

SEEKING TREASURE

Matthew 13:44-52 Parables of the hidden treasure, the pearl, and the net

⁴⁴ “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.

⁴⁵ “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.

⁴⁷ “Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. ⁴⁸ When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. ⁴⁹ This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

⁵¹ “Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asked.

“Yes,” they replied.

⁵² He said to them, “Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.”

Psalms 119:9-16

⁹ How can a young person stay on the path of purity?

By living according to your word.

¹⁰ I seek you with all my heart;
do not let me stray from your commands.

¹¹ I have hidden your word in my heart

that I might not sin against you.

¹² Praise be to you, LORD;

teach me your decrees.

¹³ With my lips I recount
all the laws that come from your mouth.

¹⁴ I rejoice in following your statutes
as one rejoices in great riches.

¹⁵ I meditate on your precepts
and consider your ways.

¹⁶ I delight in your decrees;
I will not neglect your word.

MESSAGE:

The summer after sixth grade, I happened to see a wristwatch in a jewelry store window and I decided I wanted that watch more than anything else in the world. It was an Elgin watch and it cost \$50.00. I asked my Dad if he would pay me to do extra jobs around the house that summer and he agreed. So I worked hard all

summer mowing the lawn, digging out tree stumps and weeding the garden to save up for the watch. (There were also dandelions to be dealt with, but you've already heard that story!) By the end of the summer I had saved fifty bucks and I can't *tell* you how much I enjoyed going downtown with my folks one Saturday night in late August and purchasing the watch. I WANTED it, I saved for it, and I got it.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus tells two stories about people who did the same thing. There was something precious that they wanted more than anything else in the world and so they went after it and they bought it. Now what is interesting about these two stories is that they are not only ABOUT hidden treasure, but that they actually CONTAIN a hidden treasure in the form of a hidden meaning. And it's the *third* story Jesus tells, a story about men who catch fish, that supplies the key that unlocks the hidden meaning.

Listen to the first story again. [read]

⁴⁴ "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.

Now the most obvious way to understand this story is that the treasure represents the Kingdom of Heaven and that we are like the man who discovered it. According to this interpretation, Jesus is encouraging us to give up everything we own in exchange for the riches of the Kingdom of Heaven. Now I'm sure that everyone here today would agree that the Kingdom of Heaven—eternal life with God—is the most precious thing we could ever possess. But isn't there something obviously wrong with this interpretation? I mean, can the Kingdom of Heaven be bought—like a field? Can we get it in return for giving up everything we have? Not according to the Bible we can't because the Kingdom of Heaven is not for sale! You can't buy it with money, you can't buy it with good deeds, you can't buy it period. The only way you can possess the Kingdom of Heaven is to receive it as a gift!

I think this is why Jesus says, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the Kingdom of Heaven." It's not because the rich are necessarily wicked; it's because you can only receive the Kingdom of Heaven as a gift, and gifts don't mean much to someone who already has everything. How many of you during this last Christmas racked your brains over what to give someone who already had everything he wanted? On the other hand, it's not hard to pick out something to give a poor person, is it? Poor people appreciate anything you give them. Maybe that's why Jesus said, "*Anyone who will not receive the Kingdom of Heaven like a little child will never enter it.*" Children may not have the money to buy things, but they sure know how to receive a gift!

In any case, since the Kingdom of Heaven can only be received as a gift, it's unlikely that the treasure the man buys represents the Kingdom of Heaven. But if not, then what does it represent?

Before we answer that, let's look at the second story. [read]

⁴⁵ "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.

This story is similar to the first one in many ways, but there are a few differences. For one thing, in the first story, we don't know if the man was looking for the treasure or not. He just discovered it. But in the second story, it's clear that the jewel merchant is specifically looking for fine jewels. When he finds the perfect pearl, he sells everything he has so that he can buy that pearl. Another difference is that in the first story, the man has to buy the whole field in order to possess the treasure, while in the second story the purchase is limited to the one gem. In any case, when you put the stories together, you have someone who lets nothing stand in the way of acquiring a treasure that is so precious to him that everything else is worthless by comparison. But who is this man? And what is the treasure?

The third story gives us the clue we need. [read 13:47-50]

⁴⁷“Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. ⁴⁸When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. ⁴⁹This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Well this is different, isn't it? For one thing, fish—even good fish—seem to fall in a different category than buried treasure or a perfect pearl! Especially for someone who doesn't like fish! But the main difference is that the ones doing the searching in this story are not men but angels who, Jesus says, will come at the end of the age to claim the souls of all those who have entered the Kingdom of Heaven.

And here is our clue: **God is the seeker.** Through His angels, He seeks and finds and gathers souls into His Kingdom.

Now if God is the seeker, who do you suppose the man is in the first two parables? Who came to seek and find what was lost? Who, after he found it, gave up everything He had in order to purchase it? Who purchased the whole field, just so that he could have the treasure it contained? Who counted everything in the Kingdom of this World as rubbish compared with the treasures of the Kingdom of Heaven? Who indeed but God the Seeker and Man the Finder—Jesus Christ, the God-man who came to seek and to find and to save those who were lost?

Isn't that just like God? Remember the shepherd who sought his lost sheep and rejoiced when he found him? The widow who looked all over her house for a lost coin and celebrated when she found it? The father who ran out to welcome back his lost son? The Jewish carpenter who came to seek the lost children of Israel? God is continually seeking out and saving lost people who are buried in sin, misery and death. People who are no more capable of saving themselves than a lost sheep or a lost coin or a corpse decaying in a tomb. Jesus is the man in the parable; Jesus, who loved us so much that he gave up everything he had to make us his own.

Do you realize what this means—for you and me? *It means that in Jesus' eyes we are a priceless treasure!* We are a treasure hidden in the field of this world—so

precious to him that he died for the sins of the whole world so that he could make us his own. We are the pearl of great price for which He was willing to give up everything in order to pay the ransom for our sins, so that we could be His and His alone. The price He paid to redeem us was huge. But he paid it gladly *because we are worth more to Him than anything else in the world*. Can you imagine that?

And now the epilogue to the three stories. Jesus says: [13-51-52] Now this is very interesting. Do you know what the teachers of the law teach? They teach what the law says. And the law says that in order to please God we must obey God's commands. You know what they are: don't lie, don't steal, don't commit murder, don't commit adultery, don't covet what belongs to your neighbor, and so forth. All summarized in two commands: Worship the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself. That's what you have to do to please God and so that's what the teachers of the law taught.

But the Kingdom of Heaven is not about the law; it's about the Gospel. And the Gospel doesn't tell us about anything WE have to do; the Gospel tells us about something God has already done since we couldn't do what we had to do. He has sent a Messiah, a Savior, to act in our behalf—to lead a perfect life in our behalf and to pay the entire penalty for our sins in our behalf. In other words, to set us free from the power of the law and to lead us into the Kingdom of Heaven. So the teacher of the law who instructed others about the commands of God needs to be instructed about the Gospel, the Kingdom of Heaven. And once he has heard the Gospel and it has taken root in his heart, once he has been found by the One who sought him because he saw in him a treasure he could never have seen in himself—he is like a householder who has discovered new treasures he never even knew he had. From that time on, the law ceases to be a matter of duty or obligation and becomes a source of joy and inspiration to him. So writes the Psalmist: *"I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches; I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees."* Or, as Paul wrote: *"In my inner being I delight in God's law..."* The law, which, *inner being* says, was the power of sin, no longer shackles men to disobedience, guilt and death, but opens up to them a treasure chest full of faith and hope and love.

Jesus has his heart set on you! You are a treasure to him, a pearl of great price, and He will let nothing stand in His way until He makes you His own. There is nothing in heaven or on earth which can separate you from His love. Will you pray with me?

Lord Jesus Christ, thank you for seeking me and finding me and dying for me when I was chained to sin and guilt and death. In the words of Charles Wesley: *"Long my imprisoned spirit lay, fastbound in death and nature's night; Thine eye diffused the quickening ray; I woke---the dungeon flamed with light! My chains fell off, my heart was free: I rose, went forth and followed thee."* (Just As I Am) Thank you for giving me your kingdom—a kingdom which is not OF this world, but which is daily growing IN this world—and in my heart. So with all our hearts we pray: Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, Amen