

# The goodness of God

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Jesus' answer to his disciples' question, "Who then can be saved?" reminds us that God does not see things as man does, and that things considered valuable in this world's terms may be of no account in determining our salvation. JESUS WAS ONCE ASKED, "Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" (Mt. 19:16). At first Jesus does not answer the question, but rather challenges the description of himself as 'good'. "And [Jesus] said unto him, Why callest thou me good? there is none good but one, that is, God: but if thou wilt enter into life, keep the commandments" (v. 17). The word 'God' does not appear in the best Greek manuscripts of this verse and is omitted in some translations, yet is strongly implied in Jesus' reply. It is God's goodness that Jesus wishes to highlight.

We hope to show that it is the goodness of God that features in the next two discourses in Matthew—one relating to the difficulty of a rich man entering the kingdom of heaven, and the other the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard who were each promised a penny for their work. Jesus concludes this parable with the words of the owner of the vineyard: "Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?" (20:15). Thus this collection of three discourses starts and finishes with references to the goodness of God.

Jesus was often plied with trick questions by the 'learned' of his day but the question in 19:16 was not one of these, for in Mark's account of this incident we learn that Jesus beheld the man who asked the question and "loved him" (10:21). Jesus addresses the question asked by the man, reminding him of the commandments in the Law of Moses. Having kept all these since he was young, the man wishes to know what more is required—what other "good thing" might he do to procure eternal life. Jesus tells him to do something that he would find very painful: "Jesus said unto him, If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me" (Mt. 19:21). The man went away very sorrowful because he had great possessions.

## Riches and the kingdom of heaven

Seeing his sorrow, Jesus commented: "Verily I say unto you, That a rich man shall hardly enter into the kingdom of heaven" (v. 23). Jesus then likens the difficulty of a rich man entering the kingdom to that of a camel passing through the eye of a needle. We may ask why Jesus used this strange comparison.

It is common to identify this 'eye of a needle' as a narrow gate into Jerusalem through which a camel could pass only by removing its load and getting onto its knees. The lesson from this would be that we can enter the Kingdom only by shedding our own burden of sins and praying to the Father. However, there is a difficulty with this interpretation. No gate known as 'the eye of the needle' has been identified in the Jerusalem of Jesus' day. It seems extremely unlikely, therefore, that Jesus would be referring to such a non-existent gate which would mean nothing to his hearers.

It has also been suggested that the Greek word translated 'camel', *kamēlos*, should really be *kamilos*, meaning 'cable' or 'rope', indicating that it would be difficult to thread such a rope through the eye of a needle. The problem with these 'explanations' is that Jesus wished to convey the idea of something that was humanly impossible. This is shown by his answer to the disciples' query, "Who then can be saved?" (v. 25). Jesus replied: "With men this is impossible; but with God all things are possible" (v. 26). A very similar saying is found in Jewish Talmudic literature which refers to an elephant passing through the eye of a needle as a figure of speech to imply that which was highly unlikely or impossible. Jesus was thus speaking of something that was not just difficult but impossible.

## Riches: a blessing from God?

Did the Lord mean that it is literally impossible for rich men to enter the Kingdom of God? Clearly this cannot be the case, for Jesus said in another place: ". . . ye shall see Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob . . . in the kingdom of God" (Lk. 13:28). All these three were rich men, and will be in the Kingdom. Job was one of the richest men of the east (Job 1:1-3), yet from Scripture's testimony of him it seems most unlikely that he will be excluded from the Kingdom (see Ezek. 14:12-20; Jas. 5:11).

Before we identify what the 'impossible' thing is, it is worth remembering that in ancient times it was commonly thought that riches were a sign of God's approval. Such an opinion probably prompted the amazement of the disciples and their question, "Who then can be saved?" The same thinking is apparent in the Book of Job, where Job's friends thought that the loss of his riches must have been caused by some unrighteousness on his part. Even Job himself exclaimed: "As God liveth, who hath taken away my judgment [RV: right; Heb. *mishpat*, verdict] . . ." (27:2). To Job, the loss of his wealth seemed to suggest that God's verdict of his righteousness had been withdrawn.

In truth, although riches are not necessarily a sign of divine approval, neither are they a bar to entry into the Kingdom. What is impossible, though, is to suggest that riches are a guarantee of eternal life. This is what Jesus says

is impossible. The Apostle Paul, writing to Timothy, said: “Charge them that are rich in this world, that they be not highminded, nor trust in uncertain riches, but in the living God, who giveth us richly all things to enjoy” (1 Tim. 6:17). The relevant characteristic of wealthy men of faith, like Abraham, was their trust in God, not their trust in riches. Conversely men like Peter, who followed God’s Son at the cost of riches in this world, were assured: “And every one that hath forsaken houses, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my name’s sake, shall receive an hundredfold, and shall inherit everlasting life” (Mt. 19:29). Such people can inherit everlasting life despite their humble circumstances because with God “all things are possible”.

### **The first shall be last**

Following this promise to his disciples that they will not be losers by their forsaking all and following him, Jesus underlines the point: “But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first” (v. 30). The word translated ‘first’ (Gk. *prōtos*) means first in time, place, order or importance. Here is further reassurance for those who desire to procure themselves entry to the Kingdom. God is no respecter of persons. It is not necessarily those who are ‘first’ in time or place or importance who will enter the Kingdom. The Jews were the ‘first’ to hear the oracles of God, chronologically, yet Gentiles who become spiritual ‘Jews’ by adoption may enter in before them. The scribes and Pharisees were ‘first’ in importance in their day, but Jesus assured them that “the kingdom of God shall be taken from you, and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof” (21:43).

Jesus emphasises this similar point by means of the Parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard. Early in the morning the owner of the vineyard hires labourers to tend his vineyard, agreeing to pay them each a penny. These work through the heat of the day. He later hires other labourers who work for only an hour. At the end of the day he rewards them each with the penny agreed. Those who have worked all day then murmur that they have received only the same as those who have laboured for just an hour.

What is the lesson of this parable? We may demur at the suggestion that the penny represents eternal life because we cannot imagine that any given such a reward would be discontented. But the parable was not meant to be a ‘play’ enacting future events; it was told to make a point. The point is that God’s offered reward is not proportional to the labour we expend in return. Here then is something else by which a man cannot attain to eternal life. It may be attained, but not because of the ‘good things’ a man may have done. Rather, it may be gained exclusively because of the goodness of God. Hence the householder replies to the discontented: “Is it not lawful for me to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?” (20:15).

### **Possible with God**

It is possible, then, for men—rich or otherwise—to be given eternal life. What is impossible with merely human resources is made possible by God, so long as men and women trust in Him and follow His Son. Any ‘good things’ or works done by them serve simply to demonstrate the faith by which they are saved; but the salvation itself is through God’s grace.

The Kingdom will be inherited by those like Abraham Isaac and Jacob who, despite their wealth, were nonetheless “strangers and pilgrims on the earth” and who “[desired] a better country” (Heb. 11:13,16), putting their trust not in what riches they had but rather in the God who had made promises to them. Jesus “became poor” for us (2 Cor. 8:9), and did not faint but “believed to see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living” (Ps. 27:13). The same reward is for those who similarly believe and follow the Son of God, regardless of their wealth or status in this world.