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## Through the Needle's Eye

By David Servant

### Chapter Three

#### Jesus Loves a Rich, Young Ruler, Part 2

#### Mark 10:17-30

Before we can return to our study of Jesus' encounter with the rich ruler, we must finish what we've begun in the previous chapter. We've already considered what Jesus taught about the roles of repentance and obedience in regard to salvation. He wanted obedient disciples, not crowds of people who ignored His commandments while professing to believe in Him. That is precisely why He commissioned the apostles to go and make disciples, baptizing them and teaching them to obey everything He commanded (see Matt. 28:19-20). Jesus gave no indication that He thought, as do so many modern theologians, that there were two categories of heaven-bound people—the believers and the disciples—disciples being more committed believers. To Jesus, only committed disciples were true believers. Jesus once even challenged a crowd of newly-professing believers to consider if they were truly His disciples. Only if they would abide in His word were they truly His disciples, and as they learned His truth, they would be set free from sin (see John 8:30-36).<sup>1</sup>

If preaching that obedience is necessary for salvation nullifies God's grace, then Jesus nullified God's grace by His preaching.

#### The Apostles Followed Jesus' Example in Preaching the Necessity of Repentance

Now let's consider the gospel of the apostles. If the preaching of repentance nullifies the gospel of God's grace, then Peter and Paul's preaching also nullified God's grace, because they preached that no one could be saved without repentance. Had they not, they would have been disobedient to Jesus' explicit command that "repentance for forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in His name" (Luke 24:47). But having received His grace, they didn't consider themselves relieved of the responsibility to obey Him. They preached that people must repent if their sins were to be forgiven.

On the day of Pentecost, when his convicted audience asked what they should do, Peter responded, "Repent, and let each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38, emphasis added). Didn't Peter know that people are saved by faith? Why then didn't he

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<sup>1</sup> For further proof that only Christ's disciples are true believers, see my book *The Great Gospel Deception*, pp. 85-89.

mention faith or believing to his audience? Simply because those who believed would repent.

During his second sermon at the portico of Solomon, Peter declared, “Repent therefore and return, that your sins may be wiped away” (Acts 3:19, emphasis added). Now that is preaching “*repentance for forgiveness of sins*” (Luke 24:47, emphasis added).

Peter realized that the opportunity God gave people to repent was an act of His grace. Before the Sanhedrin, he proclaimed of Jesus,

He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, *to grant repentance* to Israel, and forgiveness of sins (Acts 5:31, emphasis added).

Repentance was something that was granted, that is, given by grace. Obviously, Peter didn’t mean that God sovereignly granted certain persons the ability to repent. Peter declared that God granted repentance to Israel, that is, every Israelite was granted the opportunity to repent. Peter would later write, “The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, *not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance* (2 Pet. 3:9, emphasis added).

No one earns the opportunity to repent. It is granted by God’s grace. All of the Jerusalem elders acknowledged this same truth after Peter reported the salvation of the Gentiles:

And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:18, emphasis added).

Notice that the repentance God granted to all the Gentiles was a repentance that *led to life*. Clearly, the Jerusalem elders meant “eternal life,” and their statement again confirms their belief that repentance was essential for salvation.

Paul believed that “the sorrow that is according to the will of God produces a repentance without regret, leading to salvation” (2 Cor. 7:10, emphasis added). Thus, on Mars Hill in Athens, he proclaimed,

Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that *all everywhere should repent*, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead (Acts 17:30-31, emphasis added).

Unrepentant people are not ready for that judgment. Paul believed that repentance is absolutely necessary for salvation. And he also obviously saw no contradiction between preaching repentance and God’s wonderful grace. For example, in his farewell address to the elders of the church at Ephesus, Paul recounted his several years of ministry among them:

I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you publicly and from house to house, *solemnly testifying to both Jews and Greeks of repentance toward God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ....* But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, in order that I may finish my course, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, *to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God* (Acts 20:20-21, 24, emphasis added).

Did you notice that Paul solemnly testified of both repentance and God’s grace? (If not, read the italicized portions in the above scripture.) Although those things are

contradictory in the minds of many modern theologians, to Paul, they harmonized without problem.

Before King Agrippa, Paul summarized many years of his ministry by telling him,

Consequently, King Agrippa, I did not prove disobedient to the heavenly vision, but kept declaring both to those of Damascus first, and also at Jerusalem and then throughout all the region of Judea, and even to the Gentiles, that they should *repent and turn to God, performing deeds appropriate to repentance* (Acts 26:19-20, emphasis added).

How many modern preachers would similarly summarize their ministries? Again, if preaching repentance nullifies God's grace, then Peter and Paul nullified God's grace by their preaching.

### **The Apostles Followed Jesus' Example in Preaching the Necessity of Obedience**

The apostles also followed Jesus' example in proclaiming the necessity of obedience for salvation. If preaching the necessity of obedience for salvation nullifies God's grace, then the apostles nullified God's grace by their preaching.

Paul, who wrote, "by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God" (Eph. 2:8), also made some very strong statements about the necessity of obedience in his letters:

Or do you not know that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, shall inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:9-10).

Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19-21).

But do not let immorality or any impurity or greed even be named among you, as is proper among saints; and there must be no filthiness and silly talk, or coarse jesting, which are not fitting, but rather giving of thanks. For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience (Eph. 5:3-6).<sup>2</sup>

Paul did not believe that faith and obedience could be separated, but wrote of "the obedience of faith" on two occasions (see Rom. 1:5; 16:26). Saving faith is manifested by unselfish love (see Gal. 5:6). The gospel is not only something to believe, but also

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<sup>2</sup> Some who teach a false grace claim that there is a difference between *inheriting* the kingdom of God and *entering* heaven. "Inheriting the kingdom" is only equivalent to walking in God's blessings while here on earth, they say. This absurd theory is easily disproved, however, by reading Paul's usage of the same phrase in 1 Cor. 15:50: "Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot *inherit the kingdom of God*; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable" (emphasis added). Paul was obviously talking about entering into heaven, and the impossibility of doing that in a perishable physical body. No doubt Paul borrowed the expression, *inherit the kingdom*, from Jesus Himself, who foretold of the time when the righteous would enter heaven: "Then the King will say to those on His right, 'Come, you who are blessed of My Father, *inherit the kingdom* prepared for you from the foundation of the world'" (Matt. 25:34, emphasis added).

something to obey (see 2 Thes. 1:7-9). False Christians “profess to know God, but by their deeds they deny Him” (Tit. 1:16). This was all Paul’s doctrine.

Paul believed that eternal life waits those “who by perseverance in doing good seek for glory and honor and immortality” (Rom. 2:7), and that “glory and honor and peace” would be experienced by every person who “does good” (Rom. 2:10). However, “wrath and indignation” await those “who are selfishly ambitious and do not obey the truth, but obey unrighteousness” (Rom. 2:8). “There will be tribulation and distress for every soul of man who does evil” (Rom. 2:9).

Paul warned Christian believers,

So then, brethren, we are under obligation, not to the flesh, to live according to the flesh—for if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live (Rom. 8:12-13).

The author of the book of Hebrews also believed that obedience is essential for salvation. He wrote that Jesus “became to all those who *obey Him* the source of eternal *salvation*” (Heb. 5:9, emphasis added). He declared that,

For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries (Heb. 10:26-27).

He admonished his readers to “Pursue peace with all men, and the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14).

### **James, Peter, John and Jude say “Amen”**

The apostle James wrote about God’s grace (see Jas. 4:6), but also wrote that a person’s “religion is worthless” if he doesn’t bridle his tongue (Jas. 1:26), and that “judgment will be merciless to one who has shown no mercy” (Jas. 2:13).

He also wrote at length about how faith without works is dead, useless, and cannot save anyone (see Jas. 2:14-26). He declared, “whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God” (Jas. 4:4).

Peter, who mentioned God’s grace ten times in his two epistles, also preached that God gives the Holy Spirit “to those who obey Him” (Acts 5:32) and that “in every nation the man who fears [God] and does what is right, is welcome to Him” (Acts 10:35). He, like Paul, believed that the gospel was something to be obeyed (see 1 Pet. 4:17). He wrote of the increase of Christian virtues in the lives of believers, saying, “As long as you *practice* these things, you will never stumble; for *in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you*” (2 Pet. 1:10-11, emphasis added). He warned believers of the eternal consequences of returning to a life of sin:

For if after they have escaped the defilements of the world by the knowledge of the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and are overcome, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would be better for them not to have known the way of righteousness, than having known it, to turn away from the holy commandment delivered to them. It has happened to them according to the true proverb, “A dog returns to its own vomit,” and, “A sow, after washing, returns to wallowing in the mire” (2 Pet. 2:20-22).

The apostle John, who believed that “grace and truth were realized through Jesus” (John 1:17) and that all believers have received “grace upon grace” (John 1:16), also believed that obedience is essential for salvation. His first epistle is primarily about the identifying marks of authentic Christians. John made it clear that true believers do more than believe—they love and obey.

John declared that only those who keep Christ’s commandments know Him (see 1 John 2:3-4). Those who love the world or its things do not have “the love of the Father” in them (1 John 2:15). It is the one who does the will of God who “abides forever” (1 John 2:17). The one who “practices righteousness” is born of God (1 John 2:29). Everyone who has the hope of seeing Jesus “purifies himself, just as He is pure” (1 John 3:3). We can only be assured of our salvation if we demonstrate practical love for fellow believers (see 1 John 3:14-20).

John also wrote:

Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil. No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother (1 John 3:7-10, emphasis added).

Finally, the apostle Jude warned his readers against a heresy that divorced obedience from God’s grace:

Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints. For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who *turn the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ* (Jude 3-4, emphasis added).

If preaching that obedience is necessary for salvation nullifies God’s grace, then Paul, Peter, James, John, Jude, and the author of Hebrews all nullified God’s grace. But obviously, they haven’t, and so it is our understanding of God’s grace that needs adjustment. Any preacher, pastor, or theologian who says that repentance and obedience are not required for salvation are contradicting what the entire Bible teaches. They are guilty of a damnable heresy and have made themselves enemies of Christ, Paul, Peter, James, John and Jude.

### **The Twisting of Paul**

Regrettably, the biblical doctrine of salvation by faith has been taught in such a way that it has nullified the doctrine of the necessity of holiness for salvation. Paul’s teaching in particular, which so often emphasizes God’s grace in salvation, has been ripped from its context and twisted. Paul clearly believed that holiness is essential for gaining eternal life:

Now the deeds of the flesh are evident, which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these, of

which I forewarn you just as I have forewarned you that those who practice such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19-21).

Paul did not believe that the unholy would inherit God's kingdom. So how could he also teach that salvation was gained by grace through faith?

A closer study of Paul's letters reveals the reason why he so frequently emphasized that salvation is by grace and not by works. It is apparent that Jewish teachers were his chief antagonists as he worked to bring about the "obedience of faith among all the Gentiles" (Rom. 1:5). Those Jewish teachers sought to undermine his God-given gospel to Gentiles with a message that salvation was not based on believing in Jesus, but on a pathetic standard of works, most often circumcision and keeping some ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Law (see, for example, Gal. 4:10-11; 5:2-3, 6, 11, 6:12-15).

Paul fought their teaching tooth and nail in many of his letters. He also differentiated between the works that the Jewish legalists were emphasizing so much and true holiness. For example, he wrote to the Corinthian Christians:

Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but what matters is the keeping of the commandments of God (1 Cor. 7:19).

This single verse speaks volumes about the true nature of Paul's battle with legalists. Yet by many contemporary definitions of legalism, this one verse would make Paul a legalist himself!

Understanding this background, we can better grasp why Paul wrote statements such as those found in Ephesians 2:8-9, addressed primarily to *Gentile* believers (see Eph. 2:11-3:6):

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast (Eph. 2:8-9).

Did Paul write those words because he was concerned that the Ephesian believers were becoming overly-zealous about obeying Christ's commandments? No, he wrote them because he didn't want them to be deceived by Jewish legalists who were trying to convince his Gentile converts that they needed to be circumcised and keep other ceremonial aspects of the Mosaic Law to be saved.

Moreover, did Paul mean that because salvation is by grace and not a result of works, that one can gain heaven without holiness? As we read a little bit further in his letter, the answer is plain:

For this you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man, who is an idolater, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience (Eph. 5:5-6).

These two sentences from the same letter prove beyond any shadow of doubt that Paul did not mean in 2:8-9 that, because salvation is a gift of grace not based on works, holiness is of no consequence. And there are other similar scriptures in Paul's writings that affirm this (as we have already seen, for example 1 Cor. 6:9-10, Gal. 5:19-21). Clearly, Paul believed that no one who is immoral, impure or covetous (which are all forms of idolatry according to Paul) will inherit God's kingdom, exactly what Jesus taught in His Sermon on the Mount. Paul believed that although salvation is not the result of works, works (good works, that is) are the result of salvation. In fact, had we only read one verse beyond 2:8-9, we would have immediately realized that fact:

For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them (Eph. 2:10).

We are not saved *by* good works but *unto* good works. The gracious salvation that God offers provides more than forgiveness. It also provides transformation.

### **Jesus Harmonized With Paul**

Jesus, too, solemnly warned those who proudly trust in their own works for salvation, while He encouraged sinners to humble themselves, repent, and rely on God's grace for salvation. For example, we read His words in Luke 18:

And [Jesus] also told this parable to certain ones who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt: "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee, and the other a tax-gatherer. The Pharisee stood and was praying thus to himself, 'God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax-gatherer. I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.' But the tax-gatherer, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his house justified [righteous in God's eyes] rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, but he who humbles himself shall be exalted" (Luke 18:9-14).

This parable is often abused by those who are pushing a twisted concept of God's grace. But let's consider it honestly. Notice the primary difference between the Pharisee and the tax-gatherer was this: The tax-gatherer realized he was a sinner who needed God's grace to be saved, while the Pharisee saw no such need. That is what a true "legalist" is—*someone who is blind to his own sinfulness and his need for God's grace to be saved*. He sees salvation as something purely to be earned, and usually by means of his own pathetic standards of righteousness. In this case, the Pharisee actually believed that his weekly fasts and scrupulous tithing, along with a few other virtues, made him righteous in God's eyes. Jesus taught, however, that tithing is a very minor commandment in comparison to what God considers important (see Luke 11:42). Neither was fasting high on Jesus' list (see Matt. 9:14-15). The truth is, those who truly believe in Jesus are born again (in reality and not just in theory) and are radically transformed by the indwelling Holy Spirit (another evidence of God's grace in salvation), and their righteousness so far exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees that there is no comparison.

In spite of what some folks try to tell us, as Jesus related the attitude of the Pharisee in this parable, He was not thinking of sincere believers who have realized their sinfulness and their need for God's grace, who have believed in Him and repented, and who are now "working out their salvation with fear and trembling" (Phil. 2:12) as they "strive to enter the narrow gate" (Luke 13:24) as He commanded them! Rather, Jesus was thinking of the proud scribes and Pharisees who were blind to their sin, who saw no need for God's grace if they were to be saved (and consequently saw no need for a Savior who would die for their sins), who didn't come close to attaining God's standards of righteousness, and who, on top of all this, "viewed others with contempt" (a direct quote from Jesus' preface to the parable). And let us not add more to the parable than what was said. Let us not imagine that Jesus wanted us to think that the tax-gatherer left the temple to return to his greedy and dishonest lifestyle on his sure way to heaven!

What are the differences between the "works" of a legalist and the "works" of a true believer in Jesus? There are many.

The works of a legalist fall far, far short of God's righteous standards. They are an outward façade, and the inward motivation is often the love of people's approval. The works of the legalist are more likely to be religious and ceremonial than moral and self-denying (see Mark 12:33), things such as church attendance and tithing, which produce pride. The works of the legalist are an insult to God, because they nullify His grace and Christ's sacrifice (see Gal. 2:21). Legalists in essence say to God, "I can save myself...I don't need Jesus or His sacrifice." Legalists don't understand their own sinfulness or the righteousness of God. They are comparable to people who think they should be granted the Nobel Prize because they let their dog sleep inside.

In contrast, the works of a truly born-again believer are of a much higher standard. They stem from a pure and thankful heart that loves God and wants to please Him. They have their origin in Christ Himself who lives within the believer by the Holy Spirit, as Jesus said, they are "wrought in God" (John 3:21). The works of the born-again believer are more likely to be moral and self-denying than religious and ceremonial. True believers who were formerly religious have repented of their "dead works" (see Heb. 6:1), the works of the legalist.

### **Back to Our Story...**

Hopefully we can now return to Jesus' encounter with the rich ruler with a more biblical understanding of salvation.

When the rich ruler asked Jesus which commandments he needed to keep in order to inherit eternal life, Jesus enumerated six of the Ten Commandments (see Mark 10:19), those that deal with our relationships with others. All six could be summarized by the commandment, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," which was the seventh commandment Jesus listed in His response (see Matt. 19:19).

The rich ruler declared that he, from his youth, had kept all the commandments Jesus listed, and then asked what he still lacked. He apparently believed that he had loved his neighbor as himself since his youth! He was perhaps sincere, yet certainly deceived about his own unrighteousness, as Jesus would soon reveal to him. He had lived in disobedience to the second greatest commandment for some time.

How representative this rich ruler is of so many of us. We have no idea how far short we fall of keeping God's commandments. Although our lives are characterized by greed and we are nowhere close to loving our neighbors as ourselves, we aren't aware of it. And even more tragically, some of us who are aware of it think that our dead faith serves as a substitute for obedience, and so we have no need to strive to conform our lives to God's will. Having "received Christ as Savior," we think it is safe to continue rejecting Him as Lord.

### **Jesus' Sincere Love**

Scripture says that at this point, Jesus felt a love for the young man (see Mark 10:21). Jesus' love, of course, was a genuine love, so He spoke the truth at risk of offending. Looking at the rich man with compassion, Jesus pointedly said, "One thing you lack: go and sell all you possess, and give to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me" (Mark 10:21).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Grasping at straws, some interpreters point out that Matthew, unlike Mark and Luke, records Jesus as saying to the rich man, "If you wish to be complete [or perfect as the NASB marginal note says], go and sell your possessions." Elevating Matthew's gospel above Mark and Luke's, they attempt to convince us that the subject changes at this point from salvation to sanctification, that is, becoming more holy, or *complete*, on the road to perfection. However, neither logic nor the context supports such an interpretation. If that is what Jesus meant and what the rich man thought Jesus meant, why did he walk away so grieved? And why did Jesus then make His statement about how hard it is for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven? Why did



Jesus was simply informing the rich man that he lacked one thing in obeying the commandment to love his neighbor as himself, which happens to be the second greatest commandment. He lacked one *very* important thing in obeying one *very* important commandment. How could he claim to love his neighbor as himself if he held on to his great wealth knowing full well the plight of needy people? His sin was brought to light.

Now came the moment of crisis. Jesus hoped that the man would repent of his greed and become His follower. That is what He commanded the man to do. Jesus would have forgiven him, and he would have tasted of Jesus' amazing grace. But in order to follow Jesus, making Jesus his Master, he first had to turn away from his old master, money. He needed to repent of greed, because it would be impossible for him to serve God and mammon (see Matt. 6:24).

### **The Eternal Decision**

As you know, the man decided to cling to his old master. Not only had he been unwilling to love his neighbor as himself for a long time, he also decided to remain unwilling. Even though Jesus told him that he would be repaid in heaven for liquidating his assets, those earthly assets meant too much to him. They were holding his heart. Thus "he went away grieved; for he was one who owned much property" (Mark 10:22).

It was then that Jesus made His famous statement that has been twisted, softened, and misinterpreted perhaps more than any other words of His:

Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And 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 (Matt. 19:23-24).

If we take Jesus' words at face value, we must admit that they have application to any and all wealthy people. It is very hard for them to enter the kingdom of heaven—as hard as it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. And why is it so hard for them? It is hard for all wealthy people for the same reason it was hard for the rich, young ruler. God requires wealthy people to repent of greed, just like the rich young ruler, and they find it difficult to turn from their old master. They love money too much. Scripture unequivocally states that no greedy/covetous person will inherit the kingdom of God (see 1 Cor. 6:9-10, Eph. 5:3-6). Thus, greedy and covetous people must repent of greed in order to inherit God's kingdom. Regardless of what anyone says, that is what Jesus said and what the New Testament affirms.

Jesus' disciples were astonished at His statement about the camel and needle and asked, "Then who can be saved?" (Mark 10:26). Obviously, they interpreted Jesus' words to be applicable to all wealthy people, not just one man. And they wondered if *anyone* could make it into heaven if the requirements were so stringent.

Jesus responded, "With men it is impossible, but not with God; for all things are possible with God" (Mark 10:27). Jesus did not mean that God would, in the case of some wealthy people, eliminate His requirement that they turn from their old master. Neither did He mean that God would violate His own word and allow greedy people who have never repented of greed into heaven. That, of course, would annul everything

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the disciples ask, "Then who can be saved?" And why did Peter remind Jesus that he and the other disciples had left everything to follow Him, then asking, "What then will there be for us?" Clearly, Jesus did not change the subject from what is required for salvation to what might be an optional step in the process of sanctification. Therefore, Jesus' words as rendered by Matthew, "If you wish to be complete," can only be intelligently interpreted if they are harmonized with what Mark and Luke quoted Jesus as saying. The phrase, "if you wish to be complete" must be synonymous with the phrase, "one thing you still lack." Combining and harmonizing the three Gospel accounts would give us something like, "One thing you still lack (to inherit eternal life), and if you wish to be complete, not lacking that one thing, go and sell all you possess..."

Jesus had just said, and would have been grossly unfair to the rich man who just walked away sadly. In fact, it would have made Jesus a liar in relationship to him.

Rather, Jesus' statement was a revelation of the transforming grace of God that is available to greedy people. God gives grace to the humble, and as greedy people humble themselves, confess their guilt and cry out for God to change them, His power will deliver them from their greed. As I said in the introduction to this book, God's power and grace can get camels through needles. God's grace is available to forgive and transform.

### **A Very Common Objection Answered**

It is often stated that Jesus told only one person to sell his possessions and give to the poor. Based on that assumption, it is then argued that it is wrong to apply to anyone else what Jesus said to only one person two-thousand years ago.

Is it not true, however, that it would be unfair of Jesus to require something of one person to be saved that He does not require of every other person? Imagine a wealthy man standing before Christ's judgment throne who on earth "accepted Jesus." Imagine Jesus telling the man that he is welcome to enter heaven, even though he held on to his many earthly possessions during his life. Now imagine the rich, young ruler viewing this scene. Would he not have a valid objection? He would have had the right to say, "Jesus, you required of me what you did not require of that man!" "I will go to hell for not doing what he did not do either!"

As the rich ruler sadly walked away, Jesus knew he was making a damning decision. Are we really to think that Jesus was making it harder for him to escape eternal damnation than He would for every other wealthy person in the world? No, Jesus requires that every person repent. All greedy people must repent of greed, regardless of how much money they have. If they truly do repent of greed, it will begin to manifest itself in their actions.

But even more important, as I have already pointed out, as the rich ruler walked away sadly, Jesus plainly declared that what He said to him was applicable to all wealthy people for all time. He said, "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" (Mark 10:25). He didn't say, "that rich man," but "a rich man." And it is obvious from the apostles' response that they believed what He said had application to them and everyone else.

Moreover, Jesus repeatedly reinforced the same message at other times using different words. Did He not say that no one can be His disciple "who does not give up all his own possessions"? (Luke 14:33). Did He not say that anyone who wants to come after Him must "deny himself, and take up his cross daily"? (Luke 9:23). Does daily denial have anything to do with material things? Did Jesus not warn, "For what will a man be profited, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul?" (Matt. 16:26). Does that not indicate a correlation between gaining and keeping wealth and ultimate damnation? Did not Jesus once compare the kingdom of heaven to "a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field"? (Matt. 13:44). Did He not forbid all of His followers to lay up treasures on earth (see Matt. 6:19) and warn them that no one could serve God and mammon, because they would love one and hate the other? (see Matt. 6:24). Did He not command all His followers to sell their possessions and give to charity, making for themselves "purses which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven"? (Luke 12:33). Did He not proclaim, "Woe to you who are rich, for you are receiving your comfort in full"? (Luke 6:24). Did He not state that loving one's neighbor as oneself is the second greatest commandment? (see Matt. 22:39). Did He not command us to love one another even as He loved us and treat others just as we want to be treated? (see John 13:34-35; Matt. 7:12). Did He not warn His followers to beware of greed and then

illustrate greed's eternal danger with the Parable of the Rich Fool? (as we studied in a previous chapter; see Luke 12:13-21). Did He not warn of the final fate of those who live in self-indulgence, ignoring the plight of the poor, in the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus? (which we will study in a later chapter; see Luke 16:19-31). Did He not warn everyone of a future judgment at which those who ignored the plight of His very poor brethren will be cast into hell? (see Matt. 25:31-46). How then can anyone say that Jesus told only one man to sell all his possessions and give to charity? *Jesus commanded all of His followers to sell their possessions and give to charity* (see Luke 12:33).

So we see the great error in assuming that Jesus does not require anyone today to give up his possessions for Him because He only supposedly required that of one man during His earthly ministry. We might as well claim that Jesus does not require anyone today to repent of adultery because He only ever told one woman who was caught in the act to go and sin no more.

Of course, it certainly seems reasonable to conclude that Jesus was not requiring the rich ruler to literally sell every single thing that he owned so that he would be homeless, naked and without any food, ultimately poorer than the people he helped by his charity. He was, according to Luke, "extremely rich" (Luke 18:23), and was being required to scale down dramatically, giving up what he didn't need. But he wasn't being required to do what Jesus Himself didn't do. It is also true that it would have taken some time for the rich ruler to liquidate his assets, although he could have immediately begun taking some steps in that direction.

### **A Tax Collector Repents of Greed and is Saved**

The story of Zaccheus, a rich tax collector, helps us understand biblical salvation and what it means to repent of greed. As he was perched in a sycamore tree alongside a street in Jericho, Jesus said to him, "Zaccheus, hurry and come down, for today I must stay at your house" (Luke 19:5).

Who has the right to command someone whom he has never met to stop immediately what he is doing and proceed home, and then tell him, "I'm coming with you, because I'll be staying at your house today"? If anyone but God made such a request, we would consider him to be unbelievably presumptuous. But God has such a right, and Jesus' directive to Zaccheus demonstrated that He believed He was entitled to rule Zaccheus' time and possessions.

Zaccheus apparently also believed Jesus had that right. He immediately obeyed Him, not offended in the least. On the way to his house, Zaccheus further demonstrated his faith by publicly pledging to his new Lord, "Behold, Lord, half of my possessions I will give to the poor, and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will give back four times as much" (Luke 19:8).

Zaccheus apparently knew that Jesus was preaching a repentance that included repentance from greed. And obviously, Zaccheus knew he was guilty of greed in at least two ways. First, he neglected the poor, living in self-indulgence. Second, he gained his wealth, at least in part, by defrauding others, not an uncommon sin among tax collectors in Jesus' day. Both forms of his greed were violations of the second greatest commandment. When Zaccheus repented of both forms of greed, however, salvation came. Jesus immediately responded to Zaccheus' pledge by saying, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he, too, is a son of Abraham" (Luke 19:9). Zaccheus' heart-felt repentance was immediate and so was his salvation, although the working out of his repentance would have taken some time.

Zaccheus was not saved by his works, but by grace through faith, the only way any sinner can be saved. Grace offered him the opportunity to repent and be forgiven, and his faith was a true, living faith. When he believed in Jesus, he repented and began obeying Jesus. How would Jesus have responded if Zaccheus had said, "Lord, I am

going to continue living in self-indulgence, ignoring the plight of the poor and defrauding people, but I do accept you as my Savior!"?

Did Zaccheus liquidate all of his assets? It seems very unlikely that he relinquished his daily food and clothing or any other essentials. Perhaps he scaled down to a smaller house if the one he owned was more than he needed. We know with certainty that he pledged to give half of his possessions to the poor. He also pledged to pay back four times what he had defrauded from anyone. Obviously, Zaccheus had been guilty of that very sin or he would never have mentioned it. If only one-eighth of his net worth had been gained by defrauding people, it would have cost him half of all he had in order to repay them all fourfold. Thus the real possibility exists that Zaccheus was ultimately left with only a small fraction of his original wealth.<sup>4</sup>

So in the story of Zaccheus, we see a clear example of a wealthy person who repented of greed when he was saved. He didn't just change his attitude about his wealth, but he changed his actions, the very thing Jesus expected of the rich ruler.

### **The Similarities Between the Rich Ruler and Ourselves**

"But I am not like the rich, young ruler!" so many claim. "He obviously had a real problem with greed. The reason Jesus made such a difficult demand of him is because his disease could only be healed by radical surgery. Since we don't have his sickness, we don't need his cure."

But what makes us think we don't have the same sickness as the rich ruler, and thus don't need his cure? Our resistance to everything I've written so far reveals our sickness. The only reason we have so much difficulty with what Jesus plainly taught is because we can't imagine giving up any of our possessions. Our possessions have our hearts. We're every bit as greedy and covetous as the rich, young ruler. In fact, it is quite likely that the rich ruler tithed all his life, something that the majority of professing Christians have never done. Moreover, the majority of things we own *could not* have been owned by the rich ruler. Our lives may well be overflowing with much more *stuff*.

Moreover, we have the responsibility to spread the gospel all over the world, something the rich ruler was never expected to do. Beyond that, we, unlike the rich ruler, have access to information about suffering Christians and non-Christians around the globe and have means of supplying relief even though we live thousands of miles away. This being so, our greed may be even greater than his. The fundamental difference between so many of us and the rich young ruler is this: He believed what Jesus said was required of him to inherit eternal life and walked away sadly, while we don't believe what Jesus said is required of us to inherit eternal life and walk away rejoicing in our self-deception. If the rich ruler had said, "Jesus, I won't repent of greed and give up my possessions, but I do accept You as my Savior," and walked away praising God for his salvation, what would have been Christ's commentary?

### **The Rationalizations of Self-Deception**

"I may have many possessions, but my possessions don't have me!" is a defense frequently heard. What would Jesus have said to the rich ruler if he had proffered such an excuse? Do you suppose He would have said, "Oh! Now that makes a *real* difference! I'm sorry that I misjudged you! Since that's the case, you don't need to sell any of your property"?

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<sup>4</sup> Why did Zaccheus promise to pay back four times what he had gained by defrauding others? Probably because that is what the Law of Moses required of those who stole their neighbor's sheep (see Ex. 22:1; 2 Sam. 12:6).

As I've previously mentioned, we've somehow convinced ourselves that greed is just an attitude about what we possess, and therefore it has nothing to do with how much we possess and what we do with our possessions. Applying this logic, however, one could be the richest person in the world, share none of his wealth, and not be guilty of greed. It makes no difference how many people starve while he collects mansions, jets, and diamonds, as long as he maintains the right attitude about his possessions! How absurd!

Jesus didn't require the rich ruler to change only his attitude (if such a thing were even possible). He didn't say, "How hard it is for those with *greedy attitudes* to enter the kingdom of heaven." He said it would be hard for those who are *wealthy* to enter the kingdom of heaven. And the reason it is hard for them is because they must repent of their greed, which means financial adjustments in line with God's will. If all they needed to do was change their attitudes but not their actions, it wouldn't be hard for them at all.

A similar twisted logic is found in the common excuse, "It doesn't matter how much you have. It only depends on what is in your heart. All that Jesus requires is that we inwardly give up all we possess, because greed is a sin of the heart." Again, what would Jesus have said to the rich ruler if he had made such a statement to Him? "Lord, I'll inwardly obey You, but outwardly I'll ignore You."

Greed is indeed a sin of the heart. However, it is one that is revealed by our actions. Outwardly clinging to our possessions reveals inward clinging. Jesus said, "For where your treasure is [outward clinging], there will your heart be also [inward clinging]" (Matt. 6:21). It is that simple.

What should we think of a man who is drunk every day and who says, "Alcohol doesn't have me! Inwardly, I'm sober!"? What should we think of a murderer, who, as he drives a knife into the heart of his victim says, "I don't actually hate this person. Inwardly, I'm full of love!"? What should we think of a man whose house has pornographic magazines stacked to the ceilings and who says, "These magazines mean absolutely nothing to me. Inwardly, I'm pure!"? We would think that every one of those people was self-deceived. That being so, then why do we go on fooling ourselves with similar statements about our possessions and our supposed freedom from greed?

The list of our smokescreens is almost endless, and all are proved equally foolish when considered in the light of simple logic. For example, I've heard it said, "Poor people can be just as greedy as rich people!"

Perhaps that is true. But does that make it right for anyone to be greedy?

I've heard it said, "You can give up all your possessions to feed the poor and still not have love! Isn't that what Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 13:3?"

Yes, Paul did write that. But does that prove that everyone who gives up his possessions to feed the poor does not have love? Does that mean that none of us should give up any of our possessions to feed the poor? The answers are obvious. *One may give without loving, but one cannot love without giving.*

"I read in one Bible commentary where the author explained how Jesus was not literally speaking of a needle when He spoke of the camel and needle's eye. Jesus had in mind a certain gate in Jerusalem called "the Needle Gate," through which camels could pass only if their load was removed and they knelt."

This particular idea of a needle gate has no archeological or historical evidence to support it. It is only a myth. And even if Jesus were referring to a so-called "Needle Gate," His illustration would still convey the idea of getting rid of one's possessions in humble obedience to Him in order to enter heaven. So this interpretation doesn't really soften what He said. I must also point out that Jesus didn't say, "Needle Gate," but "a needle." He didn't say "gate" or "opening" but "eye."

## Repentance from Greed Harmonizes with Apostolic Teaching

Repentance from greed was certainly something that the apostles emphasized in their teaching. They obeyed Jesus' commandment to teach their disciples to obey all that He had commanded them (see Matt. 28:18-20).<sup>5</sup> Thus, everything He taught the apostles about money, possessions and stewardship, they passed on to their disciples. For example, during His earthly ministry, Jesus instructed all His followers to sell their possessions and give to charity (as we have already seen in Luke 12:33), and that is, no doubt, what the apostles taught their disciples. For that reason we read in the book of Acts,

And they were continually devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching....And all those who had believed were together, and had all things in common; and they began selling their property and possessions, and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need....And abundant grace was upon them all. For there was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses<sup>6</sup> would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales, and lay them at the apostles' feet; and they would be distributed to each, as any had need (Acts 2:42, 44-45; 4:33-35, emphasis added).<sup>7</sup>

In other places in the New Testament, we find examples of sacrificial giving by the early Christians. Once the Holy Spirit revealed to a prophet named Agabus that there would soon be a great famine. Luke tells us that, "in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. And this they did" (Acts 11:29-30). Note that any follower of Christ who had any means to help, did help.

While encouraging the Corinthian Christians to participate in an offering for poor Christians in Judea, Paul reported to them how the Macedonian Christians had given sacrificially, motivated by God's transforming grace:

Now, brethren, we wish to make known to you the grace of God which has been given in the churches of Macedonia, that in a great ordeal of affliction their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed in the wealth of their liberality. For I testify that according to their ability, and beyond their ability they gave of their own accord, begging us with much entreaty for the favor of participation in the support of the saints (2 Cor. 8:1-4).

Talk about cheerful givers!

Such offerings for the poor are mentioned in other places in Acts and the New Testament epistles (see Acts 11:27-30; 24:17; Rom. 15:25-28; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 8-9). Paul considered giving to the poor to be a very important part of what it meant to follow Christ. In fact, so did Peter, James and John. When Paul first visited them to compare his gospel with theirs, they gave him their full endorsement, and Paul later recounted, "They only asked us to remember the poor—the very thing I also was eager to do" (Gal. 2:10). Assisting the poor was secondary only to the preaching of the gospel.

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<sup>5</sup> Incidentally, the words of Jesus found in Matthew 28:18-20 clearly disprove the theory that Jesus' words during His earthly ministry have application only to those who lived before His death and resurrection. Jesus commanded His apostles to teach their converts to obey all that He had commanded them, which would have obviously been a perpetual commandment binding upon every future Christian

<sup>6</sup> We will see later in our study that many early Christians continued to own their homes. Thus it seems reasonable to conclude that Luke was reporting how those individuals who owned *houses* (plural) sold those they didn't need in order to give to charity and lay up heavenly treasures. People need a place to live.

<sup>7</sup> We will later consider the modern explanations that are used to prove that the unselfish sharing of the early Christians is not a good example for modern Christians to follow.

Paul taught that greed is a characteristic of those whose minds are depraved (see Rom. 1:28-29). He also taught that no greedy or covetous person will inherit the kingdom of God (see 1 Cor. 6:9-10, Eph. 5:3-5). He equated greed with idolatry (see Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5), which is another way of saying just what Jesus said, that one can't serve God and mammon, two masters.

Paul instructed the Corinthian Christians not to associate or eat with any covetous person who claimed to be a Christian, because that person's profession of faith is obviously bogus (see 1 Cor. 5:9-13). How would the early church have determined if any of their members were guilty of covetousness? There could be only one way—by looking at their lifestyles.

Paul also instructed Timothy to tell rich people to “do good, that they be rich in good works, ready to distribute, willing to communicate; laying up in store for themselves a good foundation against the time to come, *that they may lay hold on eternal life* (1 Tim. 6:18-19, KJV, emphasis added). If Paul had written, “Tell them to believe in Jesus that they may lay hold on eternal life,” we would have interpreted his words to mean that rich people need to believe in Jesus in order to receive eternal life. So why not interpret what he did actually write as meaning that rich people must be just as rich in good works of giving if they want to inherit eternal life?

John wrote that we know we are saved by our love for our brethren in Christ (see 1 John 3:14). John, however, wasn't talking only about warm, sentimental feelings of love, but of a practical love that gives whenever it sees a need and whatever it is able to give. This was the only way one could have true assurance of salvation:

We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him? [The obvious answer to that rhetorical question is, “It doesn't.” If one does not love his neighbor, he does not love God either, as he disobeys God's second greatest commandment.] Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth. We shall know by this that we are of the truth, and shall assure our heart before Him (1 John 3:16-19; emphasis added).

As I have previously mentioned, James, in illustrating the truth that faith without works is dead, used the example of a professing Christian who showed no love for a fellow impoverished believer. Although he knew of fellow believers who were “without clothing and in need of daily food” (Jas. 2:15), he did not “give them what is necessary for their body,” but only said, “Go in peace, be warmed and be filled” (Jas. 2:16). James comments: “What use is that? Even so faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself” (Jas. 2:17).

James also wrote the following scathing condemnation of rich people:

Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries which are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten. Your gold and your silver have rusted; and their rust will be a witness against you and will consume your flesh like fire. It is in the last days that you have stored up your treasure! Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, and which has been withheld by you, cries out against you; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth. You have lived luxuriously on the earth and led a life of wanton pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter. You have condemned and put to death the righteous man; he does not resist you (Jas. 5:1-6).

Obviously, James was not writing about heaven-bound people. But was there any hope for these greedy people whom James condemned? Certainly—if they believed in Jesus, repented of defrauding fellow human beings and ceased laying up treasures on earth, ignoring the plight of the poor. Do you suppose James would have assured them of their salvation otherwise? Of course not. The apostles universally believed that no greedy person was saved unless he repented in heart and action.

I have by no means exhausted the biblical evidence to prove that the teaching of the apostles harmonizes perfectly with what Jesus told the rich, young ruler. The evidence is overwhelming. Yet the majority of the church today is ignoring this clear message from Christ and His apostles.

### **Another Objection Considered**

Some teach that Jesus' words in the story of the rich ruler have application only to "those who trust in wealth." They supposedly have no application to those who simply have wealth but don't "trust in it," because that is what some later manuscripts add to Mark's rendition of Jesus' encounter with the rich ruler, recorded in Mark 10:24. (None of the other Gospel accounts include this phrase.)

If the later manuscripts of Mark's Gospel are a more accurate rendition of what Jesus actually said, then "trusting in wealth" must have been the sin of which the rich ruler was guilty, because his refusal to sell all was the basis of Christ's statement. How was the rich ruler "trusting in wealth"? He could have been trusting in his wealth as a means of security for the future, as revealed by his unwillingness to liquidate it in order to benefit those who were suffering pressing needs. Wealthy people often cling to their money out of fear. Not trusting God to take care of them, they trust in their money. *Only those who have wealth can trust in it, and the only way to stop trusting it is to liquidate it.* One who trusts in God and not in wealth has no need to lay up wealth on the earth.

Beyond that, the rich ruler, "trusting in wealth," had made it his trusted master, and he served it, giving to it what rightfully belonged only to God—his heart's devotion. So in that sense as well, all who refuse to repent of greed are also trusting in wealth.

What else could the phrase, "trusting in wealth" mean, other than these two possibilities I have suggested? Thus, even if the later manuscripts of Mark's Gospel are to be trusted above the early manuscripts, and if they are to be trusted above what Matthew and Luke recorded about the same story, Jesus' message and meaning are not altered in the least.

### **Yet Another Objection Considered**

One well-known prosperity preacher would like us to believe that, although the rich ruler came looking for eternal life, Jesus offered him apostleship, thus the reason for the difficult requirements. This absurd theory illustrates how far some go to justify their greed.

This flimsy theory is partially built on the statement that Jesus told the rich ruler to *follow* Him, just as He asked other certain people to follow Him who became apostles. However, a study of Jesus' "follow Me" expressions quickly reveals that Jesus extended the invitation to everyone to follow Him, and to become His follower was equivalent to believing in Him and doing His will (see Matt. 10:38; 16:24; John 10:27; 12:26). Even when Jesus called certain specific individuals to follow Him, it wasn't until they began following Him that He appointed some of them as apostles.

Additionally, if Jesus was offering the rich ruler apostleship, why didn't He say so? Why did He let him sadly wander away thinking that he had to sell his possessions in order to inherit eternal life, when that was only required of him if he wanted to meet the requirements for apostleship? Why did Jesus make His statement about the camel and



the needle and entering the kingdom of heaven? Why didn't Jesus clear up the apostles' misunderstanding, as revealed by their question about salvation? Many other similar questions could easily be asked that expose the fallacies of this poor theory.

### **Back to Our Story Again...**

Peter's response to Jesus, "Behold, we have left everything and followed You; what then will there be for us?" (Matt. 19:27), reveals, as I've already stated, that he believed Jesus' previous words had application to more than just one man. Clearly, Peter realized that what Jesus had just said had application to him and the rest of the apostles. We, unfortunately, know nothing about the details of their personal wealth. We do know, however, that they left all they had to follow Jesus. He, in turn, assured all of them that their sacrifices would be worth it. They would be rewarded in this life and the next, as would all who make similar sacrifices. And, yes, all such people will inherit eternal life. Below I combine Matthew and Mark's Gospels to include all that Jesus said in response to Peter:

Truly I say to you, that you who have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of Man will sit on His glorious throne, you also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel.... There is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or farms, for My sake and for the gospel's sake, but that he shall receive a hundred times as much now in the present age, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and farms, along with persecutions; and in the age to come, *eternal life*<sup>8</sup> (Matt. 19:28; Mark 10:29-30, emphasis added).

Some modern prosperity preachers, in a masterful manipulation of all that Christ said in this passage, tell us that if the rich ruler had only stayed a few minutes longer, he would have learned that Jesus really wasn't asking him to give up anything! Rather, Jesus wanted to make him one hundred times wealthier, and all he had to do was "sow a seed" that would reap a hundred-fold harvest.

Interestingly, I've never heard any of those prosperity preachers try to claim the hundred-fold return on children, or for that matter on brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers. They only claim the hundred-fold return on the houses and farms. This shows the fatal flaw of their misinterpretation of Jesus' promise.

Jesus was not promising lavish material wealth to those who sacrificed for His sake. Rather, He was promising that those who leave their families, homes and farms for the sake of the gospel will enjoy the blessing of winning many people to Christ. Those new believers will become their spiritual family, and those new brothers, sisters, mothers and fathers will open their homes to share everything they have with those who left everything for the sake of the gospel. As we have already read, of the early Christians Luke recorded, "Not one of them claimed that anything belonging to him was his own; but all things were common property to them" (Acts 4:32). Of course, this kind of sharing only occurs among real Christians, not those who imagine that they can serve God and mammon.

Had the rich ruler obeyed Jesus, he would have actually experienced greater economic security. At present, his wealth stood the chance of "[making] itself wings, like an eagle that flies toward the heavens" (Prov. 23:5). Through a bad decision, change of fortune, or even judgment from God, he could find himself destitute. His wealth was "like a high wall in his own imagination" (Prov. 18:11), and Scripture warns that "riches do not profit in the day of wrath" (Prov. 11 :4). However, if the rich ruler had disposed

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<sup>8</sup> Notice that the topic is still eternal life, as it was at the beginning of the story.

of his wealth as Jesus commanded, he would have been guaranteed that his true needs would have been met all of his life and throughout eternity. He would have been joining a family that loved him.

### **What Then Shall We Do?**

Have you perhaps discovered that you are a greedy person and that money, rather than Jesus, is your master? Then you are at the same point as the rich ruler just before he walked away sadly from Jesus. What a fool he was, esteeming earthly wealth more valuable than heavenly riches and a relationship with God. Don't make his mistake.

You can repent right now and begin to know the joy of true faith in Christ, the kind of faith that makes Jesus, and not mammon, Lord and Master. What joy you will experience as you break free from greed and begin liquidating your assets to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and send the gospel to the lost millions of this world! Think of how much good you will be able to do with your future earnings as you scale down and live more simply! Think of how much you will glorify God as you imitate Christ, no longer living for self-indulgence, but living to love God and your neighbor as yourself! Your heart will be in heaven, where your Lord and Savior is, and where your eternal treasure waits.

Teach me Your way, O Lord;  
I will walk in Your truth;  
Unite my heart to fear Your name (Ps. 86:11).