

The Treasure and the Pearl

Matthew 13:44-46

*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. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it. Matt 13:44-46.*

These parables are not noisy, but their celebration is built into both these quiet stories. Two people trying to behave like calm rational beings but they can hardly contain their excitement at their incredibly fortunate find. That's why I enjoy these stories. The kingdom of heaven is like that.

“The kingdom of heaven is like ...” When Jesus began a story that way, he does not mean the kingdom is only like the next thing he mentions, in these stories the treasure or the merchant. He means that the kingdom of heaven is like the whole story. The whole parable gives us a picture of the kingdom of heaven. Which is another name for the kingdom of God.

These stories are pretty obviously a pair, so we'll look at both of them.

The kingdom of heaven can be hidden. That is a revelation all on its own. Let's not talk as if the kingdom should be obvious to everyone. Jesus did not speak like that. *Narrow is the gate, and steep the path that leads to life, and few there be that find it.* That's how Jesus spoke. We can describe it as plainly as we can; it's still hard to find.

People have always buried their valuables in the ground for safe keeping, especially if there are enemies or danger around. It still happens. And often enough, they don't ever come back to get it. It stays in the ground. This was all common enough in the ancient world that Jesus' audience probably assumed this much.

A man walks across a field, not his field, and sees something poking out of the ground. He gets curious, then a little excited, digs it up, wow, unbelievable, like finding the ultimate lottery ticket, millions and millions.

He can hardly contain himself, he puts it back in the ground, covers it and makes the ground look undisturbed. If he can buy that field, the treasure is his. It will cost him every cent he can pull together, but if he sells it all, he can buy that field, and the treasure is his. He sells it all, gets the cash together, and buys the field. The treasure really is his!!

The kingdom of God is like that. It is hidden, hard to find, it is unbelievably valuable. To actually get it we need to restructure our lives, renovate our life completely, but if we do that, the treasure can be ours.

Because it is so valuable, so priceless, leaving everything behind to get the treasure is a joy. The kingdom of God is like that.

Some wonder if the man was entirely ethical. Should he not tell the owner what he found? It is clear from the story that the owner does not know the treasure is there. It's in his field, he has the right to it, but he has not seen it.

The way Jesus tells the story, our finder's actions are entirely legitimate. If he had come back at night, and secretly taken the treasure to his home, that would be wrong. But he did not do that. The way Jesus tells the story, to buy the field fair and square was fine. It seems that Jesus' audience saw it all as entirely acceptable; they only wished they were that finder.

What is the kingdom? The kingdom of God is the whole package we get: becoming sons and daughters of God himself, being bound to Christ himself, having our sins forgiven, receiving the Holy Spirit, the promise of the resurrection of our bodies, and eternal life – “and so we will be with the Lord forever.” That is the kingdom, the treasure, the pearl.

The story of the merchant finding the pearl mostly teaches the same things as the treasure in the field. In the ancient world, it seems that pearls were seen as the most valuable objects there were. For its size, nothing was as remarkable as an unblemished pearl.

A pearl merchant buys pearls from the fishermen that catch oysters, and then sells them at a profit, probably to jewelers, perhaps to wealthy people themselves. So he's going to where the oyster fishermen would be selling their pearls, and he sees an amazing pearl.

The fisherman himself knows this is an unusual pearl, and he wants an arm and a leg for it. But the merchant knows that this is the pearl of the lifetime, this is the find of a lifetime, and if he can get his hands on that pearl, he's got it made, he'll not worry about such things every again.

And if he sells everything he has, he can pull together what this pearl will cost him. And he does it. He overturns his life so he can get that pearl, and he gets the pearl. The kingdom is like that.

Both stories emphasize *finding* something, and the overwhelming *value* of what they found, and getting rid of everything so you can get your *hands* on this thing. And all the while knowing that this is the bargain of a lifetime, you've been so fortunate to *find* this, this is the best day of your life, your good fortune is unbelievable.

There are two significant differences between these two stories. The first difference is that the man in the field was *not a seeker*, but the pearl merchant *was a seeker*.

The man in the field is not looking for anything, just going about his ordinary life, walking through someone else's field, then he sees something that makes him curious, and it turns out to be the most amazing treasure.

The merchant is a seeker. He looks for pearls all the time, he knows what he's looking for, he can tell the right stuff when he sees it. It is his business to see what others don't quickly see, so spot a bad pearl where others think it's good, or spot a good pearl that others missed. He sees a pearl that's like nothing he seen before.

Both kind of people find and recognize the kingdom of God. People who are not seekers for truth or meaning, just carrying on, stumble upon the kingdom of heaven, and see it for what it is, and do what they need to do to get this. It may take a while, but they figure it out, and make it theirs. There will be stories like that here.

Others are seekers. They are looking for truth, meaning, life, something more than just "this," and they find Jesus the Christ, and recognize that this is what they were looking for, only better. They have been seekers a long time. Both kind of people discover the kingdom, and make it theirs.

The other main difference is that only the first man acts from joy. The man in the field sold all to buy the field, because of his joy of finding. I wanted the second story to have joy too. I realized I was disappointed that Jesus did not mention joy in both stories.

It took me a few days, but then I realized maybe that's not the right question. A better question would be, why am I disappointed in this? And an even better question yet would be: why does Jesus mention joy only once?

The answer will be that some are seekers, and some are not, so also some enter the kingdom out of great joy, and others enter the kingdom simply because they recognize the value of their discovery. They say to themselves, "this is the greatest treasure there is. I cannot afford *not* to pay any price to get this. That's actually closer to my own story.

Some are seekers, some are not; some do whatever it takes to enter the kingdom out of the joy of what they've found, others do whatever it takes just because they realize this is the most important thing there is, it the one thing they must have.

These two parables work well for both unbelievers and believers. Jesus is saying this to unbelievers: "there is a treasure to be had, a priceless find, keep your eyes open, don't miss it, don't be reluctant to do whatever it takes to make it yours.

No one gets their hands on this casually. We can find it, discover it, but if we don't put it at the center of our lives, we have not made the kingdom ours.

These two parables are celebrations, happy stories. Two people find and acquire something that is priceless. That's the core. These are the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> parables of the 7 Jesus tells in Matthew 13.

They are positive encouraging stories of kind the kingdom. But right before these two stories, and again right after, are two blunt judgement parables by Jesus about the kingdom.

If we *don't* recognize the kingdom when we see it, or *don't* take steps to make it ours when we discover it, the consequences are very severe.

To the faithful, to believers, these stories are wonderful. We don't realize what we have. I grew up in a home with parents who already had made the treasure theirs, and I grew up going to a church of mostly the same kind of people. The treasure and the pearl were familiar objects, they were around, not really any big deal.

I slowly have come to see what a big deal it is, how in credibly fortunate I am to have this treasure, that being a child of God and a follower of the Christ is the very best thing that could possibly happen to any human, ever. It makes no sense to ever envy anyone. I've got the winning ticket to the eternal lottery in my hands. Who can beat that?

That's what Jesus wants his followers to get. He wants his followers to keep things in perspective. Jesus said, "in the world you will have trouble." He knows that, it is true, in the world we will have trouble. He said every day has enough evil of its own. That's also true.

But keep it in perspective. If we are children of God, if we are followers of the Christ, then the best thing that could happen to anyone, has happened to us. We discovered the hidden kingdom, and we made it ours.

We found the priceless treasure, and we made it ours; we found the priceless pearl, and we made it ours. Don't forget it. Amen.