

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 19:23 - 19:26



### **Gospel of Matthew** - Steve Gregg

In his message, Steve Gregg urges believers to return to the uncompromised message of the Gospel that Jesus preached, emphasizing the importance of consecration and personal sacrifice for eternal salvation. He challenges the prevalent notion that saying the right words or reciting a specific prayer is enough for salvation, and emphasizes the need for a true change of heart and a surrendering of oneself to Jesus Christ. Gregg also highlights the difference between God's definition of prosperity and the false teachings of the prosperity gospel.

### **Transcript**

I'm beginning our reading today in Matthew chapter 19 and verse 23, which follows immediately upon the story which we took last time of a man who came to Jesus seemingly desperate to find salvation. He came running to Jesus and said, good master, what good deed must I do to inherit eternal life? I'll tell you, this man had more spiritual interest than many of those listening because they haven't even asked the question seriously and they've never felt the desperation that they ought to feel for the need to get right with God and to have eternal life. This man was a man who was a law keeper according to the Jewish law.

He was a moral man. He was an upstanding leader in the synagogue. He was a man who recognized who to go to for answers to Jesus.

There were some things lacking though. At first he did not quite apprehend who Jesus was. He thought Jesus was merely a good teacher as many today make the same mistake of thinking that is all that Jesus was.

Jesus addressed that initially and indicated that Jesus was more than a good teacher. He was God. And that is the first step that had to be taken for this man to find eternal life.

But there was more. The man thought that he had been totally consecrated to obedience to God. And yet Jesus pointed out to him that one of the commands of God is you shall love your neighbors yourself.

And this man himself was a rich man living in luxury and affluence in the midst of poverty all around him. And therefore Jesus said, well, if you're really going to be a keeper of the commands of God, if you really would be perfect, you have to do this next thing. You should sell what you have and give it to the poor and you just come follow me and you'll have treasures in heaven.

This step the man was not willing to take. He made many steps in the direction of obedience to God and obeyed God in a great number of things. But there was just he had his limit and Jesus found it.

The limit was that he would not really love his neighbors and love himself when it came down to sacrificing his own luxury and wealth in order to help elevate the status of his brothers and sisters and neighbors around him who were poor and who had needs. That he could help them with. It's not my purpose at this time to talk about our obligation to help the poor, though it certainly is one of the issues that is that that suggests itself here.

We do have an obligation to help the poor. But really what I think is at stake here is something different. It's related, of course, to helping the poor, but it's it's something else that comes up.

You see, a person cannot be saved by helping the poor. Do you know that in First Corinthians 13, the apostle Paul said, if I bestow all my goods to feed the poor and do not have love, it does not profit me anything. If you just take all that you have and give it to the poor, that will not save you.

It will not profit you in any way towards salvation. Giving to the poor is a good thing to do and it is what we should do. If we're taking seriously the command of God that you shall love your neighbors yourself and you see that you have this world's good and your neighbor has needs, if you shut up your bowels of compassion from how does the love of God dwell in you, the Bible says in First John, and it implies the love of God does not dwell in you.

If you see your brother in need and you have what it takes to relieve it and you don't help him. Yes, we must help the poor. Yes, we must love our neighbors.

We love ourselves and helping the poor is one of the evidences that we do have this love that we're required to have. But doing that in itself does not save anyone. Because there is more to it than just doing the good deed of self-sacrifice.

Heaven cannot be bought with money. And if you take your money and give it to the poor, you're not buying a ticket to heaven that way. Heaven is purchased by Christ alone through his shed blood.

And your acceptance of this access to heaven through Christ comes through your total

committal to him as your Lord. When Jesus becomes in all seriousness your Lord, and that means you are his slave, he is your owner, you follow him and you have no other agenda in life than that. In other words, you finally make the turnaround.

You've been living for yourself. You've been living for your own pleasure. You've been seeking happiness.

That's been the one thing most important. And you make the turnaround and say, that's no longer going to be an issue with me. Being happy, of course I'd love to be happy, but that's not going to be an issue.

I'm not going to take that course that I think will make me most happy. I'm going to live for Jesus Christ. I'm going to resign myself to his will and happily, cheerfully do it out of love for him.

That's called total consecration. It means that whatever he wants, you will do it no matter how much against your natural grain it may go. He may even ask you to die for him.

Many have had to do so in the past and you might be the next. Who knows? Are you willing to? In the case of this man, he was not quite totally consecrated and Jesus found the one thing that was holding him up, his money. And although Jesus did tell him to give to the poor, it appears to me the real issue that kept this man from being saved was not that he neglected the good deed of giving to the poor, but he neglected the taking the step of total consecration to Christ, which if he did make that step, he would gladly do what Jesus said, even if it cost him all his money.

And for us to think that we can be saved on any easier terms than this man would be foolishness. You see, many of us feel that all we have to do is say the right words, utter a certain prayer and somehow a transaction occurs that is painless and without cost to us and we've got a ticket to heaven. Now, if heaven could be obtained on those terms, then Jesus certainly did this man a disservice because the man said, what must I do to have eternal life? If that man could have had eternal life or if we could simply by saying a few painless words in prayer, if that would have done it, then Jesus certainly gave this guy a stumbling block by saying, well, you know, you're not quite there.

Here's the next. Here's what you have to do. Give all you have to the poor and come and follow me.

Take up your cross. Then you'll have the treasures in heaven. Jesus was making it harder than he needed to, unless he wasn't making it harder than he needed to.

You see, we live in an age where we make salvation as painless as possible so that we can get as many people to embrace it as possible. The thing is that what we are making painless may not really be salvation at all. It may be a false gospel.

It may be something that is not the same thing that Jesus taught. And by the way, if we teach something different than what Jesus taught, we're not teaching the truth. Jesus taught that this man must consecrate everything to God.

This man must acknowledge Jesus to be more than a good teacher, has to recognize him as God. And beyond that, he has to make a total consecration to following Jesus, which included getting rid of his stuff and giving it to the poor would be the right thing to do with it. Now, what is at issue here is the man had his price.

He would follow God up to a point, but he could be bought off of that enterprise by things, his things. You know, if you have a price, if you will follow God up to a point, but you could be bought to the point of deciding not to follow Christ, then the devil knows what that price is and there's a good chance he'll offer it to you. And if you can be bought, you probably will be.

This man looked like a man who is a very good candidate for salvation. He already had taken many, many steps in his life. In fact, consistently had kept the law of God and many other things could be said good about him, but he could be bought.

The devil was able to hold on to him by offering him his riches, his possessions. Jesus was saying, no, give those up and come follow me. The man, that was the one thing he wouldn't give up.

That was his price. He wasn't sold out, basically. He was not a sold out follower of Christ.

And that one thing kept him from salvation. Now, we shouldn't be so smug as to think that we can be saved on easier terms than that. There's only one kind of salvation in the Bible, and that is the salvation that comes from being totally consecrated to Jesus as your Lord, so that your whole orientation life has shifted from self to him.

Not I, but Christ. I must decrease. He must increase.

Those are the words of the scripture that indicate the normative attitude of the person who's made this transition from death into life. If you have said some kind of a painless sinner's prayer, you've gone forward at an altar call while the moving music was playing. If you raised your hand while every eye was closed and every head bowed, and yet you are still living for yourself, I've got bad news for a modern man here.

You are lost. You may do all these fancy little things that evangelical Christianity equates with conversion, but if you have not been changed, you have not been converted. And the change that evidences conversion is that you've changed in your whole agenda.

Your agenda before was you live to please yourself. Now you've got one thing only that matters to you, and that's to please God, whether it's at your own expense or not. That is, it may not be the thing that makes you happy, but it's the thing that God wants you to

do.

And that's all that matters to a true Christian, to a disciple of Jesus. It's not, you know, how much is it going to cost me? It's, God, how much would you like? How much can I give? You see, it's not any longer I, but Christ. That is the consecration that causes a person to take the step into salvation.

It is a step into Christ who is our salvation. But you can't come into him on any lighter terms than those. Jesus is not one to trifle with.

He's no trifler. Anyone, when you consider God came down to earth in order to be tortured and die, that is not a trifling matter with him. And people who trifle with him insult him.

And it's amazing how many people are in the evangelical churches who think themselves to be Christians, and yet they're triflers. They do the bare minimum that they think or that their preacher has told them is required to be saved, and yet from then on they make no further commitment. And they live for themselves as much as before.

There's going to be a tragic day of rude awakening for them when Jesus will say to many, I never knew you. If you don't believe that, you better read the scriptures again. And don't let your preachers talk you out of it.

A lot of preachers talk people out of believing what Jesus said. Those preachers have quite a lot to answer for on the day of judgment. But don't you be one of their victims.

Jesus did not preach like many of us preachers today do. And I think we'd better change and preach the way he did or else we're going to make false converts right and left. And by the way, it's a little late for that.

It's been happening for several decades already. We need to get back to preaching an uncompromised message, the same one Jesus preached. If it's a different one, it's a false one.

Now, this man who would have made a wonderful elder in the church, and I can hardly imagine a modern church that would have turned him away. He's already an upstanding religious and rich leader of the community. Most churches want rich guys in the congregation.

Most of them want respectable people in leadership. This guy probably was accustomed to speaking in public since he was the master of ceremonies in the synagogue. He could have made a good preacher.

Certainly would have made a good public relations guy in the church. If nothing else, he'd make a good contributor, a good tither to the church. Most churches would be

grabbing this man up and saying, oh, please join my church.

Jesus, however, wouldn't have him. Why? The man would not take the step of total consecration. He would not part with his possessions.

And this shows how different Jesus is from modern evangelicalism. Jesus would not even let the guy in his church. And I can't think of one evangelical pastor today who wouldn't urge the man to come to his church.

Now, if the man wouldn't accept the full terms of discipleship, many modern preachers would say, well, we don't want to offend you. Just come as you are, and we'll work on this matter of consecration as we go along. We can start out with maybe tithing.

You're already doing that anyway, so you can just tithe for a while, and then we'll work on maybe if you've got a little bit of idolatry in your life. We'll address that gradually and try not to make you feel too uncomfortable. Don't want to drive a rich man away from the church.

We've got a lot of bills here. But Jesus simply was of another spirit than modern leaders of churches apparently are. And the disciples were astonished when they saw how Jesus rejected this man, because the man rejected the terms of discipleship.

And it says in verse 23, Then Jesus said to his disciples, Assuredly, I say to you, it is hard for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven. And 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 his disciples heard it, they were exceedingly amazed and said, Who then can be saved? Now, the disciples had been raised to believe, as most Jews believed, that if a man was rich, that was a sign of God's favor.

Some of the holiest men in the Old Testament were rich men, and it's specifically because God blessed them with riches. And many of the Jews extrapolated from that fact, namely the fact that many godly men were rich in the Old Testament, that somehow riches and godliness were of one piece. And that a person who is rich is probably a man that God has shown unusual favor upon and must be very happy with and must be a very spiritual person.

And Jesus says, It's hard for a rich man even to be saved. I mean, how hard is it? It's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God. How contrary to the thinking of the disciples and of the Jews of the time, and by the way, how contrary to the teaching of some of the people in our own time, like the prosperity teachers, who indicate that if you have faith, you will be prosperous.

Well, the Bible certainly doesn't teach that, and it certainly makes it difficult to explain why Jesus said people who are rich have a greater difficulty to enter the kingdom of God

than a camel has difficulty in navigating the passageway through the eye of a needle. Camels would have great difficulty with that. Now, by the way, I'm aware that there's a very common preaching point that preachers make about this.

They say, Well, the eye of a needle is the name of a small gate in the walls of Jerusalem. It was smaller than most gates, and if someone, a traveler, came to Jerusalem at night after the main gates were closed, if they wanted to get in, they'd have to go through this small gate. Now, if the person was carrying baggage on a camel as he was traveling, it'd be very difficult for his camel to get through this gate.

The camel would have to get down on its knees. You might even have to just unpack the camel altogether, and just the camel would barely get through without the goods on his back, because the eye of the needle was a gate that was tiny, and so, therefore, it was a great difficulty for a camel to get through it. And they say this is what Jesus was talking about when he said it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to go through the kingdom of God.

Unfortunately for those who preach this point, there is no confirmation from history that there was ever a gate in Jerusalem in the time of Christ that was called the eye of the needle. You cannot find confirmation of it, and there is none. That is, someone came up with that idea a long time ago, and it's been preached and repeated.

There is no evidence whatsoever that Jesus was referring to a gate in Jerusalem when he said this. And besides, he couldn't have been meaning that, because when the disciples said, who then can be saved, Jesus looked at them and said to them, with men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. In other words, he's saying the salvation of a rich man, like the passage of a camel through the eye of a needle, is an impossibility, humanly speaking.

Only God can do it miraculously. It's a special miracle of God when it happens. Now, if Jesus had been talking about some gate in Jerusalem that with some difficulty a man could get his camel through, then he couldn't say with men it's impossible, because it wouldn't be.

It would be possible. Jesus is describing that which is obviously impossible. For a camel to go through the eye of a needle, literally, is an impossibility.

Could God do it? Of course he could. I mean, if he could have a whale swallow Jonah and vomit him up alive three days later, or for that matter, we might even think that God being omnipotent could, if he wished, have Jonah swallow the whale and vomit it up three days later. I mean, what is there that God cannot do? Is anything too hard for him? The Bible declares there is nothing too difficult for him.

And if God wished to send a camel through the eye of a literal needle, God could pull it

off. God could do it. And, by the same token, if God chooses to save a rich man, God can do it.

But it's just as difficult. It's humanly impossible. Now, this latter statement, with God all things are possible, gives some courage, some encouragement to rich people who want to be saved.

Because we can only say, well, Jesus said it's at least possible with God. But before we take too much encouragement in our riches and hope that we can be saved, we might say, what is Jesus really trying to get across here, though? The emphasis of Jesus' teaching is not that rich people can be saved, even though it's as hard as for a camel to go through the eye of a needle. His emphasis is that it is as difficult for a rich man to be saved as it is for a camel to go through the eye of a needle.

And although nothing is impossible with God, let me ask you how many times you have actually seen God pull a camel through the eye of a needle? He could do it, but has he ever done it? It is not a very common thing. And yet Jesus indicated that one would expect to see that more often than to see a rich man saved. I tell you, Jesus does not give any real encouragement here to the prosperity doctrine.

That's a fact. If anything, he makes it sound like the most anti-Christian teaching to come along in years, and frankly, it may well be. But the point he's making is that riches, far from being a proof of God's favor on a person, may merely be an idol in the person's life.

Now, by the way, of course, anyone can see that a man may become rich by wickedness. Many of the tax collectors, including Zacchaeus, had become rich by wickedness. And when he repented, he had to give up his riches.

He gave half of it to the poor, and he repaid those who had cheated fourfold. You see, he had become rich, but not honestly. The man who is rich may not at all be honest or good or have God's favor on him at all.

He may have gotten his riches wrongly, or for that matter, he may have gotten them legitimately. But once a man has gotten his riches, even legitimately, what does God expect him to do with them? You know, there's a statement in the Old Testament that Paul quotes. In 2 Corinthians, he says, those who gather much have no extra, and those who gather little have no lack.

That is how the economy and the kingdom of God is supposed to be. Some of us are able to gather more legitimately than others are. But if God has given us the gift of being able to generate more income, and we gather more than others, it is so that those who are unable to gather so much might have no lack.

In other words, when we come to God, we consecrate everything to God. We ourselves



become God's, that is, we belong to Him, His possession. And all that we own become His.

And if what we own is a great deal, then He decides what should be done with it, and He's already made it clear. You are one who has gathered much. He intends for you to have nothing extra.

How is this supposed to be arranged? Well, by giving what you have to those who don't have enough. This doesn't sound like the American Dream talking, but then maybe Jesus wasn't trying to teach the American Dream. Maybe He was trying to teach salvation and the kingdom of God.

We need to divorce ourselves from worldliness, even if it comes in the form of American philosophy. We need to recognize that on the Day of Judgment, God is not going to ask how good of an American you were, how good of a capitalist you were. He's going to ask how much you've consecrated yourself to Jesus Christ.

Was it sincere? Was everything given over to Him? Did you do with Jesus Christ what He wanted? And did you do with your possessions and your life what Jesus said to do? That will be all that matters on the Day of Judgment. And if you're counting on something else, if you think you can live in disobedience to Jesus Christ and still get into heaven, you better read the Bible again. You're reading a different Bible and hearing a different gospel than that which is found there.

So, with this, I would just leave you with this warning. You who are listening may well be rich because most Americans are compared to the rest of the world. It's hard for you to enter the kingdom, but you can do it.

But it requires total consecration to Christ, and this usually means giving all that you have to Him.