

**Parables of Jesus: Buried Treasure and Pearls**  
**Matthew 13:44-46**  
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Today, we are starting a new sermon series on the Parables of Jesus. Parables are the defining characteristic of Jesus' teaching. They are stories that we learn something from, or they are similitudes – a brief explanation that likens one thing to something else.

Parable comes from the greek, *parabole*, which means "to throw alongside" or bring something alongside something else. This is what Jesus did. He took something that was difficult to understand, like the Kingdom of God or God's will or God's nature, or the purpose of life, then he threw that alongside a simple story that was easier to understand. "This" is like "this".

And he used everyday, ordinary, accessible kinds of things to make the comparison. Things everyone or anyone could understand, like a woman who lost a coin and searches for it, or a shepherd who loses a sheep, or a stubborn, wayward son and his father who longs to see him again.

Parables were stories that were designed for everyone to understand.

About understanding parables, some people say that every parable has multiple meanings. Other scholars say that we should look for only one, primary meaning. Others try to find an allegory in every parable, meaning that the elements of the story represent something else. I find all three of these positions too extreme. It is good with every parable to try to find out what the MAIN emphasis is, but sometimes there are multiple meanings to a story. And while some parables are allegories, like the parable of the sower who throws seeds on different types of soil (Jesus actually explains this one and tells us that the seeds symbolize something else and the different soils each symbolize something else), it is not true that every parable is an allegory. In fact, most of them are not. So to apply one method of interpretation to all parables is not really helpful. Instead, start by looking for one main point, then explore the story for other possible meanings.

To really understand the meaning of most parables, it is important to look at the context. Look at what happens just a little before the parable to see why Jesus was telling this story. Look behind it for an explanation or for another story that compliments the first one.

The two short parables we are looking at today are called similitudes: a story that likens something hard to wrap your mind around to some everyday object or occurrence. And context is important for these two stories. Jesus had already been teaching about the Kingdom of Heaven earlier in the day, and so that evening the Disciples ask him about one of the stories he told. So to help them understand what he was telling them, he told a few more stories about the Kingdom of Heaven. In fact, in this one chapter, Matthew 13, Jesus tells 7 different parables about the Kingdom of Heaven, or Kingdom of God. And these two very short stories pack a powerful punch. Jesus is painting a picture here of what the Kingdom of Heaven, or Kingdom of God, is like in our life.

As we begin today, I'd like for you to lift out the white insert from your program. On one side is the study guide for this week. We're reading the New Testament together throughout 2007, and we'd love for you to join us by taking a few minutes to read the Bible for yourself, and use this study guide to help you think about what the passages mean.

The other side is a brief outline of where we're going today with three questions set apart at the bottom, under "Taking the Parable Home with You." I'd like to ask you to use these three questions on your own, or with your family today or in your small group to help you apply these two parables to your own life.

Again, the picture Jesus is painting here is that the Kingdom of God is like a treasure...in one case a buried treasure and in another case a pearl of great value. In both stories, the point is that once we sense the immense value of this treasure, we pour our whole life into attaining it. It is worth giving up everything else we have so that we gain something much greater. Which is kind of the nature of treasure isn't it?

Can you think of larger than life figures (mainly from the big screen) who pour their life into finding the treasure? These are the kind of movies we get easily engrossed in because there is something exciting about following a character on his/her journey to lay hold of some treasure. How many of us enjoyed losing ourselves inside the story of Indiana Jones and his quests for the ark of the covenant or the holy grail? What about Nicolas Cage in National Treasure, where his character is the last link in generations of people who searched for this lost treasure. Currently running, (have not seen it yet, but plan to soon) is Capt Jack Sparrow's quest for treasure. The idea of a treasure worth pursuing is enticing, it's captivating, it can be inspiring.

I recently watched The Pursuit of Happiness, with Will Smith. It's the real story of a real guy who had a different kind of treasure in mind. A treasure of making something out of his life. And his adventure was the overcoming of some incredible obstacles. For all of these characters, the message that grabs us is the same...there is something out there worth giving your all to! There is something so incredible, so amazing, so wonderful that you would sacrifice everything else to have it.

That's what these two parables are about. These stories are like twins, but not identical twins. They have the same message, but they are different in the details. Jesus is making the point, there is something out there worth giving your all to. And that is the Kingdom of Heaven.

Well, what is the kingdom of heaven? Matthew uses the phrase Kingdom of heaven, the other gospel writers use Kingdom of God. They mean the same thing. Some people suggest that Matthew uses "heaven" because he was writing to a Jewish audience and he wanted to refrain from writing the name of God, something that good Jews don't do.

But what is it? The kingdom of God is God's rule, God's reign. It is the dominion of God. It's where God's will is perfectly done. In one sense the Kingdom of God is everywhere, it is the cosmos, since all things were created by God. But on planet earth, God has given human beings the ability to choose to resist God's will and rebel against God's authority, or to accept God's authority in life and be subject to God. To choose to follow or not to follow God's will in their lives. And so, on earth, the Kingdom of God is both a present and an impending reality.

It is something that is here in a very real and tangible way, but is not yet complete, not yet perfect. God's will is that we would live out his love in all our relationships. Started, yes...perfected? Not yet! God's will is no more oppression, no more injustice. Started? In places...perfected? Not yet. God's Kingdom is a place where sin and death are defeated. Started? Yes...perfected? Not yet.

When Jesus calls us to follow him and to serve him, he is calling us to the mission of building God's kingdom on earth! That's what the church is about. It's not perfect, it's not complete, but the church is called to be a glimpse, a taste of God's Kingdom! A place where people experience God's love for them, where they are encouraged by the fellowship and grow into Christ-likeness. It's a place where they use their gifts to serve one another and transform the lives of their neighbors by sharing it with them in word and in action.

The Kingdom of God is outside of us, it's bigger than us, but it is also within us. It is that grace, peace, hope of God's spirit in us. You sense God's presence, you feel God's forgiveness and grace. The hope we have in us, the purpose and call God gives us in life...all these things are ways that we experience God's Kingdom within us. And just as the Kingdom of God grows as we join God's spirit in transforming lives to reflect God's love, God's character, God's will, it also grows in us as we invite God's spirit to build those very same things into our lives.

One last thing about the Kingdom of God. Remember who the King is. The kingdom reflects the nature of the King. Our King stepped off the cosmic throne and stepped into life among us. He laid down his life for his subjects, demonstrating his love for us. He shares resurrection life with us, that both literally and figuratively, we would share in life that overcomes sin and death. This is the nature of the King, and his kingdom reflects his character.

So when Jesus is saying the Kingdom of Heaven is like this or like that, he is talking about all these things...this amazing vision of life as God ultimately wants us to experience it. The hope that we have, the future and promise we have. The confidence, comfort and peace we have, the knowledge of God's love in our lives, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. All these things that we associate as good in our faith, all of it is captured in this little phrase, the Kingdom of Heaven.

So Jesus tells us that this Kingdom of God is like a treasure or a pearl of great value. It's this treasure worth giving our all for. Then he tells us something of how we are meant to respond to the treasure of the Kingdom of Heaven. What it is that we are to do as people who have become aware of the great treasure that we have in Jesus Christ.

So as we get to this first parable, let's look at it one more time. Use your imagination and listen as I read this story one more time. ***The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.***

What did you picture? Most people picture a hired hand working a plow in a field and the plow hits something and bounces out of his hand. This was a common occurrence in Jesus' time. People who were listening probably knew of someone who had this very thing happen to them. Why? Because people in those days did not entrust their money to banks. They put it in jars or pots or chests and they buried it somewhere where thieves wouldn't find it. They usually knew where they buried it so that they could go get it when they needed it. But you know how a human's memory can be, right? I have lost my wallet or check book so many times now that my wife doesn't join me in the panic or the search anymore. She says, you know that you put it in a safe place, and one of these days you will stumble upon it again. Sometimes treasure would be lost just like that. They just couldn't remember where they put it.

Sometimes when people buried their treasure, they would die before they could dig them up, so the location of the treasure could get lost. They might pass down the information to their children, but there could be any number of scenarios where the information would not get passed down. So it was lost, hidden in a field somewhere.

Now we notice in this story that the man who found the treasure was not looking for it. He just ran into it. It was a serendipity. Maybe he was a laborer plodding behind a plow and he dinks it with the plow. We don't know, we just know he happened to find it without looking for it. We just know that he found it, and when he did he was filled with joy!

I think it is interesting that this could have happened in Jesus' time, but it's fascinating to think that this might still happen! And it does, in the holy land. A few years ago, archeologists in the holy land were digging around in a field and they found a jar. Now jars are pretty common place found in fields, but this one was heavy, heavier than it should have been, and it obviously had something in it. They tried to pour the contents out, but they would not come out through the narrow opening of the jar. They didn't want to break the jar, but there was no other way to find out what the contents were, so they cut an opening in the jar and found 19 pounds of silver.

**Insert picture.**

They were silver medallions from over 3000 years ago. So when Jesus told this parable, that silver treasure had already been buried for about 1000 years. And you can imagine the joy the team felt when they discovered what exactly their discovery was! That is what Jesus is describing in this parable.

Now I like that Jesus uses the word “treasure”, because he means something more than just monetary value. He is talking about something that makes your heart leap! Most people don’t talk about their money as their treasure. They don’t say, “I’ve got my treasure in the bank” or “my treasure is in my investment portfolio”. Ask people what their treasure is and you will see them get excited as they tell you about something that makes their heart leap. What you will discover is that their treasure has a deeper value and meaning than money.

I have a friend who collected baseball cards. He had full sets of cards from the late Fifty’s to the early Seventy’s stored at his parents’ house. One day, without asking him, his mom cleaned out the attic and had a garage sale. She sold the whole collection! I didn’t even become his friend until years later and he was still crushed! It wasn’t the monetary value of the cards...it was that they represented his love for baseball and his childhood. But to his mom, it was just trash.

My grandfather was in wholesale grocery sales most of his life. He collected glass bottles. I remember that they were right in the hallway on open shelves, in an area where us kids liked to play. He was always cautioning us about those old bottles. They didn’t mean anything to me, still don’t. My dad has them on an open shelf! But the story is that my grandpa picked up most of those bottles out of trash. He would even stop on the backroads at country dump sites and hunt for bottles. This may explain some of my eccentric behavior.

A few weeks ago, we had a couple of garage sales here at the church. For weeks ahead there was the piling of stuff. So I’d go dig around in this stuff, looking for “treasures”. And guess what? I found some! You know the saying, “One man’s trash is another man’s treasure”.

This is how it is with the Kingdom of God. Some people whether they are hunting for it or stumble upon it, when they find it, they see it and they treasure it and it is the most important thing in their life. And other people, well to them it is just trash, something to be cast aside. For the atheist, God is just a delusion. But for those of you who are in Christ, God is the greatest treasure in your life.

So when the man in the field finds it, his heart leaps for joy. He wasn’t looking for it, He just found it. And that is how conversion happens for many of us. Many of us in this room, you were converted, not because you were looking for God, it just happened. It was a surprise to you. You weren’t really expecting it.

Maybe this is how it was for you. Like, you thought your kids needed to come to church and one Sunday you decided to stay because that was less trouble than going all the way back home and getting out again in an hour. So you came. And you were surprised...you stumbled on it. You discovered that you needed the treasure. And your heart leapt for joy! And God has become the focus of your life, and the source of joy in your life.

This is how the Kingdom of God works sometimes. We stumble across it, we weren’t even looking for it. But when we found it, we recognized what a treasure it is. And our hearts filled up with joy.

Now, what can be a troubling spot in this parable for folks is what the guy does next after he finds the treasure. Jesus says that the man found the treasure, reburied it, sells everything he has, and purchases the field. In today’s practices, that does not sound very ethical, does it?

So there is this little problem with the parable, and some scholars say that this is the way it was in Jesus’ time. It was finders-keepers. The ethics of the day was that there was so much artifact buried in the land, even 2000 years ago, that whatever you found, where ever it was, it was yours to keep. In that case, the man in the story is really doing more than is required by purchasing the field.

OK, so that’s the first parable, let’s take a look at the second one.

Listen again to the story.

***The Kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.***

In this story, the merchant didn't just stumble on the treasure. He had been looking for it all his life. He had oriented his whole life around searching for the treasure. He spent his whole life buying and selling pearls. In Jesus day, pearls were extremely valuable items. Pearls were harder to find than gold or silver, especially a high quality one. Everyone who heard this story knew just how rare a really fine pearl was.

So this man in the story, finally finds the pearl he has been looking for. And when he finds it, what does he do? He sells off everything else to get the one pearl. He is willing to part with all his lesser treasures to gain the one treasure that is above all. It was what his heart had been longing for his whole life.

The Kingdom of God is like that pearl. Jesus is telling us that there is one treasure that is greater than every other treasure. One treasure that fulfills your heart's longings more than anything else. There is one treasure so great, that when you find it, everything else you own will pale in comparison to it, and you will be willing to let go of all the other stuff to grab onto it. And that treasure is God's Kingdom.

This story relates to those of us in this room who were searching for God, you were searching for something to bring fulfillment, joy or purpose or meaning. There was something missing and you knew it and you set out to find it.

I think of my own life. When I went off on my own way, I felt this emptiness. No matter how much pleasure I poured into my life, it wasn't enough. In fact, it meant less and less over time. I searched in all kinds of places, including drugs for a spiritual peace, but it was elusive. My searching finally led me back to the church that I had abandoned years before...and there I found Jesus, and I knew that he was the treasure my heart had been searching for.

I think of many of you, especially those who found Jesus through the Alpha course. You were looking, you were searching. Maybe you had looked in many other shops before and hunted in lots of other places...some that may have led you down some bad roads in life...some that maybe weren't bad, it just wasn't the treasure that made your heart leap! Nothing seemed to satisfy the desires in your heart. And so you came here, through Alpha, or any other way, looking for that treasure and when you found it (it is not Saint Paul's, by the way – it is the Kingdom of God) you knew it. And you responded...you knew that was a treasure beyond all other treasures. It was the treasure you could not find any other place, in fact, you won't find it anywhere else...only in Christ.

Some of you today may still be searching. You may be new to the church, you may have been in the church for years, and you're still searching. Because there is a difference between believing in God in your head, and experiencing God's love, God's peace, God's grace, God's treasure in your heart, in the cradle of your soul. There is a treasure God wants you to find, and it is way more than just belief in our minds...it is the treasure of a relationship with the living God...the treasure he offers to us through his son, Jesus. The treasure is found in a relationship with a real person...Jesus.

Now both of the men in the parables had the same response. They found the treasure and they sold everything else to get it. Now Jesus is not making the point that we all have to sell everything we have to gain this treasure. In fact, you don't have to sell anything. This treasure is free. It is a gift.

Jesus is telling us that there is no greater treasure in the world...and if you had to sell everything you had to gain it, it would be more than worth it. You would not regret it. And he's also saying if there is anything else, any other treasure you are pursuing, you are sacrificing for, that is driving you MORE than the Kingdom of God, the relationship God wants to have with you, then you are missing out. You are headed down another dead end road.

What I've discovered in my spiritual life over the years is that the more my life is invested in the true treasure – in my relationship with Jesus and in the work of his kingdom – the more fulfilling my life is...the more I experience joy and peace in every other aspect of my life...the more I experience blessing, especially in my family relationships.

Contrast that with the times when I invest in lesser treasures in my life. I lose focus and direction; I feel that emptiness in my soul again; I am less patient and caring in my other relationships; the glimmer of treasures attained is less fulfilling...

What are you aiming at in life? What is driving you to do what you do? Jesus is saying that you will never find a better purpose, a more meaningful pursuit to give your energy and life to, than the Kingdom of Heaven.

Here's the way the apostle Paul puts it:

***...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, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ – the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith...Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.***

Here's the thing. I want for God to be the most important thing in my life. I cannot say that that is always the case. But that's what I want. I want to know that I would give up whatever God asks to, whenever God asks. Have I obtained this? Paul says he hasn't. Not yet. But he also says that he presses on toward that.

That's what the Christian life is about. Pressing on...doing everything we can to pursue the right treasure in life. To let the Kingdom of Heaven define who we are and what we do. To stay connected to the relationship we have with Jesus – a relationship that is beyond any other treasure.

I kind of look at it this way. Some treasure is going to own me. Some treasure is going to direct and define my life. I am going to give my life to the pursuit of some thing...some ideal...some goal...some treasure. So are you. The only question is: which treasure will it be?

***The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. The Kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.***

Today, that is the good news of Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Prayer: Lord, sometimes we are more interested in the treasures of our own making. Forgive us for putting other treasures before you. Today, we want to say, for the first time or the 100<sup>th</sup> time, you are our treasure, and we want to give our lives to growing in our relationship with you, and helping others discover the treasure of your love.

Place in us, or restore in us, the joy of finding that our heart's desires are fulfilled in you. And Lord, we want to be your people, living in your love and grace, and surrendering our will and our resources to your will and desire.