

Mt 13:44-46: The discovery of your life

Meditations on the parables #2

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Mt 13:44-46 – The parable of the hidden treasure and the pearl merchant

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. 46 When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

What do you dream of? What is it that you have been looking for for years but still haven't found? Something you wish you had experienced or seen in your life?

Maybe your dream is to visit Australia or to climb a mountain. You want to earn a degree, buy your own home, or start your own business.

There are discoveries in life that you can't plan for. They just happen to you and surprise you. Suddenly you look at life in a new way. You discover that you communicate with others on a different level, like you've never done before. Or you meet and discover this wonderful person that you never want to lose.

In two parables Jesus speaks about a life-changing discovery. These short stories provide a snapshot of how the discovery of the kingdom of heaven will impact your life.

Someone is working in a field. While he is plowing, he stumbles upon a treasure. This man is not the owner of the land, he is just a worker. Therefore he hides the treasure again and makes a plan to buy the land so that he can claim the treasure as his own.

We should not ask the question whether what the man does is honest, saying that he should have reported it. That's not the point of the parable.

The key to the meaning of Jesus' parables is always in the surprising things. They describe common situations, but always with an unusual element. The story takes a turn, and that's where you need to look for the meaning.

Both parables are about surprising discoveries. The people in Israel were familiar with farmers plowing their fields, but they knew that it was quite unlikely to find treasures in such common places that were plowed so often. This is far-fetched. It only happens in your dreams!

The other parable relates a similar experience: although the merchant is hunting for beautiful pearls to sell and maybe to keep for his own collection, he could not have foreseen that he would stumble upon a pearl of such beauty. It is so expensive that it would take his entire fortune to get it in his possession.

Both men make an unexpected discovery of a treasure that becomes the center of their lives. Both parables stress that the kingdom of heaven is a hidden treasure of unexpected value.

Nobody suspects the value of the kingdom Jesus was bringing on earth. In this world, people go after gold, influence, a nice home, becoming famous, or having a great family. Only a minority knows the value of the kingdom of heaven: it is a hidden treasure; it often remains out of sight.

How come?

This is how Jesus established the kingdom of heaven: it entered the world in a humble and modest form, almost unnoticed.

It did not start with a bang but with a baby in a manger.

It does not spread with the clattering of weapons, but with the soft voice of a teacher: Jesus Christ.

It was not established like the empires of this world, with a victory on the battlefield, but with Jesus' death on the cross.

It grows almost imperceptibly. It presents itself in a humble way. It does not make the headlines and feature in the evening news. It spreads when the gospel is preached every week, when God's children read their Bibles, pray, and obey God's will.

Because of this, many people have misjudged the kingdom, looked down on it, and therefore never received it.

But it has an immense value for those who discover it. You cannot see its true value with the naked eye. You need faith in Jesus in order to recognize it.

Today you, too, have stumbled upon this treasure.

Maybe you do not consider yourself religious and you are not a seeker. Then consider this: many others like you have heard the good news of Jesus Christ and discovered the kingdom of God in unexpected places. They met an old friend who had become a Christian; or a business partner explained the gospel to them over lunch. Thousands found this treasure when someone explained it to them on a napkin in a restaurant: Jesus Christ paid for your sins; you can come to him with all your failures, your disappointments, and emptiness, and he fills your hands and gives you a future. He deals with your past and brings you back to God. You don't need to improve first and you don't need to qualify for it. He gives it to you for free. You have discovered God's grace!

When you hear the gospel for the first time - maybe even today as you listen to this radio program - you become like that man who stumbled upon a treasure. He was so excited that he sold everything he had in order to get it. The treasure immediately took hold of his heart.

Maybe you have been looking for God and consider yourself a religious person.

Then, too, the gospel of Jesus Christ can be the discovery of your life. You are like the man in the second parable: the pearl merchant. His quest for fine pearls brought him all over the world. He had probably seen his share of pearls in his life. Could another pearl still excite him?

Yes. Suddenly he found an extraordinary pearl, unlike any other he had seen.

Your search for the truth may have led you to many different religions. You may have checked out Islam, learned about Buddhism, and been impressed by the Dalai Lama's wisdom. Maybe you think they all have a grain of truth. They are like pearls, each one with its own beauty.

But then you meet Jesus Christ. Listen to what he says, consider his miracles, and think about his death on the cross. Consider his promise of eternal life in God's presence. And look at how seriously he takes your situation and points out what your deepest problem is: you are a sinner; you live without God.

You don't need a new philosophy or religion. A little patching up in your life will not cut it. Jesus tells you that you need a radical change of heart. No other book than the Bible gives us such devastating news about ourselves. And at the same time there is no other person than Jesus who deals with the root problem of our lives so radically. He died in order to save your life. His sacrifice on the cross takes away your sins that separate you from God.

His cross is the symbol that he has dealt with your past. And his resurrection is proof that he really means what he says, and that he delivers: he lives and shares his life with you if you believe in him.

Only Jesus opens the doors of the kingdom of heaven: you can live in God's presence, have a relationship with him.

All other religions tell you what you need to do in order to gain the favor of one or more gods. In contrast, Jesus gives you rest: you don't need to earn God's love and attention. You receive it as a gift. All you need to do is to believe in him. Stop trying to impress God with your perceived goodness or decency. Stop making yourself look better than you are. Relax and believe in Jesus. His sacrifice on the cross is sufficient. He has met all the requirements in your place.

When you consider what the gospel is all about and discover that Jesus is your only savior, you are like the pearl merchant. You have been looking for pearls but now you have found the only one you'll ever want. You can throw away the rest.

This is what happens to everyone who discovers this treasure. The kingdom of God beats everything. When you have it you don't need anything else. It takes hold of your heart. You are so impressed by its beauty that the other desires lose their attraction.

Both the farm worker and the pearl merchant responded in the same way: they sold everything they had in order to own the treasure they had discovered.

I hope you don't fail to see this important point: both men *responded* to their discovery and sprang into action. They could have gone home and told everybody about their find without doing anything. They could have mesmerized about it and said 'What a great treasure! I wish it was mine. Maybe I'll get it someday.'

This is how many people approach Jesus. They say: what a wise teaching, such great ethics, how impressive are his miracles! But they don't do anything with it. They treat it as any other teaching or religion. They don't see the beauty of the gospel and the unique character of Jesus Christ the Son of God.

Maybe you have been putting it off. You know a little about the Bible and have heard a little about Jesus Christ, but you haven't taken the time to really check it out. 'I can always do it later' you think.

Think again: God tells you that this is the greatest treasure you'll ever find. When you find it you should make an effort to make it your own, so that it won't escape you.

Maybe you think it's one of the many religions. Then I would encourage you to read the Bible seriously and find out what Jesus means to you. You should begin attending a church that teaches the Bible so that you can learn more about this kingdom. Have you really seen the beauty of the gospel, or are you passing by without noticing the treasure?

The men in these parables were not satisfied with only finding the treasure. They wanted to own it. It would be meaningless if it were not theirs.

This is how you become a Christian: you hear the gospel of free grace in Jesus Christ. And you realize that this is what you need. Until now you settled for substitutes, for things that could not satisfy. But now you have found the only treasure and the only pearl you'll ever want. You know that Jesus Christ is all you need. And you are willing to give up anything in order to receive him.

This is the striking thing about the kingdom of God: it reshuffles your priorities. God opens your eyes for the riches Jesus offers you: his love, free forgiveness, a restored relationship with God, peace with him, his Holy Spirit in your heart, and a treasure in heaven that you will never lose. Once you have found the greatest treasure in the world and seen its beauty you desperately want to have it. So much so that you will give up everything that is dear to you in order to gain this one thing. This is what faith is all about.