

How to Get a Camel Through a Needle's Eye

by John Piper

Jesus teaches that conversion unto salvation is impossible with man, but with God all things are possible, and that nobody is too hard for God to save.

Duration: 39:57

Scripture: Matthew 6:33, Matthew 19:16, Matthew 19:18-19

Topics: "Eternal Life", "Evangelism Faith"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the topic of salvation and the desire for eternal life. The text being discussed is Matthew 19:16, where a man asks Jesus what good thing he must do to have eternal life. The speaker emphasizes that salvation is described in six ways in this text, with eternal life being the first. The sermon also highlights the importance of evangelism and faith, as the speaker calls for the church to strive for three impossible goals: nine million dollars pledged, 1500 more people brought to Christ, and a thousand people sent out as missionaries.

Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from Desiring God Ministries is available at www.desiringgod.org Please turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew chapter 19, verses 16 and following. Matthew chapter 19, verse 16.

And someone came to him and said, Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life? And he said to him, Why are you asking me about what is good? There is only one who is good. But if you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments. Then he said to him, Which ones? And Jesus said, You shall not commit murder.

You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness.

Honor your father and mother, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself. The young man said to him, All these things I have kept. What am I still lacking? Jesus said to him, If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven.

And come, follow me. But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property. And Jesus said to his disciples, Truly I say to you, It is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven.

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. When the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, Then who can be saved? And looking at them, Jesus said to them, With people this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Then Peter said to him, Behold, we have left everything and followed you.

What then will there be for us? And Jesus said to him, 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. And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for my name's sake will receive many times as much and will inherit eternal life. But many who are first will be last and the last first.

This message was conceived about two weeks ago as I was praying concerning the impossibility of giving another 3.8 million dollars to education for exaltation and growing without growing. Here I am preaching and praying about the Gideon venture, the Isaac factor, the coin in the fish's mouth, and lifting up this great truth that God very often chooses to act in the world in such a way that highlights the helplessness of man and the omnipotence of God. Three hundred Israelites defeating 120,000 Midianites and an old woman barren and beyond menopause giving birth to a child and a coin shows up in a fish's mouth to pay taxes with and we lift it up and say precisely because God does the impossible, let's pray toward this pledging.

And an inconsistency in my prayer life and my preaching landed on me with tremendous force. Namely, that here we come toward the end of the decade at the beginning of which God gave us a prayer goal we believe called 2,000 by 2,000 and it feels so utterly impossible to finish it that I've just not been praying about it anymore nor have I been lifting it up in your presence and calling you to pray about it. Turn to the back of the bulletin because most of you here don't know what I'm talking about.

I asked them to print this here. In 1990, we just felt led by God to have a prayer goal. We called it a prayer goal.

Lord, we want to send 2,000 missionaries of these various kinds career missionaries, short-termers of one kind, short-termers of another kind, pastoral ministry through the apprenticeship program, parachurch ministry, church planning people going out from us, nationals brought over from third world country and sent back. We want to send out 2,000 people like that in this decade, closing in eight months from now. Not last December, eight months from now.

And we stand at 988, you see there. We're not halfway there. We're about halfway.

And the second half of 2,000 by 2,000 was that we wanted to harvest 2,000 people. That is 2,000 professions of faith. Before last Sunday where 47 people checked off on their cards that they were professing faith in Christ, it stood at 507.

That's about one a week. Unlike the New Testament, the Lord added unto the church daily as many as were being saved. We could say the Lord added unto the church one a week, maybe.

So here we stand with eight months to go. And on the one hand, I'm crying out with all the might I can muster, precisely because it is impossible, let's pray for \$9 million. And on the other side, I'm letting this just kind of fade into the sunset of the decade for the same reason.

It feels impossible. That's a disconnect, right? Something's wrong here. And so I dealt with that and took it to the staff retreat that we had a week ago, and I just laid out before them, I said, I feel real inauthentic right now.

And here's why. Pushing like crazy to have everybody commit big time to building that building for \$9 million and letting 2,000 by 2,000 just drop out of our vocabulary. Why? Shoot.

It's impossible. To which somebody should have shouted, So this sermon is intended to fix the inconsistency for the next eight months and to put us on a trajectory in which we will give as much energy and focus to praying that 2,000 by 2,000, impossible as it is, be done before the end of the year. Why not? Same logic applies.

Same sermons could have been used. What's wrong? Father, as we look into this text now and let Jesus talk to us about what's possible and what's impossible, I pray for my own mind and heart and tongue that I would speak the truth as Jesus is presenting it here and Matthew is being his mediator for us in these words. And I pray that these friends would listen with spiritual ears and with the ears of their hearts and that our eyes would be opened and that a great work of prayer and a great work of evangelism and a great work of faith and hope and expectation would be wrought in our midst so that we would not give ourselves just to laying hold on you for one impossible thing, but for three impossible things.

\$9 million pledged by October 15. 1,500 more people brought to Christ and another 1,000 people sent out from us. Lord, you are God.

Come, speak now, I pray. In Jesus' name, amen. Jesus addresses the issue for us here in this text that Justin just read.

In particular, the winning of 1,500 people to Christ in the next eight months. So that's what we'll focus on, but you'll see the application to the others as well. The first observation I want to make about this text is that it is about salvation.

There are six ways that Jesus describes salvation in this text, so let's be sure we see what the text is about, because that's what I want to be about. In the next eight months, I want this church to be about that for ourselves and for the friends and relatives and colleagues and classmates that we have, so let's be sure we see it in the text. Verse 16, number 1. Someone came to him and said, Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life? So that's the first way salvation is described.

Eternal life, having eternal life. I want that, you want that, and you know lots of people you want that for. Number 2, verse 17 at the end.

If you wish to enter into life, keep the commandments. There's the second way. Enter into life.

That's the second way of describing salvation. Third, verse 23. Jesus said to his disciples, Truly I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to... Here's the third way.

Enter the kingdom of heaven. So you have having eternal life, entering into life, and now entering into the kingdom of heaven. They're all referring to salvation.

Fourth, verse 24. It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to... Fourth, enter the kingdom of God. There's no difference between the kingdom of heaven and the kingdom of God.

But here's a fourth way of saying what it means when salvation happens. Fifth, verse 25. When the disciples heard this, they were very astonished and said, Then who can be saved? Now there's our word.

Our beloved word, salvation, or saved. Don't ever mock this word. Don't ever tell jokes about this word.

As though one little teeny brand of Christians are concerned with saving people. And the rest do other stuff. This is Jesus' word.

This is the disciples' word. This is a biblical word. It is precious.

Everybody in the world needs to be saved. That is, have eternal life. That is, enter the kingdom of heaven.

That is, enter into life. That is, enter the kingdom of God. He's just filling up the meaning for us here.

You don't have to walk out of here wondering, What does that churchy word, saved, mean? Verse 29, number 6. Everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or farms for my name's sake will receive many times as much and will, sixth, inherit eternal life. So the future dimension is being brought in here. There's an inheritance coming called eternal life.

And if you are saved, you will enter into and inherit eternal life. So this text, this sermon, and this church, and we as individuals ought to be about this. Salvation.

What does he say about salvation? One main thing I'm going to focus on, because I don't have time to focus on anymore. The most striking thing he says about salvation is that the conversion which leads to it is humanly impossible. And what makes this so striking is that he says it in response to a question that doesn't ask for that answer and didn't have to get that answer.

He brought this up. I don't bring it up. The disciples didn't bring it up.

Jesus brought it up and he didn't have to bring it up, which makes it all the more striking. We'll see that in just a moment. So let's unpack this text with a view to that striking truth.

Verse 20. This man thinks that he has kept the whole law. Jesus had just summed up the whole law in verse 19.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Love your neighbor as yourself. All the law hangs on that, according to chapter 7. Love your neighbor as yourself.

And this man says, all these things I have kept, what am I still lacking? Now, I don't think Jesus agrees with him. And to bring out the problem and expose this man's love for his money, the satisfaction he finds in his money, the security he finds in his money, so that he's not a loving person, especially to the poor, Jesus says, if you wish to be complete, perfect, go, sell your possessions, give to the poor, you'll have treasure in heaven, come follow me. Four things.

Unshackle your heart from your possessions. Have a heart for the poor. Treasure God in heaven.

Follow me as your only hope. And the text says in verse 22, he went away grieving, for he was one who owned much property. He wouldn't do it.

To which now, Jesus responds in verse 23, truly, truly, I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again, I'm going to say it another way and make my meaning clear. 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.

One thing is crystal clear. Camels can't go through the eye of a needle. And if you have ever heard a preacher say or read in a book that it's a reference to a low gate in the wall called the needle's eye through which a camel would have to get down real low and get all the burdens off his back and thus it's a spiritual lesson about humbling yourself before God.

Forget it. There is no such gate and it contradicts the context. Jesus makes very clear what he means in the following verses.

It's he who uses the word impossible, not me. With man it is impossible. That's Jesus' word, not mine.

There's no doubt about what this means here. Camels cannot go through the eye of a needle. Now, the disciples hear this spoken about this rich man who just walked away and they are absolutely astonished.

See that in verse 25? And they ask, who then can be saved? Now, here's the question that I said a moment ago Jesus responds to in a way he didn't have to respond this way. They were asking a question, okay, you say rich people can't be. Who can be? Why not say believers can be? Or poor can be? Or people who follow me can be.

He didn't answer their question. He continues on the same road he was on with the camel. He said, with human beings, this, what you just asked about, who then can be saved, this is impossible.

But with God, all things are possible. Now, let's get real clear here. What is this referred to? This is impossible.

A rich young man has just been unwilling to leave his possessions, care for the poor, treasure God, and follow Jesus. To which Jesus has responded, how hard it is to be converted when you're rich. To which the disciples do not pick up and talk about the rich.

They broaden it out and they say, who then can be saved? They see something here that says, wait a minute, you talk about that towards this man? It sounds like you're saying salvation for anybody is like that. Or do you want to tell us that there's a class of people for whom it's not impossible? It's impossible for the rich, but it's not impossible for another class of people. And Jesus won't answer that question.

Because there is no other class. They're right. The disciples are absolutely right at this point.

This is not a money issue, this is a heart issue. There's a heart that cannot change without divine power. The leopard can't change his spots.

The tiger can't change his stripes. And humans can't make themselves stop loving money. This is impossible with man.

Jesus could have answered the question totally different the way that disciples were asking it totally differently. And he picks up on their broadening it out to everybody. And he says, right.

Nobody can be saved. It's impossible. But with God, all things are possible.

So what's impossible? Conversion unto salvation or eternal life is impossible with man. But all things are possible with God. It's the same thing Jesus taught in John 6, 65.

When he said, no one can come to me unless it be granted to him from the Father. It's the same thing Paul taught in Romans 8, 7. The mind of the flesh does not submit to the law of God, for indeed it cannot. It's the same thing Paul taught in 1 Corinthians 2, 14.

The natural man does not welcome the things of the spirit because they are foolishness to him. And he cannot understand them because they are spiritually appraised. It's the same thing he taught in Ephesians 2, 5. We are dead in trespasses and sins.

It is impossible for a dead man to be converted unless God does the humanly impossible. That's what Jesus is teaching. When he didn't have to teach it.

They didn't ask him to say that. They just said, who can be saved? And his answer was, nobody, unless God does the humanly impossible. Now, there's a theology, an interpretation that goes like this.

That's right. All human beings are fallen and depraved and can't move towards God. But God, in his great mercy, gives universal grace to all people.

Overcomes that fallen deadness. Brings them to a point of ability to believe. Then the decisive thing happens.

Whether they choose that God-given liberty to believe or not. Apart from any added work from God. So yes, it is impossible.

Apart from the universal grace of God. And God gives that universal grace to everybody. And therefore, the reason anybody does not believe is not because of the impossibility.

That interpretation will not work in this text. It absolutely will not work. Look, here's a rich man.

Who loves his riches so much that he chooses to have them rather than treasure in heaven. Chooses to have them rather than help the poor. Chooses to have them rather than follow Jesus.

And Jesus explains this tragic choice. This man is making a tragic choice. How does he explain this tragic choice? He explains it like this.

Or does he explain it like this? Everybody in the world, including this man. Has received a universal work of grace in their lives. To make it possible for them now to do what they have to do to get eternal life.

And he waits to see if they'll do it. Is that what Jesus says is the explanation? It's emphatically the opposite of what he says. What Jesus says is, here is a single individual human being.

Under that interpretation, he has universal grace working in his life. He comes to me with that universal grace working in his life. I tell him what he must do and he refuses to do it.

My explanation is, it is impossible. The other interpretation is useless to explain what's happening here. It's useless.

The issue here is not, how did that man get here? The issue is, when he hears the gospel word from Jesus, he doesn't obey at this moment in this time with this decision before him. And that's what Jesus is

explaining. Why didn't this man follow me? Answer, with man.

This is impossible. This is impossible. That's the issue here.

That other theology doesn't even come close to explaining this text. What we have here is the Lord Jesus pronouncing a very powerful sentence on us as human beings. We are so sin sick.

We are so depraved. We are so fallen. We are so blind.

We are so rebellious. We are so dead that there will never be a freedom from love of money, a love of the poor, a treasuring of God in heaven, and a following after Jesus as our only hope, if something supernatural beyond what humans can do happens decisively. That's what Jesus is teaching so clearly here.

All things are possible with God stands now at Bethlehem not only over \$9 million. It stands over your son and your daughter who are not walking with the Lord. All things are possible with God stands over your mother and your father, who have you prayed for for the time you got saved.

All things are possible with God stands over your sister and your brother, who are so callous to spiritual things. They call themselves Christians and they go to church three or four times a year and they have no spiritual bone in their body. And you're just about ready to give up.

All things are possible with God stands over your colleague at work, your Jewish friends and your Muslim friends and the Somalis. All things are possible with God stands over the hardest sinner you know. Nobody is too hard for God to save.

That's the point of this text. Nobody is too hard for God to save. That's the point of this text.

And God saves and does what is humanly impossible. So here we are at a fork in the road in this sermon. It's a fork for individuals and it's a fork for us as a body of believers.

Let me give you the two roads that we have to choose here now. At this point in the sermon, we can elevate our human reasonings above Scripture and say, well, if the Bible teaches that conversion unto eternal life is impossible for man, then men can't be held accountable and there's no point in evangelizing and there's no point in praying and so there's only fatalism and so I'm checking out. You can do that with your mind if you want.

You can elevate your reasonings above the plain teachings of Scripture to the opposite of all those conclusions, or you can get on another road and you can say, King Jesus has taught me that both I and everybody I know are hopelessly dead in trespasses and sins and can never save ourselves. And unless he does what is supernaturally necessary and what is humanly impossible, I and all my friends will be lost and he has promised with God all these impossible things are possible and therefore I will contemplate the hardest sinner I know, the person I love most whom I prayed for the longest, and I will not give up and I will with all boldness and all courage and all hope and all love press on in my prayers and my witness believing that all things are possible with God. That's the other road you can walk on.

You can either elevate your mind and make hash out of the Bible or you can take it as it stands and believe the glorious promises of God's omnipotent power to save and lay hold on it in prayer and open your mouth to speak the gospel which God says is the power of God unto salvation and labor until Jesus

comes to save as many as you can. And I can tell you which road I'm on and where I want us for the next eight months and as many years as God gives me breath and that's this road right here. That for eight months we won't just lift up our prayers over nine million dollars.

We will lift up our prayers over fifteen hundred unsaved people and more and say this is not hard for God. Three thousand in a day in Acts 2. And it isn't too hard for God to send out a thousand missionaries. So there are now three impossible things that we're going to give ourselves to and I just want to close by calling you to join me and the staff and the elders and the vision team in three practical steps.

Here they are. Number one. You've got to contemplate now.

All right. If I'm going to join Pastor John on this road of believing God for the impossible to save as well as give then what practical steps could I take? Number one. I called Dan Holst on the phone last night after he emailed me and I said let's do it Dan.

We'll call it the First Sunday Sunrise Prayer. And we'll do what we did for three Sundays moving toward the Challenge Sunday. That is next Sunday is the first Sunday of May at 630 in the Fellowship Hall.

Dan Holst will lead us in an hour and a half of laying hold on God for three impossible things. Not just one but three. 3.7 million dollars more in pledges by October and the salvation of 1500 people by December and the sending out of a thousand more people from us.

Impossible though they may seem. So the first Sunday of every month until the end of the year we will pray from 630 to 8 on Sunday morning. Would you be here next Sunday? Please and join us.

Second. We've always for now two years been doing the First Tuesday Fast. So that's this coming Tuesday and we'll keep on with the First Tuesday Fast.

That simply means we skip our lunch as a staff. We invite as many of you as will come to skip your lunch and pray for an hour. 12.30 to 1.30 on Tuesday.

And now we won't just fast for the coming of the Lord Jesus as we've been fasting. We'll fast for the pledges. We'll fast for the harvesting and we'll fast for the sending.

12.30 Tuesday. First Tuesday of every month for the rest of this year. Lastly.

Do you remember me saying several times in the last weeks? Don't do the math. Pray God to do the miracle. And I got my financial people upset at me.

Where's Scott? I saw you over here somewhere. I'm glad there are people that do math in this church. I really am.

But I said don't do the math. Ask God to do the miracle. Well, do the math on 1,500 souls.

Here's the second grade question. How many people, precious people created in the image of God in your family and in your circles, How many people each do 1,500 people have to lead to Christ this year for there to be 1,500 professions of faith? Tell me the answer. One person each.

Great months of those who've attended these two services. And that's closer to 2,000. So, will you join me? I'm going to pray this very personally for myself.

Should I pray with them on Sunday morning on the first Sundays? Should I pray with them on the first Tuesdays? Should I go to one of the seven prayer meetings there are every week in this church, always listed in dark print on the back of the bulletin there. No excuse for five people on Wednesday night in my judgment at 545. Why not 15? Why not 50? Where are we? Let's pray together.

Let's unite our hearts and pray. And then ask God particularly to give us one person. I know that in this room right now, almost everybody deep inside would say, I would love to have the joy of leading one person with my witness into a profession of saving faith in Jesus.

That would make my life. Because some of you have never done it. And so maybe this would be the year.

Maybe this would be the year when you personally would do it. Let's pray. Father in heaven, as we bow in these closing seconds, I ask that you would give us unity on the road towards bold, God-exalting, Christ-centered evangelism, prayer, and giving.

Whom have we to turn to in a world of such hardness of heart and callousness and indifference and world saturation than you? And so we do turn to you. And I ask that you would give us a sweet burden to pray for the giving and pray for the prayer and pray for the evangelism in order that 1,500 people would profess Christ in the next eight months. A thousand of us would be sent out and \$3 million more would be pledged.

Would you stand up for a benediction? Now, by the power of the Holy Spirit and in the name of Jesus, may the Lord grant you the freedom and the love and the joy and the power of trusting him. To give and to pray and to witness so that you could be involved in the great harvest and the great joy. And all the people said, Amen.

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You can also stay up to date on what's new at Desiring God. Again, our website is www.DesiringGod.org or call us toll free at 1-888-346-4700. Our mailing address is Desiring God 2601 East Franklin Avenue, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55406.

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