

How a Camel Illustrates Conversion

Luke 18:18-30

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We know that there is no works-based test to become a Christian. You don't have to present your bank account to God and prove how poor you are for Him to allow you into heaven. So why does Jesus connect our entrance into God's kingdom with how much money we have? As Stephen Davey explains, it's not a matter of prosperity, it's a matter of priority. Money is not the same as love of money—particularly the love of money that supersedes all other loves. That's the lesson Jesus taught the rich young ruler, and it's a lesson He's still teaching today.

506 years ago (as of this coming Tuesday), a monk named Martin Luther would influence the world by nailing a list of 95 theses—or statements—to the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany.

He wrote them in Latin, which the ordinary peasant didn't understand. But someone translated them and they were printed and within months, it set off a national firestorm.

The backstory to this firestorm was the fact that a year earlier, Luther had decided to preach through the Book of Romans at the Town Chapel. It was a dilapidated wooden building, and the services were barely attended by anyone. The pulpit was 3 feet tall, made of old wooden planks and from that pulpit, Luther began to preach.

His method of expository preaching, verse by verse, was unheard of; it was shocking in its authority, derived from the Scriptures alone. From his practice, the Latin motto of the Reformation would surface: "Sola Scriptura."

Luther preached every weekday at 1 p.m. and soon, it was filled; professors and church leaders began stopping their day to come over and hear his exposition.

One well known church leader named Meullerstadt was in town, and he stopped in to hear Luther and then left the chapel saying, and I quote: "This monk will put all our doctors of theology to shame; he is building on the words of Christ, and no one can resist that word."

By the time Luther reached Romans chapter 9, Erasmus had finished editing his Greek New Testament and it fell into the hands of Luther. He began reading it.

When he came to **Matthew 4:17**, a classic Roman catholic proof text still used to this day, the Latin version he was using read, **“Do acts of penance.”** But the Greek text said, **“Repent.”**

There is a vast difference between “penance,” a word that doesn’t appear in the Greek New Testament, and the word “repentance.”

Penance is doing things to counter sinful deeds, to balance the scales and earn forgiveness; it’s a man-made system. Repentance is admitting your sin and receiving God’s gift of forgiveness.

Not long after this, in the perfect timing of the Lord, Johann Tetzel, a Dominican Friar, appeared in town selling indulgences—pieces of paper representing so many sins forgiven and so many years out of purgatory, depending on how much money you gave the church.

Tetzel was traveling at the pleasure of the Pope, raising money for the building of St. Peter’s Basilica in Rome. And the money was pouring in; people were told by the church that they could now earn their way out of Purgatory; they could buy their way out of hell.

And not only for themselves, but for their relatives and friends who had already died.

Johann Tetzel used a little Latin phrase in his fund-raising efforts that was hugely successful but totally and demonically corrupt; it went: *“As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs.”*

That massive cathedral of St. Peter’s—the headquarters of the Vatican—was built on corrupted theology, deceiving people that salvation could be earned, and forgiveness could be bought.

And their theology hasn’t changed 506 years later.

A few years ago, the pope opened several cathedrals in Europe, promising everyone who celebrated mass inside one of them that they would never spend any time at all in purgatory but go straight to heaven when they died.

But let me tell you, this concept isn’t just a Roman Catholic issue, this issue is a liberal protestant just-be-a-good-person-so-God-will-let-you-in issue; this is a Judaism issue; this is a Hindu issue, a Muslim issue, a Buddhist issue, a Mormon issue, a Church of Christ issue, a Seventh Day Adventist issue, a Jehovah’s Witness issue. I’m not trying to offend everybody; I just don’t want to leave anybody out.

Beloved, this is the primary issue of every false religious system that adds some kind of work to salvation.

Some kind of system to merit salvation, to earn forgiveness—in a nutshell, “earning God’s forgiveness”—is the definition of false religion.

And one of the passages that false teachers go to in the New Testament and twist it and misinterpret it to support their corrupted theology is the passage before us today.

So, I need to stop my introduction and get to it; we’re in the Gospel by Luke, chapter 18, now at verse 18.

Luke 18:18:

And a ruler asked him (Jesus), “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Luke 18:18

There it is: the classic religious question, “What penance? What good deed? What pilgrimage? What should I do to earn heaven?”

Now if you combine the Gospel accounts, this was a Jewish man, a young man, and a very wealthy young man. This word for **ruler** here indicates that he held some kind of prestigious civil or religious role in the Jewish synagogue.

But even though he had everything to indicate that he was blessed by God—the Jewish people equated financial blessing with the blessing of God—still, he was uncertain he was going to get into heaven, that he hadn’t done enough.

Now Jesus does something interesting here in **verse 19**:

And Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good except God alone.”

Luke 18:19

Instead of answering his question, He baits what I like to call an evangelistic hook here in **verse 19**: “Why’d you call Me good? Only God is good.”

The popular teaching of this day was just that only God was good; the word used here means, “intrinsically, inherently good.” This was never used for anyone else but God.

J. Dwight Pentecost, The Words and Works of Jesus Christ (Zondervan, 1981), p. 360

This is the same exact question a lawyer asked Jesus back in **Luke chapter 10:25**:
“Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

This young man here in Luke 18 asks the same question but he adds “**Good**” before “**Teacher.**” And the Lord takes a different approach entirely with him.

By the way, this is a good example that evangelism isn’t a cookie cutter approach—one size doesn’t really fit all.

There are good people who will tell you to begin with the law; others will tell you to begin with the good news of heaven; others will tell you to begin with creation.

There’s nothing wrong with using a certain method, so long as you have the right message.

Jesus begins here by effectively asking, “You and I both believe that only God is good, but you used that expression for me; are you saying that you believe I am God?”

Now the cults take this verse to try and prove that Jesus is saying He isn’t God.

But He has already declared His deity as God the Son; He’s actually saying the opposite here.

What Jesus is doing is asking this young man if he’s ready to accept the implication of what he just called Him? “Are you serious about the title you just applied to me?”

Kenneth E. Bailey, *Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes* (Eerdmans, 1983), p. 162

“No respectful Jewish person would call anyone inherently good except God and you just called me inherently good.”

I like the way Dale Davis comments here, “Instead of repudiating His deity, Jesus is asking this young man to reflect on it—think about what just came out of his mouth.”

Adapted from Dale Ralph Davis, *Luke: The Year of our Lord’s Favor* (Christian Focus, 2021), p. 98

Jesus is also baiting the hook with another reflection, look at it again in verse 19:

“... No one is good except God alone.”

So, Jesus’ opening line hints at His own deity, but also this young man’s insufficiency. As if to say: “No one is good, not even you, young man, are inherently, intrinsically good.” No one is.

Now between verses 19 and 20, in that little white space between those two verses, I believe there is a long pause.

Jesus has given this young man some important things to think about.

Following this pause, it would have been great if the young man volunteered back with something like, “Yes, I do believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God”; or something like: “You’re right, I know I am a sinner; I’m not worthy to inherit eternal life.”

But there’s just silence.

You might notice that the young man doesn’t even respond to this question from Jesus. He seems to ignore it or brush it off.

He doesn’t take the bait, so to speak.

That happened to me the other day with a repairman who came to the house; he walked into my side door that leads to my study with my library; I’m surrounded by some 7,000 volumes.

He stopped and said, “You got a lot of books.” I said, “I’m a pastor, and the congregation doesn’t want me to have any excuse for a bad sermon.”

He didn’t think that was funny. He just said, “Where’s the dishwasher.” And I knew that was all I was going to say because he wasn’t ready to listen.

Another time, a repairman responded and said, “Really? What church do you pastor?” Which gave me the opportunity to tell him and then ask him, “Do you have a church home?” And he was quiet, then he admitted that he wasn’t where he should be spiritually. I was able to share with him the gospel.

The Lord is taking that approach here. He’s dropped a line; he’s baited the hook, but this young man doesn’t respond. The truth is, he’s not interested in Jesus; he’s not interested in the gospel; he’s only interested in making sure he’s got fire insurance.

He’s saying to Jesus, “I’m pretty sure I’m in but I want to make sure I’ve got all the bases covered.”

And with that Jesus effectively says, “Okay, you want to measure your good deeds to see if you’re good enough to get in?” **Verse 20:**

“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 from my youth.”

Luke 18:20-21

Can you imagine? “I’ve kept these commandments since I was a little boy! I never got out of line.”

He’s the child I never was; he’s the child I never had!

Now Jesus, the omniscient Lord, could have stopped the train right here and said, “Oh really?”

- Just a month ago you lied to a business associate to make yourself look better;
- Just two weeks ago you lusted after a woman in your village—which is tantamount to adultery;
- Three months ago, you disrespected your father and mother; you didn’t say anything to them audibly, but I heard what you said in your heart.
- And on and on and on.

J.C. Ryle writes that this man’s answer, “I have kept these from my youth up” is an answer filled with darkness and self-deception; how different was the apostle Paul who cried, “I know that in me dwelleth no good thing” (Romans 7:18).

Adapted from J.C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on the Gospels: Luke* (Evangelical Press, 1879, reprint: 1975), p.

One author writes, “How tragic that someone knows the commandments of God but not himself.”

Davis, p. 99

Maybe you’re thinking, “I can’t believe anybody could be that self-deceived to think they’re good enough to get into heaven.” Well, go out there and talk to people.

They’ll be fine until you suggest that they’re sinners, that what they’re doing is sinful. Then you’d better duck.

People are measuring themselves against their own law, their own standard, and they’re all just like this young ruler: they’re all getting straight As!”

What should have happened here in **Luke 18** is a moment of reflection, and then admission, and then confession.

“You know, Lord, I haven’t kept these commandments; the truth is, I’ve failed often in life. I don’t know what’s wrong with me but something is; in fact, the reason that I’m uncertain if I’ve done enough to inherit eternal life is because I think there’s something still missing in my life. Maybe there’s something more I need to do!”

But instead, he basically says to Jesus: “Toss me another commandment and I’ll show you how good I keep that one too.”

So, with that, Jesus effectively corners him in **verse 22**:

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.

Luke 18:22-23

Now at first glance it seems like Jesus just said there was a way to earn his way into heaven.

“Go sell your family estate and distribute it—a compound word here that means **distribute to various poor people** your wealth.

Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Regency, 1976), p. 195

And then (don’t miss this): **come and follow Me.**

Jesus is challenging him here. “Since you believe you have the commandments down pat, it seems to me we didn’t mention the first commandment: **“Thou shalt have no other gods before me?”**

I’ve just identified your god!

Listen, whatever stands between you and following Jesus happens to be your true god. Jesus is essentially asking, “Do you want me? Or do you want your money? Do you want to follow Me? Or do you want your family estate?”

Jesus is not condemning his possessions; He’s exposing his priorities.

And at first, it seemed like this young man wanted to go to heaven. But not anymore, if it meant giving away what he had on earth.

Jesus is not demanding penance; he’s giving this young man an opportunity to demonstrate true repentance.

Earlier in Luke’s Gospel, Jesus said, **“You cannot serve God and money” (Luke 16:13).** Literally, “You cannot be devoted to money and be devoted to God at the same time.”

So, Jesus was really asking a question, “Is there one thing in your life that you want more than God?”

And his answer was, “Yes; the one thing I love more than God is money, and I want to remain in control of my life and my possessions even if it means I lose eternal life in heaven.”

We're told here in **verse 23** that this rich young ruler realized what was going on and he became very **sad**; he realized he didn't want heaven after all.

He was sorry; he was very sorry, but he wasn't sorry enough.

John Phillips, *Exploring the Gospel of Luke* (Kregel, 2005), p. 234

Now with that, Jesus draws an application here in **verse 24**:

"How difficult it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!"

Luke 18:24b

By the way, Jesus didn't say it's impossible for wealthy people to enter the kingdom, but it sure is difficult for them to accept the gospel of the kingdom.

Why is that?

Let me suggest four reasons:

First, wealth can create a sense of independence.

"I pulled myself up by my bootstraps and I'm a self-made person; I don't need help for anything."

Second, wealth can create a spirit of self-confidence.

"Look what I've done with myself; I'm proud of myself."

Third, wealth can create a false sense of wisdom.

"I'm right about my financial investments and my business acumen, so I'm probably right about a lot of other things, including God and religion."

Fourth, wealth can create a superiority complex.

"I'm better than others who are less prosperous, and if they're following Jesus, I can understand why, they need a crutch; they don't have it together like I do, so I'm not about to stoop down to their level in life."

Now with that, the Lord uses a camel to illustrate conversion, here 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."

Luke 18:25

Now again, the rich person Jesus has in mind isn't going to get into the kingdom of God because he's rich, but because his hands are full and he won't empty them.

No one can receive the treasure of heaven if they're satisfied with treasure on earth.

The problem wasn't that he had wealth, the problem was wealth had him!

Prying his fingers off what he loved most would be as impossible as ***squeezing a camel through the eye of a needle.***

This was a popular proverb in the Lord's Day, copied into the Babylonian Talmud compiled centuries before the birth of Christ.

The Talmud provided direction and commentary on the life of the Jewish people; in it, one proverb referred to the impossibility of an elephant passing through the eye of a needle. The elephant was the largest animal in Babylon.

Pentecost, p. 361

Jesus adapted the proverb, changing the animal to the largest animal in His part of the world, which was ***the camel.***

Now there's an interesting notion that Jesus was referring to the Needle Gate in Jerusalem that required the camel to bend really low in order to enter.

That's an interesting thought, but there was no such gate in Jerusalem.

Furthermore, the word ***needle*** that Jesus uses here—that Dr. Luke would have understood—was a needle a doctor would use for stitches.

Reinecker, p. 196

So, pick the largest animal you can think of, if the Lord said this today, in light of fossil discoveries, it might read, "It's impossible for a Brontosaurus—or a Spinosaurus or a Giganotosaurus—to go through the eye of a needle."

My grandsons have taught me just about all the names of dinosaurs, it's been a thrilling education!

Here's the point: you're not going to get a camel through the eye of a surgical needle, just like you won't get a rich person into heaven who's entirely devoted to the things of earth.

The truth is, as one author writes, "Spiritually speaking, no rich person comes to God as a rich person anyway, but as a poor person."

J. Seth Davey, "Money Problems," *Heart to Heart Magazine*, October 8, 2023, p. 19

A spiritually destitute person—the poor in spirit—inherit the kingdom of God, Jesus said in Luke 6:20.

Now for the crowd standing nearby listening in, they're stunned by the implications of Jesus rejecting this rich young ruler. They ask Jesus the obvious question in **verse 26**:

Those who heard it said, "Then who can be saved?"

Luke 18:26

Notice, they didn't ask, "Then how can this rich man be saved?" No, they're asking, "If this devout, wealthy, Jewish ruler isn't the picture of someone God has blessed, if he isn't good enough, how are any of us going to be saved?"

They got the message: *nobody* qualifies! Nobody can be good enough!

Jesus answers them here in verse 27:

"What is impossible with man is possible with God."

Luke 18:27b

In other words, "You're right; no one qualifies."

It's impossible for any human being to earn their way into heaven.

- They can't buy enough indulgences;
- visit enough cathedrals;
- take enough pilgrimages;
- pray enough prayers;
- do enough good deeds to balance out some invisible scale of right and wrong.

Which leads the Lord's audience, and us, to understand our desperate condition which we cannot fix ourselves.

Listen to what the apostle Paul writes: here's one of the verses that led Martin Luther to essentially begin a Reformation 506 years ago.

I can just imagine him preaching this text behind that pulpit made out of old wooden planks, squinting in the dusty room, surrounded by desperate people.

He reads from Romans chapter 5:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God. ... God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:1-2, 8

Christ died for sinners; we stand, not in our works but in His work; not in our goodness, but in His grace.

So, here's the good news:

- You are not saved by being good.
- You are not saved by promising to become better.

What is impossible for you to achieve:

- to save yourself;
- to be perfect;
- to follow the commandments without fail;

That is impossible, but Jesus Christ has done the impossible *for* you, in His perfect life and through His sacrificial death for sinners like you and me, so our faith—our trust, our hope—is in Christ alone. Our boast is in Him.

Now Peter interjects here in verse 28:

And Peter said, "See, we have left our homes and followed you."

Luke 18:28

Matthew's account has Peter asking what their future holds now that they've become, essentially, destitute, having left everything. Jesus promises them a glorious occupation in the coming kingdom.

Luke boils the Lord's response down to these encouraging words here in **verse 29:**

"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."

Luke 18:29b-30

In other words, you might sacrifice everything, but in the light of eternity, those sacrifices will be made up by the glory of heaven, a thousand times over.

So, with that, we have every reason to believe that this young man, this wealthy, young, up-and-coming religious leader, slipped away from the crowd, with a sad heart but a heart resolved to reject Christ.

One author writes, for him to turn down Christ's invitation to [put Christ first], to follow Christ, revealed the lawlessness of his heart, and he knew it ... so he walks back home to his vault.

Adapted from J. Seth Davey, p. 19

A vault, so to speak, that is full; but with a heart that remains lost, and a life that remains empty.

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