



The treasure, the pearl

Read: Matthew 13:45-46

Each of the parables in Matthew 13 deals with an aspect of the kingdom of heaven. This kingdom can be described as the gracious reign of God in the heart of His people by faith in His Son, the King of the kingdom. The parables of the mustard seed and the leaven, which we already looked at, demonstrated the mysterious *expansion* of the kingdom (Matt. 13:32-33). The parables of the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price hone in on the *worth* of the kingdom.

It's noteworthy that Christ told these two parables to His disciples after He sent the multitudes away. These parables are especially for His disciples; Christ desired to open up the preciousness of the kingdom particularly to them.

The scenery

Christ uses two similar-sounding parables, the one on the heels of the other. There are similarities and differences between the two parables. Both deal with a *treasure of surpassing value*. Both picture someone who has an all-consuming love for the treasure, evidenced by the fact that they sell all.

In the first parable, however, the man *stumbles upon* the treasure. In the second, the merchant man *seeks diligently* for pearls, though in the end he also finds something that exceeds his expectations. He was looking for "goodly" (or valuable) pearls, and found one of "great price," one that was extremely valuable.

We are not told much of the man who finds the treasure in the field. Some think that Christ may have meant a farmer plowing a field or a traveler who stumbles on the treasure as he walks through the field. In those days, when people did without banks, those who had reason to hide their riches would do so in an earthen vessel somewhere they alone knew. If they died unexpectedly, their treasure would remain hidden only to be discovered sometime in the future, usually by accident. This man sells all he has in order to buy this field and thus come into ownership of the treasure as well.

Christ is a bit more specific about the pearl merchant. He pictures a merchant who possesses expert knowledge of pearls and travels widely to the large markets in the cities of his day. Pearls were considered to be the stuff of royalty, so this merchant would have moved in elite circles. During Christ's time on earth, pearl harvesting was very difficult and dangerous. Apparently, this merchant is skilled in detecting the best pearls, which are those free from defects and imperfections. Christ does not tell us where and how this merchant finds the "pearl of great price." However, the pearl overwhelms him with its unsurpassed beauty. The sheer eminence of the pearl makes the man sell everything he has and buy it.

The substance

These two parables were directed at the disciples to teach them that the value of the kingdom is so great that it far exceeds the value of everything we own. Those who part with everything they thought was valuable in exchange for the kingdom are no fools. Instead, *the worth of the kingdom transcends any and every cost*. When we break this down we see three things:

1. Discovering the kingdom

The kingdom of God is not something that everyone possesses. It is like treasure hidden in the field or a pearl found one day somewhere on a market. We are not born with the treasure of God in our hands. In fact, we acquire many substitute treasures and, unless God shows us that they are substitute treasures, we live out our days with far less than what we could have if we had discovered the kingdom.

2. Discerning the value of the kingdom

Something can have value, but we need to have an understanding of it and an ability to estimate it in relationship to other things. The most beautiful diamond could pass under my eye, and I might not value it any more than I would a cup of coffee. Everyone understands that this doesn't mean that the diamond is not valuable. It only means that I lack the right value system as it pertains to diamonds.

Spiritually speaking, we are born with the wrong value system. We prize the things of the world above the things of God. The illuminating work of the Holy Spirit causes us to see value where we never saw it before; what we formerly valued is often useless or at least far inferior to the kingdom. The Holy Spirit brought Paul to the point where his genealogy and law-keeping became as worthless as "dung," and what he had sought to root out of the earth was actually the most valuable thing in all the world (Phil. 3:1-8).

3. Enduring the cost of the kingdom

Both parables help us to understand that the intrinsic worth of the kingdom makes the cost of it more than worth it. Of course, grace cannot be purchased by us. It is without money and without price (Isa. 55:1-2). Nevertheless, it costs us everything. We cannot hold on to the substitute treasures as well as the true treasure. Just as the pearl in the parable is explicitly identified as "one" (Matt. 13:46), so we cannot serve God and mammon. We cannot hold both the kingdom of heaven and the kingdoms of this world.

To the believer, however, this "costly" element of the kingdom is likewise blessed, for he experiences the blessing of having all substitutes exposed for what they are and all false allegiances exchanged for the only allegiance that matters. To the man in the field, the exceeding great value of the treasure made everything he owned pale in comparison. To the merchant, the unsurpassed value of the pearl made every other pearl dispensable for the sake of attaining this pearl. Like Moses, the believer esteems "*the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt*" (Heb. 11:26).

By contrast, the rich young ruler went away sorrowful when he was told to relinquish his tight hold on his riches in exchange for the life of following Christ (Luke 18:23). This only showed that he had not truly discerned the value of the kingdom. He could not endure the cost.

The Savior

Not only does Christ *reveal* the value of the kingdom; He *represents* and *enfolds* that value in Himself. It is right that interpreters throughout the ages have understood the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price as essentially the Lord Jesus Christ. In Him are "*hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*" (Col. 2:3). It is because of Him and in Him that the kingdom of God is a kingdom of grace. No price tag can be put to the redemption by His blood, which is more than gold and silver that perishes (1 Pet. 1:18-19). To believers, Christ is precious above all (1 Pet. 2:7). It's only a testimony to the blindness of fallen man that he does not see any beauty in the Savior (Isa. 53:2).

It's astounding to think that Jesus left all the treasures He had in the glories of heaven in order to buy back His fallen and wretched people. He became so poor that He was content to be buried in a field in Joseph of Arimathea's tomb, in order that all that believe in Him through His poverty might be made exceedingly rich (2 Cor. 9:9).

By His Spirit, He opens our eyes to see the attractiveness of His Person and work. It overpowers and overwhelms us to the point that we are willing to sacrifice all the things we previously held dear in order to “*apprehend that for which we have been apprehended*” (Phil. 3:12). Ultimately, the unsurpassed beauty of Christ is what weans us away from the substitute treasures and pearls and makes us willing to lose all, even our lives, in order to possess — rather, *be possessed by* — this treasure, Christ Jesus.

The searchlight

The parable searches our aims, our actions, and our affections. Have we been mesmerized by the glory and beauty of Christ to the point that we are willing to lose all we hold dear, if only we may possess Christ for time and for eternity? Sadly, even many professing Christians have a lot of “selling” to do. We need to lose our sins as well as our self-righteousness. We need to be done with our love for this world and all that it holds before us. We need to put our substitutes on a heap and sign away our title to these things through and for the sake of the blood of Christ. Too often, we are too enamored by our versions of Christianity rather than the treasure that Christ is Himself.

Questions

1. Why do you think Christ told two very similar parables? Is there any significance in the fact that the one man stumbled upon treasure, while the other was seeking it? Do these represent two different kinds of conversion?
2. Do true Christians need to literally sell everything they have? Discuss what some substitutes for true treasure our hearts often pursue.
3. Compare how the rich young ruler (Matt. 19:16-22) and Paul (Phil. 3:1-11) responded to the demands of Christ differently. Relate their responses to these parables.
4. Using what you know about pearls, discuss in what ways Christ can be compared to the “pearl of great price.”

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