

The Church: Pearl of Great Value

Matt. 13:45, 46

Intro. Matt. 13:44-46 - "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." Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.

It's impossible to overstate the extraordinary value ancients placed on the misfortune of an oyster called a **pearl**. It's believed **pearls** were known and treasured 3,500 years before Christ. They were supremely valued in Mideast and Asian societies. In lands around the Mediterranean, pearls were known as the *Queen of Gems*. The mystique of a round glimmering object from the sea was no doubt inspiration for the pearl's worth. In poetry, art and music, pearls are rhapsodized as symbols of purity and feminine charm. From the financial and marketing center of Bombay, pearls found their way into royal collections throughout India / Persia / Egypt, and beyond. But pearl-fever reached its heights in Rome. General Vitellius is said to have financed an entire military campaign by selling just one of his mother's pearl earrings. Pliny the Elder wrote that by the 1st cent. B.C., pearls were first in value among all precious things. Some may remember screen star, Grace Kelly. Kelly said, *"I favor pearls on the screen and in my private life."* Jackie Kennedy Onassis said, *"Pearls are always appropriate!"* Margaret Thatcher's sentiment was, *"I feel improperly dressed without my pearls."* So down through history, pearls have maintained a high value as an ornament of grace and charm.

Yet pearls held no value for the Jews. Their disinterest relates to **Lev. 11:9-12** where according to OT dietary laws, even the carcasses of marine creatures without fins and scales were to be regarded as unclean and detestable. Although ***mother of pearl*** is mentioned once in association with the royal gardens of the Persian King Xerxes, (**Est. 1:6**) the OT has no other mention of pearls.

So let's consider what this parable means. The last three parables in **Matt.13** concern the *outcome* of the Kingdom of Heaven. These parables answer the question, *how will the period between Christ's two advents end? What will the culmination be like?* Three parables were necessary to answer this question because God sees three distinct groups of people on earth...the Jews / Gentiles / and the Church. His separate program for each of group is illustrated by these final three parables.

The parable of **Hidden Treasure** concerns the divine program for **Israel**. 6x's from Exodus to Malachi, the nation is declared to be God's **treasured possession**. Yet because of unfaithfulness, Israel's glory has been hidden or concealed. What happens to expensive silver if it's never polished? Or as Jesus said, what good is a light if hidden under a bushel? The reflection of God in the life of His favored nation has been obscured by their unbelief and disobedience. Only Bible believing Christians have any regard for Israel's claim to be God's chosen people. Even though Christ paid the price to redeem Israel and the world, Israel continues in sin and unbelief. In the Tribulation, God will cause His people to realize the One they crucified is their Messiah. At that time, they will embrace Jesus. God will then remove their sin and the nation will be saved. The glory God intends for them will finally become apparent. God's treasured possession will be lifted up and exalted among the nations. **Isa. 32** is just one chapter among many that contain this promise.

The second parable concerns God's program for **the Church**. Although other suggestions are offered for what the treasure and the pearl represent, I'm convinced those interpretations don't line up with the rest of Scripture. Listen to a comment made by the late Dr. J. Vernon McGee:

"The popular interpretation of this parable says that the sinner is the merchantman and the pearl of great price is Christ. The sinner sells all that he has that he might buy Christ. I cannot accept this interpretation, and I have dismissed it as unworthy of thoughtful consideration.

To begin with, who is looking for goodly pearls? Are sinners looking for salvation? My Bible does not read that way, nor has that been my experience as a minister. Sinners are not looking for salvation. And the merchantman cannot be the sinner because he had nothing with which to pay. To begin with he is not seeking Christ, and if he were, how could he buy Him? The merchantman sells all that he has - how can a sinner sell all that he has when he is dead in trespasses and sins? (Eph.2:1) Further, the Scriptures are very clear that Christ and salvation are not for sale...salvation is the gift of God!" So the interpretation I offer isn't my own invention. It finds good company with men like J. Vernon McGee / Arno Gaebelein / James Montgomery Boice / Ray Steadman and others!

Several subtle differences exist between the parable of **treasure** and the parable of the **pearl**. Some suggest the second parable merely repeats the lesson of the first for emphasis. But details in each parable seem to have a distinct and intentional meaning. While we shouldn't press the details of a parable beyond reason, I'm convinced that Jesus never wasted words or used words carelessly. Even the metaphors He used are remarkably precise! So let me point out several subtle differences.

1. Differences between the treasure and pearl parables...

- The **treasure** in the first parable is twice hidden, but the **pearl** isn't hidden at all.
- In the first parable, the man **found** the hidden treasure though the parable doesn't say he was looking for it. It was like the folded up \$5 bill I found on the bike trail the other day. Through Hosea, the Lord said, **I found Israel like grapes in the wilderness. - Hos. 9:10** Like something unexpected **found** in an unlikely place, the Lord said, **I found Israel**. But in the second parable, the merchant came searching for something particular and continued looking until He found it. This may seem like a minor point, but it would seem to correspond to Christ who came in search of lost souls and continues to seek them today.
- The **treasure** of the first parable could have been gold / silver / precious stones or some thing else. Jesus didn't say. Each of those treasures from the earth is an inorganic mineral. The **pearl**, on the other hand, belongs to a small group of organic gems because a pearl derives from a living marine creature. Again, without pressing details too far, a fascinating similarity may explain why the Lord chose the **pearl** to represent His Church. We'll revisit this thought.
- In the first parable, the man sold all he had to purchase **the field** in order to have the **treasure in the field**. In the second parable, the object of purchase for this same merchant is one singular **pearl of great value**. Again, this subtle difference seems to relate to the redemption programs of Israel and the Church respectively.

Having noted several differences, let's look at the particulars of the parable in **vs. 45, 46**.

2. The Meaning of the Parable

The phrase, **kingdom of Heaven**, (which now appears for the 17th time in Matthew's Gospel), refers to *Christ's rule over the earth during the period between His two comings*. This period is also described as the *Church Age*, or *the Age of Grace*. It's today...the period we're presently living in...a period when Jewish glory is hidden and God is claiming people for Himself from among the Gentiles. **(Acts 15:14)** According to **Col. 1:13**, we who are saved are **rescued...from the dominion of darkness and brought... into the kingdom of the Son He loves**. Just as **the farmer of v.3 / the man who sowed good seed of v.24 / and the man who planted the mustard seed in v.31** refer to Christ...so the **man of v.44** and the **merchant man of v.45** also represent Jesus. The main character in 6 of the 7 parables of **Matt.13** is Jesus Christ.

The one exception is the parable of the **yeast**. There the main character is the **woman** who introduces **yeast** or false teaching into the kingdom.

As Dr. McGee observes, it is Christ who seeks the sinner, not the sinner who seeks Christ. It is Christ who sees value in us, not sinners who see value in Him. It is Christ who by suffering and death sold all He had to redeem us, not believers who sell all we have to gain Him. Christ freely offers His salvation to any who will trust Him. The credit and glory of redemption belongs to God and not to any human being! From Genesis to Revelation we find the wonderful story of the God who has become our Redeemer. In **Gen. 3:21** it was God who came seeking Adam and Eve and God who provided the skins of sacrificed animals to cover their sins. Then in the closing book of the Bible, it is Christ who is praised because **with His own blood...purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation". (Rev. 5:9)** So the **merchant-redeemer** of history is God!

Notice this **merchant man** came **looking for fine pearls**. Because pearls were valued so highly, the **merchant** came seeking the most treasured of all possessions. The disciple's ears must have perked up at the mention of a **pearl**. Several of them were fishermen...men of the sea. At least one was a tax official. And Judas, who held the purse, seems to have been quite fond of valuable things. Though the disciples couldn't fully comprehend all Jesus meant, nothing is more valuable in God's sight than people. Jesus came to earth in search of lost people. **"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."** - **Lk.19:10** He came in search of lost sinners like me and like you. One writer respectfully calls Christ, *"the Hound of Heaven"*. He pursues sinners to save them and give them the gift of everlasting life.

But notice...in the process of seeking fine pearls, the merchant **found one pearl of great value**. As we said last time, the **treasure hidden** in the field represents **Israel**. Throughout the Bible, the **Jewish** people are often associated with earth's land mass. But the non-Jewish nations are often associated with the **sea**. So Jesus came into the world to purchase one **pearl of great value** which represents the Church. Instead of a string of pearls, this single **pearl** represents the oneness and unity of the Body of Christ. In Christ, earthly distinctions disappear. **Gal. 3:28 - There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.**

Now this single **pearl** was so valuable the merchant had to **sell everything** to purchase it for Himself. As we said last time, this wholesale liquidation represents the sacrifice of Christ. It represents the enormous price paid to redeem us...the price of God's Son dying on Calvary's cross. **I Pet. 1:18,19 - For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.** Our redemption was purchased by the blood of Christ. Giving up life itself, Jesus sold all that He had! We sing, *"He gave His life, what more could He give, Oh how He loves you and me."* By popular demand, I won't sing it for you.

By the way, the word **precious** in **I Pet.1:19** is translated from the Greek word *timios* which means *very costly*. This same word is used in a metaphorical sense in **I Cor. 3:12** when referring to precious or costly stones. The Holy Spirit chose the same word to describe both the worth of Christ's blood and the worth of expensive gems.

And notice, having sold everything he had, the man **bought it...**he paid the full price to have the pearl for himself. The price He paid was complete and final. The merchant didn't put the pearl on layaway promising to pay off the balance sometime later on. He didn't finance the pearl. He didn't begin to work off the amount owed. He didn't make a partial payment leaving others to pay the rest. **v. 46** says, **He bought it.** For big ticket items, we typically ask what the monthly payments will be. Most of us don't have the lump sum required to pay cash for a house or automobile.

But here the total redemption price was paid and nothing more was owed. **Heb. 10:12** speaks of the finality of Christ's sacrifice. **But when this priest (Jesus) had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.** This complete...once for all payment, is something we struggle to accept. It seems too good to be true. But Christ claims us as His own based on the work He finished on the cross. And listen...nothing more can be added to make a cancelled debt more canceled! Nothing makes ownership more complete than a receipt stamped, *"paid in full."* So with complete confidence every believing sinner can say, *"My sin debt is paid. I am forgiven, clean, and right with God forever!"* And not one ounce of this assurance stems from anything we have done. All the glory belongs to Jesus!

But let's consider the uniqueness of the pearl. Several fascinating reasons explain why the Lord chose this particular gem to represent His Church. Who knows...maybe God created the oyster and the pearl just to illustrate the glory of His bride.

3. The Significance of the Pearl

Consider where a **pearl** comes from. Did you ever see an oyster? They're crusty, jagged and almost as ugly as a blobfish. Now there's a face only a mother could love! (Catch and retreat!) People eat the pink fleshy part of the oyster raw. Attached to structures at the bottom of the sea, an ugly mollusk is the main producer of this beautiful gem that is so highly valued. As I mentioned a moment ago, throughout the Bible, the sea represents the nations of the world. So here in the depths of the sea, in a most unlikely place, Jesus found a thing of beauty for Himself. I can't help but think of **Psa. 40:2** and the place from which David was rescued. **He lifted me out of the slimy pit, out of the mud and mire; he set my feet on a rock and gave me a firm place to stand.**

Then consider how a pearl is formed. If you come back tonight at 6 PM, I'll show a video explanation of how pearls are formed. The pearl is quite literally the product of misfortune and suffering on the part of an oyster. When an irritant like a grain of sand becomes trapped inside the oyster's shell, the creature begins to secrete a substance called nacre. Concentric micro-layers of nacre surround the irritating object and eventually form the sphere called the pearl. In a similar way, the Church is the result of Christ's suffering. **Heb.13:12 - And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.** Jesus repaid men's evil with good. His pain made possible our salvation. Out of His suffering came atonement or the covering that put away our sin and the irritation it caused. We don't think about this often enough...but sin is offensive and a terrible irritation to the God who is holy and sinless. The god of the 21st century is tolerant and soft on sin. He's a god of easy believing and no fault insurance. That's god as people want Him to be...but it isn't the God of the Bible! **Rom. 1:18** says, **The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness... Wrath is God's righteous anger and settled disposition directed against all that is sinful and wicked.**

And several other things are known a pearl. A pearl is only released from its dark compartment by the death of the oyster. So Christ died for us and by faith, we died with Him. And just like this one valuable pearl, the Church is formed and enlarged over time by the process of accretion. We see this in **Acts 2:47** which says, **the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.**

But consider the nature of the **pearl** itself. As I mentioned earlier, the pearl belongs to a small class of organic gems. In other words, the pearl, is produced by a living organism. It forms from the life fluids of an oyster. So too, it is the blood of Christ that saved us. Our glory is the Christ who lives in us. In **I Pet. 2:5** believers are called **living stones**. Notice, we are organic stones or stones that live. Our mortal life has been invaded by the eternal life of Jesus Christ. We are alive with the very life of God.

And a pearl is a unity. You can't cleave or carve a pearl like a diamond or emerald. To split a pearl is to ruin it. This corresponds to the spiritual unity that exists among those who belong to Christ.

Eph. 4:4-6 lists 7 unities that bind believers together. **In Christ** we are one whether that spiritual unity is visible and practiced or not. Ultra separatist Christians who treat other believers like second class citizens are in for a big surprise! Heaven will be a potpourri of sinners with one common denominator ...saving faith in Jesus Christ. We all are sinners saved by grace. In His High Priestly prayer of **John 17**, Jesus prayed that all who believe Him would be one. The spiritual unity created by God's Spirit is permanent and indivisible. You may not like me so much, but you'd better get over it. If you're saved like I am, I'm your neighbor for eternity. Our challenge here and now is to **make every effort to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace. - Eph. 4:3**

Notice there is only one pearl of **great value**. This also represents the unity of the Church. The Body of Christ (singular) is found in only one of two places today. Part of Christ's body is already in Heaven and the rest is on earth. But there is only One Body of Christ. In **Eph. 3:14, 15** Paul prayed for the church as one family. **For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name.**

Finally, consider this...the word translated **pearl** in English comes from the Greek word *margarites* from which we also derive the female name Margaret. *Margarites* conveys the idea of purity. Earlier in the Beatitude of **Matt. 5:8** Jesus said, **Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.** The purpose of Christ's death was to purify us because none of us was born pure. **Titus 2:14** declares why Jesus died. **(He) gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good.** So what applications should we draw from this parable?

4. The Applications of the Parable

- 1.** Consider the price paid to redeem us. **II Cor. 8:9 - For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.** Jesus sold everything to redeem us. In this same chapter the reality of Christ's sacrifice is held up as an example that should stimulate us to live for Him and share what we have with others.
- 2.** Consider how much God values the Church on earth. The Church is compared to the most highly valued treasure in the whole world. Never underestimate the worth of God's people! The most important business of all is what we do to serve, bless and increase the Body of Christ.
- 3.** Consider the predominant characteristics of the pearl. The pearl represents unity and purity. It's interesting that **Eph. 4** is about unity and **Eph. 5** is about purity. Check it out for yourself. Unity and purity are two qualities God is most eager to produce in the lives of His people. These chapters are a challenge to every believer. But I would almost guarantee there's an irritation or six in your life. Someone or something really bothers you. It may be someone who makes you angry or circumstances that make you anxious and fearful. It may be something that threatens unity or tempts you to impurity. An irritation can be any number of things. Do you know what God does for us? When we surrender it to Him, His grace can soothe that irritation and cover it. He uses the irritation to build something precious and beautiful in us.
- 4.** Consider the goal of redemption. We have been purchased at enormous cost by Jesus Christ and for Jesus Christ. We belong to Him. **Eph. 5:25-27** says, **Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, and to present her to himself as a radiant church, without stain**

or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless. Forget the husband-wife part for a minute. (and the wives say, “*Don’t you dare!*”) Note that Christ gave Himself up for her (the Church) to make her holy so that he might present her to Himself as a radiant Church. The day is coming when we will stand before our Savior **without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless.** Our beauty and purity will exceed that of the finest pearl. In the meantime, Paul wrote, **Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body. - I Cor. 6:19, 20**

It’s incredibly amazing to think of Jesus holding His Church in His hand and looking at us the way the merchant admired the magnificent beauty of the pearl he purchased. But that’s what Christ does. We are His treasure! **Rev. 21:21** says the 12 gates of the Heavenly city are made of one single pearl. We’ve never seen a pearl as large as a city gate...but then again, we’ve never seen avenues of gold either...gold so pure that it appears transparent. As we pass in and out of those pearly gates they will remind us of our value to God. Now I’m thinking church ought to be a little heaven on earth, don't you agree? I hope when you come and as you leave week by week, you will be encouraged by how precious you are to Jesus. You may feel alone and not worth much in this world, but there is a Savior who values you above all else!

5. Finally, and perhaps the greatest application of all regards the Kingdom of Heaven. Entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven isn’t gained by people eager to enter by works or sacrifice or religion or anything else. The Kingdom of Heaven is God reaching down to save sinners. It’s like the man who found treasure and value in a most unlikely place. In free-grace, with no motivation other than love, the Lord of Heaven paid the price necessary to redeem us for Himself. Since the price of entry has been paid in full, there remains only one requirement...faith.

To see the formation of a pearl watch:
www.youtube.com/watch?v=T18E58vOTus