

PROMISES, PROMISES

“He said to them, ‘Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.’”

People sometimes think that the Old Testament and the New Testament describe two different Gods. The God of the Old Testament is an angry God who punishes sinners while the God of the New Testament is a merciful God who forgives sinners. God seems to have two faces: Jehovah, who is a “vengeful God,” and the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who is a “gracious God.” There’s a theological term for this doctrine: it is called “balonius.” The God of the Old Testament and the God of the New Testament are not two different Gods but One God. God did not change and He will not change because God is the same, yesterday, today and tomorrow. As He said through the prophet Malachi: *“I the Lord do not change.”*

Today’s lessons from the *Book of Deuteronomy*, *Paul’s Epistle to the church at Rome*, and the *Gospel of Matthew* are vivid illustrations of the unity and the unchangeability of God. The passage from *Deuteronomy* is a good example of what is sometimes called Gospel in the Old Testament—God speaking of his unconditional love for His people: *“For you are a people holy to the Lord your God. The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, his treasured possession.”* Remember those words: *“his treasured possession”* because we’ll come back to them later. God’s people are precious to him—whether they are those to whom he was speaking in the Sinai wilderness 36 centuries ago or those to whom he is speaking today in this church. They were—and we are—a treasure to him. That’s why He doesn’t place any conditions upon His love: He gives it freely and we receive it freely.

In his *Letter to the Romans* Paul also speaks of the great love God has for his people. *“If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things...For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* There’s nothing in these words about conditions or requirements. Paul doesn’t say that God will love us only if we do this or that, he just says that God will always love us with a Father’s love that overcomes all obstacles and knows no bounds.

So why do we think and act as if God has put conditions upon his love? *“Surely we have to do SOMETHING to get into heaven. Surely it can’t be free!”* It’s an amazing thing about our human nature that we’re more comfortable with the law than we are with the Gospel. I think this is what Luther meant when he once said that the Gospel was alien to the heart of man. In our fallen state, law makes more sense to us than Gospel. Maybe it’s our pride: we want to believe that we deserve what we receive rather than just have it given to us. Maybe it’s our suspicious nature: after all, everyone knows that there’s no such thing as a free lunch and that you only get what you pay for. Whatever the cause, people take to

the Law like ducks take to water and they really struggle with the Gospel: the idea that God has given us something for nothing just doesn't make sense. The result is that even though God has offered us the Kingdom of Heaven as an absolutely free gift, we keep on trying to earn it.

This propensity we have to put conditions on God's gifts that He never attached to them has blurred and diluted the Gospel to millions of Christians ever since Jesus ascended to heaven. Jesus said, *"Don't be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom."* And we reply, *"What must I DO to inherit eternal life?"* God says, *"...anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it,"*—and we aspire to have a "mature faith." God blesses us with baptism, *"...the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit,"* and we say, *"Does a person HAVE to be baptized in order to be saved?"* Paul writes, *"...we know that in ALL THINGS God works for the good of those who love him..."* and then something goes wrong in our lives and we cry out, *"Why would God let THIS happen to me?"* See what I mean? We're willing to trust God up to the point where what he says doesn't make sense to us, and then we would rather trust our "common sense" than trust God's Word, forgetting that our common sense once told us that the heavens revolved around the earth and that the earth was flat. "God wouldn't do that...or say that...or mean that," we say, and we place our confidence in our own flawed judgment rather than the promises of Almighty God.

I guess this is why whenever a member says to me, "Does the Bible say that we have to..."—I have a strong impulse to stop the person asking the question right there and say, "No." But that's wrong, of course; there are plenty of "have to's" in the Bible. There's a name for them too: they're called "laws"—and there are a number of them. They're all good; they all reflect the perfect mind and will of God and it would be wonderful if we could obey them. If we could, we wouldn't need a Savior. The problem is that even though the Law is good and wise and perfect, we are not, and the effect it has on us is not to make us want to obey, but to make us want to rebel. When I was in the second grade, a man came into our class one day and told us that we should never smoke cigarettes. I was a little puzzled about why he was there because it had never occurred to me to smoke a cigarette, even though my parents smoked. Still, I listened carefully to everything he said and then went home, filched a cigarette from my mother's purse and lit up. He gave me a rule and all it did was make me want to break it. A law to us is like a red flag to a bull. And God knew that when he gave us laws we would rebel against them and break them. *That's why he gave them to us!* Did I hear you right, pastor? Did you say that he gave us laws specifically so we would break them? That's right. That's what I said because that's exactly what the Bible says: You can read it yourself in *Romans 5:20*: *"The law was added so that the trespass would increase."*

Now why would God do that? Why would God do something that would cause people to sin all the more? Well, he did it because he wanted us to learn how sinful we really are. Ever heard the expression: "We learn by doing?" Well, there's never been a better example of it than when it comes to sin. The more we sin, the more we learn how sinful we really are. And the reason He wanted us to learn how sinful we really are is so that we could come to understand how much we need a Savior. That's called repentance and it too is a gift from God. God helps us repent so that we will turn to him and ask Him to forgive us in the Name of His Son. And He will—that's all there is to it. It's all gift, from soup to nuts. If you find a condition in it, then you put it there because God did not.

Our Gospel lesson for today provides us with two good examples of how we tend to attach conditions to God's gifts. Jesus tells two parables about the Kingdom of heaven. First he says that the kingdom of heaven is like a man who found a treasure hidden in a field and sold all he had to buy the field so that he could have the treasure. Then he says that the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant who finds a pearl of great value and then sells everything he has so that he can buy the pearl.

Now the most obvious way to understand the first parable is that the treasure buried in the field represents the kingdom of heaven and that the man who finds it represents us. According to that interpretation, what Jesus seems to be saying is that the kingdom of heaven is so valuable that we ought to be willing to give up everything else we own in order to acquire it. In the same way, in second parable the kingdom of heaven is like a precious pearl and we are like the merchant who finds it and then sells everything he has so that he can buy it. Now in a certain way, the parables do teach us this because nothing is as important for us to possess as the kingdom of heaven. It is worth more than anything else—indeed, everything else—that we could ever possibly possess. There's only one problem—and it's a big one: ***you can't buy the kingdom of heaven because the kingdom of heaven isn't for sale!*** You can't even find the kingdom of heaven because if you're not already in it, you're not even looking for it. People of this world don't seek God; he seeks them. The lost sheep doesn't find its own way back to the shepherd; the shepherd leaves the flock and goes out and finds the lost sheep. As Jesus said to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane: *"You did not choose me; I chose you."* If there is one consistent theme in the Bible that runs from *Genesis* to *Revelation*, it is the fact that fallen man doesn't seek God; on the contrary, he *hides* from Him. What's the first thing Adam and Eve did after they sinned? They tried to hide from God. Fallen man doesn't seek God, but God does seek fallen man. We don't seek the Kingdom of Heaven, the Kingdom of Heaven seeks us.

Is there another way—a Gospel way—to understand these parables? Well let me ask you this: If the man and the merchant don't represent you and me, then whom DO they represent? Who gave up everything he had so that he could acquire a treasure that was hiding from him? Who sold all he owned to purchase something more precious to him than anything else in the world? Isn't that exactly what Jesus did on the cross--give up all he had so we could become his treasured possession? Sell everything he had so that he could buy us back and make us his own? Do you see how it works? The Bible literally overflows with the Gospel promises of God, which is what Luther meant when he said that if you cut the Scriptures at any point they will bleed Christ. *"You shall not steal"* means *"You better not steal,"* it's true; but it also means that if you love the Lord your God and acknowledge him in all your ways, in your heart you will not want to steal. *"You shall not steal"* is a prediction as well as a warning. Thus it is that *"...every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old."*

O the depth and riches of God's love! When we begin to think of God not as a judge or a teacher or a policeman, but as a Father who loves us with a Father's love and will allow nothing to come between us and His love for us—then we will find new treasures in His Word. We will also find that we can rest in his love and trust in his promises. Amen.

Deuteronomy 14:2

² For you are a people holy to the LORD your God, and the LORD has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.

Romans 8:31-33, 35-39

³¹ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? ³³ Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.

³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? ³⁶ As it is written,

“For your sake we are being killed all the day long;
we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered.”

³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, ³⁹ nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Matthew 13:44-46, 52

⁴⁴ “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

The Parable of the Pearl of Great Value

⁴⁵ “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, ⁴⁶ who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

⁵² And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”