



The Hidden Treasure & The Pearl

We've been looking at the parables of Matthew 13 for the past two weeks. They emerge at a key turning point in Jesus' ministry, as the larger crowds start to fall away and increasingly only Jesus' true followers remain close by. None of this has caught Jesus by surprise. He has talked about the varying receptions of the word by means of the parable of the sower. He has made the promise in the parables of the wheat and the weeds, the mustard seed, and the leaven that God's kingdom will advance mightily, even through the tiny group that now truly follows him, and despite the many obstacles they will face.

Now in this final third of Matthew 13, Jesus defines most pointedly what distinguishes true disciples. Quite simply, *true disciples are those who recognize that God's kingdom is so valuable that it's worth sacrificing whatever it takes to be its citizens*. With his two illustrations of the man who accidentally stumbles across treasure hidden in a field and of the merchant who regularly seeks precious pearls (vv. 44–46), Jesus covers the whole spectrum of humanity—from those who initially are not seeking the kingdom in any respect to those who look intensely over a long period of time.

Similar to the mustard seed and the leaven, the treasure hidden in a field and the valuable pearl furthers the themes of smallness and hiddenness. The element of the relative smallness of the present form of the kingdom continues. In 13:44 it consists of treasure in a much larger field. In 13:45 it consists of just one pearl. Likewise, there is continued emphasis on the element of hiddenness. The treasure is hidden in the field while the pearl is not initially obvious.

But new accents also emerge, particularly the interplay of searching, finding, celebrating, and selling all in order to possess something of great value. The person who finds the treasure joyfully “sells all” to buy the field. The merchant “sold all” to buy the pearl. In these actions, the power of that which has been found is seen to be at work. The treasure and pearl possess the finders and shape their lives. Together these parables emphasize more strongly than either could alone that the kingdom is a fortuitous finding deserving total investment. So it is with us as we participate in and devote our lives to the kingdom of heaven; it is worth everything.

The Hidden Treasure (Matthew 13:44)

“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.”

Background¹: In all cultures, including modern ones, people have hidden money and other valuables in the ground, especially during uncertain times such as war. First-century historian Josephus tells of wealth hidden by Jews and the efforts of Romans to find it. The servant who hid his talent in the ground (Matt 25:18,25) shows the same practice at less troublesome times. At any rate, finding such a treasure in the ancient world was the equivalent of winning the lottery.

Interpretation²: As with other parables starting with “The kingdom is like...,” the analogy is not merely between the kingdom and the treasure. The analogy is with the whole process described in the parable: The kingdom of heaven is like the case of a man who finds a treasure, covers it, and because of joy goes, sells all, and purchases the field. **The kingdom encompasses all of these aspects.**

The point of the parable is in the behavior of the finder; he found something hidden worth all he had, and he took all necessary measures to acquire it. The hidden kingdom is like that, beyond compare and worth whatever is required to participate in it.

The parable presupposes that the kingdom is hidden and available to be found. Put another way, the kingdom is present and awaiting recognition of its value and the radical action it deserves. It is not about a reward in heaven or the age to come. **Jesus told this story to announce the presence of the kingdom and to elicit the joy of discovery and the radical action of following him.**

The gospel of Jesus includes at least four primary items: joy, compassion, fulfillment of the promises to Israel, and the presence of God’s kingdom. This parable involves two of these themes explicitly and offers quick insight into Jesus’ ministry and message. The parable urges a recognition of what time it is. With Jesus’ ministry the kingdom is present, and it is time to celebrate and participate in that kingdom at any cost.

The Pearl (Matthew 13:45-46)

“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.”

Background & Interpretation³: Pearls were greatly valued in antiquity, perhaps even on a par with gold or diamonds, so they became a figure of speech for something of supreme worth, which is the basis of this parable. The pearl merchant is “in search of fine pearls,” and his search is rewarded with the discovery of an immensely valuable pearl.

This parable has a similar message to that of the hidden treasure and is linked by the simple statement: “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like...” (v. 45). There are, however, subtle but important differences between the two parables. In this instance the main character is “a merchant in search of fine pearls,” and his active search is rewarded with the discovery of an exceptionally fine pearl.

¹ Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*.

² Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to Jesus’ Parables*.

³ Ibid.

By contrast, in the parable of the hidden treasure, the man who discovers it seems not to have anticipated his good fortune—similar to the first disciples when Jesus comes to them unexpectedly (Matt. 4:18–19; 9:9). The man in the field is doing his regular work, not looking for anything special, when he comes upon the treasure quite by accident. Yet the merchant is actively seeking, knows what he is looking for, and still finds something beyond all his expectations. One thinks of the magi who seek out the Messiah (Matt 2:1–12). Even within this chapter, Jesus tells his disciples that in encountering him and his message they see and hear what many prophets and righteous people longed to see (13:16–17). **Such an active search for the kingdom of heaven compels one to “sell all” in order to gain it.**

Whether the kingdom is found through an unexpected discovery or a determined pursuit, these parables illustrate how the kingdom can become real in either way. In these two parables, John Dominic Crossan finds a fundamental pattern: (1) **“discovery”** (i.e., the profound recognition of the compelling nature of the reign of God); (2) **“reversal”** (i.e., the call for conversion of life, where one yields everything to the demands of God’s reign); (3) **“action”** (i.e., full commitment to the reign of God in all of one’s life). With short, vivid strokes these two parables describe the dynamics of Christian discipleship. Regardless of how the kingdom is found, Jesus says that specific and concrete actions must follow.

Finding Treasure, Seeking the Pearl⁴

How did Jesus seek to change attitudes and behaviors with this parable? And how will it change our own?

- **The parables remind us that all of life is seeking after value.** Sometimes we find value fortuitously and other times with great effort, but often our sense of value is skewed. We need to aim higher. Our relation with God is the most important part of life. All our other pursuits are trivial by comparison. More specifically, understanding what God has done in Christ and following Christ are more valuable than all else we possess or seek. It is clear too that we cannot be focused on “our things” and do justice to God’s kingdom. God’s call surpasses all else in life—and it is worth it.
- **We also need to realize what time it is. If the kingdom is present, our complete response is needed now.** If the kingdom is worth all we have, then joy and celebration should accompany our finding and involvement with the kingdom. The problem with most of us is that we would like a little of the kingdom as an add-on to the rest of our lives. We want to hedge our bets. You cannot hedge your bets with the kingdom. This parable urges us to abandon what we thought was the focus of life and focus entirely on what God is doing with the kingdom.
- **Similarly, these two parables remind us that there is a cost to discipleship.** Discovering God’s treasure takes effort. We invest all that we have to offer. We give up what is less valuable, in order to invest in what is most valuable. With all the daily distractions of our lives, we seek what is hidden just beneath the surface of our lives. It is the costly path of discipleship.
- **We must face the reality, though, that to many people any talk about Christianity partaking of a “treasure” borders on laughable or is outright foolishness.** Christians have so frequently failed to live their own gospel and have identified with certain cultural and political ideas that Jesus’ message has been lost. The gospel we proclaim must deserve and explain the label “treasure,” and our lives must express the ultimate value found in Christ.

⁴ Excerpted from Snodgrass, pg. 247.

- **Finally, we have seen how our recent parables address the hiddenness of the kingdom during Jesus' lifetime, and the point of those parables is as relevant as ever.** This is where a word about the Holy Spirit and the resurrection is important. If the kingdom was present with Jesus, it was only because the Holy Spirit endowed his ministry from the beginning. If any claim can be made that the kingdom is still present, it is because the Spirit was poured out by the resurrected Christ. Thus, for the church to have any viable message today, it must demonstrate through the power of the Spirit the presence of God's kingdom in our world. The church does not bring in the kingdom. It witnesses to, is a servant of, and demonstrates the presence of the kingdom. Christians have the task of showing the reality of the new age right in the midst of the old. That same Holy Spirit active with Jesus must be evident in us, showing the compassion, acceptance, forgiveness, justice, and joy that marked Jesus' own ministry.

Discussion

1. Some opening ideas: What is your favorite movie that involves people searching for hidden treasure? Have you ever unexpectedly found something of great value—what was it and what did you do after finding it?
2. We read in the previous section: “The problem with most of us is that we would like a little of the kingdom as an add-on to the rest of our lives.”
 - What is your initial reaction to this statement? When you consider the many things that demand our time and attention in life, is this a fair assessment?
3. The point of the parable of the hidden treasure is in the behavior of the finder; he found something hidden worth all he had, and he took all necessary measures to acquire it. What makes this type of pursuit challenging?
4. “If the kingdom is worth all we have, then joy and celebration should accompany our finding and involvement with the kingdom.” How do you respond to that statement? How has your involvement with the kingdom produced joy and celebration?
5. In the parables the hidden treasure and the pearl, what basic truths about the kingdom stand out to you? What is Jesus communicating with these parables? How do they encourage action — and what actions do they call for?