

Matthew 13:44 – 46

^{13:44} The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

⁴⁵ Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, ⁴⁶ and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Background

- The 'kingdom of heaven' is something Jesus has been progressively defining throughout his ministry, as narrated by Matthew. It is not simply 'heaven' as in 'going to heaven when you die.' Rather, it is 'bringing heaven to earth by being in the reign of God.' The direction of the kingdom is from God towards this world, to impact it and heal it by bringing it under His reign. Jesus is God's reign in human flesh and over it, as he retells humanity's story (Mt.3:13 – 4:11). That's because God has always wanted humanity to bear His image (Gen.1:26 – 27) and now in Jesus, God is stamping His image onto Jesus as His new humanity. So, the kingdom of heaven is the relationship that God wants with human beings, on this earth, shown now in Jesus, and to be extended to others.
- Pearls were the most expensive and valued jewelry of the Roman Empire – only one in ten thousand oysters created a pearl (this was before people cultured oysters) and divers would have to go through great danger to retrieve the oysters. Cleopatra apparently had a pair of pearls worth around 9 million dollars each. Imagine the life of a successful pearl merchant, then.

Questions

1. Notice Jesus says that the kingdom is like a precious object in v.45 and like someone buying a precious object in v.45 – 46. It is both ultimately valuable and worth giving everything up for.
2. Are these parables about Jesus, or about us? If it's about Jesus valuing us and giving everything up for us, that would make some sense. If it's about us valuing Jesus and giving everything up for him, that would make some sense, too. But notice it is about 'the kingdom of heaven.' Jesus gives up everything for the kingdom of heaven to be embodied in human flesh. He call us to give up everything we have to embody the kingdom in our own flesh.
3. Parable of the treasure in the field.
 - a. Who is this guy? He's probably a hired hand. He's working someone else's field. He finds a treasure buried there. Evidently, it's too big to try to get out himself. Maybe people could see him if he tries to take a little at a time. So he hides it again, and goes away to liquidate his assets and buy the whole field.
 - b. How does this guy look foolish, if you were on the outside, watching him?
 - i. He gives up everything he has. That is strange. Ordinarily, of course he'd have to sell something. He might sell part of his own land or his crops or maybe even his animals. Then he'd buy that field. But it's just a field. The impression Jesus gives is that the field looks ordinary. So what this guy pays is a little disproportionate.
 - c. What is this guy's experience?
 - i. He knows he's getting a great deal! No wonder Jesus says this man is filled with JOY. Can you imagine his JOY?!? What a great deal he's getting!!! AND he'll be able to tell his friends what a great deal he got! (That appeals to some of us, right? You know who you are!)
 - ii. He has a secret. His secret is that he's not just buying the field. He's buying a treasure, stuck in there, worth more than anything he could ask or imagine!! Others don't know what he knows. He knows there's more. He's seen it with his own eyes. And he's filled with joy. That treasure makes it all worth it.
 - d. How is living for Jesus like that?
 - i. JESUS IS EXCEEDINGLY VALUABLE. He is more, so much more, than just a good teacher or a nice guy. He is the epitome of value. If you had eyes to see, you would know that in no other person, place, or thing is so much value concentrated in one location. Jesus is worth it. But the flip side is...It's not obvious to everyone. Most people, in fact, see nothing unusual, nothing supernatural, nothing valuable about Jesus.
 - ii. Have you ever been in that kind of position? Where you own something valuable but other people don't see its value?
 - iii. Illus: When I first started being interested in Jesus, I would spend time asking people questions. I would think, which took time. I read the Bible and went to a church service to learn about Jesus, which took time. To some people, learning about Jesus was a silly waste of time. I was 16 years old, and my life was about school and swimming. I was this intense, success-oriented, driven guy. And from the outside of what I was doing, it must have seemed ridiculous. Especially when I went to Mexico with a group of Christians over spring break my junior year for what I thought would be a building project. To my friends and parents, that was a waste of a good spring break! But I had found a treasure. Jesus was already beginning to transform me as I learned about him. I was a selfish jerk – he started making me actually care about people. I was also suffering pretty deeply from my parents arguing about divorce – Jesus showed me that he was with me in that. And I had tons of questions about life – Jesus was answering them. On the outside, it looked weird, but if you stepped into the inside of what I was doing, you would know that I had found a treasure, and I was glad to be giving up my time and money because I had discovered Jesus. He was worth it.
 - e. Jesus became valuable *to me* not just on a sentimental level, like my wedding ring or my family photo albums. Those things are valuable *to me* but they're not *objectively valuable*. Jesus claims that he is *objectively* valuable. He is *objectively* worth it. That's a tall claim, isn't it? But nothing brings that out more than the second parable.
4. Parable of the pearl
 - a. In comparison to the man who buys the field, the merchant seems kind of dumb, doesn't he?

- i. What's his life like before he found the pearl? Hobnobbing with all rich people, traveling to exotic places, enjoying fine wine and food.
 - ii. Application: As you come to college, you might want to be like this merchant at the height of his success, right *before* he sees the pearl of great price. Maybe you came from a small hometown, maybe you felt underestimated in high school, and college represents your chance to be a connoisseur of fine things – able to talk about ideas, able to mingle with high potential people, able to partake of the best opportunities, and eventually to get the best stuff. It must mean you know something about something. And now college represents the ultimate market, the place to be if you're in search of fine pearls. Things and even people might have some value for you, but they're even more valuable for your future. You're hoping that you got a bargain. You're hoping that one of these things will be worth it, that in one of these areas of life, you'll get back more than you put in. You're utilitarian.
 - iii. So what's it like for the merchant to find THE GREAT PEARL? It is THE pearl – incomparable in beauty and jawdropping in value, and he decides he must have it. He simply must have it, not for business, not for profit, not for other pearls, but just for THE GREAT PEARL. So, Jesus says, he goes and sells everything he has in order to buy this pearl. He doesn't just sell his other pearls, mind you, he sells every last thing he has for the sake of this great pearl.
 - iv. Let's be honest. This is why the merchant seems really dumb. The man who bought the field with hidden treasure? Really smart. The merchant? Really dumb. It just doesn't make sense from the outside. Even in finance, you don't put all your money in one stock, you diversify, you broaden your portfolio. But this guy has dissolved his business, he has no more capital, no more possessions for that matter, only this one pearl. At the end of the day when he goes home, if he still has a home, what does he have? His pearl. It's just him and his pearl. Can you picture him, sitting on the park bench, just admiring his pearl? What's up with that? Has he gone mad? Is he like Gollum, raving on about 'my precious'?
- b. So why does the merchant fall in love with the pearl?
- i. He knows there is nothing else like it. It is absolutely unique.
 - ii. On the inside, this is a story about love. The merchant has bought this pearl not for profit, not for what the pearl is going to get him, but for love. Somehow all his life's training has prepared him to recognize the value of this pearl. All his life, it has been his destiny to own this pearl. He has found his treasure. He loves it. He has given up maximizing profit, he's given up the search for other pearls, but he has found an object worthy of his love. Therefore, for the first time, he loves. He was utilitarian, now he's aesthetic. On the inside, his internal motivational structure has completely changed. For him, this is worth it!
- c. How is the kingdom of heaven – participating with Jesus in his kingdom expansion – worth everything? Do we have that perspective?
- i. All our lives, we are on a quest to possess something of eternal value. In the movie Troy, Achilles wants to possess something of eternal value, so he fights the Trojan War. Nowadays, just because we're not sure what's eternal doesn't mean that we aren't pursuing it. Actually, it means we pursue everything at once. This is why we get overcommitted. Stressed out. We live either to maximize the present or to build up currency for the future, all the while looking for that one thing that will make sense of everything else, the one thing that is worth all of who we are and more, the one person who engages all of who we are and more.
- d. Illus: Hudson Taylor, who gave up a great career in England to be a missionary in China. Taylor was known for his sensitivity to Chinese culture and zeal for evangelism. He wore native Chinese clothing even though this was very rare for missionaries of that time to do. He and his organization campaigned against the Opium trade, which made him a controversial figure. Taylor learned and was able to preach in several varieties of Chinese, including Mandarin, Chaozhou, and the Wu dialects of Shanghai and Ningbo. That was a big sacrifice. He suffered health losses personally. And while he was in China, he buried two of his children, then his first wife Mary.

But he later said, 'I have never made a sacrifice.' Those are incredible words for a man who actually did give up so much. He had found the pearl of great price.

- e. Illus: My wife graduated from Harvard, and I graduated from Stanford, so there is a lot of stuff that we could have come to value. So many things, conveniences, experiences that we could buy. And yet we have decided to give to Jesus as much of our lives as we could. We have chosen to live in the second highest crime area in Boston, in a lower income neighborhood. And we've paid a cost for this. Our house has been broken into twice in the last 4 years. There are some big challenges. And yet what we have received back from Jesus has been worth it. A few years ago, we had the opportunity to care for 2 kids from our neighborhood. Their mom, a single mom of four, decided to take 2 full time jobs, which meant she was either working or exhausted. Since we're friends with her, we offered to take in her 6 year old and 13 year old for as long as she wanted us to, to make sure they were eating right, doing their homework, and going to bed on time. She said sure, and praised God. During that time these kids lived with us, I have never been so angry! But we saw Jesus pouring out his life through us. And he touched their lives, too. Several couple friends of ours got married that summer, and we took these kids along with us. They were Christian weddings, so the Christian ideals of commitment, love and faithfulness were clearly presented. They were beautiful weddings. One weekend, the 13 year old girl was coming out of my house, and I was passing her going in. She turned to me and there was a beautiful light in her eyes. She asked me out of the blue, 'Mako, when I get married, will you walk me down the aisle?' What could I say? I stuttered, 'Uh, sure!' Then I went inside and told Ming, 'Do you know what she said?!?!' Do you know what an act of God that was, to give a girl who had experienced the abandonment of her father and different types of abuse, to give her hope for good relationships? That was Jesus touching her life through us, and that moment had eternal value.
5. Jesus has the ultimate inside view of the kingdom. For him, it is totally worth it. He loves each of you. He will give up everything to establish the kingdom in us. 'For the joy set before him [he] endured the cross, despising its shame...' (Heb.12:2) The joy was doing the Father's heart and loving us.
6. Let me distill the points of these two parables.
 - a. Point 1: Participating with Jesus in his Kingdom is ultimately valuable. What is striking here is how valuable Jesus regards himself and his kingdom movement. Look at how valuable the treasure and the pearl are in these stories. They are so valuable they make everything else seem worthless by comparison. In fact, the man who buys the treasure and the merchant who buys the pearl stop at nothing. They sign their whole checking account away.
 - b. Point 2: It takes everything you have. Here's a definition of how to respond to Jesus: Jesus is not free. Jesus takes everything you have and everything you are. In both parables, the person sells all he has. The man buying the field sells all he has. The merchant seeking fine pearls sells all he has. An authentic experience with God takes all that we have. To be a part of the kingdom of heaven, to help establish heaven on earth, takes all that we have. But you get something far greater than what you gave. And that leads me to Point 3.
 - c. Point 3: But you get back even more. It's like trading in your old, beat-up, junky car for a brand spankin' new one. What a bargain! Or your old, beat-up, junky obsolete computer for a brand new one. What a bargain! That same principle of upgrading is true on the level of your life. There is an order of magnitude 'life upgrade' Jesus offers. UPGRADE YOUR LIFE. It's worth it. You can't out-give God. You don't earn it either because you can't claim to deserve what you receive.
 - d. Point 4: Jesus does this for our joy. C.S. Lewis said it like this, "If there lurks in the 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 around with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered to 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."
7. Sharing: What was one time where other people outside the kingdom looked at you, and thought you were crazy because you lived for Jesus?

8. Sometimes we forget how valuable God's kingdom is, and need reminding. Sometimes we only see the cost. That's the outsider's view. How can we pray for each other to have the insider's view?

Optional: See the structure of this particular section of Matthew's Gospel, where Jesus tells seven parables about the kingdom and how it grows. See my notes for Mt.12:46 – 13:58.