

**“The Opposite of Rich”**  
**from Barbara Brown Taylor’s**  
*The Preaching Life*

*Obligatory note about the “eye of the needle” (Mt 19:24):* There never was a small door next to a gate in Jerusalem called the “Eye of the Needle.” That’s a myth. Jesus is referring to the hole in a needle you stick the thread through—just the way it sounds. Such is the desire to avoid the obvious text that as early as the fourth century Cyril of Alexandria insists that instead of *kamelon* (camel) the correct Greek word is the similar-sounding *kamilon* (rope, or cable), which he says is “not entirely pointless (as a camel would be)” but is just *next* to impossible.<sup>1</sup> We have no reason to believe this isn’t just what Jesus said. In fact, “In Jewish rabbinical literature [from Babylonia, where the largest land animal was the elephant, not the camel,] an *elephant* passing through the eye of a needle is a figure of speech for sheer impossibility.”<sup>2</sup>



1. Read Mk 10:17-31 [see also parallels Matthew 19:16-22; Luke 18:18-23]. The man is rich, a Jew, knows the Law and apparently does a good job following it. It sounds like he’s where he needs to be. Why do you think he is talking to Jesus?
2. When Jesus tells the man that none is good but the Father, is he just correcting an incidental mistake, or does his statement relate to the man’s question and problem?
3. The *New Bible Commentary* writes of this passage, “The man’s question assumed that *eternal life* could be achieved by *doing some good thing* (a conspicuous act of charity?).” Calvin, drawing upon Romans, sees the rich young ruler as pursuing the righteousness of the law (Rom 10:5), rather than the saving righteousness of faith (Rom 10:6) and believes Jesus answers to suit the question:

Hence we infer, that this reply of Christ is legal, because it was proper that the young man who inquired about the righteousness of works should first be taught that no man is accounted righteous before God unless he has fulfilled the law (which is impossible) that, convinced of his weakness, he might betake himself to the assistance of faith.<sup>3</sup>

Do you agree? Why do you think Jesus answered as he did?

4. BBT writes,

It seems to me that Christians mangle this story in at least two ways. First, by acting as if it were not about money, and second, by acting as if it were only about money.

The *New Bible Commentary* quotes R. H. Gundry, who adds:

That Jesus did not command all his followers to sell all their possessions gives comfort only to the kind of people to whom he *would* give that command.

Readers often point out that Jesus didn’t require this of *all* his followers. To this, F. F. Bruce replies,

It is true that those who joined [Jesus’] company and went around with him as his disciples appear to have left all to follow him. But what of those friends by whose generosity they were maintained—those well-to-do women who, as Luke tells us, “were helping to support them out of their own means” (Lk 8:3)?

...Even so, Jesus’ advice to the rich man is by no means isolated; it is a regular feature of his teaching. The same note is struck in words appearing without narrative context in Lk 12:33-34: [Kaiser, *ibid.*]

Read Lk 12:16-34. What is Jesus’ motivation for his teaching about selling one’s goods and giving the proceeds to the poor? How does BBT answer this question?

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<sup>1</sup> *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*, Matt vol. 2.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, IVP, 1997.

<sup>3</sup> *Commentary on Matthew, Mark, Luke - Volume 2*.

5. BBT writes,

The catch is, you have got to be free to receive the gift. You cannot be otherwise engaged. You cannot be tied up right now, or too tied down to respond. You cannot accept God's gift if you have no spare hands to take it with. You cannot make room for it if all your rooms are already full. You cannot follow if you are not free to go...

I know, I know. The children, the mortgage, the aging parents, the doctor's bills, the economy, the future. I know. It's the same for me. There are days when threading a camel seems easier than following Jesus. So who *can* be saved? And who is brave enough to be free? The question has not changed much, but neither has the answer: for us it is impossible, but not for God. For God, all things are possible.

Now, let's assume you are a baptized member of the body of Christ, and your love for God and neighbor, however humble, bears witness to Christ living in you<sup>4</sup>. As such, you are in Christ and beyond condemnation (Rom 8:1). Is it correct to say that you are already *in* the kingdom of heaven, and should read passages like this as an indication of what to aspire to—not how to be saved? Or, as John Chrysostom puts it,

And so after Jesus had made eye contact with them, he said, "With men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible." So with a pleasant and gentle look, he soothed those whose hearts were terrorized and relieved their anguish... Then he uplifted them with his words as he focused on the power of God, and thus gave them faith.

If you also want to learn the way and how the impossible becomes possible, listen. He did not make this statement that what is impossible for man is possible for God merely so you could relax and do nothing and leave it all to God. No, he said this so you could understand the importance of calling upon God to give you help in this rigorous contest and that you might more readily approach his grace.<sup>5</sup>

6. Jesus, discerning the man's need, calls him to take the leap. Interestingly, Jesus does not invite him to join the inquirers' class, send his elder for a visit to suggest he transfer his membership, later invite him to join in a small group with other members of the congregation, and then rest on the Holy Spirit to work through the deep nourishment of adult Sunday school and twice-weekly sermons (and, if necessary, an off-season retreat in a Finger Lakes cabin) to gradually bring him to the point of recognizing his monetary idolatry.

We all here give of our time and money to help the poor. How do we know if we are putting our faith in money rather than God? If so, *what should we do?*



*Fun Quotation:* "But it is **excessively ridiculous in the monks**, under the pretense of this passage, to claim for themselves state of perfection. First, it is easy to infer, that Christ does not command all without exception to sell all that they have; for the husbandman, who had been accustomed to live by his labor, and to support his children, would do wrong in selling his possession, if he were not constrained to it by any necessity. To keep what God has put in our power, provided that, by maintaining ourselves and our family in sober and frugal manner, we bestow some portion on the poor, is a greater virtue than to squander all. But what sort of thing is that famous selling, on which the monks plume themselves? A good part of them, finding no provision at home, **plunge themselves into monasteries as well-stocked hog-sties**. All take such good care of themselves, that they feed in idleness on the bread of others."

**NEXT TIME: "THE ONE TO WATCH"**

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<sup>4</sup> *How do you know you are saved?* For starters: Your character and your love for others, contrasted with the character of "the world" (Gal 5:22-24; 1 Jn 4:19-5:5); your spirit calling to God as Father (Rom 8:15); your having the Spirit (1 Jn 4:13-16) which is demonstrated by your attesting to the Gospel (1 Jn 4:2). As it says in 1 Jn 5:13, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may *know* that you have eternal life" (emphasis mine). "This is love for God: to obey his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, for everyone born of God overcomes the world" (1 Jn 4:3-4a).

<sup>5</sup> See again the *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*. This is a demonstration of the *Principle of the Johns*: if you are ever bewildered by Scripture, find rest and comfort in the abidingly wise counsel of Calvin and Chrysostom!