

Matthew 13:44-52

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Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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You Are the Treasure

The Word of the Lord from Matthew 13: "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." This is the Word of the Lord.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

Matthew 13 is full of parables – we've heard a couple over the last two Sundays, and our Gospel lesson today gives us the last few of the chapter. Put all of them together, and the Lord gives you a good look about how the Church lives until He returns in glory. Today, we have parables about redemption and judgment.

The first two parables of our text sound vaguely similar: Jesus says, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it." In both cases, a man finds something valuable – either a treasure or a pearl; and in both cases, he sells all that he has in order to buy it. These are parables of redemption, though it's amazing how terribly these parables have been twisted by many preachers.

What I mean is that the parable of the treasure is often preached like this: "Jesus is the treasure hidden in the field. He's there for the taking – will you seek Him out? Will you give up all that you have to make Him your own? Are you willing to give up everything for Jesus?" Likewise, the parable of the pearl is preached like this: "Jesus is the pearl of great price – if you have Him, you have heaven. You're the merchant who seeks Him out. All you have to do is surrender – give up everything you have for Him; and when you have done so, you can be sure that salvation is yours." How common is this interpretation? For fun, I once googled this text, and nine of the first ten sermons more or less interpreted it this way.

These are horrible interpretations for all sorts of reasons. The first is textual: up to now in Matthew 13, Jesus has been the *doer*, the One actively doing things in parables: He is clearly the Sower who sows and the Lord of the field where the enemy plants weeds among the wheat. Textually, it doesn't make sense that He would suddenly become the passive object rather than the doer. But far more importantly, interpretations like these destroy the Gospel that we are saved by grace alone. To say that you must give up everything you have in order to have Jesus is to say that you are saved by your work of giving everything up. It says that Jesus needs you to find Him before He can find you. This is the theology of many Christian churches in the world today. We give thanks that the Lord is still there with salvation by means of His Word, but this teaching contradicts that Word, obscures the Gospel and prevents Christians from being sure of their salvation. After all, how can you be sure that you've really given up everything for Jesus? If you truly have, then you'll no longer fall prey to sin and temptation because you've given all of that up. That is true of no one, so such Christians are left to say, "I hope I've given up *enough* to have Jesus." But they can never be sure.

There is a far, far better interpretation of these two parables, one that is squarely in keeping with the Gospel: you are the treasure. You are the pearl. The Lord Jesus has sought you

out. He has found you. And, in order to buy you – to redeem you, He has given up all that He has. That is certainly in keeping with Philippians 2:5-8:

⁵Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸*And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.* (Philippians 2:5-8)

It is certainly in keeping with Hebrews 12:2, which calls Jesus, “the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him *endured the cross*, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.”

Behold the miracle: Christ gave up everything for you, for God made Him to be sin in your place on the cross. And then Christ rose again, all things restored.

Which is Good News to you: “Jesus is yours, *as long as* you give it all?” or “Jesus has found you and redeemed you by His death and resurrection”? The first is Law that cannot save. The second is the Gospel of your salvation in Christ.

You are the treasure. You are the pearl of great price. We hasten to add that you are only the treasure and the pearl because of Christ. Apart from Him, you are far from having great worth: when the Scriptures describe you and your righteousness apart from Christ, it uses words in Greek and Hebrew that we don’t normally say in English in polite company. We use words like refuse, filthy rags, offscouring; the original is far more graphic. The news of these parables is even greater – and gives more glory to Christ – than you might think. Why are you a treasure and a pearl? Because Christ took your sin upon Himself: He became sin in your place and suffered for it on the cross. By His death on the cross, He has both given all that He has to redeem you, and by doing so has turned you from refuse to treasure. Now, for His sake, your Father in heaven doesn’t see you as trash for the dung heap: He tells you that you are worth the price of His Son’s own blood.

This is important, because it means your worth before God doesn’t change. That’s different than the world: the world establishes your worth based upon who you are and what you can do. If you make a big mistake and fall out of favor, you’re worth less than you were before. If health and age prevent you from doing what you could once do, then the world says you’re not worth that much anymore. All of this means that we’re declining in value as time goes on. But that isn’t how the Lord works: your sins, afflictions and loss of abilities are all the result of sin. For the sake of Christ who has taken away your sins, God doesn’t count your sins against you anymore: therefore, if you are forgiven, you remain a treasure before God – no matter what you have lost or have had taken from you here.

That’s why Christians look out for those who are disabled, defenseless, sick, failing, less fortunate: because while the world sees them as “less,” you know that they are priceless in God’s sight for the sake of Jesus. And if caring for others keeps you from doing what you want to do, you know that heaven awaits and is far, far better.

You are the treasure and you are the pearl, and you have been redeemed. All of that is for the sake of Jesus.

We should say one more thing about the parable of the treasure of the field, in order to defend the story and magnify Christ that much more. Some have objected that the man who buys the field does so unethically; given our modern understanding of property rights, he should

go to the owner of the field and tell him about the treasure. But that tries to impose 21st century law on 1st century reality. Back then, there were no banks: it was common for people to take money and valuables and bury them somewhere to keep them safe. Sometimes, these people would die, or forget, or be carried off by invaders – and so the treasure lay forgotten. The treasure in the field often didn't belong to the owner of the field; so the law of the time stated that the one who found the treasure could have the treasure – as long as he first bought the field. The man in the parable, then, is doing the lawful thing. This is reason to rejoice in Christ even more: rather than leave you lost, forgotten, forsaken, Jesus redeemed the entire field – the whole world – in order to save you.

One more question before we move on: why two parables so similar? It seems like one would do. Perhaps it is just for the sake of repetition, but there's a difference between them – a theme that runs throughout the parables of Matthew 13: the hidden and the visible. The treasure is hidden in the field while the pearl is visible in the market. Think back to the Gospel lessons of the last couple of weeks: in the parable of the Sower, the harvest grown from the Word is clearly visible; in the parable of the weeds, the harvest is hidden because the weeds look just like the wheat. Throughout the parables of Matthew 13, the Lord points out the distinction again and again: in the parable of the mustard seed, the seed grows into a tree that's big enough for all the birds and visible to all; but in its partner parable of the leaven, the yeast clearly spreads throughout all the dough – but you can't see the leaven. As the Lord teaches us about the Church throughout these parables, He reminds us that the Church is both visible and hidden. You can tell that there is a Church on earth: you can see buildings and believers, Bibles and baptisms. You can see people gathered together to hear the Word. But at the same time, the Church is hidden: you cannot see faith. You cannot see into the hearts of churchgoers and know who is a believer and who is not.

It will always be so until the Last Day. But on the Last Day, everything will be made known, and that's what the next parable teaches. In the parable of the dragnet, the fishermen throw a net into the sea and then haul it ashore. As they draw it in, they know that it's full of fish, but they do not know what kinds – for the moment, that is hidden. When the net is brought on shore, all is made known. The good fish are kept and the bad are thrown away. This one is easy to decode, because Jesus does it for us: "So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth." Until that Day when all is made known, though, faith is hidden. On the Last Day, there will be some whom everybody thought were Christians who will be thrown into the furnace; and there will be some whom you never expected who are saved, because they believed the Word and trusted in Christ.

As Jesus tells us about the Last Day, He teaches you an important truth about your life and salvation until then. You are not a treasure because you belong to a visible congregation. You are not a pearl because you appear to be a good, loving person to others. You are the treasure and you are the pearl solely for the sake of Christ, not because of any group you've ever joined or anything you've ever done. It is Christ who gives you forgiveness and faith in His Word and Sacraments. There are visible parts to those means of grace, too – like a preacher, or water, or bread and wine. But it is Christ, the Word made flesh, who adds His Word to these means to give you forgiveness and life. It is still He who makes and keeps you as the treasure, as the pearl.

We should note at the same time, however, that this is not an excuse for anyone to say, "Since I'm not saved by being part of a visible congregation, I have no need to go to church." This is simply a foolish rationale, for the Lord bids you to gather with other believers and receive His means of grace together. If your view of worship begins with, "I can worship God by defying Him and not going to church," then your faith is terribly, perhaps fatally, flawed.

“Have you understood all these things?” asks Jesus. I pray that, for you, the answer is yes. I further pray that this proclamation then has been like a master of a house, bringing out of the treasury what is new and old, for all the Scriptures point you to Christ. He has given all that He has at the cross to redeem you. For His sake, you are the treasure and you are the pearl, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen