

THE CASE OF THE VALUABLE PEARL

by Ray C. Stedman

We turn again this morning to the marvelous secrets our Lord is telling us in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew. They unveil to us things we would never know about history if he had not told us about these secrets of the kingdom of heaven, the mysteries of God at work in this present age. As we have been studying these parables in past weeks we have seen how accurately our Lord foresaw and foretold all that has happened in these twenty centuries of Christian life. Now we come to the sixth parable, usually termed "the parable of the pearl of great price," found in Verse 45:

"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." {Matt 13:45-46 RSV}

Note that this links very closely with the one preceding it, the parable of the treasure hidden in the field which the man found and covers up again and then went and sold all that he had and bought the field. We looked at that together last week. And, as we saw, there is a common misinterpretation of these two parables. It is that the treasure and the pearl are Jesus Christ; we are the men who are seeking for them, When we find him we must sell all that we have in order that we might have him. But this is a mistaken interpretation not only because it makes both these parables mean exactly the same thing, and our Lord never wastes words like that, but also because there is no sense in which the gospel, salvation, the gift of Jesus Christ, is ever presented in Scripture as capable of being bought by anyone. The Lord has come to offer himself to us as God's free, healing gift. He can never be purchased. There is no way that we can earn our way into his presence, into his family. We can have that cannot buy it. Therefore we must set aside that common misinterpretation.

If we will but follow the suggestions which the Lord himself has given to us in this series of parables, as he has interpreted some of their elements, we will again have our clues to the meaning of this story.

The man who is searching for the pearls is, of course, Jesus himself. He is the sower who went out to sow. He is the one who scattered the sons of the kingdom throughout the world, as he tells us. He is the one who planted the mustard seed in the field. Throughout these parables he is the one who is active in the midst of this age. So it is Jesus, then, who comes as a merchant seeking fine pearls.

This is an oriental picture. It is true that the Hebrew people never valued pearls. One of the strange things about the Old Testament is that, though you find many jewels and gems mentioned there, diamonds and rubies and sapphires and topazes and agates, you will find no mention of a pearl. For some reason the Hebrew people did not think much of them. But these disciples were Galileans, and Galilee was a region to which many Gentiles came. So they were familiar with Gentile traders who came looking for valuable pearls and who would pay fabulous prices for them in order to purchase them -- not for themselves but for their kings.

So the disciples understood the symbol our Lord is using here: A merchant comes seeking pearls and finds one of great value. In order to obtain it, he must sell all that he has and buy it. This is obviously the same kind of activity as in the parable of the treasure hidden in the field of humanity. We saw that the treasure is the nation Israel, and that it embodies the ultimate solution to the problem of establishing world peace and harmony. Until Israel comes into a right relationship with its Messiah and Lord, there is no way men can work out peaceful international relationships. This does not mean that it is wrong to try. It is perfectly right to do so. The creation of an organization like the United Nations as an attempt to try to solve this problem is not wrong. Men must try to hold war in check. But the Word tells us again and again that they do not know the secret and that they will not know it until Israel comes into its own.

To bring that nation into its own, as we saw last week, the Lord Jesus came and gave all that he had and bought the field so that he might one day bring to pass world prosperity and peace. We saw that the giving of all that he had is a picture of the cross of our Lord. He gave himself. As Isaiah so beautifully expresses it, "He poured out his soul unto death," {Isa 53:12 KJV}. As Paul says, "He emptied himself," {Phil 2:7 RSV}. He exhausted his treasury, he pauperized himself, he gave all that he had, literally and truly, in order that he might purchase the field containing that treasure.

Now we come to another aspect of the work of the cross. We need only ask ourselves, "What other great treasure does God value in this world?" -- in order to discover what this pearl means. For what else has Jesus given all that he has in order to obtain it? The obvious answer is: The church. Our Lord came to this world and, seeing the church as God sees it, with his view of history -- already complete and worth so very much, he gave all that he had so that he might obtain it. I am sure that Paul had this very parable in mind when he wrote to the Ephesians:

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ... that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish. {Eph 5:25b, 5:27 RSV}

Why did our Lord choose the symbol of the pearl for the church? Why didn't he use the ruby or the diamond, or any other jewel? The answer is that the pearl is the only jewel which is the product of living matter. A pearl is the response of an oyster to something which causes it injury. A pearl grows out of hurt. You probably know how a pearl is formed. A little particle of sand or some other irritating substance gets inside the shell of the oyster and it is like cracker crumbs in bed -- constantly irritating. The oyster has no hands with which it can brush the irritant out, no means of defense except to transform that thing that is injuring it. What an apt and beautiful symbol our Lord has chosen here for the church! I was tempted in thinking through the subject of this parable to label this "The Case of the Irritated Oyster" because the response of an oyster to that which irritates it is to transmute it and transform it into something which is no longer a source of irritation. This is what our Lord came to do, and, in order to accomplish it, he gave all that he had.

Nothing we have considered up to this point has begun to exhaust the implications of that vast phrase: "he gave all that he had and bought it." I wonder if any of us at any time fully grasp the significance of that. Most of us have tried to think through the sacrifice of Jesus. Oftentimes we think of it as a kind of commercial enterprise -- "The Lord paid the price" -- as though he were merely making a purchase in a marketplace. Our terms for redemption are sometimes rather crass. Or we dwell upon the agony of the cross, its physical hurt, its anguish, the injury, the pain, the thirst, the tears, the darkness, the death. Our Lord went through all that. But we have not even remotely touched the deepest significance of the cross when we deal with it on the physical level. We won't begin to understand it until we see something of the personal emotional experience of the Lord Jesus when he entered into the human family, became one with us, and in the cross identified himself with our hurt and shame and sorrow and heartache. It is easy even to sing about the wounds and the blood, the thirsting and the pain, but that doesn't begin to touch the depth of what this phrase means. It goes far, far deeper than that. It involves the hurt in the heart of God as he fully identifies with us in all our agony and extends his forgiveness to us.

Healing human hurt is God's business. The cross is God's answer to the hurt humanity has caused. This is a hurting race we belong to. Who is not aware of that? I suggest that no generation has ever been more aware than this one of the hurt of human hearts. All of us hurt ourselves and we hurt each other. We do not mean to, but we do. The very efforts we make to try to satisfy ourselves, and to meet our needs, we find to be damaging us in many ways. Yet in ignorance we go right on doing the things that are hurting and destroying ourselves and each other as well.

Every family, every individual bears deep and abiding heartache. Sometimes it is very evident on the surface. Most of it is due to the fact that we suffer from guilt, a sense of condemnation and self-hate. This is so because we have such a deep and abiding sense of being a failure. But this is what the cross is all about. God saw that hurt in the human race, all the agony and misery of our struggle to try to live properly without understanding the secrets of doing so. He wanted to do something about that, but he had a problem -- a problem with which everyone of us is familiar.

I am sure that you all have had someone try to "help" you to stop doing something which they saw was wrong and was injuring you. But if they came with a self-righteous attitude, placing themselves on a level higher than you, and began to correct you while implying that they couldn't understand how you could get into this kind of difficulty because they would never do a thing like that -- you know what your reaction would be. You would immediately be filled with resentment and would not hear a word they said. Instead of listening to what they were saying in order to try to open your eyes, you would have your hackles raised and would be very defensive. Everything they might say would only increase your resentment, and hostility, and sense of guilt. This is a mistake we parents frequently make with our children. We approach them in a spirit of condemnation, of blame.

And if self-righteousness on the part of a human being can cause that kind of a reaction in someone else, can render them utterly unable to be helped, how much more does the true righteousness of God frighten us when we think of having to deal with him? As Isaiah put it, "Who among us can dwell with the everlasting burnings?" {Isa 33:14 RSV}. Who can stand in the presence of the holiness of God and feel the greatness of his righteous being, his spotless life, and not feel condemned, wiped out? If God comes to us in his justice and righteousness we immediately feel that we cannot stand it. That is why man has fled God and has refused to deal with him, has tried to shove him out of his thinking. We are afraid of a God like that.

So how could he reach us? In order to gain us, in order to form the pearl which he so desperately wants and loves and cherishes, he came and gave all that he had. That means that he took our place. He came where we are. He came into the place of hurt and agony and heartache and loneliness and sorrow and shame and darkness, and became what we are.

There is no greater commentary on this phrase than that in Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 5, Verse 21: "He who knew no sin was made sin for us." Sin is merely a label by which we gather up all the terrible wrongdoing and the aching, hurting, lonely misery of mankind. When Jesus came, without making any contribution to this on his own part ("he who knew no sin"), nevertheless in the Garden of Gethsemane and on the cross he entered fully into what we feel. He felt the hurt. He knew the aching loneliness, the heartache, the misery, the rejection, the sense of despair, of self-loathing, of emptiness and worthlessness and meaninglessness, and the awful hostility that sin engenders. He felt the condemnation of a righteous God. He entered into all of that. He gave all that he had in order that, when he comes to us in the midst of our hurt, he might be able to say, "I know just how you feel. I've been right there. I know exactly what you are going through. I understand. I know what it has done to you and I want to show you what I've learned through this." And he can put his loving hand upon us and begin to lead us out. "Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience through the things which he suffered," {cf, Heb 5:8}. Thus he gave all that he had so that he might heal the hurt of humanity.

What symbol of that more perfect than a pearl could ever be given? Something hurts an oyster, but the oyster's response is to transform and transmute the injurious object, covering it with a soft and delicate nacre which is built up layer by layer until it forms a lustrous and shining and beautiful jewel. That is what our Lord has chosen as a symbol of the church.

You can see how true it is. We are the ones who have wounded our Lord, as in that hymn we often sing:

Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! How can it be that
Thou, my God, shouldst die for me?

That is what Jesus is telling us in this parable. He came and give all that he had so that he might take all the hurt of humanity into his own heart, might know the aching agony of all that we go through, and thus be able to touch us, to heal us, and to minister to us by beginning to clothe us with his own beauty, taking of his own life, out of his wounded side, to wash away with his own blood our wounds, our sins, our guilt, and to cleanse us and impart his life to us so that we might become more and more like him. That is what happens in an oyster. The grain of sand, the irritating substance, the cause of injury, is transmuted. The unsightly is

transformed into something of beauty. And that is the action of love.

John Oxenham once wrote a little poem which catches up our Lord's attitude. It becomes our attitude as we learn how to live as a Christian. He said of a friend who had injured him,

He drew a circle that shut me out,
Rebel, heretic, a thing to flout.
But God and I had the wit to win:
We drew a circle that took him in!

That is Christianity. That is what our Lord has done. He has reached out to us and is healing the hurt of our human hearts by giving all that he had.

Now tie these two parables together: Our Lord is showing us what he is doing in this present age lying between his two advents. Israel, he said, is going to be hidden again in the world of humanity. Human governments will stumble on in blindness and folly, ever dreaming of world peace, never able to find it, and never knowing that the secret of it lies in a little nation in one obscure corner of the world, which for centuries was lost and forgotten, which is only now beginning gradually to come to life, and which still does not know the secrets of its own nature. But, because of that treasure, our Lord bought the world, so that some day the earth should be filled with righteousness as the waters cover the sea, and all the glowing, beautiful dreams of the prophets should be fulfilled.

I love to turn to the thirty-second chapter of Isaiah and some of the other great passages which follow it in which he describes in such magnificent language the glory of a restored earth when the desert shall blossom like the rose and the curse shall be removed from nature and from the animal world. The lion shall lie down with the lamb, the cow with the bear shall feed, and a little child shall lead them. All this is coming. Swords shall be beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks. Men shall live in peace and harmony, each one under his own fig tree. The burdens shall be lifted from the weary shoulders of mankind and the springtime of the earth shall come. There is a beautiful passage in the Song of Solomon which says,

**"for lo, the winter is past,
the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth,
the time of singing has come,
and the voice of the turtledove
is heard in our land." {Song 2:11-12 RSV}**

That is what the treasure shall do and to that end our Lord gave all that he had.

But what about the pearl? Jesus came seeking for that, he says. What is it for? Well, there is no mention of the field in connection with the pearl. It is true that the church is taken out of sorrowing humanity but it is not intended for that alone. It has its purpose in this present age, as Paul tells us very plainly. It manifests right now the greatness and the grace of God. But the pearl is not ultimately intended for earth. It is intended for the heavens. That is what we learn from Paul's letters. The pearl is lifted out of the troubled sea of human sorrow to be a people that shall flash in glory upon the bosom of God for unending ages, the chief medium through which he shall manifest his grace and glory in all the many running ages to come.

That is what the pearl is being formed for. Our Lord is making for himself a glorious church without spot or wrinkle or any such thing. You and I sometimes wonder why we have to go through trouble, why we get into difficulties with each other. Even as Christians we have a struggle getting along with one another. We have to work at it. We cannot just ignore the problem; it doesn't go away. We have to take the bit in our teeth and go to one another, sit down and patiently and lovingly try to talk it out and work it all out.

We had an experience like that last week on the Board of Elders of this church. We met together and had a scheduled agenda. But we found that we could not get to the agenda. We had to set it aside and sit down and work out our difficulties among ourselves. We haven't gotten to the agenda yet. Pray for us that we will!

Why do we have to go through this? Because, in the process, the Lord is working out all the defects in his church, healing all the hurt and the sorrow, and bringing about a glorious church, a church without spot or blemish, a glowing, translucent, beautiful pearl which will be the manifestation of the glory of God throughout unending ages.

Notice how Paul expresses this in his letter to the Ephesians. In Chapter 2, Verse 4, he says,

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up with him, and made us sit with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith; and this is not your own doing, it is the gift of God -- not because of works, lest any man should boast. {Eph 2:4-9 RSV}

Our Lord has beautifully captured all this in his marvelous story of the pearl.

When I was a young Christian I enjoyed so much a hymn which you hardly hear anymore:

"Holy, holy, holy," is what the angels sing,
And I expect to help them make the courts of heaven ring!
But when we sing redemption's story, they must fold their wings;
For angels never felt the joy that our salvation brings.

God is working out a vast purpose. This is a great thing to remember when you are going through times of hardship and difficulty, especially when you are going through difficult personal relationships. In the process of that, through the heartache and the hurt, by his marvelous ministry to us, our Lord is turning what is injurious into a translucent, glowing, beautiful pearl. God is doing that with you and with me. I have experienced this personally this week and I am sure many of you have also. As we go along, we can see layer after layer of shining nacre being added to the pearl, to make it a lustrous thing of beauty, a pearl of great price which the Lord, in divine anticipation, saw when he came, and for which he sold all that he had in order that he might purchase it for himself.

God is not through with us. He is working out his purposes through the daily grind and all the turmoil and pressures and problems and perplexities of our lives. That is what Jesus is telling us. And these difficulties are part of the process. So don't push them away. They are God's instruments sent to do his work in your life. So don't resist them, don't gripe and moan your way through them all. Welcome them, learn to rejoice in them, as God tells us to do. As Paul cries, "I glory in my infirmities." Why? "Because when I am weak, then he is strong. His strength is made perfect in my weakness," {cf, 2 Cor 12:9-10}.

As these trials come to us, God is preparing us to be an instrument for untold blessing in the coming ages throughout the far-flung reaches of His great, unfettered universe -- so as to manifest and demonstrate the immeasurable riches of his grace. You and I have a part in that. Keep that clearly in mind, as God commands us to do when he says, "put on the helmet of salvation" {Eph 6:17}, the hope of the eternal purposes of God, which will keep your mind straight and hold you steady in the midst of the pressures and varying uncertainties of this present hour. As Paul says, "This slight, momentary affliction is preparing for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory," {cf, 2 Cor 4:17}.

Now, the world knows nothing of this. You will never see this heralded in the pages of your newspaper nor in some magazine like *Time* or *Newsweek*. They do not understand God's purposes. But God sees history differently than we. We see a long record of civilizations and kingdoms and battles, of explorations and discoveries, etc. But those are only the merest incidentals. God looks at history and sees the human hurt and heartache and pain and anguish. He sees the healing of love and the understanding of grace. And he sees a new thing being formed -- a marvelous, magnificent pearl which shall be shining and flashing in the heavenly places throughout all the ages to come as a testimony through all eternity of the glory and the greatness of our God.

So that is the pearl of great price. No wonder someone has called this earth of ours "God's treasure island." Hidden in it is the treasure of the field, which shall bring to pass at last the hopes and the dreams of men for world peace. And hidden also is this marvelous mystery of the pearl, which shall at last accomplish God's purposes in planets and stars and solar systems far beyond our own, in that great day when God brings about all that he has in mind.

Prayer

We thank you, our heavenly Father, that your love and grace has planned and provided for us throughout all the eternal future. Thank you for lifting our eyes above the mediocre, above the daily routine of our lives, above all the hurt and the anguish of our days, and for helping us to see that a great and mighty purpose is being worked out and that we have a part in it, that our lives have meaning, that we move to an appointed end, that you are accomplishing your work through the things that we experience. Thank you for that healing of love and grace which transmutes and transfigures the very thing that injures us and makes it into a thing of beauty. Help us not to reject your ministry to us but to accept it and to give thanks for it. We ask in Jesus' name, Amen.

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