

What is the Eye of the Needle?



By Cameron Buettel

I haven't always sat under the teaching ministry of John MacArthur. In fact, earlier parts of my Christian walk have been tarnished by over-exposure to some really bad Bible teachers, and attendance in some very man-centered churches. A lot of my expertise in error comes from first-hand experience.

It took longer than I care to admit, but eventually, the reckless handling of Scripture became too hard to ignore. One of the most blatant examples was related to Christ's interaction with the rich young ruler. [Luke 18:22-25](#) explains the sad end to their conversation.

When Jesus heard this, He said to him, "One thing you still lack; sell all that you possess and distribute it to the poor, and you shall have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me." But when he had heard these things, he became very sad, for he was extremely rich. And Jesus looked at him and said, "How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God! For 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."

Based on the simple reading of the text, there shouldn't be any confusion about what it means to pass a camel through the eye of a needle (the reference also appears in [Matthew 19:24](#) and [Mark 10:25](#)). And yet I've witnessed pastors do all sorts of exegetical gymnastics to explain away the clear meaning of Christ's words—not only in my original Australian congregation, but throughout Europe and America, as well. What at first glance seems like a straightforward hyperbolic illustration has been twisted, contorted, and explained away through eisegesis and iffy archeology.

The explanation usually goes something like this: Christ wasn't referring to the eye of a literal needle—that would be preposterous. Instead, He was talking about a narrow entrance into the city of Jerusalem, a gate known locally as “the eye of the needle.” This gate was so small that a camel could only be brought through with great difficulty, squeezed through on its knees—which depicts how we humbly need to come to the Lord.

That explanation can be quite compelling—after all, humility is necessary—as long as you don't read the next two verses of Luke's gospel: “They who heard it said, ‘Then who can be saved?’ But He said, ‘The things that are impossible with people are possible with God’” ([Luke 18:26-27](#)).

Christ's words make the point of His illustration abundantly clear. He can't mean that the rich man can only attain salvation through humility—getting a camel to stoop and squeeze through a narrow gate might be challenging, but it doesn't require divine intervention. In context, His point is unmistakable: Manufacturing your own salvation is just as impossible as threading a massive beast of burden through the eye of a sewing needle. Apart from the intervention of the Lord, it cannot be done.

In his commentary on the passage, John MacArthur explains another key flaw with the spurious interpretation:

There is no evidence that such a gate ever existed. Nor would any person with common sense have attempted to force a camel through such a small gate even if one had existed; they would simply have brought their camel into the city through a larger gate.
[1]

Instead he says,

The Persians expressed impossibility by using a familiar proverb stating that it would be easier for an elephant to go through the eye of a needle. The Jews picked up the proverb, substituting a camel for an elephant, since camels were the largest animals in Palestine. [2]

So why go to such great lengths to sidestep the clear meaning of Christ's illustration? The reasons come into better focus when we consider the most vocal proponents of the “Needle-Gate” theory.

For starters, it's predominant among many prosperity preachers and televangelists, who understandably don't want to draw scrutiny and rebuke for their extravagant lifestyles. Christ's exclamation, "How hard it is for those who are wealthy to enter the kingdom of God!" ([Luke 18:24](#)) would have been a shock to His original audience. As John MacArthur explains, "The idea that wealth was a sign of God's blessing was deeply entrenched in Jewish theology." Prosperity preachers today have repeated that lie to pillage the people of God. What better way to insulate their thievery from Christ's warning than to warp the meaning of His words altogether?

There's another group that favors the "Needle-Gate" theory, and they're grounded in the same mindset that Christ originally rebuked. The rich young ruler was a product of the Jewish religious system, and his self-assurance about earning his salvation was a direct reflection of the Pharisees' man-centered legalism.

Just consider his original question to Christ, "What shall I do to inherit eternal life?" ([Luke 18:18](#)). As John MacArthur explains, "In keeping with his legalistic system of self-righteousness, he sought that one elusive good work that would push him over the top to obtain eternal life for himself." [3]

In the same way, countless pastors and church leaders today downplay the Lord's intervening work in salvation and defy Christ's words in this passage, treating faith as a mere decision, and repentance as nothing more than simply changing your mind. The God-centered gospel of regeneration is substituted with a man-centered decisionism which makes salvation the result of one's humility—however difficult that may be.

As John MacArthur explains, that betrays the point of Christ's words, and the truth of the gospel.

The obvious point of that picturesque expression of hyperbole is not that salvation is difficult, but rather that it is humanly impossible for everyone by any means, including the wealthy. Sinners are aware of their guilt and fear, and may even desire a relationship with God that would bring forgiveness and peace. But they cannot hold on to their sinful priorities and personal control and think they can come to God on their own terms. The young man illustrates that reality. [4]

The "Needle-Gate" theory isn't exclusive to false teachers—it's been around long enough and taught widely enough that even some faithful teachers assume this interpretation by not carefully studying the text in context. Tragically, a wrong interpretation of this text not only promotes error, it becomes a missed opportunity for worship. How so?

[Luke 18:25](#) is one of the clearest testimonies from our Lord on the inability of man to do anything to save himself. This doctrine of total inability is a vital component to the gospel; it highlights the impossibility of salvation apart from a sovereign work of God in a person's heart. More than that it highlights God's grace in that He does do that work. For that reason this text should lead to humble praise of our God and Savior.