

“The kingdom of heaven is worth infinitely more than the cost of discipleship, and those who know where the treasure lies joyfully abandon everything else to secure it.”

Don Carson

Well I am going to start my sermon with a little game of “Show and Tell.” I wanted to show you some of the items that our construction crew found when they were digging around the church during the renovations.

First some little bottles. Perhaps pill bottles? Not sure.

Next an old toy train. A piece of rusted decorative metal – perhaps from a lamp? Not sure. Some hardware, probably from the original build.

Finally a piece of black stone called obsidian. Obsidian is a naturally occurring volcanic glass. Prized for its sharpness, it was used by native Americans for tools and arrow heads.

So that was the treasure buried under our church. Fun, but not exactly valuable.

British amateur treasure hunter Terry Herbert had a different experience. He was searching in a Staffordshire field with a metal detector that he bought at a garage sale for £2.50 when he discovered a medieval treasure that had been buried since 700 AD. It was a stash of Anglo-Saxon gold and silver and jewel-studded weapons and helmets and shields. It was one of the most significant archaeological finds in the history of Britain. The “Staffordshire Hoard” (as it was called) was eventually sold to the British Museum for £3.5 million pounds.

There is a bit of a sting in the tale, though. Herbert was prospecting on the land of farmer Fred Johnson, who technically ‘owned’ the treasure since it was found on his land. The two ended up in a bitter feud about the money.

Buried treasure. It’s exciting to imagine, isn’t it?

Our Bible story today is all about finding buried treasure, and what you would do if you found it. So why don’t we pray that God would speak now as we open his word.

Our heavenly Father, please teach us now as we look at the Bible. Will you reveal hidden treasures to us and cause us to see their great worth. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen

Well we are continuing in our series called Hidden Treasures, from Matthew 13-16. Today's passage is literally about hidden treasure – it's where I got the name for the series from. But the theme of hidden treasure, and hidden truth, and hidden meaning has come up again and again in the passages. Jesus is asking us to look for the hidden treasure in what he's saying. It might be right there in front of you – you just need to look hard enough, or listen carefully, and you'll find what you are looking for...

With that intro, why don't we open our passage for today. It's just a short one – two little parables that explain what the kingdom of heaven is like. From 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.
(Matthew 13:44-46)

Two parables, connected by the idea of finding treasure, and then selling everything in order to possess the treasure.

What was Jesus getting at?

Remember that a parable is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning, a relatable image that reveals spiritual truth.

Well there's some historical context that helps us understand these parables a bit better.

First, with the man who finds buried treasure, that was something that was a distinct possibility back in Jesus' day. They didn't have banks like we do, and so the safest place for people to store their riches was under the ground.

That was especially important when the political situation was unstable. In the 5 centuries before Jesus' birth, Israel had been occupied by the Babylonian Empire, then the Persians, then the Greeks, then the Romans. Armies came and looted homes and livelihoods, dragged people off into exile, men were conscripted to go to war, and properties were left vacant for long periods of time – and so it was quite normal for people to bury their money underground in the hopes of returning and finding it later.

Apparently Pablo Escobar did the same thing – Escobar was, of course, the number 1 Colombian druglord in the 1980s. He buried money all over the country. Just a few years ago a farmer was digging on his farm and found a barrel containing \$600 million dollars, presumably Escobar's drug money... The government seized the money and the farmer was left with nothing.

But back in Jesus' time, if you found buried treasure on your own property it was yours to keep. The rabbis had a saying, "If a man finds scattered fruit, scattered money... these belong to the finder."¹

So the parable has a man finding hidden treasure. He realizes that it could be his, and so he hides it and goes away and sells everything he has to buy the field with the treasure in it.

Now we have to be a bit careful here. We might be tempted to question the morality of the man who found the treasure. Is he trying to defraud the original owner? If not, why did he hide the treasure again?

And we could try to examine every element of the parable for its meaning. But I don't think that's the point of the parable. It's not an *allegory* where every element of the story has its own hidden meaning. Parables generally have one main meaning, and in this case, it's the joyful discovery of a hidden treasure.

Jesus wants us to imagine ourselves as that man, imagining uncovering something of great worth, and the joy and the excitement that you would have in that moment.

That's the historical context for the first parable.

The second parable is similar. It's about a pearl merchant who spends his life looking for fine pearls, and when he finds one of great value, he goes away and sells everything he has to buy the pearl.

Back in the first century, pearls were considered the most precious of all gems, more expensive than diamonds even. That's because naturally occurring pearls are extremely rare – pearls occur naturally in one out of 10,000 oysters, but only 1 in a million will be of gem quality.

And looking for pearls is dangerous. Pearl divers in those days didn't have scuba equipment, so they tied large stones around their waist and held their breath while they sank down to the bottom of the ocean to look for oysters. There were sharks and storms and just the danger of drowning... This all added to the allure of pearls, and their value.

Apparently when Roman Emperors wanted to show how rich they were, they would dissolve pearls in vinegar and add them to their wine.

So the pearl merchant in the parable, he is someone who would have scoured the markets for a pearl of exceptional quality. To have such a pearl would have put him in a position to bargain with royalty. The perfect pearl would have returned his investment many times over...

¹ Barclay, p85.

The Meaning

So what are we to make of these parables? Remember that these parables are principally about understanding the kingdom of heaven, and what it's like.

With that in mind, I think we learn 5 lessons from these short verses. So here are they are.

1. The Kingdom is priceless.

There are 2 diamonds in the world that are considered priceless. The Koh-i-Noor which is part of Queen Elizabeth's crown jewels, and the Sancy Diamond which was once part of the French crown jewels. Both these diamonds are considered so valuable that no price can be named for them.

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like finding one of those priceless diamonds. His kingdom is worth more than you could ever imagine, and if you find it, there could be nothing more valuable in the world.

2. Some people are searching for God's kingdom, and some people stumble onto it by accident.

Back in Australia in 1869, two prospectors found the world's largest-known gold nugget – the Welcome Stranger weighing in at almost 200lb. They were looking for gold.

Just 2 years ago, a family was walking their dog in a town not too far from where the Welcome Stranger was found, when the daughter kicked a stone as she was walking. She picked it up and said to her dad: "Is this gold?" It was – a nugget worth \$25,000.²

Sometimes we stumble onto good things when we least expect it. Life-changing things. You might be here because you are on a spiritual journey. You're searching for meaning. Look carefully because Jesus says he has the answers.

You might be here for other reasons. Perhaps somebody invited you along to church today. Perhaps you've always come to church but it's never really grabbed you. Jesus says, look down! You might just find gold...

I love running courses like Alpha, because there are always people who come along and they discover the kingdom for the first time. They meet Jesus and all of a sudden the penny drops. It all makes sense.

Perhaps this whole Christian thing doesn't make sense to you right now – why not come along to Alpha? Because it might just be the thing that leads you to the hidden treasure of understanding who God is, and what he wants from you.

² <https://www.insideedition.com/family-stumbles-upon-25000-gold-nugget-while-walking-down-street-52950>

And that leads to the third lesson we learn from the parables...

3. The kingdom will cost you everything you have.

In the parables, both men sold everything they had to possess the treasure they were seeking.

All of us seek treasures in life – not usually hidden treasure, but treasures in the form of wealth or success or status, relationships, family, achievement. I suspect you know the treasure that you aim for in life.

And most of us will sacrifice a lot to achieve that outcome that we desire. We put that goal on a pedestal and we do whatever it takes to get there, no matter the collateral damage, no matter the compromises we find ourselves making. That ultimate goal becomes the thing that commands our time, and our attention and our focus. It becomes our driving force. And sometimes the thing that drags us under...

We all seek treasure in life.

But Jesus holds up a different treasure. A treasure that, when compared to all others, is of incomparable worth. The treasure that you've been seeking, whether you knew it or not.

But it is treasure that demands your time and your attention and your focus. A treasure you would give everything you have just to get it... Later on Jesus would say to his disciples:

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 25 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. (Matthew 16:24-25)

The kingdom, Jesus says, will cost you everything. Even your very life! I'm just going to leave that thought with you, because we'll come back to it when we get to Matthew 16. In a few weeks time. But there is something deeply costly about following Jesus.

Is it worth it? The parable tells us yes, it is. And ask any Christian, I think they'll give you the same answer. Theologian Don Carson says this:

“The kingdom of heaven is worth infinitely more than the cost of discipleship, and those who know where the treasure lies joyfully abandon everything else to secure it.”

So what is the kingdom treasure that Jesus offers? And what makes it worth the price?

That brings us to the 4th lesson we learn from the parable.

4. The kingdom is the source of ultimate joy

Like I said before, we all seek treasure in life. But how many of us find satisfaction?

Sadly these treasures often promise the world, but they deliver much less. Sometimes they end up demanding everything from us. Rather than enriching our lives, they become a destructive force in relationships and mental health and so many other aspects of life.

Solomon, one of the great kings of the Old Testament, knew what it was to achieve greatness in a worldly sense. But listen to his summary of all his accomplishments:

⁴ I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards.⁵ I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them. ⁶ I made reservoirs to water groves of flourishing trees. ⁷ I bought male and female slaves and had other slaves who were born in my house. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. ⁸ I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers, and a harem as well—the delights of a man’s heart. ⁹ I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

¹⁰ I denied myself nothing my eyes desired;

I refused my heart no pleasure.

My heart took delight in all my labor,

and this was the reward for all my toil.

¹¹ **Yet** when I surveyed all that my hands had done

and what I had toiled to achieve,

everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind;

nothing was gained under the sun. (Ecclesiastes 2:4-11)

Solomon had it all – money, power, sex. But in the end, he says, it is all a chasing after the wind. Our human accomplishments only last so long, before they’re forgotten.

And there’s nothing wrong with human accomplishment – Solomon was one of the most accomplished leaders the world has ever seen. But he recognized that his achievements ultimately came to nothing.

And I think so many of us go on the same journey that Solomon did – trying to make sense of life and who we are and what makes a person important. We bundle our worth up with the treasures that we amass.

But come back to the parable. Because Jesus offers a better treasure. Treasure that brings joy, and ultimate satisfaction.

Jesus doesn’t explain exactly what the treasure is in this parable – he is deliberately elusive. He wants us to be intrigued. He wants us to wonder what is so special about his treasure. He wants us to start digging and to uncover it, and to see for ourselves. He wants us to search for the

answer like a pearl merchant who scours the world looking for something that is not just found in any cheap counterfeit. He wants us to seek his kingdom, and to find out firsthand the difference it makes...

This parable is an invitation.

When I was a schoolteacher, this is the verse that I would write in kids' yearbooks – because it is an invitation to experience the treasure for yourself, to experience the kingdom.

One of the best ways to do that is to keep coming along to church. Join us for Alpha where we deliberately discuss the basics of the Christian faith. Get a Bible and start reading it for yourself – perhaps you could start with the book we're reading now – Matthew – it's one of four stories of Jesus' life and death and resurrection that are recorded for us in the Bible. And pray. Ask God to show you the treasure...

Because the last thing we learn from the parable is this:

5. Jesus wants us to find this treasure!

Jesus wouldn't have told this parable if he intended for the kingdom to remain hidden. All throughout this chapter, Jesus has reiterated that the kingdom is there for those who have ears to hear and eyes to see. The hidden treasure of Jesus' kingdom is right here for us to discover in the pages of the Bible!

And Jesus reveals this precious treasure to us because he desperately wants us to be part of his kingdom. We normally read this parable with ourselves as the farmer or the pearl merchant, finding the kingdom and becoming part of it.

But in another way, this parable reminds us that Jesus counts us as his treasure. All through the OT, God called the Israelites his chosen people, and his treasured possession (Exodus 19:5). And Peter uses the same language for the NT church. **We are treasured by God!** God loves us, and God seeks us. And there is nothing God wouldn't do to purchase us back from our counterfeit gods, there was no price that was too great. After all, Jesus gave up everything – even his very life to pay for our forgiveness, by dying on the cross in our place.

God treasures us, as his chosen people and his precious possession. And he longs for us to find the greatest treasure we could ever imagine...

Why don't we pray that we would find it?



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