

The Parables of Jesus

The Hidden Treasure and the Pearl

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

A prominent 19th c. NT scholar named Constatin von Tischendorf, evoking language from our text this morning, speaks of a trip he made to St. Catherine's Monastery at the foot of what many believe to be Mt. Sinai. He says:

It was at the foot of Mount Sinai, in the Convent of St. Catherine, that I discovered the pearl of all my researches. In visiting the library of the monastery, in the month of May, 1844, I perceived in the middle of the great hall, a large and wide basket full of old parchments; and the librarian told me that two heaps of papers like these, mouldered by time, had been already committed to the flames. What was my surprise to find amid this heap of papers a considerable number of sheets of a copy of the Old Testament in Greek, which seemed to me to be one of the most ancient that I had ever seen. The authorities of the convent allowed me to possess myself of a third of these parchments, or about forty-three sheets, all the more readily as they were destined for the fire. But I could not get them to yield up possession of the remainder. The too lively satisfaction which I had displayed had aroused their suspicions as to the value of this manuscript. I transcribed a page of the text of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and enjoined on the monks to take religious care of all such remains which might fall in their way.

Fifteen years later Tischendorf returned to St. Catherine's and tells of an incident with the steward of the monastery:

He took down from the corner of the room a bulky kind of volume, wrapped up in a red cloth, and laid it before me. I unrolled the cover, and discovered, to my great surprise, not only those very fragments which... fifteen years before, I had taken out of the basket, but also other parts of the Old Testament, the complete New Testament, and, in addition, the Epistle of Barnabas and a part of the Shepherd of Hermas. Full of joy, which this time I had the self-command to conceal from the steward, I asked, as if in a careless way, for permission to take the manuscript into my sleeping chamber to look over it more at leisure. There by myself I could give way to the transport of joy which I felt. I knew that I held in my hand the most precious Biblical treasure in existence--a document whose age and importance exceeded that of all the manuscripts which I had ever

examined during twenty years' study of the subject. I cannot now, I confess, recall all the emotions which I felt in that exciting moment with such a diamond in my possession. Though my lamp was dim, and the night cold, I sat down at once to transcribe the Epistle of Barnabas.

What Tischendorf had discovered is what we today call Codex Sinaiticus, the most ancient set of NT manuscripts in the world (NIV). His description of that first night with the NT manuscripts where he feels it would be almost sacrilegious to sleep... his sheer transport of joy upon this discovery, is a vivid picture of what the two characters in our text this morning feel upon discovering the kingdom of God. Two points, two parables: The Hidden Treasure and The Pearl.

I. The Hidden Treasure

In our first parable, beginning in v.44, we are told the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. The likening of the kingdom to treasure in the first parable and the pearl of great value in the second makes one thing clear: the kingdom of God is of surpassing, inestimable wealth. Finding it was like every child's fantasy about finding buried treasure. Buried treasure was not at all uncommon in Palestine, though finding some was extremely rare.

You have to recall this was before banking and sophisticated safes and locks. In a land like Palestine, subject to wars and invasions, one would reasonably hide valuables, usually in a jar or a chest, underground, or in some secret place. A hundred years after Tischendorf (mid 20th c), the Dead Sea scrolls were found in a series of caves by Bedouin shepherds. One famous discovery is known as the Copper Scroll, which has on it a list of various treasures and their hiding places.

Now, the fact that the kingdom can be discovered, in the case of the first parable, by accident, without looking for it; the fact that it can even be likened to treasure hidden in a field, shows us, as we saw last week, that the Kingdom will not come according to much Jewish expectation. It comes in the lowly humiliation, the sheer ordinariness of the servant of the Lord, the Son of Man. So the man, not even seeking it, not even knowing it existed, finds the treasure hidden in the field. He doesn't run off with it, he covers it up and then, in his joy he goes and sells all he has, and buys the field.

Some have questioned the ethics of this saying that the treasure should rightly belong to the owner of the field. Others have, citing rabbinical law on finding treasures, defended the man here as being perfectly within his rights. But both of these are, in my view, an over-reading the parable. This is a constant danger with the parables: attempting to find significance in the details which diverts one from the overall thrust. While there are parables where Jesus uses unethical characters, who nonetheless have a trait he wants his disciples to emulate, that is not the case here.

This parable is simply not concerned with the ethics of this action, and is almost certainly viewing it innocently. The concern is with the response to the find. And thus with our response to the stunning surprise of the treasure of the kingdom which has come in Jesus. The man sells all that he has and buys the field. This way he becomes the rightful owner of the treasure. Now, let me point out a second way in which this parable, and the next one, are over-read.

Some commentators, not wishing to leave the impression that we can “buy” the kingdom, allegorize these parables. Usually, it’s something like this: Jesus is the man who pays the full price, who gives up everything He has, to purchase the treasure – which is seen to be the church. This is what happens when people see their favorite doctrines in every text. The parable is about *our response* to the kingdom, not what Jesus has done to establish the kingdom.

Next we must address the man’s response: he sells everything he has to buy the field. Now here some caution is called for. The rich young ruler WAS called upon to sell all that he had and follow Jesus. For him there was no way to enter the kingdom until the stranglehold of his wealth was shattered. Yet, Zacchaeus gave up only half of his wealth and Jesus said salvation had come to his house. And in the parable of the talents the disciples keep and invest the wealth the Lord has given them, and some make even more wealth and are praised for it.

So, there is no uniform, one size fits all approach to how much wealth we have to give up to be Jesus’ disciples. Yet, we should not miss the sting of this text. Jesus tells the parable in the most radical way possible to provoke us to realize that nothing – NO THING or THINGS – can stand in the way of whole-hearted commitment to the kingdom. Seek ye FIRST, the kingdom of God and all these things shall be added to you.

Telling the parable this way would also resonate deeply with the disciples who, in fact, had left everything, their nets, their livelihoods, and families to follow Jesus. It is precisely this point which Peter makes to Jesus in response to the parable of the rich young ruler. Lord we HAVE left everything to follow you! And Jesus assures him that no one has left lands or houses or family to follow him who will not be more than compensated. Clearly, this text presents to us a searching question: what have, or what are we willing, to part with for the kingdom? The stuff we have is NOT our stuff. We are stewards. But we don’t talk or act like stewards. It’s OUR house, OUR car, OUR computer, OUR stuff. And all of it is a potential threat. As the wonderful old blues song puts it:

Too much stuff. There's just too much stuff.
It'll hang you up, dealing with too much stuff.

I'll resist the temptation to sing it. But the point is clear: we don't get rid of stuff easily. We are stuff accumulators. No one puts a subtraction on their house for

the sake of the kingdom. Even where we are not being called to sell it all, repentance is in order. We need to sit lightly with our stuff. If for no other reason then it's NOT ours. And this brings us to perhaps the more significant point in this parable. As difficult as it is for us to even conceive of parting with our stuff, in these parables Jesus is not asking for a sacrifice. Or perhaps more accurately, he is not asking for an irrational transaction.

The action of the man in this parable and the pearl merchant in the next are both utterly reasonable. They are not fanatics. In fact, they are being economically shrewd. Both the treasure and the pearl are viewed as more valuable than all that the man or the merchant own. There is a deep rationality to these responses to the kingdom. The kingdom, like the treasure and the pearl, is of infinite value. To view it otherwise would be myopic and blind. If the Lord were to call you to sell everything and be a missionary in Africa it would be a boon for you. An upgrade in real, indestructible wealth. It would be the height of sober, economic rationality.

Nothing compares to the value of the kingdom. It is worth sacrificing whatever it takes to possess it. In fact, we are told in the second half of v.44 that it was sheer joy for the man to sell everything. Tischendorf would have gladly sold his whole library for a copy of Codex Sinaiticus – and had he done so, he'd have been a wealthier man.

II. The Pearl

The second parable is really something of a twin, though not an identical twin, with the first, so let me just comment on it briefly. In v.45 we read: Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls. In the first parable the man is not seeking. Here we have one seeking. The kingdom comes, in God's good providence, to those who don't care at all about it, and to those who look long and hard for the truth. Yet neither parable places any emphasis on the piety of either the man or the merchant.

The kingdom is always a surprising gift. Here there is no possible ethical question. The merchant is doing what merchants lawfully do. The merchant is search for fine pearls. Pearls were found in the Red Sea, the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. They were perhaps the most valuable items in existence. He finds, the texts says in v.46, ONE pearl of great price. This is THE pearl of great value, the pearl which is worth more than all the pearls in existence, the kingdom of God.

So, like the man in the first parable, he goes and sells all that he had and bought the pearl. Both men are richer by far because they have rightly evaluated the kingdom. But, as both parables teach, it is NOT enough to rightly evaluate the kingdom. We need to rightly evaluate our STUFF in light of the kingdom. The

kingdom will not share center stage with our stuff. Jesus is saying to us: don't hedge your bets on the kingdom. That is what the people in the third class of the parable of the sower did. They wanted the kingdom AND their stuff – in the end they lost both.

Our valuation should be that of the apostle Paul who wanted us to know the riches of the glory of our inheritance in Christ. Who said, in Philippians 3, whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss – not because I have a martyr complex – but because of the SURPASSING worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. Because of this Paul said he suffered the loss of all things, counting them as rubbish, in order that he might gain Christ.

This is sheer normalcy. It is the deep rationality of the economy of the kingdom. Paul had seen the kingdom. For him, like the man in the first parable, this was a joyful exchange. The exchange here is a great bargain – great gain Paul calls it – for whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Christ will save it. This is the paradox of the kingdom. Jesus is saying to his disciples – and thus to us – do you know what my standing in front of you means? Do you know what time it is? It is the time of the kingdom. It is the day of salvation. With great joy we must celebrate AND participate in this kingdom – at ANY cost. He who has ears, let him hear. Amen.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#) (Thirdmill). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*.

Subscribe to *Biblical Perspectives Magazine*

BPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like BPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [BPM](#), please select this [link](#).