

Mark 10: 23-27; “Through the Eye of a Needle”, Sermon # 84 in the series – “Astonished at His Teaching”, Delivered by Pastor Paul Rendall on February 20th, 2011, in the Morning Worship Service.

How hard is it for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God? Our text says that 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. This is a very profound picture that has been given to us by our Lord Jesus Christ, and we want to think about it in relation to ourselves this morning. You are probably thinking to yourself; But I am not rich; what does this have to do with me? Well, it is your definition of rich that I want to address this morning. I want you to be able to understand that you could consider yourself to be very poor, when actually you are very rich. And you might consider yourself to be very rich, when actually you are very poor. In fact, there is a proverb about this in the Bible. Proverbs 13, verse 7. It says, “There is one who makes himself rich, yet has nothing; and one who makes himself poor, yet has great riches.” This is the truth that we want to consider today. So first, I would like you to think about your entering the kingdom of God. Then second; I would like you to think about your going through the eye of a needle. And then third, I would like you to think about the good possibilities with God.

1st – I want you to think about your entering the kingdom of God.

In verse 23 it says, “Then Jesus looked around and said to His disciples, ‘How hard it is for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God!’” “And the disciples were astonished at His words.” But Jesus answered them again a second time in the same way; “Children, how hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God!” Jesus said this two times to show his disciples the importance of their understanding this truth. You will have a hard time entering the kingdom if you have riches, but more especially, if you are trusting in them. Jesus called his disciples “children” here, to show them that there were some things that they did not understand yet about riches, even though they had entered the kingdom of God. They didn’t understand how riches could hinder, or even keep a person from entering in to the kingdom of God. They had thought that it would be a tremendous advantage for a person to be rich in terms of being able to enter. Entering in to the kingdom of God should be the goal of all of our life in this life. Entering in to the kingdom of God is only done by faith in Jesus Christ, and cannot be done by the works of the law. Entering through Christ means that you will have an everlasting inheritance. And yet, if we would inherit the kingdom of God, we should understand that grace will so change our hearts that we will become generous and giving people, whether we are rich, or whether we are poor. To enter in to the kingdom of God is to enter upon a life of trust in Christ, and a continuing life of trust and obedience in following Christ. If we do not enter, by faith, in to the kingdom of God in this life; before we die; we shall never inherit

eternal life after we die. This is why the rich young ruler's life is so sad. He did not understand true riches. He did not understand that trusting in his riches, that he would perish in his sin.

We saw last week that he had fooled himself in regard to how he saw himself keeping the commandments of God; specifically the second table of the law; commandments 5-10. Those commandments which Jesus rehearsed to him didn't specifically mention the 10th commandment, at first, unless we think of his saying, "You shall not defraud", as the 10th commandment re-worded. But Jesus did give that rich young man one commandment specifically designed for him; a command which would prove that he really had not kept the 10th commandment; that he really was a covetous man. "One thing you lack: Go your way, sell whatever you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come take up the cross and follow me." Jesus said to him that there was one thing that he lacked, but then he gave him 6 things to do; all of which would show whether he lacked obedience to the 10th commandment, or had broken it. This should show us that the commandments of God have a depth to them, and that we all stumble in many ways in regard to our obedience to the word and will of God. The rich young ruler thought that it would be a simple thing to enter the kingdom of God because he had a simple view of the commandments. But now he saw that it was very hard and difficult. Or was it? If he had received Jesus' word and acted upon it, he would have entered. There was only one thing which he lacked, Jesus had said, but what was that? It was seeing that he was really a sinner and not a righteous man. But in seeing and believing himself to be a sinner, he could have found the true riches in Christ, by believing in His Word. He could have said to our Lord, "Please show me now, how I can do this"; and Jesus would have said to him what he said to his own disciples a few moments later. "With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible. But since he knew that he could not do what Jesus had commanded of him; he thought that it could not be done. This is a legal obedience, and it will never bring a person an everlasting inheritance. Only Christ can give you that. It was obvious that this man's besetting sin was covetousness. But in committing that sin and falling into it over and over again, he was really breaking all the commandments of God.

Let us think for a few moments about how hard it is for those who are trusting in riches to enter the kingdom of God. Let's think of the 1st commandment of the 10 commandments in relation to the 10th. A person who is trusting in riches is a covetous person. If you are covetous, you really have another God besides the true and living God; you love your money and possessions more than God. You will pay more attention more to your business and your accounts than to God and the Bible. But the Lord Jesus says that you cannot serve God and mammon. A person may pay lip-service to knowing God or walking with God, but really, their whole mind and heart may be caught up with things related to their money and their possessions. You must ask yourself this very serious question, whether you are a

rich person, or whether you desire to be rich; or whether you are poor person who desires to be rich? Have I given my all to God; that Christ might save me? Have I given to Christ my soul, my body, my strength, my resources, my days, and my plans for personal advancement? Does God have my heart? Do I consciously include God in all my thoughts and plans and works, or is he left out? All of this is done by faith in Jesus Christ. Do you not see that if you are not doing this, that there is no way that you can come to know God or have eternal life, if you are not willing to include Him in all of your thoughts? Psalm 10, verse 4 says, "The wicked in his proud countenance does not seek God; God is in none of his thoughts." But covetousness is very particularly a sin of the mind and the heart, encompassing all of what you want to have and possess, or hold on to once you possess it. The rich young ruler could not sell all that he had and give to the poor because it did not seem right to him. He had worked hard for all of the property and possessions that he had. He intended to enjoy these things that he had worked hard for; and nobody, not even God, would take it from him. But Jesus is good, and He is God. And no one is good but God alone. And Jesus, being the Lord of all, asked him for it. The Triune God had given him everything that he had, and yet he could not give it back when asked for it. Let me ask you, now, if Christ asked you today to give away all that you have worked hard for; would you be able to go home and start making plans to do so? I am not saying that this is what He is asking for from you, but I am asking that if He asked for it; would you go about to do it?

Think about the 2nd commandment. You shall make no graven image or likeness of God, of anything on earth, and call it God or worship it. And yet this rich young ruler, and many people in our day as well, have made their money and their possessions their god. Job says in Job Chapter 31, verse 24, "If I have made gold my hope, or said to fine gold, 'You are my confidence; if I have rejoiced because my wealth was great, and because I gain much; This would have been an iniquity deserving judgment, for I would have denied God who is above.'" Some persons may think that they are Christians and yet they love to count their gold and their assets, more than look into God's word and count His promises. How can they inherit the kingdom of heaven?

Think about the 3rd commandment. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. The rich young ruler could come to Jesus, reverencing him by bowing before Him, calling Him good Teacher; and asking and inquiring of Him the way to eternal life. But when he was told it, he walked away sad. He may have even phrased these words that he spoke to Jesus, in his own mind, as a prayer to God. But if he did, he surely took the name of the Lord in vain. We must ask ourselves; if we come to God in prayer and ask Him to show us what to do with our money; how we should use it and how can we help His kingdom and cause; will we then do what the Spirit moving in our heart is asking us to do? He lays a particular poor person upon your heart to help them, and yet you will not consider more carefully, more particularly, how you can help them. It is too much you think; it is

too hard; I cannot do it. I believe that you are taking His name in vain. This is just a sample of how the law works spiritually to convict us of how we have not kept his commandments. We could do the same thing with all the rest of the commandments of God.

This is why it says in James Chapter 2, and verse 5, “Listen my beloved brethren: Has God not chosen the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?” “But you have dishonored the poor man.” “Do not the rich oppress you and drag you into the courts?” “Do they not blaspheme that noble name by which you are called?” “If you really fulfill the royal law according to the Scripture, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself,’ you do well; but if you show partiality, you commit sin, and are convicted by the law as transgressors.” “For whoever shall keep the whole law, and yet stumble in **one** point, he is guilty of all.” So, you see, the issue is not; can I or have I, kept all the commandments of God. Because you and I cannot and have not kept them anywhere near perfectly. We are all very guilty in this regard and deserve eternal punishment from God’s standpoint. The issue is whether you will have faith in Christ; whether you will trust in Him as your Savior and Lord; whether you will give Him everything that you have; whether you are rich or whether you are poor. You can be a very poor person and still be very covetous. You might covetously desire everything that belongs to your neighbor. You might think that all your problems will be solved if you won the lottery. Or, you could be a rich man and not be covetous; as Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, and Job were. But it is rare. The rich man usually will, unless he is very prayerful and very careful, fall into trusting in His riches instead of trusting in God. Jesus here, is saying that this rich young ruler and the vast majority of rich people are in the harder, more difficult situation, because they have been deceived by their riches into a position of worldly security, and they really think that they are well-off even though they do not have Christ and His grace. This can even happen to Christians.

Listen to the words of Jesus in Revelation Chapter 3, verse 14 and following, which are addressed to professed Christians – “And to the angel of the church of the Laodiceans write, ‘These things says the Amen, the Faithful and True Witness, the Beginning of the creation of God: ‘I know your works, that you are neither cold nor hot, I will vomit you out of My mouth.’ “Because you say, ‘I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing’—and do not know that you are wretched, miserable, poor, blind, and naked—I counsel you to buy from Me gold refined in the fire, that you may be rich...” You can see, can’t you, that the gold that Christ is talking about is the true riches of His grace which would lead to their becoming zealous for keeping His commandments; not in a legal way of obedience; but the way of their trusting in Christ’s atonement to cover all the inadequacies of their obedience. Following Christ in learning to do good works; learning to be generous in their giving; learning how to be thoughtful in how they could help others; denying themselves and taking up their cross to follow Christ by

taking their stand for the truth of His Word; this would be “gold refined in the fire”. Trusting in His power to help them to do what is right and to find great joy in it; trusting that the riches of his word is enough to provide for, nourish, and sustain them; trusting in the Lord that He would supply every good thing which they would need. “And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4: 19) When a person enters the kingdom of God; he does so by faith. When a person goes about to live the Christian life, they live it by faith in the Son of God. When that person finds that through Christ’s merit, he will inherit eternal life through what Jesus has done and is doing for him; he is able to give his old life away to Jesus, and exchanges it for the new life which Christ brings. He knows or should know, that this life will involve self-denial, cross-bearing and giving to the poor. But you will find more than enough treasure will be stored up in your heart and in heaven where you are going.

2ndly - I would now like you to think about your going through the eye of a needle.

(Verse 25)

Jesus says, “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.” “And they were greatly astonished, saying among themselves, ‘Who then can be saved?’” They thought that a person would have to be “pulled through a knot-hole”, so to speak, in order to enter the kingdom of God, by the way that Jesus was speaking. But this is not what Jesus was speaking of. There have been various explanations of this saying down through the years, in which certain commentators and others have tried to make the obvious impossibility of the words, seem more plausible. Listen to R.C.H. Lenski on the wrong interpretations– “Not until the fifth century did some men thinking about this passage, change the word for camel in the Greek, Κάμελος, into Κάμιλος, the heavy rope or cable that is attached to the anchor of a ship.” “This alteration was not a gain, for no cable can be threaded through a needle’s eye.” “In the fifteenth century the opposite was tried, the needle’s eye was enlarged by saying that it referred to a small portal that was used by foot passengers when entering a walled city, through which a camel might pass after its load had been removed.” “This changed the impossible into the possible and was attractive because it suggested that, as the camel had to leave its load and crawl on its knees, so the rich man had to shed his riches, i.e., his love for them and humble himself on his knees and crawl into the kingdom.” “But as in Matthew 23: 24 Jesus had in mind an actual gnat and an actual camel, (that is; the Pharisees straining a gnat and swallowing a camel) so here the camel and needle’s eye are actual.” I agree with Lenski on this. Jesus is telling everyone with ears to hear, that it is extremely hard for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God, and He gives this great illustration. A camel with its long neck and legs, and its hump or humps on its back is not going to go through the eye of a needle. Most of you know that the camel is used as a mode of transportation in the Middle East, and it is also a pack

animal. The riches of this world can be compared to a camel. They supposedly get people to where they are going to, but not in spiritual and eternal things. I hope that you can see that a camel is a rather unusual conveyance to ride on, to get to where a person wants to go to. But the rich man cannot find salvation or get to heaven, packing his covetous desires and earthly-minded goals along with him like the humps on the camel's back.

In getting on-line and researching the camel; to my surprise, I found this: "Question: How much water does a camel's hump hold?" "Answer – None!" "A camel's hump does not hold water at all - it actually stores fat." "The camel uses it as nourishment when food is scarce." "If a camel uses the fat inside the hump, the hump will become limp and droop down." So think about it; the camel's hump, which you would think would hold water, really holds fat. Riches, which you would think would be something that that would hold water to the thirsting soul; which you would think would nourish and sustain the heart and mind of the rich man; instead in most cases, they will not help anyone on to give them joy or peace, or in any way help them to know the meaning of life; or help them on to heaven. And what is worse; when riches are taken away or lost, the person who had them will become "limp and droop down in their soul". Their trust was not in the right place. In the camel; with proper food and rest, the hump will return to normal. For the rich man, if his stock portfolio rebounds and grows in value, and his assets are secure, he thinks that all is well with his soul, but it not so. Riches seem to be the answer to everything as it says in Ecclesiastes 10: 19. But it is not so in eternal things. The camel will simply not go through the eye of the needle.

A few other verses will confirm this. Proverbs 11: 4 – "Riches do not profit in the day of wrath, but righteousness delivers from death." Proverbs 11: 16 – "A gracious woman retains honor, (the true riches) but ruthless men retain riches." Proverbs 23: 4 and 5 – "Do not overwork to be rich; because of your own understanding, cease!" "Will you set your eyes on that which is not?" "For riches certainly make themselves wings; they fly away like an eagle toward heaven." Psalm 37: 16 – "A little that a righteous man has is better than the riches of many wicked." "For the arms of the wicked shall be broken, but the Lord upholds the righteous." The word for needle in our text is ραπηιός, (ra-pe-is) and in Luke's gospel it is a βελόνες, (be-lon-es) a surgical needle. And truly a surgery certainly needs to be performed upon a rich man's heart before he can enter the kingdom of God. It is the needle's eye that the rich man has to somehow go through in order to enter the kingdom of heaven. In other words; something very radical has to change in his whole being, to shrink this camel down to a very small size. Thomas Manton says, "That there is something in turning Christian, or entering into the kingdom of God, that answers the needle's eye, and that is the strait gate and the narrow way which leads to life, Matthew 7: 14, the strait gate of repentance, and the narrow way of constant mortification.(or putting sin to death, by the power of the Spirit) That there is something on the rich man's part which answers to the

camel; namely, that they grow so great and bulky in regard to their pride, worldly lusts, joys, and confidences, that they cannot reduce themselves to those straits that are necessary for entering into the kingdom of God, as the camel's bulk and bunchback hinders his entrance into a strait place." "This; without straining, I might observe; though I must tell you, I think the main intent of this proverbial speech is nothing else but this, to express an extraordinary difficulty on the rich man's part, *which* is not to be removed but by the almighty power of grace." What Manton is saying is that every person, not just the rich man, has to go through the strait gate; every person must go through the eye of the needle, and not be a camel. And this leads me to our last truth which we want to consider this morning.

3rdly - I would like you to think with me about the good possibilities with God.

(Verse 27)

"But Jesus looked at them and said, 'With men it is impossible, but not with God; for with God all things are possible.'" Jesus is speaking, here, particularly of the salvation of rich men; their entering the kingdom of God and their inheriting eternal life. It is not a thing impossible; not with God. It is impossible with men. What is it that God must change in the rich man's heart so that they might be saved? What is it that they must do, as a rich person, so that they might not only enter the kingdom of God, but become useful in the kingdom of God, and glorify him. Well, if you will turn over to Proverbs 13, verse 7 with me, we will think about these words once again. I think that things will come clearer. God must change the heart of the rich man, and then out of that great change comes an entirely different attitude toward himself and money. "There is one who makes himself rich, yet has nothing; and one who makes himself poor, yet has great riches. Before God does a work of grace in a rich man's heart, his whole attitude is that he is "making himself rich". Now, this is something that can happen to a man who is actually poor, as well. A man who is poor could borrow excessive amounts of money, or run up great debts on credit cards, and he could make himself rich. At least that is how he sees himself when he does these things. As the New American Standard translation has it; "There is one who pretends to be rich, but has nothing." The man who actually has earned the money thinks of himself as having made himself rich by his own wisdom and hard work, and the poor man who borrows also thinks that he has made himself rich. Really, both have nothing in relation to the true riches, because they do not have Christ's wisdom and grace working in their hearts. They do not see everything that they truly have and own as coming from God, and belonging to Him. They are unwilling to give all of themselves and their substance to Christ, so that God could give all of Christ and his riches to them. It is all or nothing with God. When God changes a rich man's heart, he might still have great riches, but in his heart he pretends to be poor; he makes himself poor, by not spending his riches on himself; but lavishing it on Christ's kingdom and cause, and he is very desirous to help the poor. He does not

flaunt his wealth any longer. He has now has the true riches and having them has made him humble. The true riches have satisfied his soul, and as a result, he no longer loves the world and the things in the world, or sees that they are so great and important. He sees investments in God's kingdom and God's people as the great thing.

Thanks be to God that He does have mercy on some rich men, and saves them and changes their attitude entirely. Listen to 1 Samuel, Chapter 2, and verse 6 – “The Lord kills and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and brings up.” “The Lord makes poor and makes rich; He brings low and lifts up.” “He raises the poor from the dust and lifts the beggar from the ash heap, to set them among princes and make them inherit the throne of glory.” That is being given the true riches. That is being brought to saving faith. When a rich man begins to see himself as poor spiritually, he is in a good position to do good to others and to help forward the kingdom of God and Christ. Zacchaeus in Luke 19, who was a chief tax gatherer, and a rich man; when Jesus told him that he was going to come to his house to stay, he made haste and came down from the tree had climbed up into, in order to see Jesus, and it says, “he received Him joyfully.” Others, when they saw it, they complained saying, “He (that is Jesus) has gone to be a guest with a man who is a sinner.” That is what God does through Jesus Christ, in His mercy toward those whom he would call to Himself. He causes them to see themselves as spiritually poor. Verse 8 of Luke 19 says, “Then Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, ‘Look, Lord, I give half of my goods to the poor; and if I have taken anything from anyone by false accusation, I restore four-fold.’” “And Jesus said to him, ‘Today salvation has come to this house, because he also is a son of Abraham; for the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which is lost.’” Do you see how happy Zacchaeus was to be able to restore what he had once taken to make himself rich? Do you see how joyful he was in the thought that he could be generous to the poor? Do you now see that all things are possible with God? If you are not a person who often thinks about what you could do, to give to help the poor or to further Christ's kingdom; things can change for you. You don't have to walk away sad, like the rich young ruler did. You simply need to give everything that you are and have up to God, and be willing to use everything that you have in his service. He will probably not be asking you to do what He asked this rich young ruler to do; to give all your possessions away, or to give great sums of money. But he will make it known to you by His Spirit what you should do specifically with your money and possessions. Think of what Jesus saw in Luke 21: 1-4. It says there: “And He looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury, and He saw also a certain poor widow putting in two mites.” “So He said, “Truly I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all; for all these out of their abundance have put in offerings for God, but she out of her poverty put in all the livelihood that she had.” Since she had already given herself and everything that she had to God; this great act of generosity was something that she knew that she must do; not to merit

entrance into the kingdom and to inherit eternal life; but rather she knew, that she had such great treasure in heaven. “For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.” It is by believing in Jesus that you become truly rich; rich toward God, and compassionate toward the poor, and thus you shall inherit eternal life.