

BURIED TREASURE AND A PRICELESS PEARL

MATTHEW 13: 44 – 46

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One Sunday morning the pastor of a small country church asked his congregation an important question, “How many of you want to go to heaven?” Everyone raised their hands except for a little boy sitting on the front pew. Addressing him, the pastor said, “Young man, don’t you want to go to heaven?” The boy responded, “Yes sir, but I thought you were getting up a group to leave this afternoon.”

When we hear the word “heaven,” most of us almost automatically think of the hereafter. But are there some other possibilities, especially when we hear these words, “the kingdom of heaven” or “the kingdom of God?” At the beginning of His ministry according to the Gospel of Mark, Jesus proclaimed, “The time has come. The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news” (Mark 1:15). And later when Jesus’ disciples asked Him to teach them to pray, He gave them this model prayer, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:9-10). So according to Jesus, “heaven” or “the kingdom of heaven” has something to do with life here on earth as well as what might be taking place elsewhere.

For the next three weeks, therefore, let’s talk about “the kingdom of heaven,” the phrase that Matthew uses, or “the kingdom of God” that is found in the Gospel of Luke. These terms are really interchangeable, and for the most part they refer to a number of parables or stories that Jesus told to His followers. We’ll be taking a look at three of them in the weeks to come.

But before we do, let’s define what Jesus meant when He said the kingdom of God is near, close at hand. What is the kingdom of God? Simply put, it is the rule and reign of God. During the Middle Ages it was called “Christendom,” and it referred to the establishment of an earthly kingdom ruled by the Church in Rome. But that’s not what Jesus meant. Addressing Pilate on the last day of His earthly life, Jesus said, “My kingdom is not of this world. If it were, My servants would fight to prevent My arrest by the Jews. But now My kingdom is from another place” (John 18:36). That other place is the hearts and lives of His people. That’s where He desires to establish His rule and His reign. Of course, when that happens, when we give our allegiance unto Him, begin to live by His teachings, desire to whole heartedly do His will, then not only our lives but, indeed, the lives of everyone around us, even the culture and society in which we live, are transformed. That’s what Jesus was talking about when He said that we are to be like yeast. Mix a little of us into the dough of life, and we can help it rise into a beautiful and fruitful loaf of humanity (Matthew 13:33). But that’s a parable for another time.

This morning let us focus our attention on buried treasure and a priceless pearl. Jesus told this two-part parable to drive home a single truth. The kingdom of God is valuable. It's the most valuable thing in all the earth. It's like the discovery of buried treasure or the relentless search for a perfect pearl. Each part of this two-part parable has something to tell us. Let's look very carefully at both parts.

There's something about buried treasure that is absolutely fascinating. Right here in Bedford County, more than one person has gone looking for Beale's Treasure. Who knows, maybe one day someone will decipher the clues and find the gold. Personally, I've become intrigued by the TV show "The Curse of Oak Island." Supposedly there is some kind of fabulous treasure at the bottom of a shaft over 100 feet below ground. For well over a hundred years people have been digging and searching and some have even lost their lives searching for it.

But looking for buried treasure is nothing new. Even in the days of Jesus people were looking for and finding buried treasure. Most people did not have access to anything resembling a bank. So when enemies appeared, and there were lots of them in the Middle East, people buried their valuables and hoped they would live to retrieve them. In fact, there was a rabbinic saying that "there was only one safe repository for money—the earth." And if you will remember in the parable about talents, the servant who only received the one talent went and hid it in the ground. So when Jesus said that the Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, His listeners knew precisely what He was talking about.

But just in case you missed it, here are a couple of footnotes that might be of interest. In this parable, the man who found the treasure was pursuing his regular duties as a farmer. He was probably plowing the field when he unearthed the treasure, plowing deeply because he was a conscientious, hard-working farmer. He was also plowing someone else's field. He didn't own it when he made the discovery. Perhaps he was a tenant farmer. The discovery brought about great joy because now he was a rich man, and he took pains to hide what he had found until he could purchase the field and the treasure and make it his own. But just in case you're thinking that this man was a bit devious, please keep this in mind. There were claim jumpers back then just like there are today, and there was a well-known saying in that day and time very similar to the little rhyme that goes like this, "Finders keepers, losers weepers." The treasure was his by right of discovery.

So in the ongoing affairs of everyday life, this farmer made a serendipitous discovery that brought great joy into his life, and in response he sold everything he had to possess it. Jesus was driving home this singular point. The Kingdom of God is supremely valuable, and you should never be afraid to sell everything you have to obtain it. I learned this truth from an associate pastor in the church where I grew up. His name was John Ivans.

John Ivans was a successful business man. I believe he worked in the field of insurance. But there was something lacking in his life. He was not satisfied. He was not happy. The only place that brought him any real joy was the church where he and his family worshipped. One day he came to an amazing decision. He would sell his business, his home, and just about everything he owned to go back to school and become a minister. Becoming a servant in the Kingdom of God was more important, a greater treasure than anything the world had to offer. I

still remember standing in line for refreshments at Vacation Bible School. Using his business background, he had everything so well organized that the entire program could be tracked on a stop watch, and while the children came marching in for their soda and cookies, there was a great big smile emanating from his face, a joyous satisfaction that he was exactly where the Lord wanted him to be, doing exactly what the Lord wanted him to do.

Now let's move on to the second part of this parable. I still remember the trip that Sherry and I and my mother took to Europe. One of our last stops was the diamond market in Amsterdam. Diamond merchants stood eagerly behind their counters to show their wares, beautiful arrangements from all around the world. The whole process was lost on me. I can't tell the difference between a rhinestone and a precious gem. But Mom and Sherry got excited and after careful deliberation, my mother selected a ring that we still possess.

With that in mind, just imagine a world class merchant seeking to purchase not a diamond but a pearl of great price. Pearls were much sought after in the days of Jesus. A buyer would go to almost any lengths to purchase not just a pearl, but a pearl that was radiant and beautiful, a pearl that possessed an inner glow which radiated from within. And this merchant found just such a pearl. It had been a long and time-consuming search, evaluating and examining countless numbers of pearls. When he saw this specimen, however, he knew that his search was over. Just like the man who discovered the hidden treasure, he sold everything he possessed to purchase this pearl of exceeding beauty and value.

And so it is with the Kingdom of Heaven. It is supremely valuable not only with regards to its worth but also with regards to its beauty. Consider, for example, the story of Saint Augustine. He is considered to be one of Christianity's greatest theologians. But he didn't start out that way. He was a brilliant philosopher and teacher in the 4th century Roman world, who was searching for something beyond the hedonistic pleasures of this world, something of lasting beauty and grace. He had been drawn to the preaching of a well-known pastor by the name of Ambrose, and his mother, a devout Christian, did not cease in her prayers for his salvation. Nevertheless, he still could not bring himself to give up his lifestyle of wine, women and song. Then one day while he was sitting in a garden, he heard a voice on the other side of the garden wall. He was never sure whether it was a little girl or an angel. The voice said, "Take up and read." A scroll of the book of Romans was resting in his lap. He picked it up and began to read these words, "Let us behave decently, as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and debauchery, not in dissension and jealousy. Rather, clothe yourselves with the Lord Jesus Christ, and do not think about how to gratify the desires of the sinful nature" Romans 13:13-14. At last, after years of searching for meaning and purpose he had found the one perfect pearl of truth, the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. He turned aside from the vain philosophies of the Greeks and the Romans and his wayward way of life. He embraced Christ, and that made all the difference.

Closer to our own day and time, I had the opportunity to read a book that Pastor Salley entrusted into my care. Written by Rosario Butterfield and entitled *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*, it tells the story of her journey of faith from the LGBT community to a personal relationship with Christ. There are many today who would say that such a transition is impossible. Once you have identified yourself with and embraced the homosexual/transgender

life-style, there is no going back, especially if you desire to have a fulfilling and meaningful life. Her story begs to differ from that erroneous assumption. Happily married and the parent of numerous adopted and foster care children, she and her husband are actively involved in a Reformed Presbyterian Church. But in order to get there, she found herself separated from almost everything from her past, including a teaching position in the Center for Women's Studies at a major university in the northeast. She discovered what Paul had uttered so long ago, "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord for whose sake I have lost all things." (Philippians 3:7-8). She found that one priceless pearl, a beautiful relationship with Christ and His people, and she was willing to give up everything to possess it.

And that brings me to this final question. How valuable and how beautiful is the rule and reign of Christ in your life? Is it the most precious thing that you possess, or just something that sits alongside all of your other interests and responsibilities? It's easy to arrive at this place in life, especially since we're so good at compartmentalizing our lives. We do the church thing on Sunday mornings and perhaps serve on a committee or two, and then we're free to pursue whatever else strikes our fancy. But that's not what Jesus was talking about. He was talking about our relationship with Him, and how that relationship should impact every area of our lives.

Let me give you a couple of examples. Writing notes to the sick and bereaved because God has given you a knack for saying just the right thing and you know down deep in your heart that this is what He would like for you to do. Getting to know the people in your neighborhood and building friendships with them that includes an invitation to worship with you right here at Bedford Presbyterian Church on a Sunday morning. Serving as a helper at Bedford Christian Ministries packing groceries because like Jesus you can help to feed the multitudes. In other words, our lives should be lived out like the two little sisters, ages three and five who were playing house. After pretending to make beds, sweep floors, prepare supper, and wash dishes, the five-year-old said to her sister, "Now it is time to go to bed, but first we must say our prayers." The two knelt bedside their beds, folded their hands, and bowed their heads. Then the three-year-old sister prayed, "We've had a good day today, Lord. What's your plan for tomorrow?"

That's what it means to live in the Kingdom of God, and along with that decision comes two blessings—God's provision and God's protection. During Jesus' Sermon on the Mount He said, "So do not worry, saying 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all of these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:31-33). That's God's provision. He has promised to take care of us. And God's protection? Whether in this life or the next, we have the assurance of this awesome declaration, "The kingdoms of this world are become the kingdoms of our Lord and of His Christ, and He shall reign forever and ever" (Revelation 11:15).