

Parables of the Heart

“Priceless Pearls”

Passages: Revelation 21:9-27
Matthew 13:45-46

We come to the sixth parable of Matthew 13, traditionally called *“the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price”*, found in verse 45:

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.”* (Matthew 13:45-46)

Now, most people, when they hear this parable, immediately remark that this parable sounds very similar to *the Parable of the Hidden Treasure* that we looked at last week. And that’s the reason why *this parable is commonly misinterpreted in the exact same way as last week’s!*

As I said last week, most people think that we are the treasure hunter and that the treasure is the Kingdom of Heaven. That, then, leads us to the conclusion that we must sell everything we have in order to buy it. Similarly, in today’s parable, they see us as the pearl merchant and the pearl of great value as the Kingdom of Heaven. The conclusion for both parables is, therefore, the same: It is not only *up to us* to discover this “pearl” of the Kingdom of Heaven, but when we do, we have to sell all we have in order to make it ours!

Like I said last week, however, **this conclusion goes against the Scriptures!** Never is the Kingdom of Heaven described as something we have to go look for! To the contrary, **it is always Jesus**, the Good Shepherd, **who looks for us!** It is He who came *“to seek and to save the lost”*. Furthermore, from Scripture we learn that the Kingdom of Heaven is never something that we have to purchase! Salvation is always a free gift of God!

What we need to do with *today’s parable, therefore*, is to use the exact same interpreting tools that we used when interpreting *last week’s parable*.

Remember? As we saw in all the parables of Matthew 13, the central character is always Jesus! (In the first parable, Jesus was *the sower* who sowed his seeds in four different types of soil. In the second, He was *the man* who planted wheat in the field but whose enemy planted weeds. In the third, He was *the gardener* who planted a mustard seed in his garden and, when it was grown, the birds came and nested in its branches. In the fourth parable, Jesus was *the*

woman in the kitchen who took yeast and thoroughly mixed it into the dough. Finally, in last week's parable, Jesus was *the treasure hunter* who found the hidden treasure buried in the field.)

In the exact same way, in today's parable, **Jesus is the pearl merchant who travels throughout the world in search of fine pearls!**

With this idea in mind, we can now move on to some of the finer details of this parable. You see, it could easily sound as if the *Parable of the Hidden Treasure* and the *Parable of the Pearl of Great Price* were saying pretty much the same thing—and to some degree, they do. They are both about Jesus and His great desire “to seek and save the lost”. However, there are two major clues that point to the uniqueness of this parable:

First, in last week's “*Parable of the Hidden Treasure*”, the treasure hunter (Jesus) was looking for only one particular object; there was only one treasure in His sights. But in today's parable, the pearl merchant (Jesus) is actually on the hunt for “*fine pearls*” –plural! (⁴⁵ “**Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls.**”) It seems clear that Jesus, the pearl merchant, wants to collect as many pearls as He can find! **It is this plurality which, I believe, offers a significant clue as to how we should interpret this parable.**

A **second important clue** that points to the uniqueness of this parable comes from the fact that **the pearl merchant (Jesus) is searching for pearls, and not for some other precious gem**. Why is that important? Because, unlike precious gems, gold or silver, **pearls are not valued in every culture around the world.**

Let's do a quick experiment. I want you to take a look at a few products on the screen that are sold in different parts of the world. I want you to ask yourself two questions: **1- “Would I buy this product? 2- If not, why not?”**

- Poo Poo Smoothies
- Pee Cola
- Barf Detergent
- A Fart bar
- Aass Fatol beer

The reason why these products *put us off* is because, in **our** culture, the names of these products are too easily associated with things that are **unclean**. (Poo, Pee, Barf, Fart, Fat ass.) It's this mental association with something unclean that changes our attitude towards them.

This idea, I believe, is one of the keys to unlocking today's parable! From a Westerner's point of view, *pearls are beautiful objects...objects of great value!* But, did you know that, in ancient Hebrew culture, *pearls were of little or no value? That's because they come from oysters;* and oysters were considered **unclean!** Even in Jesus' day, no Jewish woman would have been caught dead wearing a string of pearls, or pearl earrings-- It would be equivalent to someone in our culture wearing a roll of toilet paper around their neck! Disgusting!

This is the reason why **there is not one reference to pearls in the entire Old Testament!** You will find references to diamonds, rubies, sapphires, topazes and agates, **but you will find no mention of pearls.** Pearls were associated with uncleanness. And, as such, *it became a metaphor for the Gentiles.*

Now, do you know where the very first reference to pearls is *in the entire Bible?* It's found in Matthew 7, in the Sermon on the Mount, when Jesus told His disciples, ***"Do not give to dogs what is sacred; do not throw your pearls before pigs."*** Dogs, pearls and pigs-- all 3 spoke of uncleanness. Indeed, all three words were used as short-handed insults against the Gentiles!

This idea has important implications for us as we interpret today's parable. If, for a Jew, **pearls** were unclean... and were even used as a metaphor to describe the Gentiles..., then, it is highly likely that, in this *Parable of the Pearls*, **Jesus is making a veiled reference to the Gentile world!** Indeed, by calling **Himself a "pearl merchant"**, Jesus is openly declaring to His *Jewish* disciples that He is, in fact, on the look-out for **"fine pearls"**! That is, He is reaching out to the Gentiles! Clearly, Jesus can see their value, despite what His Jewish culture believed about them.

Even more remarkable is the fact that, when He finds just one pearl of great value, **Jesus is willing to give up everything He has to purchase it!** This, of course, is another foreshadowing of the cross. This time, however, Jesus is telling His disciples that it's not for Israel that He is ready and willing to give up His life-- **He is willing to give it up for Gentiles as well!** In Jesus eyes, the *Gentiles were worthy of the Kingdom of Heaven!*

Let me add one more angle to this already intriguing discussion.

As you probably know, **pearls are the only jewel which comes from a living organism.** They are created *in response to an irritation.* A little particle of sand or some other irritating substance gets inside the shell of the oyster and it is like cracker crumbs in bed -- constantly irritating. The oyster has no hands with

which it can brush the irritant out; no means of defence. And so, when something hurts an oyster, the oyster's only response is to transform the injurious object by covering it with a soft and delicate nacre which is built up layer by layer until it forms a lustrous, shining and beautiful jewel.

I see this as a beautiful metaphor for the Gentile world. Think back to the days of Noah, when God got rid of all the irritations in the world with one fell swoop—a flood! But, then God did something quite astonishing—He placed a rainbow in the sky, making a promise to Noah (and to the human race) that He would never destroy the world in this way again. Of course, that put God in quite a difficult situation! **From now on, He would have to endure the crumbs in bed!** He would have to patiently put up with the irritation of paganism and rebellion, of idolatry and self-destructive behaviours. God would have to endure the pain of watching this world go into a tail-spin...with His proverbial hands tied! He couldn't brush it away!

This is what grace is really all about—it's about God enduring the pain of this broken world; a world that is trying to go its own way without Him! **In grace**, He endures the constant irritation of individual hubris. **In grace**, He puts up with the selfish pride of the nations. **In grace**, He suffers the humiliation of those who deny His existence. **In grace**, He puts up with it all. Why? Because, in time, He will *transform that which is injuring Him by covering it with something of His own making*. As the sins of the world are taken into Himself, they are covered (coated if you like) with the redeeming blood of His Son!

Do you see the subtle message of this parable? Even though the Gentiles have long been without God, God has always been at work in them (call it *common grace*, if you like), producing for Himself **something of great beauty and value for which Jesus was willing to lay His life!** If only the Gentiles would see this, they would turn to Jesus and be saved!

Now, perhaps you may think that I've stretched your imagination about pearls too much? I don't think so. For the fact is that the Apostle John went much further than this! Indeed, as a way of concluding my sermon, I want us to take a look at the 21st chapter of the Book of Revelation! John is taken to see a great city (2,200 kilometres cubed in shape) coming down from heaven. This city, the New Jerusalem, is the bride of Christ, His church. Now, what I find remark (given our subject today) is that the 12 gates of the city are, each one, made from a single **pearl**.

Listen again to Revelation 21:18-21.

With all these precious stones and jewels available to God, why does He choose to make each of the 12 gates from a single pearl? What's the point? And the answer is; **the gates are a deliberate reference to the Gentiles!**

- Verse 25 says that these gates of the New Jerusalem will never be shut! That's because the Gentile world will be free to come in and out of the city. It is no longer a city for Jews alone, but for all redeemed humanity.
- Verse 24 says that ***the kings of the earth will bring their splendour*** into the city through these gates. Every nation will freely contribute the best of their ideals and values ...all to the glory of God.
- Verse 26 says that ***the glory and honour of the nations*** will be brought into the city through these gates. The good things of every human culture will combine together to uplift and enrich God's people.

I think the point can't be any clearer! In John's vision of the New Jerusalem, both Gentiles and Jews will live together in perfect harmony... in this city which is called 'the bride of Christ'!

Not surprisingly, this is exactly the same image that Jesus was privately giving to His Jewish disciples when He gathered them together in the quiet of an inner room and gave them these last two parables:

- The *Parable of the Buried treasure* was about the Jews!
- The *Parable of the Pearls* was about the Gentiles!

When we combine these two parables together, we come up with one complete picture...a picture of how both Jews and Gentiles will one day be united and gathered into one family, as one people. For the fact is that Jesus has bought the entire world...He has given up everything for us all (Jew and Gentile alike) ...in order that every nation might share in the glory of His redemption!

With this in mind, let us focus our thoughts on the task at hand. Do you truly believe that every human being is precious to God? Do you believe that every person is either a **Hidden Treasure** or a **Precious Pearl**?

I go to two Nursing Homes each month. In one of them, there's a woman who, if I come anywhere near her, she screams, "Stay away! I don't want your religion!" I have to constantly remember that she's a pearl!

This is our task! We need to keep this in mind as we walk down the street. We must keep this in mind as we go through our day at work. We must keep this in mind when we're in the grocery store or the coffee shop. **Everyone on earth is**

precious to God...even if you can't see it; even if your culture or your family background has taught you differently!

There's an old adage that says: "***Beauty is in the eye of the beholder!***" Jesus gave up all that he had on this earth in order that he might purchase both **the hidden treasure of the Jews** and **the pearls of the Gentiles** for himself. He did it because He had the eyes of His Father! He could see the beauty of humankind; He understood our hidden worth.

Do we have those same eyes? Can we see the beauty in others?

One last thing- Don't forget to include yourself in this! Take a look in the mirror and tell yourself, "*I am a pearl of great value to God!*" Don't let the world, or your past, or your boss, or your circumstances tell you otherwise. Jesus gave up everything for you!

Let's pray.