

# Threading the Needle

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Preacher: Edward Kang

[ 0 : 00 ] Holy God, I tremble before your word, pleading and begging that you would help me. You would help me to bring honor to your name and to love this church, to love this people.

Father, would you anoint my lips? I am a man of unclean lips. Just like Moses, I complain that I don't know how to speak, but Lord, you are the creator of our mouths.

You are in control of all things, and I know you've sovereignly created this opportunity. What a good opportunity it is to preach and teach your word.

Thank you for this blessing. You are such a good God. We pray that our hearts would be stirred and that you alone would be the one thing that we seek in all that we do.

God, help us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Let's stand all together for the reading of God's word. Again, we're going to be reading from Luke 18, verses 18 to 34.

[ 1 : 22 ] Luke 18, verses 18 to 34. And a ruler asked him, Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?

And Jesus said to him, Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone. You know the commandments. Do not commit adultery. Do not murder. Do not steal.

Do not bear false witness. Honor your father and mother. And he said, All these I have kept for my youth. When Jesus heard this, he said to him, One thing you still lack.

Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor. And you will have treasure in heaven. And come, follow me. But when he heard these things, he became very sad.

For he was extremely rich. Jesus, seeing that he had become sad, said, How difficult it is to those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.

[ 2 : 27 ] For it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. Those who heard it said, Then who can be saved?

And, but he said, What is impossible with man is possible with God. And Peter said, See, we have left our homes and followed you.

And he said to them, Truly I say to you, There is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God who will not receive many times more in this time and in the age to come eternal life.

And taking the twelve, he said to them, See, we are going up to Jerusalem and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished.

For we will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon. And after flogging him, they will kill him. And on the third day, he will rise.

[ 3 : 29 ] But they understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them and they did not grasp what was said. This is God, God's holy and authoritative word.

Please be seated. We have all experienced various forms of and varying degrees of privilege.

In our world, privilege opens doors. It gives you access to places and people that others might not have access to. It tips public perception in your favor.

It confers power on those who possess it. But in our passage for today, we learn that the kingdom of God is unlike the kingdoms of this world.

It is an upside down kingdom that even the rich cannot enter. In fact, it is impossible to enter the kingdom of God except through faith in Christ the King, which is our main point of the sermon today.

[ 4 : 35 ] So first, we're going to be exploring how the text speaks about the upside down kingdom in verses 18 to 30, then talks about an unlikely king in verses 31 to 34.

A ruler asks Jesus a question in verse 18. Luke usually specifies what kind of ruler this person is. For example, in Luke 8, 41, he calls Jairus a ruler of the synagogue.

And in Luke 14, 1, mentions a ruler of the Pharisees. When he doesn't specify it, he is referring to the members of the Sanhedrin, which was the highest Jewish ruling council on religious, political, and legal matters.

This would explain why Jesus assumed that this ruler knows the commandments in verse 20. This ruler is a VIP by all measures. He had religious standing, political standing, social standing, and as we find out in verse 23, economic standing, since he was extremely rich.

He has all the privilege that you could imagine. And he asked Jesus, good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? And to hear someone like this address him as good teacher and seek his spiritual direction must have been flattering to Jesus.

[ 5 : 59 ] But Jesus responds with a correction in verse 18. Why? Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.

In the original Greek, the personal pronoun me is fronted for emphasis. It's why me do you call good? So we should read it as why do you call me good?

No one is good except God alone. Jesus is not denying that he is in fact good. He is good because he is the son of God, the second person of the triune God who alone is good.

But Jesus is here challenging the rich ruler's shallow understanding of moral goodness. He is confronting what Sean calls the PGP delusion, the pretty good person delusion.

Many people in this world think of themselves as pretty good people. I'm sure you can think of some of them. And this ruler likewise believed that some human beings, especially esteemed religious teachers like Jesus, were quote-unquote good people.

[ 7 : 10 ] But he really should have known better. Psalm 53, 1-3 says, The fool says in his heart, there is no God. They are corrupt, doing abominable iniquity.

There is none who does good. God looks down from heaven on the children of man to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God.

They have all fallen away. Together they have become corrupt. There is none who does good, not even one. There is not one man in this world that is good in an absolute sense.

Only God is good. This ruler thinks that he can attain eternal life by doing. By doing good. He thinks that he can make the cut.

And Jesus reminds him no human being can be called good in an absolute unqualified sense. No one is good by God's perfect, unattainable standards.

[ 8 : 13 ] That's precisely why Jesus had to come to save us. As Jesus said in the preceding passage, it's not those who trust in their own righteousness, but those who humbly entrust themselves to Christ with Christ-like faith that will be saved.

We are not good people, but the good God sent his son to be the good teacher to instruct us in the way of salvation. So this ruler is unwittingly acknowledging something profound.

Jesus really is good because he is the son of God, the chosen one of God, the messianic king. If this ruler really understood this, he would have left everything behind to follow Jesus as Jesus invites him to do in verse 22.

But as we will see, this ruler did not have that faith. This ruler's question is exactly the same as the question that a Jewish leaguer scholar asked Jesus earlier in Luke 10, 25.

And in the same way, he answered the question before. Jesus now points the ruler to God's law in verse 20. You know the commandments. Do not commit adultery. Do not murder.

[ 9 : 30 ] Do not steal. Do not bear false witness. Honor your father and mother. Father. These commands come from the second half of the Ten Commandments, which we've been learning all about, which is a summary of the entire Old Testament law.

The first four of the Ten Commandments deal with our love for God. And the latter six deal with our love for our neighbor. That's why the command to love God with our whole selves and our neighbors as ourselves is the greatest commandment that sums up the entire law of God.

Jesus only lists the second half of the Ten Commandments that deal with our love for our neighbors. And that's not because loving God is less important than loving our neighbors. But it's because, as Jesus taught in Luke 10, our love for God finds concrete expression in our love for our neighbor.

1 John 4, 20 to 21 puts it this way. If anyone says, I love God and hates his brother, he is a liar. For he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

And this commandment we have from him, whoever loves God must also love his brother. Similarly, our love for God whom we cannot see is demonstrated in our love for the neighbors whom we can see.

[11:01] Curiously, the Ten Commandment, which is what we would have heard today, which says, you shall not covet, is omitted from Jesus' list, possibly because it's the commandment that Jesus already knows that this rich young ruler is failing to keep.

The rich young ruler replies in verse 21, and it exposes his prideful delusion. All these I have kept from my youth. All these I have kept from my youth.

Jews believe that God holds children accountable for their moral actions only after they have become youths. So when the rich young ruler says, all these I have kept from my youth, he's saying that he's never failed to keep them.

He is saying, if that's what's required for eternal life, then I can rest easy. because I'm all set. His self-righteous attitude is very similar to that of the Pharisee in earlier passages in Luke.

When Jesus heard this, he says in verse 22, he said to him, one thing you still lack. Sell all that you have and distribute to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven and come, follow me.

[12:24] Jesus contrasts the one thing that the rich young ruler lacks with all that he has. He seemed to have it all. Political power, social clout, religious standing, and what's in view extreme wealth.

But the abundance of his wealth was precisely what caused his spiritual poverty, his spiritual lack. As 1 John 3, 17 says, if anyone has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?

Similarly, the rich young rulers, lack of generosity towards the poor, revealed a lack of love in his heart for his neighbors. But does this mean that all of us also have to give up our possessions in order to enter the kingdom of God and have treasure in heaven?

I don't think that this means that Christians can't have or can't use money. It does not mean that in order to get into heaven we have to take a vow of poverty and to beg for our livings.

We can see clearly that in the latter story of Zacchaeus, a rich tax collector who gets saved through faith in Jesus. But there's a reason why Jesus makes this criterion for entry for the kingdom of God for this rich ruler.

[13:48] He says in verse 23, but when he heard these things he became very sad for he was extremely rich. Jesus knew that the love of money was the one thing that held this rich ruler back from wholeheartedly following God.

Jesus' invitation to follow him is a standard word that indicates discipleship. A disciple is someone who follows his teacher to learn through instruction and imitation.

But instead of responding with joy at Jesus' invitation, the rich ruler became very sad because he knew he could not follow Christ because he was unwilling to relinquish his extreme wealth.

Jesus said earlier in Luke 16, 13, no servant can serve two masters for either he will hate the one or love the other or he will be devoted to one and despise the other.

You cannot serve God and money. This rich ruler was trying to serve both God and money and Jesus makes it clear that you must choose one or the other.

[15:04] Even though he was otherwise a law-abiding Jew, love of money was the one thing that he could not pronounce or renounce. This is a choice that faces each and every single one of us.

What is the one thing that you lack? What's the one thing that you're not willing to give up for Jesus? Who is the one person that you love more than you love God?

Is your academic performance or career advancements the first priority of your life? Is ensuring the future success of your child making sure that she outshines all her peers the overriding goal that takes precedence over your child's and your family's wholehearted pursuit of Christ?

Is appeasing your boyfriend or girlfriend your husband or wife your parents your boss your professor or advisor more important to you than pleasing Christ?

Is earning and saving more and more money so that you have financial security and a deposit for the future your most pressing concern?

[16:16] All of these things must be second to Christ. Jesus must be first. If we want to call Christ our Lord and King we must subordinate all other allegiances to him.

Notice that Jesus does not negotiate the terms of discipleship as this rich ruler turns away in sadness. He is uncompromising. He doesn't say hey hey don't leave so soon.

Okay alright alright let me cut you a deal. Since you're keeping all these other commandments I'll turn a blind eye to you know this one thing you could still be my disciple. No he says one thing you still lack sell all that you have and distribute to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven and come follow me. You cannot follow me until you renounce your love of money. You cannot be my disciple as long as money is more important to you than me. [17:23] That's what Jesus says. if your great desire in life is for earthly treasure then you cannot desire God as your greatest treasure and therefore you cannot be Christian.

If we live for the treasures of earth we should not expect to have treasures in heaven. seeing that the rich ruler had become sad Jesus laments in verse 24 how difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.

It's hard for wealthy people to enter the kingdom of God and it's highly unfortunate that we live in one of the richest parts of the entire world. 24-7 Wall Street which publishes financial news and opinion pieces online reviewed median household income data from the U.S. Census Bureau from 381 U.S. metro areas and concluded that the Boston-Cambridge-Newton metro area is one of only five metro areas where most households earn at least \$85,000 a year.

I have no idea when that's stated or when Sean wrote this sermon but that sounds about right. It's one of the five richest cities in the United States.

It's hard for our friends and neighbors in Cambridge and Boston to enter the kingdom of God because of their wealth. Do you really get this? As Christians we should know better than to dream of getting rich and living large.

[19:17] If that's what you daydream about that's a spiritual emergency you're in grave trouble. It is difficult for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God.

Why? Why in the world would you want to be rich? Don't desire to be rich. 1 Timothy 6, 9-10 says, Those who desire to be rich fall into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction.

For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evils. It is through this craving that some have wandered away from the faith and pierced themselves with many pangs. Does falling into temptation, into a snare, into many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction sound enjoyable to you?

Does being pierced with many pangs sound pleasurable to you? Get back to your senses, brothers and sisters. Don't desire to be rich.

If you work hard and steward your resources well, and wealth is the incidental result of that, great, then great. in that case, use your money generously for the kingdom of God.

[20:41] Give sacrificially to the ministry of the gospel. Give liberally to the poor, but don't ever desire to be rich. Don't ever love money.

Jesus continues his explanation in verse 25, for it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.

The camel is the largest animal native to this part of the world. It can be about seven feet tall, I had no idea, complete with a giant hump or two in its back, and it makes a shocking and silly image. Good luck trying to fit that thing in an eye of a needle, which is so small that it's even hard to pass the end of a thread through it. People have had a hard time understanding this saying throughout church history because it is impossible for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.

So, is Jesus saying that rich people can't be saved? Well, that can't possibly be. So, Jesus must be trying to say something else.

[21:57] In order to improve Jesus' teaching and make it more palatable to our sensibilities, so some people have suggested that at Jerusalem there was a certain gate called the needle's eye through which a camel could not pass but on its bended knees and after its burden had been taken off so the rich should not be able to pass along the narrow way that leads to life till he had put off the burden of sin and of riches that is by ceasing to love him.

That's by Thomas Aquinas. The only trouble with this explanation is that there is no historical evidence whatsoever of a gate called the needle's eye at any point in Jerusalem's history.

It's merely a romantic speculation. The point of Jesus' illustration is not that rich people have to lay aside their wealth in order to enter the kingdom just as camels must lay aside their burdens before entering through a low gate.

The point of the illustration is that it is impossible for rich people to enter the kingdom of God. This is then confirmed in verses 26 to 27.

Those who heard it then said then who can be saved? But Jesus said what is impossible with man is possible with God.

[ 23 : 25 ] This is precisely Jesus' point. It is impossible for the rich to enter the kingdom of God. The allure of money is so strong.

The distractions that it creates are so numerous. The temptations that it multiplies are so enticing that it's impossible for the rich to be saved.

As biblical scholar Daryl Brock puts it, wealth can shrink the door of the kingdom down to an impassable people. The self-focused security of the wealthy is a padlock against kingdom entry. In fact, it's impossible for any man to enter the kingdom of God with his own merit and with his own strength. But hear, hear, brothers and sisters, hear his hope.

What is impossible with man is possible with God. God alone can wean the rich people away from their love of money.

[ 24 : 34 ] God alone can wean us away from various idols. As Jesus speaks of salvation as something that is humanly impossible, Peter seeks assurances from him in verses 28 to 30.

And Peter said, see, we have left our homes and followed you. And he said to them, truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God who will not receive many times more in this time and in the age to come.

Eternal life. As we saw earlier in Luke 5, 11, 28, Peter, James, John, and Levi have left everything they had and followed Jesus.

This is what Peter is referring to. And Jesus commends them as examples of discipleship. Many ancient Jews were disowned by their families for following Christ.

Christians in some other places in the world face similar ostracism and persecution. So to some believers following Christ might literally mean having to leave house, wife, brothers, parents, children for the sake of kingdom of God.

[ 25 : 58 ] But even if this is not literally true for you, to be a Christian is to be a person who has left house, wife, brothers, sisters, children for the sake of the kingdom of God.

In the sense of subordinating all these responsibilities and commitments to following Christ. So you might own a house, you might have a spouse, sibling, parent, or child, but none of them must be the controlling center of your life.

Your priorities and purposes must be submitted to Christ. Everything and everyone, including you, yourself, must be second. to Christ.

Yes, this is costly. Yes, this requires sacrifice, but oh, it is worth it. Look at the rewards that Jesus holds out to us in two parts in verse 30.

He says, we will receive many times more in this time. That's the first stage of our reward. And in the age to come, eternal life.

[ 27 : 12 ] that's the second stage of our reward. These two stages of rewards corresponds to the already but not yet nature of the kingdom of God. God's kingdom has already broken into our world through the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, but it has not yet been consummated.

It has not yet been brought to full fruition. salvation. So we will be rewarded in this time with many times more than what we give up for God, but we will also be rewarded later in the age to come with eternal life.

Truly, I say to you, Jesus says, and that means I assure you, I guarantee it, there is no one, not one, who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God who will not receive many times more in this time and in the age to come eternal life.

Those who give Jesus the primacy that he is doing their lives become part of the kingdom of God. As they share their lives and possessions with each other, we're part of one family.

We may lose our homes as our exclusive private property, but we gain a hundred times more in the homes of our Christian brothers and sisters.

[ 28 : 45 ] We may lose our spouses, siblings, parents, and children, but we gain hundreds more within the family of God. Some of you have found in the church the family that you have never had in your birth homes.

that's what Jesus is talking about. Jesus said earlier in Luke 8, 21, my mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it.

We receive many times more in this time and in the age to come we will also be given eternal life. And in short, whatever we give up for God, no matter how much we sacrifice for the sake of the kingdom, what we gain from the Lord will be far greater.

Perhaps you are not yet a follower of Christ. You are weighing the costs of discipleship. Perhaps you are wrestling with the one thing that you still lack, considering whether or not you are willing to pay that price to follow Christ.

perhaps you have already decided to follow Christ, but you are being lured back by the treasures of this world and backsliding.

[ 30 : 05 ] The costs of following Christ are high, but they are nothing compared to the eternal rewards that Christ holds out to you.

I pray you understand the weight of that word eternal. Two summers ago, an Amsterdam art dealer and historian named Jan Six purchased a painting at Christie's, a famous British auction house. The painting is a portrait of a young gentleman, and the artist behind the painting was reputedly one of the disciples of Dutch master Rembrandt.

The pre-sale estimate of its value was about \$20,000 to \$27,000, but Jan Six paid \$172,000, about seven times more than the estimate.

So you might say he was ripped off, but the art dealer was onto something. The young gentleman in the portrait is wearing a velvet coat with an ornate white lace collar, and Jan Six observed that the way the lace collar curls at the edges, almost like you could put your finger underneath it, was a clear giveaway.

[ 31 : 26 ] He believed that the painting was both a bit too early and a bit too good to be the work of Rembrandt's disciple, and concluded that it must be the work of the Dutch master himself.

So he shelled out \$172,000 to buy it at the auction, and his hunch has paid off because the portrait is being hailed by art historians as the first previously unknown painting by Rembrandt to surface in nearly half a century.

And guess how much the last Rembrandt painting was auctioned off for at Christie's? Over \$33 million in 2009.

The art dealer paid a very high price for that portrait, but what he gained was far greater. He was willing to pay the price because he knew what it was really worth.

Likewise, only those who see God truly as the infinite priceless treasure that he is will forsake earthly treasures to follow Jesus and enter the kingdom of God.

[ 32 : 37 ] Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of kingdom of God who will not receive many times more in this time and in the age to come eternal life.

God's kingdom is an upside down kingdom and it is impossible to enter it except through faith in Jesus Christ. Those who cling to their earthly riches will be turned away and follow Christ, they alone can enter in.

But how does God change us? How does that reorientation take place? Taking his twelve disciples aside, Jesus instructs them in verses 31 to 33 which comes to the second portion of our sermon today.

See, we are going up to Jerusalem and everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished. For he will be delivered over to the Gentiles and will be mocked and shamefully treated and spit upon.

But after flogging him, they will kill him and on the third day he will rise. Son of Man is a term that Jesus frequently uses to refer to himself indirectly.

[ 34 : 04 ] It highlights the fact that he is not only the Son of God as he is described in other places throughout the gospel, but also the Son of Man, the God who took humanity so that he can identify with us, take on our sins in death, and represent us to God the Father.

This is now the fourth time that Jesus predicts his imminent suffering, and it's a reference to his death on the cross. A few chapters later, these predictions will be fulfilled, and Jesus will be delivered over to the Gentiles, mocked, shamefully treated, and killed on the cross.

But on the third day, he will rise after his death. death. Interestingly, each of the four predictions of suffering align responsibility to different human parties.

In chapter 9, verse 22, the Jewish elders and chief priests and scribes are to blame, and in 914, the hands of men are to blame, and in 1725, this generation is to blame, and here in 1832, the Gentiles are to blame.

These four predictions then implicate Jews, Gentiles, this generation, and all of humanity in general. People throughout history have tried to single out Jews or Gentiles or people of Jesus' generation for his death, but that's only partially true.

[ 35 : 49 ] they were all guilty, and we are all guilty because it's for our sins that Jesus had to die on the cross.

Yet in the ultimate sense, it is God who is bringing all this about. That's what we see in verse 31. Jesus says that everything that is written about the Son of Man by the prophets will be accomplished.

That's passive. That's passive language. It will be accomplished. By who then? This is what grammarians call the divine passive.

The implied subject of the verb is God. God is accomplishing all this. And why? Because it is through the death of his only Son that God restores sinners to the kingdom of God.

Remember what Jesus said earlier. No one is good except God alone. We all lack something. We do not deserve to be entered, admitted into the kingdom of God.

[ 37 : 01 ] God in his perfection and his holiness does not tolerate sin or evil. And the question begs who then can be saved?

Jesus answers in verse 27. What is impossible with man is possible with God.

It's to atone for the sins of his people that Jesus died on the cross. It's to give us eternal resurrection life that Jesus raised us from the dead.

God. Psalm 130, 3-8, comments on this dilemma. If you, O Lord, should mark iniquities, who, O Lord, could stand?

But with you there is forgiveness. Thank you, God. That you may be feared. I wait for the Lord. My soul waits.

[ 38 : 01 ] And in his soul I hope. My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen for the morning. More than watchmen for the morning. O Israel, hope in the Lord.

For with the Lord there is steadfast love. And with him is plentiful redemption. And he will redeem Israel from all his iniquities.

The psalmist prophesied that though all of us are guilty and none of us are able to stand before God, that God himself would come to redeem his people from their iniquities.

That's what he did when he sent his one and only son, Jesus Christ, as his representative, the messianic king. Jesus is the ransom price to buy us back from our slavery to sin and death.

Jesus is the unlikely king who rescues his people and restores them to his upside-down kingdom. Jesus' prediction of suffering was plain enough because it defied expectations so thoroughly.

[ 39 : 18 ] It says in verse 34 that the twelve understood none of these things. This saying was hidden from them and they did not grasp what was said.

They expected God's Messiah to march into Jerusalem with his followers, the city in which Jewish kings of old reigned, and begin his overthrow of the Roman Empire that had subjugated the Jews. But that would not accomplish the impossible. That would not get camels through the eye of the needle. That would free them from their political oppression but not from their spiritual oppression. That would wean them off from the Roman Empire but not from the idols of their own hearts. That's why Jesus had to suffer and die. When we confess Jesus Christ as our Lord and believe in our hearts that he is the one who died and raised for our salvation, we become one with Christ through our faith.

we become partakers in his death and resurrection so that we become dead to sin and alive to Christ. We are born again into the family of God and we are given new hearts and filled with the spirit of God.

[ 40 : 42 ] This is the only way that the camels go through the eye of the needle. And it's when we live in light of this objective reality reality that more and more the idols of our hearts, they lose their grip in our subjective experience.

It says in 2 Corinthians 3.18, have you beheld the glory of the Lord?

Do you love him more than the idols of the earth? Look to the cross where Jesus bled for you. Look to the empty tomb which Jesus rose victoriously.

Let go of the idols of this world. Let go of your love of money and take hold of Jesus who alone is your salvation. As the 19th century hymn written by Oro Rowan entitled Hast thou heard him, seen him, known him, puts it what has stripped the beauty of the idols of the earth.

Not a sense of right or duty, but the sight of peerless worth. Let's bow our heads in prayer.

[ 42 : 11 ] God, help us to be a people that we would want the one thing, just like David prayed, that the one thing that we seek is your glory, to dwell with you in your temple, that we would sit at your feet and let your words be the food we eat, that we would say, man does not live by bread alone, we live by your words.

God, help us to pursue you with wholehearted devotion, single-minded focus, that all other things, we would lay aside all other burdens to seek after you, Jesus, for you alone are worthy, you alone deserve our entire lives, so we lift up our ransom lives to you, take it and use it as you see fit for the glory of your kingdom and of your name, God.

Help us, in Jesus' name we pray, amen. Amen. Thank you.