

## **The Incomparable Value of the Kingdom**

### **Matthew 13:44-46**

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.

Whenever Jesus talks about his kingdom, he is referring to something absolutely beyond comparison. In fact, he has in mind something so glorious that it far surpasses anything we have experienced or known. Think about what brings you a measure of joy: beautiful music, a good book, majestic scenery such as a mountain range like the Rockies or the Olympics, perhaps a seascape, the joy of an unexpected discovery, or the exhilaration of achieving something towards which you have labored, or of finding something for which you have searched intently. Whatever may be the source of your joy, the kingdom of God holds forth the promise of far surpassing it. When Jesus rose from the dead, it was the first fruits and guarantee of an incalculable harvest which, when completed, will foreclose the old order of things completely. The grand redemption provided by our Lord will encompass the whole creation. That's why in Romans 8:21 Paul exclaimed that, ***"The creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God."*** In other words, the creation itself will participate in and benefit from our redemption.

The sweep of our Lord's redemption is as vast as the universe itself and as enduring as eternity. Whatever ill effects were introduced by the entrance of evil, whatever corruption now taints the cosmos, will all be removed. In other words, all of the marks of evil's tyranny will be erased. Not only our souls, but also our bodies and our environment will have been redeemed. Everything will have come under the transforming power of the Master's redeeming touch.

Through the prophet Isaiah, our God says:

***"Behold, I will create new heavens and a new earth. The former things will not be remembered, nor will they come to mind. But be glad and rejoice forever in what I will create ..."*** – Isaiah 65:17-18a

Then, in Revelation 21:5, the One seated on the throne says, ***"Behold, I am making everything new!"*** As one writer puts it, "The Christian hope makes even the Communist dream of the future society on earth look small and drab; it shrinks the whole vast sweep of science's view of the universe to a mere episode. As C. S. Lewis said once, 'Even the galaxies shall be remembered as but an old tale.'"

I bring these things to our remembrance this morning because we need to rediscover the awesome dimensions of the kingdom of God. Otherwise, the buoyancy, and the sheer joy of the hope that has been set before us as our inheritance and our destiny will be lost to our sight. So far, in our study of the parables of the kingdom, we have seen that it is characterized by small beginnings leading to unimaginable endings. May I suggest that too many of us spend too much time focusing on the small beginnings almost to the exclusion of the unimaginable endings? Some of us spend too much time focusing on all that is wrong with our world, all that is mean-spirited and twisted, dying and decaying. Some of us spend too much time focusing on the shortcomings of the institutional church here in the western world – shortcomings which are very real and discouraging to say the least. But too easily do we forget that the Lord promised that he would build his church and not even the gates of

Hell would prevail against her. Too readily do we forget that these parables are graphic word pictures of what will surely come to pass. We end up focusing on everything that is wrong and on nothing that is right. No wonder there are so many joyless Christians! I want us to note that *joy* is a significant feature of the parables of the hidden treasure and the great pearl.

In these two parables, the kingdom is said to be like a treasure hidden in a field, or a great pearl, in fact, what you might call *the mother* of all pearls! The basic message of both parables is the same; that the kingdom of heaven is so valuable, so incomparably valuable, such a wellspring of incomparable joy, that it is worth our while and in our best interests to be willing to give up everything else in order to get it.

Look at the two characters in these parables, the ploughman and the merchant. The ploughman stumbles upon his treasure. While cutting a furrow in the ground he comes up against something hard and unyielding. He digs and uncovers a chest filled with treasure – gold, jewels, and coins – handfuls of them. This was not unheard of in those days. Only the wealthy had access to banks, but in those days banks were not particularly safe and secure according to modern standards. It was rather typical for people to bury possessions of great value. This was especially true of Palestine because it was subject to many wars. In order to keep conquerors from taking their valuables, landowners would often take them to a field and bury them with the intention of recovering them later. The earth was a veritable storage house.

The ploughman closes the chest and covers it with dirt. He knows what the law says. The one who finds such treasure is able to keep it - if it has been found on land he owns. He must own the land, even if it means liquidating all his other assets in order to purchase it. This he is willing to do. He will part with everything and not rest until he has a sealed deed of purchase. His family may think he has gone out of his mind, but on that day, he takes them out into the field and digs up the treasure chest before their astonished eyes.

At this point, you may wonder why Jesus cut the story short. His listeners would have expected him to tell what the ploughman did with his newly found riches. But by cutting the story short, Jesus lays the emphasis just where he wants it, on the *sheer joy of discovery*.

Now look at the merchant. He is no doubt a wholesaler who sells to retailers. Pearls were the equivalent of diamonds today. They were the most valuable gem in the world at that time. If you owned pearls, you owned a fortune. It is said that when Roman emperors wanted to show how rich they were, they would dissolve pearls in vinegar and then drink them in their wine.

This merchant is perpetually on the hunt. He is consumed with the idea of finding fine pearls. One day he comes across what we might call *the mother* of all pearls. It is so exquisite, so valuable that he, like the ploughman, is willing to liquidate everything he owns in order to obtain it. Now, again, Jesus cuts the story short. The unmistakable impression he wants to leave us is this: the merchant doesn't buy the pearl in order to sell it and make a profit; he's buying it *in order to possess it*.

These two parables approach us from different angles, but their message is the same: *the surpassing, incomparable value of the kingdom of God is worth giving up everything else one values*. In both parables, the men are surprised by an inexpressible joy, so much so that they are blown away by their discoveries. Their response seems extreme, but they realize that they have found something of extreme value. And, mark this, what they do is motivated by joy.

Now here is where we must be careful in our understanding of this joy. What is the source of such joy? I believe the answer is straightforward: Jesus himself is the essence of his kingdom. The kingdom is of such surpassing value because of the incomparable value of the King. As John Piper puts it so well, “The kingdom of heaven is the abode of the King. The longing to be there is not the longing for heavenly real estate, but for camaraderie with the King. The treasure in the field [and the pearl of great value] is the fellowship of God in Christ.” In John 16:22 our Lord draws a straight line between joy and fellowship with him. Listen to him speak to his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion:

***“Now is your time of grief, but I will see you again and you will rejoice, and no one will take away your joy.”***

Seeing Jesus produces joy. Our source of joy is our relationship with Jesus. When we first perceive who Jesus is, and when we begin to understand that we are the object of his matchless love and amazing grace, and when we realize (and its like a sudden awakening, as if a light has come on) that this is the Person for whom we have been looking all along, there is inexpressible joy. It is the joy of discovery – the discovery of a lifetime. This God-shaped void that has so haunted us is about to be filled at last. Suddenly we know beyond a shadow of a doubt that there can be no meaningful substitute for a relationship with our Creator. That’s why the men in these parables sold everything – they were motivated by sheer joy. There is nothing like the joy of the Lord to loosen our grip on the things of the world.

I’m afraid that so many of us get it all backwards. We think that if we offer to give up things, discipline ourselves, or work a little harder for the cause of the kingdom, we’ll find joy. But in these parables it’s the joy that comes first! It’s the sheer joy of discovering Jesus that motivates a man or woman to see everything else as expendable. Prized possessions and once-cherished dreams begin to fade like the morning mist in the heat of the rising sun. They seem so ephemeral, of such passing interest and value. The apostle Paul expressed this as well as anyone when he said:

***“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. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him ...”*** – Phil. 3:7-9a

That’s the same message as in these two parables. For both the ploughman and the merchant, suddenly everything else was expendable. They wanted the kingdom of the Great King!

So few people are truly happy. They are like the rich young ruler who came face to face with our Lord (Matt. 19:16-22). He did not really perceive who Jesus was – and what the Master was offering – and when our Lord put him to the test in order to see if he was willing to part with his worldly wealth in order to follow, this young man went away sad. It seemed to him that the sacrifice was just too great. C. S. Lewis sums it up very well:

**“The New Testament has lots to say about self-denial, but not about self-denial as an end in itself. We are told to deny ourselves and take up our crosses in order that we may follow Christ; and nearly every description of what we shall ultimately find if we do so contains an appeal to desire. If there lurks in most modern minds the notion that to desire our own good and earnestly to hope for the enjoyment of it is a bad thing, I submit that this notion has crept in from Kant and the Stoics and is no part of the Christian faith. Indeed, if we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the gospels, it would seem that our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.”**

Scott Grant adds, “These parables are an invitation to take a holiday at the sea, and to let the King’s love for us lap up onto the shores of our heart.”

This morning, if the joy of the Lord seems elusive to you, or seems to have deserted you in the midst of life’s cares, then I point you to our Jesus. You will find that the chorus is true:

***Turn you eyes upon Jesus,  
Look full in his wonderful face,  
And the things of earth will grow strangely dim  
In the light of his glory and grace.***