, the allegory follows thusly:

Return to 2020 Index

19:16 —

Because this verse begins with “And behold...,” it seems quite probable that it connects with something foregoing. If we notice, in 19:14 Jesus had just proclaimed the need to be child-like because “the kingdom of heaven belongs to such [innocent ones] as these.” It seems quite possible that the rich man heard this, and that it prompted his questioning of the Lord regarding “the kingdom of heaven.” Hence verse 16 begins, “And behold...”

The man asks about attaining eternal life — no doubt, in his mind, the equivalent of “the kingdom of heaven” in verse 14. This man (as did all of Israel) equated such attainment to be accomplished by “good” WORKS. It is ONLY NATURAL that this should be so since the Law admonished and rewarded good works. So the man is not inappropriate in his question to the Lord. He merely reflects the (correct under the Law) understanding of how to gain life. But Jesus has another lesson in mind.

19:17 —

Thus Jesus immediately replied with what must have seemed a shocking response to the young man. Jesus wants to deliver a whole allegorical message through this young man. He begins by asking, “Why are you asking me about what is good?” This question accomplishes more than one thing. It says in one respect: “You KNOW what is good — and you know the SOURCE of what is good.” Jesus is NOT speaking ill of the Law as such. He just wants this young man to understand THE PURPOSE of the Law — to be a schoolmaster to draw men unto the Messiah. Then Jesus ACKNOWLEDGES what the young man believed: “If you want eternal life, you must keep the commandments.”

Now, Jesus knew very well that that was, indeed, the promise of the Law. But he also knew that the man COULD NOT keep them, and he could consequently NOT gain eternal life from them. He was shortly going to propose A WAY OUT of this problem. But first he lets the young man continue.

19:18 —

The young man probably was a bit confused by the response. He likely thought he was MISSING SOMETHING (which he was)! So he asks, “Which ones?” Jesus lists four “shalt NOT” commandments and in

19:19, —

he lists two “shalt” commandments. Jesus has not listed the entire list, but he has listed things which he, no doubt, felt the young man could honestly say that he lived up to (at least in the spirit). The fact that this man was rich (verse 22) attests to the fact that he

Return to 2020 Index

was an honest attempter to live up to the Law. The Law rewarded faithfulness with gain “in basket and in store.” Jesus KNEW this, but he wanted to lead Israel (as represented by this young man) to deeper understanding.

19:20 —

In this verse, the man testifies that he is (at least in spirit) a keeper of these commandments. In our allegorical meaning, we must here pause to see what is happening. Many in Israel were sincere. But sincerity is not faith. Jesus was making the point that many who were inseparably bound to the Law and its precepts WERE NOT ready to accept the Gospel Age message of FAITH over works.

When the young man then asks, “What am I still lacking?,” we are getting to Jesus’ allegorical point. The man, like Israel, was lacking FAITH. The entire Jewish Age had built a society reliant on and zealous of WORKS. The transition to an age of FAITH was going to be impossible for many of them.

19:21 —

Jesus knew the problem. He was going through this entire allegorical sequence to explain the problem! Therefore, Jesus explains: “If you WANT to be complete (or perfect), you must GIVE UP ON THE WORKS OF THE LAW! You must sell the Law to gain FROM IT the real wealth that will allow you to be able to do away with all the mental, physical, and real poverty which plagues mankind — this POOR WORLD! If you are willing to take this GIGANTIC STEP OF FAITH, if you are willing to FOLLOW ME (the Messiah you do not yet recognize due to lack of faith), then I will promise you something you have never even considered. You will have REAL WEALTH — and you will have it **IN HEAVEN!**”

At this point Jesus has introduced a resurrection to a spirit nature — something Israel had NEVER dreamed of. But they MUST abandon the riches of the Law in order to find the riches of the spirit world. They must abandon the advantages to SELF, which the Law provided, for the advantage of rescuing others — the “poor.” Jesus was saying to the man (who here represented Israel), “How would you like to become the true seed of Abraham which will bless the whole world?”

19:22 —

The response of Israel had been prophesied. Israel walked away “grieved” — not comprehending what had been explained to them and offered to them. Israel preferred what they considered to be the “riches” of the Law. The decision would leave them in true poverty. How many Jews actually loved what Jesus was saying but left him when he spoke things they could not grasp!

Return to 2020 Index

19:23 —

Jesus, now speaking quite allegorically, says, “It is SO DIFFICULT for Israel (“the Rich Man”) to enter into the kingdom prospects!”

19:24 —

He continues, now using the famous analogy which here takes on additional meaning: The access to the city (“The New Jerusalem”) requires the Jew to rid himself of all the baggage of the Law. The camel was a beast of burden; and the burden of the Jewish people was the Law — even if they considered it riches. WITH the Law, one could not enter the New Jerusalem. One could not enter the “Needle’s Eye.”

19:25 —

We have here an interesting response from the disciples. Their reply is VERY APPROPRIATE for the allegory, but it is VERY STRANGE for the disciples! The disciples were NOT rich men on the whole. Yet they inquire, “Then who can be saved?” The allegorical point is this: They WERE the “rich man” in that they were Jewish. Thus this response of theirs seems tailored especially for OUR understanding. Their NORMAL response would well have been, “Well, we AREN’T rich men, so this should not be a problem on OUR part!”

19:26 —

Interestingly, this verse does NOT say “And Jesus said to them...” It says, “AND LOOKING UPON THEM, Jesus said to them.” Sometimes the slightest distinctions can be meaningful! Jesus’ “looking upon them” apparently might mean something like, “YOU are a part of Israel. And even though the fleshly response of Israel makes the entry into the kingdom IMPOSSIBLE, God has made it possible for a FAITHful remnant (you) to do so.

19:27 —

Peter may have caught the SURFACE thought about PERSONAL riches. Even though the disciples were not rich, they had given up all to follow Jesus. It is unlikely at this point that Peter would have recognized the allegory. But he says, WE HAVE left everything and followed you” — the VERY direction which Jesus had given to the rich man. Allegorically, of course, the disciples HAD accepted Messiah and were following him BEYOND the Law into the incipient kingdom age.

Peter then asks what would be the result for those who had done so.

Return to 2020 Index

19:28 —

And Jesus, quite interestingly, MAKES REFERENCE TO ISRAEL! He says to Peter, “When you attain the kingdom honors, you will JUDGE Israel (this “Rich Man”) in all of its tribes.”

19:29 —

Jesus then EXPANDS on the subject. To paraphrase: “Not only will the Jewish faith-remnant receive this honor, but EVERYONE who makes like-sacrifices will receive it.”

Jesus is LOOKING FORWARD TO GENTILES in the Church. When he later utters the Rich Man & Lazarus Parable, he will introduce Lazarus to represent the influx of Gentiles into the promised seed of Abraham. But at this point in his ministry, that is a subject which would only confuse. The Gentiles are “hidden” in this verse, but it is all ABOUT them!

19:30 —

This verse introduces the following parable about laborers in the vineyard which teaches the SAME lesson according to 20:16. THAT lesson, of course, is that some (in THIS case the Jews) who had worked long in the Lord’s dispensational vineyard (The Jewish Age) will not come in “first” for the rewards. THEY will be “last” because they refused the Lord’s instructions as to how to attain the desired end. Thus, at least in one surface application, the Chapter 20 parable is here in the context to show that the expectations of the Jews would suffer frustration when they could not understand how their “remnant” (based on FAITH, and coming in at the close of the age) could possibly be rewarded with an entry into the kingdom which THEY (the Jews) had expected as THEIR HONOR for nearly 2000 years!

SUMMARY

So often we have “favorite” little texts that we use all the time. We have NOT wasted our time on them. In most cases our understandings and uses of them are correct. But we are able, if we search, to find ever-deeper and more beautiful meanings in the Lord’s Word when we consider CONTEXTS and COMPANION TEXTS. This seems to be the case here in Matthew 19.

Whether or not the conclusions of this possible allegory be correct, we cannot help but be strengthened by the contextual connections and lessons involved.

Return to 2020 Index

It should be noted that wealth and poverty are NOT requirements nor disbarments from membership in the body of Christ. That in itself suggests strongly that Matthew 19 is NOT about a literal rich man, but rather about a symbolic rich man — the nation of Israel. In the early Church there WERE rich brethren; there also were poor brethren. And the rich brethren didn't give away all they owned! Quite to the contrary, they CONSECRATED it to serving the Lord via serving the brethren. Wealth and poverty are immaterial when entry into the embryo Kingdom of Heaven is concerned. Wealth versus poverty falls into the same kind of variety which Paul explains is IGNORED in the Church: Jew versus Gentile, male versus female, etc. The entry of a rich individual into the kingdom's calling is no more impossible than the entry of a poor man. But the entry of Israel (as the symbolized "Rich Man" of this allegory and of Jesus' parable in Luke 16) IS IMPOSSIBLE because he will not give up the very thing that blocks his way — the Law (which he considers his greatest wealth.)
