

The Hardness of the Way

by George MacDonald

The sermon emphasizes the difficulty of entering the kingdom of heaven, particularly for those who trust in their riches and are unwilling to let go of their possessions.

Scripture: Matthew 5:48, Matthew 19:24, Mark 10:24, Luke 14:33, Luke 18:22

Topics: "Surrender To God", "Material Possessions"

Description

George MacDonald preaches about the challenges of entering the kingdom of God, focusing on the story of the rich young man who struggled to let go of his possessions. He emphasizes the difficulty of truly surrendering to God and the dangers of being enslaved by material possessions, whether rich or poor. MacDonald highlights the importance of keeping God's commandments, seeking eternal life, and being willing to let go of anything that hinders one's relationship with God. He stresses that true salvation comes from knowing and being in oneness with God, rather than trusting in external merits or possessions.

Transcript

'Children, how hard is it!--St. Mark x. 24.

I suspect there is scarcely a young man rich and thoughtful who is not ready to feel our Lord's treatment of this young man hard. He is apt to ask, 'Why should it be difficult for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven?' He is ready to look upon the natural fact as an arbitrary decree, arising, shall I say? from some prejudice in the divine mind, or at least from some objection to the joys of well-being, as regarded from the creatures' side. Why should the rich fare differently from other people in respect of the world to come? They do not perceive that the law is they shall fare like other people, whereas they want to fare as rich people. A condition of things in which it would be easy for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of heaven is to me inconceivable. There is no kingdom of this world into which a rich man may not easily enter--in which, if he be but rich enough, he may not be the first: a kingdom into which it would be easy for a rich man to enter could be no kingdom of heaven. The rich man does not by any necessity of things belong to the kingdom of Satan, but into that kingdom he is especially welcome, whereas into the kingdom of heaven he will be just as welcome as another man.

I suspect also that many a rich man turns from the record of this incident with the resentful feeling that there lies in it a claim upon his whole having; while there are many, and those by no means only of the rich, who cannot believe the Lord really meant to take the poor fellow's money from him. To the man born to riches they seem not merely a natural, but an essential condition of well-being; and the man who has

made his money, feels it his by the labour of his soul, the travail of the day, and the care of the night. Each feels a right to have and to hold the things he possesses; and if there is a necessity for his entering into the kingdom of heaven, it is hard indeed that right and necessity should confront each other, and constitute all but a bare impossibility! Why should he not 'make the best of both worlds'? He would compromise, if he might; he would serve Mammon a little, and God much. He would not have such a 'best of both worlds' as comes of putting the lower in utter subservience to the higher--of casting away the treasure of this world and taking the treasure of heaven instead. He would gain as little as may be of heaven--but something, with the loss of as little as possible of the world. That which he desires of heaven is not its best; that which he would not yield of the world is its most worthless.

I can well imagine an honest youth, educated in Christian forms, thus reasoning with himself:--'Is the story of general relation? Is this demand made upon me? If I make up my mind to be a Christian, shall I be required to part with all I possess? It must have been comparatively easy in those times to give up the kind of things they had! If I had been he, I am sure I should have done it--at the demand of the Saviour in person. Things are very different now! Wealth did not then imply the same social relations as now! I should be giving up so much more! Neither do I love money as he was in danger of doing: in all times the Jews have been Mammon-worshippers! I try to do good with my money! Besides, am I not a Christian already? Why should the same thing be required of me as of a young Jew? If every one who, like me, has a conscience about money, and cares to use it well, had to give up all, the power would at once be in the hands of the irreligious; they would have no opposition, and the world would go to the devil! We read often in the Bible of rich men, but never of any other who was desired to part with all that he had! When Ananias was struck dead, it was not because he did not give up all his money, but because he pretended to have done so. St. Peter expressly says, "While it remained was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power?" How would the Lord have been buried but for the rich Joseph? Besides, the Lord said, "If thou wouldst be perfect, go, sell that thou hast." I cannot be perfect; it is hopeless; and he does not expect it.'--It would be more honest if he said, 'I do not want to be perfect; I am content to be saved.' Such as he do not care for being perfect as their Father in heaven is perfect, but for being what they call saved. They little think that without perfection there is no salvation--that perfection is salvation: they are one.'--'And again,' he adds, in conclusion triumphant, 'the text says, "How hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of God!" I do not trust in my riches. I know that they can do nothing to save me!'

I will suppose myself in immediate communication with such a youth. I should care little to set forth anything called truth, except in siege for surrender to the law of liberty. If I cannot persuade, I would be silent. Nor would I labour to instruct the keenest intellect; I would rather learn for myself. To persuade the heart, the will, the action, is alone worth the full energy of a man. His strength is first for his own, then for his neighbour's manhood. He must first pluck out the beam out of his own eye, then the mote out of his brother's--if indeed the mote in his brother's be more than the projection of the beam in his own. To make a man happy as a lark, might be to do him grievous wrong: to make a man wake, rise, look up, turn, is worth the life and death of the Son of the Eternal.

I say then to the youth:--

'Have you kept--have you been keeping the commandments?'

'I will not dare to say that,' I suppose him to answer. 'I ought to know better than that youth how much is implied in the keeping of the commandments!'

'But,' I ask insisting, 'does your answer imply that, counting the Lord a hard master, you have taken the less pains to do as he would have you? or that, bending your energies to the absolute perfection he requires, you have the more perceived the impossibility of fulfilling the law? Can you have failed to note that it is the youth who has been for years observing the commandments on whom the further, and to you startling, command is laid, to part with all that he has? Surely not! Are you then one on whom, because of correspondent condition, the same command could be laid? Have you, in any sense like that in which the youth answered the question, kept the commandments? Have you, unsatisfied with the result of what keeping you have given them, and filled with desire to be perfect, gone kneeling to the Master to learn more of the way to eternal life? or are you so well satisfied with what you are, that you have never sought eternal life, never hungered and thirsted after the righteousness of God, the perfection of your being? If this latter be your condition, then be comforted; the Master does not require of you to sell what you have and give to the poor. You follow him! You go with him to preach good tidings!--you who care not for righteousness! You are not one whose company is desirable to the Master. Be comforted, I say: he does not want you; he will not ask you to open your purse for him; you may give or withhold; it is nothing to him. What! is he to be obliged to one outside his kingdom--to the untrue, the ignoble, for money? Bring him a true heart, an obedient hand: he has given his life-blood for that; but your money--he neither needs it nor cares for it.'

'Pray, do not deal harshly with me. I confess I have not been what I ought, but I want to repent, and would fain enter into life. Do not think, because I am not prepared, without the certainty that it is required of me, to cast from me all I have that I have no regard for higher things.'

'Once more, then, go and keep the commandments. It is not come to your money yet. The commandments are enough for you. You are not yet a child in the kingdom. You do not care for the arms of your father; you value only the shelter of his roof. As to your money, let the commandments direct you how to use it. It is in you but pitiable presumption to wonder whether it is required of you to sell all that you have. When in keeping the commandments you have found the great reward of loving righteousness--the further reward of discovering that, with all the energy you can put forth, you are but an unprofitable servant; when you have come to know that the law can be kept only by such as need no law; when you have come to feel that you would rather pass out of being than live on such a poor, miserable, selfish life as alone you can call yours; when you are aware of a something beyond all that your mind can think, yet not beyond what your heart can desire--a something that is not yours, seems as if it never could be yours, which yet your life is worthless without; when you have come therefore to the Master with the cry, "What shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" it may be he will then say to you, "Sell all that you have and give to the poor, and come follow me." If he do, then will you be of men most honourable if you obey--of men most pitiable if you refuse. Till then you would be no comfort to him, no pleasure to his friends. For the young man to have sold all and followed him would have been to accept God's patent of peerage: to you it is not offered. Were one of the disobedient, in the hope of the honour, to part with every straw he possessed, he would but be sent back to keep the commandments in the new and easier circumstances of his poverty.

'Does this comfort you? Then alas for you! A thousand times alas! Your relief is to know that the Lord has no need of you--does not require you to part with your money, does not offer you himself instead! You do not indeed sell him for thirty pieces of silver, but you are glad not to buy him with all that you have! Wherein do you differ from the youth of the story? In this, that he was invited to do more, to do everything, to partake of the divine nature; you have not had it in your power to refuse; you are not fit to be invited.

Such as you can never enter the kingdom. You would not even know you were in heaven if you were in it; you would not see it around you if you sat on the very footstool of the throne.'

'But I do not trust in my riches; I trust in the merits of my Lord and Saviour. I trust in his finished work. I trust in the sacrifice he has offered.'

'Yes; yes!--you will trust in anything but the Man himself who tells you it is hard to be saved! Not all the merits of God and his Christ can give you eternal life; only God and his Christ can; and they cannot, would not if they could, without your keeping the commandments. The knowledge of the living God is eternal life. What have you to do with his merits? You have to know his being, himself. And as to trusting in your riches--who ever imagined he could have eternal life by his riches? No man with half a conscience, half a head, and no heart at all, could suppose that any man trusting in his riches to get him in, could enter the kingdom. That would be too absurd. The money-confident Jew might hope that, as his riches were a sign of the favour of God, that favour would not fail him at the last; or their possession might so enlarge his self-satisfaction that he could not entertain the idea of being lost; but trust in his riches!--no. It is the last refuge of the riches-lover, the riches-worshipper, the man to whom their possession is essential for his peace, to say he does not trust in them to take him into life. Doubtless the man who thinks of nothing so much, trusts in them in a very fearful sense; but hundreds who do so will yet say, "I do not trust in my riches; I trust in--" this or that stock-phrase.'

'You forget yourself; you are criticizing the Lord's own words: he said, "How hard is it for them that trust in riches to enter into the kingdom of heaven!"'

'I do not forget myself; to this I have been leading you:--our Lord, I believe, never said those words. The reading of both the Sinaitic and the Vatican manuscript, the oldest two we have, that preferred, I am glad to see, by both Westcott and Tischendorf, though not by Tregelles or the Revisers, is, "Children, how hard is it to enter into the kingdom of God!" These words I take to be those of the Lord. Some copyist, with the mind at least of a rich man, dissatisfied with the Lord's way of regarding money, and like yourself anxious to compromise, must forsooth affix his marginal gloss--to the effect that it is not the possessing of riches, but the trusting in them, that makes it difficult to enter into the kingdom! Difficult? Why, it is eternally impossible for the man who trusts in his riches to enter into the kingdom! it is for the man who has riches it is difficult. Is the Lord supposed to teach that for a man who trusts in his riches it is possible to enter the kingdom? that, though impossible with men, this is possible with God? God take the Mammon-worshipper into his glory! No! the Lord never said it. The annotation of Mr. Facingbothways crept into the text, and stands in the English version. Our Lord was not in the habit of explaining away his hard words. He let them stand in all the glory of the burning fire wherewith they would purge us. Where their simplicity finds corresponding simplicity, they are understood. The twofold heart must mistake. It is hard for a rich man, just because he is a rich man, to enter into the kingdom of heaven.'

Some, no doubt, comfort themselves with the thought that, if it be so hard, the fact will be taken into account: it is but another shape of the fancy that the rich man must be differently treated from his fellows; that as he has had his good things here, so he must have them there too. Certain as life they will have absolute justice, that is, fairness, but what will that avail, if they enter not into the kingdom? It is life they must have; there is no enduring of existence without life. They think they can do without eternal life, if only they may live for ever! Those who know what eternal life means count it the one terror to have to live on without it.

Take then the Lord's words thus: 'Children, how hard is it to enter into the kingdom of God!' It is quite like his way of putting things. Calling them first to reflect on the original difficulty for every man of entering into the kingdom of God, he reasserts in yet stronger phrase the difficulty of the rich man: 'It is easier for a camel to go through a needle's eye, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.' It always was, always will be, hard to enter into the kingdom of heaven. It is hard even to believe that one must be born from above--must pass into a new and unknown consciousness. The law-faithful Jew, the ceremonial Christian, shrinks from the self-annihilation, the life of grace and truth, the upper air of heavenly delight, the all-embracing love that fills the law full and sets it aside. They cannot accept a condition of being as in itself eternal life. And hard to believe in, this life, this kingdom of God, this simplicity of absolute existence, is hard to enter. How hard? As hard as the Master of salvation could find words to express the hardness: 'If any man cometh unto me, and hateth not . . . his own life also, he cannot be my disciple.' And the rich man must find it harder than another to hate his own life. There is so much associated with it to swell out the self of his consciousness, that the difficulty of casting it from him as the mere ugly shadow of the self God made, is vastly increased.

None can know how difficult it is to enter into the kingdom of heaven, but those who have tried--tried hard, and have not ceased to try. I care not to be told that one may pass at once into all possible sweetness of assurance; it is not assurance I desire, but the thing itself; not the certainty of eternal life, but eternal life. I care not what other preachers may say, while I know that in St. Paul the spirit and the flesh were in frequent strife. They only, I repeat, know how hard it is to enter into life, who are in conflict every day, are growing to have this conflict every hour--nay, begin to see that no moment is life, without the presence that maketh strong. Let any tell me of peace and content, yea, joy unspeakable as the instant result of the new birth; I deny no such statement, refuse no such testimony; all I care to say is, that, if by salvation they mean less than absolute oneness with God, I count it no salvation, neither would be content with it if it included every joy in the heaven of their best imagining. If they are not righteous even as he is righteous, they are not saved, whatever be their gladness or their content; they are but on the way to be saved. If they do not love their neighbour--not as themselves: that is a phrase ill to understand, and not of Christ, but--as Christ loves him, I cannot count them entered into life, though life may have begun to enter into them. Those whose idea of life is simply an eternal one, best know how hard it is to enter into life. The Lord said, 'Children how hard is it to enter into the kingdom!' the disciples little knew what was required of them!

Demands unknown before are continually being made upon the Christian: it is the ever fresh rousing and calling, asking and sending of the Spirit that worketh in the children of obedience. When he thinks he has attained, then is he in danger; when he finds the mountain he has so long been climbing show suddenly a distant peak, radiant in eternal whiteness, and all but lost in heavenly places, a peak whose glory-crowned apex it seems as if no human foot could ever reach--then is there hope for him; proof there is then that he has been climbing, for he beholds the yet unclimbed; he sees what he could not see before; if he knows little of what he is, he knows something of what he is not. He learns ever afresh that he is not in the world as Jesus was in the world; but the very wind that breathes courage as he climbs is the hope that one day he shall be like him, seeing him as he is.

Possessions are Things, and Things in general, save as affording matter of conquest and means of spiritual annexation, are very ready to prove inimical to the better life. The man who for consciousness of well-being depends upon anything but life, the life essential, is a slave; he hangs on what is less than himself. He is not perfect who, deprived of every thing, would not sit down calmly content, aware of a

well-being untouched; for none the less would he be possessor of all things, the child of the Eternal. Things are given us, this body first of things, that through them we may be trained both to independence and true possession of them. We must possess them; they must not possess us. Their use is to mediate--as shapes and manifestations in lower kind of the things that are unseen, that is, in themselves unseeable, the things that belong, not to the world of speech, but the world of silence, not to the world of showing, but the world of being, the world that cannot be shaken, and must remain. These things unseen take form in the things of time and space--not that they may exist, for they exist in and from eternal Godhead, but that their being may be known to those in training for the eternal; these things unseen the sons and daughters of God must possess. But instead of reaching out after them, they grasp at their forms, reward the things seen as the things to be possessed, fall in love with the bodies instead of the souls of them. There are good people who can hardly believe that, if the young man had consented to give up his wealth, the Lord would not then have told him to keep it; they too seem to think the treasure in heaven insufficient as a substitute. They cannot believe he would have been better off without his wealth. 'Is not wealth power?' they ask. It is indeed power, and so is a wolf hid in the robe; it is power, but as of a brute machine, of which the owner ill knows the handles and cranks, valves and governor. The multitude of those who read the tale are of the same mind as the youth himself--in his worst moment, as he turned and went--with one vast difference, that they are not sorrowful.

Things can never be really possessed by the man who cannot do without them--who would not be absolutely, divinely content in the consciousness that the cause of his being is within it--and with him. I would not be misunderstood: no man can have the consciousness of God with him and not be content; I mean that no man who has not the Father so as to be eternally content in him alone, can possess a sunset or a field of grass or a mine of gold or the love of a fellow-creature according to its nature--as God would have him possess it--in the eternal way of inheriting, having, and holding. He who has God, has all things, after the fashion in which he who made them has them. To man, woman, and child, I say--if you are not content, it is because God is not with you as you need him, not with you as he would be with you, as you must have him; for you need him as your body never needed food or air, need him as your soul never hungered after joy, or peace, or pleasure.

It is imperative on us to get rid of the tyranny of things. See how imperative: let the young man cling with every fibre to his wealth, what God can do he will do; his child shall not be left in the hell of possession! Comes the angel of death!--and where are the things that haunted the poor soul with such manifold hindrance and obstruction! The world, and all that is in the world, drops and slips, from his feet, from his hands, carrying with it his body, his eyes, his ears, every pouch, every coffer, that could delude him with the fancy of possession.

'Is the man so freed from the dominion of things? does Death so serve him--so ransom him? Why then hasten the hour? Shall not the youth abide the stroke of Time's clock--await the Inevitable on its path to free him?'

Not so!--for then first, I presume, does the man of things become aware of their tyranny. When a man begins to abstain, then first he recognizes the strength of his passion; it may be, when a man has not a thing left, he will begin to know what a necessity he had made of things; and if then he begin to contend with them, to cast out of his soul what Death has torn from his hands, then first will he know the full passion of possession, the slavery of prizing the worthless part of the precious.

'Wherein then lies the service of Death? He takes the sting, but leaves the poison!'

In this: it is not the fetters that gall, but the fetters that soothe, which eat into the soul. When the fetters of gold are gone, on which the man delighted to gaze, though they held him fast to his dungeon-wall, buried from air and sunshine, then first will he feel them in the soreness of their lack, in the weary indifference with which he looks on earth and sea, on space and stars. When the truth begins to dawn upon him that those fetters were a horror and a disgrace, then will the good of saving death appear, and the man begin to understand that having never was, never could be well-being; that it is not by possessing we live, but by life we possess. In this way is the loss of the things he thought he had, a motioning, hardly towards, yet in favour of deliverance. It may seem to the man the first of his slavery when it is in truth the beginning of his freedom. Never soul was set free without being made to feel its slavery; nothing but itself can enslave a soul, nothing without itself free it.

When the drunkard, free of his body, but retaining his desire unable to indulge it, has time at length to think, in the lack of the means of destroying thought, surely there dawns for him then at last a fearful hope!--not until, by the power of God and his own obedient effort, he is raised into such a condition that, be the temptation what it might, he would not yield for an immortality of unrequited drunkenness--all its delights and not one of its penalties--is he saved.

Thus death may give a new opportunity--with some hope for the multitude counting themselves Christians, who are possessed by things as by a legion of devils; who stand well in their church; whose lives are regarded as stainless; who are kind, friendly, give largely, believe in the redemption of Jesus, talk of the world and the church; yet whose care all the time is to heap up, to make much into more, to add house to house and field to field, burying themselves deeper and deeper in the ash-heap of Things.

But it is not the rich man only who is under the dominion of things; they too are slaves who, having no money, are unhappy from the lack of it. The man who is ever digging his grave is little better than he who already lies mouldering in it. The money the one has, the money the other would have, is in each the cause of an eternal stupidity. To the one as to the other comes the word, 'How is it that ye do not understand?'

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