

The Kingdom of Heaven is Like

Part 4 – Buying the Farm

Matthew 13:44-46

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ January 22, 2017 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

⁴⁵“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; ⁴⁶on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. (Matthew 13:44-46, NRSV)

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Parables are stories or images Jesus employed to teach us about the Kingdom of Heaven, specifically about how God is at work bringing heaven to earth so that in time every square inch of this world might reflect God’s will. Parables, however, don’t just teach us *about* God’s Kingdom, they invite us to participate *in* God’s Kingdom. They present a picture, yes, but that picture is meant to become a mirror which can reflect back to us our own lives that we might see how God wants to change us or lead us. Ultimately, then, that mirror becomes a window through which we see what God has in store.

In the two parables of the kingdom we just read, Jesus paints two very similar pictures to make the same point. The two people in these parables are both on a quest, though only one realizes it at first. The second man, a merchant, is clear on his quest. He knows what sort of treasure he’s after. He’s searching for pearls, top-quality pearls to be exact. The first man, on the other hand, seems to stumble across his treasure which is hidden in a field. Once he finds it, however, he knows immediately that he must have it. In other words, for him the treasure becomes the answer to some unfulfilled desire in his life he hadn’t yet identified but now cannot deny.

It’s right here at the outset that we see Jesus’ picture become a mirror. *We* are these seekers. Some of us may realize it and some of us may not, but either way we are all on a quest in life to discover the same thing, the Kingdom of God. You see, every human being was created for a life with his or her Creator, to live and thrive in a world where life is abundant and everlasting. Think about it. Isn’t it true that every person you know is ultimately looking for the same things in life, for a world where the deepest desires of our souls are fully satisfied - our thirst for justice, our hunger to find and know intimacy with our Creator and with one another, our longing to capture abiding beauty and prosperity? Or course, we are not all looking for these things in the same places, or even in the right places. As somebody once said, “The young man who knocks on the door of the brothel is actually looking for God.”¹ Again, just because we’re all searching for the same thing doesn’t mean we’re all looking in the right places.

Now some of us, like the pearl merchant, know this is our search. There is the woman who has always believed that there must be some god or another out there somewhere who created us and wants the best for us and so she systematically undertakes an exploration of all the world’s great religions, one by one, looking for the truth. When she finally discovers the truth she knows it at once and it changes everything.

Others of us, however, like the fortunate fellow who stumbled across the treasure hidden in the soybean field, seek without an awareness that we are seeking. There is the man who shows up in church one afternoon only because he is attending the memorial service of a colleague from work. He doesn’t come expecting to do anything but pay his respects. But then the pastor gets up and proclaims a message of undeniable hope that, to his great surprise, cuts to his heart and reveals a treasure he at once knows has been the unnamed desire of his soul all along.

¹ This quote is often attributed to G.K. Chesterton but is more likely from Bruce Marshall in his book, *The World, The Flesh, and Father Smith* (1945).

Whether we know it or not, we are all searching for the same treasure. And we must search because the treasure is hidden. We learn that from Jesus here. In fact, sometimes we don't find it right away and that means we can easily become restless, like shoppers during the frantic holiday season who just can't seem to find the perfect gift and so, in desperation, become gullible to some slick sales pitch, or exercise questionable taste, or buy what's in the rack at the check-out line just because it's convenient. When that happens we settle for false and empty imitations of the *true* treasure.² But if we are patient in our search, waiting until the *real* treasure is revealed, we will not be disappointed. As Jesus himself once promised, **"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you."**³

When we do find the Kingdom we find something of inestimable value. That is one of the main points of these two simple parables. The first man finds a treasure in field of immense worth, a circumstance, by the way, which would not have surprised the people who first heard Jesus tell this story. Remember that in those days there was no Bank of America where you could invest your money for safekeeping. In fact, it was common for people with wealth back then to take their liquid capital and bury it somewhere secret. But then what often happened was that person would die suddenly, maybe in battle, or be taken off as a captive, leaving the treasure hidden away beneath the ground of a new landowner who had no idea what was buried on his property. In other words, the man in the first parable has likely discovered somebody's lost life savings!

The treasure of the second man is no less impressive. Pearls in those days were among the most precious gem of all, more precious even than diamonds. We know, for instance, that Cleopatra at one time possessed a pearl worth 25 million denarii. Since one denarius is worth a day's wage, this pearl was worth about 4 billion dollars by today's standards. When this pearl merchant, somebody who recognized a fine pearl when he sees one, discovers a pearl that beats them all, he knows at once that he must have it.⁴

Notice how Jesus describes the reaction of these two seekers. The man discovers this great treasure in the field and then **"in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys the field."** We can assume a similar reaction from the pearl merchant because he, too, rushed off to sell everything he has. What does this tell us? Again, the treasure in both instances is so exquisitely valuable that each man is instantly willing to give up everything else to obtain it and to do so without even a hint of reluctance. Jesus' message is simple. When we discover what it is that God actually has in store for us our immediate and natural response will be one of pure joy. You see, people who dedicate themselves to following Christ in life out of a sense of duty or guilt have somehow missed the true nature of the life to which Jesus has called us. The person who does not give herself or himself to Christ with joy is the person who has grossly underestimated the value of the treasure Christ offers.

This, in fact, is our common problem. Too often, even in the church, we expect far too *little* from God. We come to church hoping that God will help us pass that Chemistry exam next week, or help us find a better job than the one we now have, or even cure us from some disease the doctors can't seem to figure out. And while it's true that God cares about these things, even the smallest details of our lives, he is also inviting us to expect from him so much more.

In his classic work, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis puts it this way:

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on; you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently He starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make any sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of - throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were being made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.⁵

² I'm borrowing some language here from Robert Farrar Capon in his excellent commentary, *The Parables of the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1985), 142.

³ Matthew 7:7 (NRSV)

⁴ From a sermon by Timothy Keller entitled, *The Parable of the Pearl – On Priorities* (Redeemer Presbyterian Church, New York City, Aug 28, 1994. Listen to it at <http://www.gospelinlife.com/the-parable-of-the-pearl-on-priorities-6348>

⁵ C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Collins, 1952).

Jesus did not come *only* to help us get good grades and find meaningful work and live cancer free. More than that, Jesus came to completely transform us and the world around us, to make us into new creations who flourish in ways well beyond what we can now imagine and in every aspect of life, with him at the center of it all. This is the Kingdom he came to usher in and anybody who gets a true glimpse of it knows immediately that it is worth forsaking all else to possess it.

Notice in the second parable that the original owner of the pearl doesn't have to give his fellow merchant a sales pitch. I hate sales pitches, by the way, and I have a natural aversion to salespeople. My problem is that, like you, I've grown up in a consumer culture where nearly every company uses advertising and marketing that is, in some way, trying to manipulate us to buy their products.

Some, in retrospect, seem ridiculous, like the old Camel ad that promised that more doctors preferred their cigarettes to any other brand. Other claims ought to appear equally ridiculous but we've heard them so many times we've subconsciously come to accept them. But really, has this particular breakfast cereal actually contributed to the success of some of the world's greatest champions? Mercedes Benz tells us that men talk about women, sports and cars, but that women talk about men inside sports cars, and because that message is repeated often enough it subtly reinforces this crazy but widely accepted idea that our identity is tied to the car we drive. Can happiness really be found in a bottle of sugar water? Companies will tell us anything to get us to buy their products!

Not so with this pearl owner. He doesn't need to say a word. The product sells itself. No manipulation or sales pitch necessary. Actually, there's not even a decision involved. The merchant doesn't have to sleep on it, or get a second opinion, or check the pearl shop across town for a better deal, or talk to his financial advisor to see if it's a wise investment, or even call home to check with his wife. The decision is so easy it's not even a decision.

Have you ever played around with those *Would You Rather* questions? These are questions designed for conversation starters and they usually work because they try to pose two different but equally appealing or unappealing options. For example,

Would you rather have to always say aloud everything that was on your mind or never be able to speak again?

Would you rather reverse one decision you make every day or be able to stop time for 10 seconds every day?

Would you rather win \$50,000 or let your best friend win \$500,000?

Would you rather re-live the same day for 365 days or lose a year of your life?

Would you rather eat a handful of poison ivy or bumblebees?

Would you rather put an end to worldwide hunger or worldwide hatred?

You see, what makes those questions challenging is that for most of us they aren't very easy to answer. The choice is too difficult. I always want a third option, or both options! It's not, would you rather make the world full of peace or full of violence? Or, would you rather eat poison ivy or Swiss chocolate? Those are easy questions, apparently just like the questions posed to these two men in the parables. Would you rather possess this treasure you just found buried in the field or keep everything else you own? Would you rather own this fine pearl or all your other stuff? No-brainer questions, both of them. And so at once these men go home and liquidate everything. The car is immediately posted on Auto Trader. The house is listed with Century 21. The furniture all goes on Craig's list. Even the Willie Mays autographed baseball and the vintage Rolling Stones albums go on eBay. No hesitation.

By the way, this is why when the Bible identifies people who glimpse the life that God offers us in the Kingdom and then, instead, choose the life the world offers, it often identifies those people as fools. I'm not talking about people who have never heard of what God offers but people who hear and see and taste and then do the unthinkable by turning and walking away. You'd have to be a fool to see what God has freely offered and then turn him down. As Jesus put it, **"What does it profit a person who gains the whole world but loses or forfeits their very soul?"**⁶

⁶ Luke 9:25

As one of my favorite commentators puts it, when you come face to face with unimaginable splendor it cannot help but lead you to unconditional surrender.⁷ Notice the order, by the way. We are not expected to give up everything and then God, because he has seen our commendable efforts now reveals to us what our devotion has earned us. No, that's like the game show contestant who has to give up all her prize winnings to take a chance on what's behind door number three. No, the Gospel is not about what we must do to earn the treasure of God's favor. The Gospel is about what God has already done, that through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, life, grace, peace, favor, and all that is wrapped up in the Kingdom of Heaven, is already ours for the taking. All we must do is receive it. Joy is the engine of sacrifice, not the other way around! We don't have to sell everything until *after* we've seen it is absolutely worth it to do so!

Still, *selling is a condition*. That must be made clear. We don't find because we sell; we find because we *seek*. But once the treasure is found, selling then becomes necessary. The original pearl owner doesn't say to his fellow merchant, "Oh, you like the pearl do you? Take the pearl. Go on, take it. It's yours for nothing. I want you to have it." No, the pearl comes with a price. And the stunned man in the soybean field can't just run off with the treasure he's unearthed. No, that would be theft. He must buy the farm to own the treasure and the price tag on the farm adds up exactly to everything he has.

By the way, all this made me think of the euphemism "bought the farm", a phrase which refers to somebody's death. Somebody dies and we say, "He bought the farm." Well, there are lots of theories to the origin of this phrase. One of them is the idea that in the old days when a jet crashed on a farm the farmer could sue the government for compensation. The government payout then would generate a large enough amount of money to pay off the farm's mortgage. Hence, the pilot "bought the farm" with his life.⁸

I hope I'm not stretching it too much when I suggest that the man who discovered the treasure in the soybean field and then sold everything he owned to buy the farm did, in a sense, experience a death when he did so. He died to everything that was his former life so that he could receive a whole new life that he knew would be infinitely better. And is this not what we do when we discover the treasure of the Kingdom of Heaven and, out of joy, die to ourselves, our old lives, that we might truly live! Remember how Paul puts it in Galatians 2:20, "**I have been crucified with Christ [I've died!]; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me.**"

So what does it mean to die to ourselves for the sake of Christ? Does it mean, like it meant for the two men in the parables, literally going and selling everything we own on Craig's list. It's possible, but I'm not sure that's the first thing Jesus has in mind. Instead, what the selling signifies for us is an ordering of our affections in life that places Jesus far above everything else. In other words, when we 'buy the farm' we recognize that Jesus and what he offers us is such a treasure that he becomes more important to us than anything. There is no loss that we will not suffer in order to keep Jesus.

If being publicly identified with Jesus will cost me my reputation than I will sell my reputation. If following Jesus in life leads me to give up my dreams in exchange for his dreams I will sell my dreams. If following Jesus leads me to uncomfortable places in life, I will sell my comfort. If Jesus points out some thing or another in my life – some possession, some attitude, some habit - that he says is hurting me or other people around me, I will sell that thing. When I discover the joy of Christ's love I will be quick to sell my own unloving heart. When I discover the joy of Christ's forgiveness I will readily sell my resentment and un-forgiveness towards others. When I discover the joy of Christ's generosity I will have no second thoughts of selling my own stinginess.

Not everybody, of course, buys the farm. As we learned in the Parable of the Sower two weeks ago, just because the seed of Christ is planted in the soil of a human heart, there is no guarantee that every human heart will receive it and produce a harvest. Some seekers walk right past the hidden treasure, mistaking it for discarded junk. And as hard as it might be to imagine, some seekers even hold the pearl of great price in their hands and never recognize it's true value. Tragically, they set it down and walk away. Hell itself has been described as the perpetual rejection of an equally perpetual gift, a lifelong struggle to escape from the grip of a love that never wants to let us go.⁹

⁷ Timothy Keller, *The Parable of the Pearl*

⁸ From <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/72850.html>

⁹ Robert Farrar Capon, 138.

So how can we make sure we don't make this mistake? How can we seekers make sure that we recognize the true value of the treasure freely given us in Christ so that in joy we will sell whatever is required to possess it? Part of what we must do is continually fill our minds – every morning, every evening, and as much as possible in all those in-between moments – with the treasure we have been promised. In Romans 8:18 Paul writes, **“I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory about to be revealed to us.”** This is a man who has made a habit of continuously considering the treasure of the life to come in the Kingdom so that the hardship of his present life does not swallow him up.

You see, the more we consider what it is that Jesus has done for us, is doing for us, and promises to do for us, the more we hold up that pearl of great price to the light and savor its beauty, the more we will find ourselves captivated by joy. Sometimes the first step is simply confession, admitting to Jesus that we don't love him like we ought to love him, before all things. It's not a matter of trying to change our behavior. We make that mistake way too often. That's selling before discovering. No, we pray that would first come to love Jesus so that then the rest of our lives will, in time and with his help, fall in place.

The great English poet, John Donne, once wrote such a prayer using these breathtaking words:

Take me to you, imprison me, for I
 Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,
 Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.¹⁰

I put those words on the cover of your bulletin so you can take them with you. They are worthy of your attention. Meditate on these words, perhaps even memorize them. Make them your heartfelt prayer, so that whether you know you are seeking or not, that Christ would reveal himself to you, enough of himself at least that you would be enthralled and ravished, full of unparalleled joy, and thus at last set free to let go of everything else for the sake of possessing this one priceless treasure. For nobody who buys the farm ever, in the end, looks back with regret.

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Matthew 13:44-46 again. What do you notice first?
2. How are these two parables similar? How are they different? What do you think is meaningful about the differences?
3. What do you think the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price in these stories represent? Why are they so valuable that Jesus says the person who finds them will (with joy!) give up everything else to possess them?
4. Could you ever imagine selling everything you possessed and doing so with joy? What on earth would lead you to do such a thing?
5. Was there in a time in your life when you remember discovering the treasure of Christ's love and grace and the “unimaginable splendor” of it all led you to a place of “unconditional surrender”?
6. Augustine once (a long time ago!) wrote, “You must love things in the right order so that you do not love what is not to be loved, or fail to love what is to be loved, or have a greater love for what should be loved less, or an equal love for things that should be loved less or more, or a lesser or greater love for things that should be loved equally.” When it comes to Christ and his Kingdom, have you ‘ordered your loves rightly’? What is it that tends to get out of order and jump ahead of Christ in line?

¹⁰ Cited by Timothy Keller, *The Parable of the Pearl*.

7. Robert Farrar Capon describes hell this way: “It is the perpetual rejection of an equally perpetual gift. It is the lifelong struggle to escape from the grip of love that will never just let us go.” Is this a good description?
8. It’s been said that we should spend less time repenting from our failure to keep God’s law and more time simply repenting for our failure to love God. Do you agree? Is the first step in loving God more to admit that we don’t love God like we should?



Table to Table Question

A question for kids and adults to answer together

The people in these stories give up everything for treasure.
What is Jesus trying to teach us here about the Kingdom of Heaven?