

The Treasure and the Pearl

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- [0 : 0 0] Years ago, a woman wrote a story in Reader's Digest. It was a true story from her childhood. It was about a summer that she spent with her grandmother in rural Missouri.
- And it was a really hot summer, and she had a job that was her job. Every day she had to walk all the way down to the mailbox and get the mail and bring it back.
- And the walk was about a mile. And on her first day of doing this chore, her grandmother, as she was walking out the door, put a bucket in her hand and said, take the bucket with you.
- And she said, why? She complained, I don't want to have to carry this. It's already a long walk. It's hot. There's no point. And her grandmother said, well, you never know what you might find along your walk.
- Just take the bucket. So she takes the bucket, takes it about halfway, sets it down, gets the mail. When she comes back, a few pokeberries have fallen into the bucket. So she takes the bucket home and says, look, I found some pokeberries.
- [1 : 0 1] And the grandmother says, great. And she crushes the berries up and makes some ink. And they spend the afternoon drawing with pokeberry ink. Then the next day she goes, and along the way she notices some peppermint that she hadn't seen before.
- And so she thinks, well, that'll be interesting. And so she picks the peppermint, puts it in the bucket, brings it back. And over the next several weeks, every day she goes out, she finds something. And she begins to notice all kinds of things that she hadn't noticed before.
- Flowers and eggshells and abandoned bird nests and interesting rocks and all kinds of things. And then one day, weeks into the summer, she's out for a walk.
- She has her bucket with her. And she notices the monarch migration. And if you've ever seen the migration of the monarch butterflies, it's quite breathtaking. And she sees all these butterflies being carried along by the wind.
- And she's totally taken by the beauty of it. And she gets home, and she's breathless, and she's telling her grandmother all about it. And then she realizes that in all the excitement, she forgot to bring anything back in the bucket.
- [2 : 0 6] And she says, I forgot because I was so taken with the butterflies. And the next morning, she wakes up, and she goes to get the mail, and she grabs the bucket. And her grandmother stops her and says, you don't need the bucket anymore.
- And I love the story because we see that in this story, it's sentimental and all that. But in the story, the bucket is a tool. It's like training wheels.
- It's like training wheels for this little girl to learn how to see. How to see things that she was walking right by, not even noticing. How to see the magic and the mystery that was all around her.
- When Jesus comes into the public sphere, when Jesus, around the age 30, begins his public ministry, one of the things that marks his ministry is that he teaches about something called the kingdom of God.

He begins to talk about this new reality that is breaking into our reality, an entirely new way of being. It's a new way of relating to God that didn't exist in any of the world's religions.

[3 : 12] And it's a new way of relating to one another. And the primary way that he teaches about this kingdom of God, this kingdom of heaven, is with stories about everyday things, what the Bible calls parables.

And you see, the parables were like the bucket. They're tools that are meant to help his disciples see this new reality that was emerging all around them that they might otherwise completely overlook.

And so this summer, we're spending, like that little girl, we're going to spend the summer learning how to see. Learning how to see this reality called the kingdom by looking at these parables of Jesus.

And tonight, we're just going to look at two really short parables. They're two very similar parables. It's just three verses, and they're very similar. But they teach us a lot about the kingdom. And these parables are found in Matthew chapter 13, verses 44 to 46.

So what I want to do is summarize the parables and then ask what they teach us about the kingdom of God. So before we do that, let's pray together. God, I thank you that in this room we have gathered here so many people, so many of us from so many different backgrounds and places and sets of assumptions.

[4 : 27] We are all coming out of our own contexts. One of our great hopes, Lord, is not that we have words written on a page or even spoken words, but that we have you and your promise to speak to us, sometimes through the most unlikely of circumstances.

And so we pray that you would do that as only you can, Lord, in your wisdom and for your glory and our good. And we ask this in your Son's name. Amen. So first, I just want to summarize these two parables.

They're very short, a couple of verses. He tells two stories. He says, first of all, imagine you have a man who's out working in a field. It's not his field. It belongs to somebody else. And he's going along.

He's plowing the field. And all of a sudden, the plow bumps up against something that doesn't sound like a rock. It sounds wooden. So he gets out from behind the plow, gets down, looks, and it's a corner of a box.

And so he digs it away, digs it away, pulls the box up and opens it. And he realizes that he's stumbled upon, totally by accident, an immeasurably valuable treasure.

[5 : 32] And so he immediately closes the box, puts it back in the hole, covers it up, because it's not his field. And you see, the law is dubious here. Roman law was unclear. Jewish law said finders keepers.

If you find it, it's yours. But Roman law, and Romans occupied the territory at the time, was unclear as to who that might belong to. Finding treasure was not that uncommon.

See, you didn't have banks, safety deposit boxes. Marauding armies were fairly common. And so if a marauding, hostile army were to come through your village, it was very common to go and to hide your valuables, hope to survive, and then you could go get them again.

And you might survive the looting. But also, what might happen is that you might hide all your valuables, and then you would get killed, and then nobody would know that that stuff was there, and the land might change hands several times before anybody discovered it.

So this is a likely scenario. And the man wants to make sure that this treasure will belong to him, and so he goes and he sells everything so that he can buy the field just so he can have the treasure. So that's the first parable.

[6 : 34] The second parable is similar. This time, unlike the field worker, see, the field worker, he's working, he's a day laborer, the field doesn't belong to him, he's probably poor, he's probably uneducated, he's a laborer.

But the second parable has to do with a pearl merchant, and we know that at this day and age, pearl merchants were very wealthy. So this person is in many ways the opposite. He's wealthy, he's probably educated, he's probably fairly cultured and well-traveled.

And this man's whole area of expertise is pearls. You know, unlike the guy in the field who stumbles upon the treasure totally by accident, this guy knows this world.

All he does all day long is look for fine pearls, which is the Bible's way of saying good deals. You know, buy at a good price and sell at a higher price. Pearl he's ever seen, he immediately, and he spends all his life searching for pearls, and then he comes across the most beautiful pearl he's ever seen.

He immediately recognizes what he has. So he liquidates his entire inventory so that he can buy this one pearl. So these are the two parables. And now that we kind of know what they're saying, we want to ask a couple of questions of these and really look at what they're trying to tell us about the kingdom of heaven.

[7 : 46] The two questions we're going to ask are these. First of all, who is the kingdom of God for? What kind of person? Who is it for? And then second, what happens when we find it?

What happens when we find the kingdom? So the first question, who is the kingdom of God for? As I alluded to a moment ago, these stories are very similar in some ways, but I want to notice the differences between these two stories.

There's a number of key differences. One man is poor, and one man is rich. One man is probably most likely fairly uneducated.

One is probably pretty educated and well-traveled and worldly and cultured. One man finds the treasure by accident, totally by accident, just in the course of a normal day. And one man is actually seeking something just like this, and he knows it when he sees it.

And these differences are striking because this really, from these differences, emerged the first point of these parables, which is this, that the kingdom of God, the spiritual treasure of Jesus, we might say, is not just for one kind of person.

[9 : 01] It's not just for poor people. It's not just for rich people. It's not just for educated people or uneducated people. It's not just for any one race or ethnicity or country or culture.

And the reason is actually, the reason that it's not for any one person or any one group of people is because of the nature of the kingdom, the nature of how it comes to be.

Because Christianity is the only religion in the world that's based not on anything we are. See, many of the world's religions, especially at the time Christianity came into being, were very closely tied to an ethnicity or a people group.

And part of what it meant to be that religion was that you were born into it. With Christianity, it's not the case. It's not based at all on who we are, and it's not based on anything we do for God.

It's the only religion there is that's based entirely on what God has done for us, for human beings. So becoming a Christian happens not when we pledge ourselves to God.

[10 : 08] It actually happens when we recognize and believe and accept that God has actually pledged Himself to us. That God has pledged Himself to us.

That He's sacrificed Himself for us. And it's been said that the gospel, the news of this, is like the ocean. You know, it's shallow enough for the smallest of children to splash around in, and yet it's deep enough to confound the most skilled of mariners.

You know, this is something that a child can understand, and yet it is so profound that it has challenged the most brilliant minds across the ages. This sense that God has done this for us and what that means.

But because of this, the early church was radically diverse. You know, if you ever want to read a great book, and I mention this all the time, but Rodney Stark's *The Rise of Christianity*, he's a historical sociologist and wanted to answer the question, why did the early church grow at the rate that it did?

How did it go from being this tiny nothing of a sect of Judaism to being the dominant religion in the Roman Empire? And it was profoundly diverse. One of the great examples of this is the city of Antioch.

[11 : 21] I mean, imagine if they did this today. So when they built Antioch, Antioch is, by the way, where they first started calling Christians Christians. It's where they got the name. It was originally a derogatory term.

But Antioch, when they first built it, they didn't just build a wall around the city. They built walls all throughout the city. They actually divided the city with walls into 18 individual kind of ethnic ghettos.

And the idea was to separate and give each ethnic group, each culture, their own section of the city, and the walls divided it.

And so each kind of quadrant or quarter or ghetto had its own culture, its own customs, its own language, its own religion, because religions were very closely tied to culture and ethnicity.

And that was the case in Antioch until the gospel came. And for the first time in history, the Christians went over the walls because they recognized that the gospel was something that was meant for everybody, that it wasn't just limited to one people group.

[12 : 24] And so they began to cross the walls. They were the wall crossers. And they began to tell everybody about the kingdom of heaven. And so you have this amazing little place in Acts chapter 13 where we actually see the leadership team of the church in Antioch.

Imagine this leadership team of a church in our day, not to mention in a place like Antioch. The leadership team includes a Jewish Pharisee, a black African, a Roman, a Levite who's ethnically Greek, and then a Greek person who's a Roman prince.

That's the leadership team of the church. So John Stott says these five men represented three continents and four different ethnic groups, all part of one church. That was unheard of in this time.

So the kingdom of God is not just for one kind of person. It's for all people. Another way that this applies is this. It's not just for religious people. You know, being in D.C. for the last eight years, one of the most common conversations I have with people who aren't a part of any church, when they ask what I do and I tell them, many times the conversation goes in this direction.

People say, well, that's great. I'm so glad that you can believe that, and that obviously is great for you and your family, but I'm just not a very religious person, or I'm not a spiritual person. And that's a kind of a way of saying, you know, some people have religious needs and inclinations, and some people are not inclined in that way.

[13 : 50] And religions are good for those people that are inclined that way, but religions, you know, really are irrelevant for people who aren't religiously inclined. And that's kind of the assumption underneath that. But what this is saying, the idea behind this parable, if you compare the pearl merchant and the day laborer, what do you see?

The pearl merchant is the religiously inclined person. This is the person who's seeking, who wants to know, who's evaluating the world's religions, who has that, you know, God-shaped hole in their heart, and they're aware of it, and they want to fill it.

And so they're reading the philosophers, they're reading the truth claims out there, and they're wanting to know, is there anything real for me? But the day laborer, what is the day laborer? This is the person who doesn't care.

They don't care about religion. At best, they tolerate it. People tell them, you have a God-shaped hole in your heart, they have no idea what they're talking about. They've never felt that. They don't really think about it. They don't really care.

They don't really ask these questions. They're not religiously or spiritually inclined in any way that they're aware of. This is the guy who just shows up at work one day. He's not thinking about anything other than what he's going to do on the weekend.

[15 : 00] He's got nothing on his mind that has anything to do with anything, and then all of a sudden, boom, he slams into something. He investigates, and then it changes his life.

You know, I read about this guy, and it reminds me of this story of John Shore. And I don't, you know, these days I wouldn't agree with everything Shore puts out there, but when you read the story of his conversion, it's pretty amazing.

He wrote a book about it. I read about it in the Huffington Post a few years back. But the title will tell you a lot. The title of the article is this, I, a rabid anti-Christian, very suddenly convert.

Right? So here's a guy, John Shore. He just turns up at work one day, and he says, at this point in his life, he, not only is he not religiously inclined, he's pretty anti-Christian. He thinks Christianity is stupid.

He thinks it's for kind of immature, weak-minded individuals. He hasn't thought much about it. His view of himself is pretty good. He's, you know, high self-confidence, high self-esteem. Thinks he's a pretty decent person.

[16 : 01] And he just goes to work one day, and he's like sitting there at his job, and all of a sudden, he says this feeling comes over him. And he says he couldn't describe it. It's like he was being filled up with warm water. And he says that he knows that something's happening to him, and he knows, he doesn't know what's going to happen, but he's got to get out of there.

So he tells his co-worker, I'm going to go use the bathroom. He gets up, and the only place he can find to go that's private is a broom closet. So he runs into the broom closet, slams the door, and he just kind of stands there. And he says, and he says this, he says, and what happened, as he's standing there in the broom closet, rather all at once, was that I saw what a complete a-hole I was.

And he says, isn't that awful? And he says, all at once, the truth was before me that instead of being a good guy who's basically always trying to do the right thing, I was a selfish, emotional weakling who was always doing and saying whatever best served my own needs at the time.

And then he goes on to just reflect on this new view of himself. And he says, what was worse than realizing that I was a total a-hole is realizing that I was never going to change.

He said, all these illusions that one day I'll be more mature, one day I'll be more selfless, one day I'll be more caring, one day I'll be more charitable. He says, that's not going to happen. And he says, what's more, I realized that I was going to die and I was going to die just like this.

[17 : 16] And he says, shouldn't I at least like myself before I die? But that's not going to happen. And he starts to cry and he falls down to his knees. And he says, can you picture it?

I never cry. I've never had anything like this happen to me before. And there I am on my knees in the broom closet at my job weeping like a baby. And then he says, he hears a little voice not unlike a little cartoon voice say into his mind, isn't this what Jesus is for?

And he says, and just like that I stopped crying. And do you know what I knew at that moment? What instantly imprinted itself upon me? That the story of Jesus is historically true.

That it happened. That God desiring above all else to show people he'd created that he loved them, became a human, came to earth, and sacrificed himself and in every way did everything he possibly could to show people exactly how deeply and terribly he loves them.

And he says, that's what my conversion consisted of, a sudden sure knowledge that the historical story of Christ is true. How many times had that day laborer been working in that field, walked across that field, been there 10, 12 hours a day, having no idea that the priceless treasure that would change his life was right there under his feet?

[18 : 44] And it makes me think, how many times had John Shore heard the gospel? I mean, he grew up in the United States. How many times had he heard this? You know, Jesus died for his sins, blah, blah, blah.

You know, we could all repeat it. You can go out to anybody on the street and ask them and they could probably repeat it. How many times had he heard this and had no idea that just under the surface of those words that he had heard all his life was a priceless treasure?

And it makes me think about us, you know, I mean, as I have said a couple of times, one of the great things about our church is there are so many people, some are Christians, some are not. So I'll ask those of you who would not consider yourselves to be Christians, is it possible, have you ever considered that you spend your life on the threshold of this immeasurably valuable treasure?

If only you would stop and look and see what's in that box. And is there any way that your life is knocking up against that box right now? Is it worth a look? So the first question is this, who is the kingdom of God for?

Well, it's for everyone. It's for rich people and poor people and educated people and uneducated people. It's for the religiously inclined and the non-religiously inclined. You know, most of the people that came into the church were not the religious people of Jesus' day.

[20 : 02] They were the people who didn't fit into the religion. They were the people, the slaves and the eunuchs and the widows and the orphans are the people who didn't really feel that they had a place in proper society.

But they found a place in the kingdom. So that's the first question. Second question is this, what happens when we find the kingdom?

How do you know you found it? What happens? To go back to the parables for a second, imagine what people were saying about the two guys in the parable. Just imagine for a second. Like, hey, you know that lot on the edge of town?

That empty lot with all the rocks and the kudzu and the poison ivy? Did you hear what Joe did? Joe sold his house, he sold his car, and he cashed in his 401k and he bought that lot.

And people would say, that's insane. Who would do that? You know? I mean, maybe in D.C., but in most places, most places that's not going to happen. Right? And then imagine people talking about the pearl merchant.

[21 : 04] Did you see the collection that guy had? That guy had some of the most rare pearls in the world. He had the most amazing, have you ever been to his pearl seller and seen his pearls? Right? Did you know that that guy liquidated his entire inventory for one pearl?

And people would look at them and be like, they got hosed. They got taken advantage of. They got ripped off. They had no idea. It was a huge loss. Why would they do something so stupid? I thought he was a good businessman.

See, on the outside, it looks like these men are making a huge mistake. But the whole point of the parable is this. They know something that everybody else doesn't know.

Because they alone see that this treasure that they found is worth infinitely more than anything else in their lives. And that's really the point of these parables. It's this. Here's the point.

The kingdom of God is so valuable that it is worth sacrificing anything to gain it. The kingdom of God is so valuable that it's worth sacrificing anything to gain it.

[22 : 11] What that means is it touches every part of your life. It calls every aspect of your life into question. You know, it's interesting.

I think we live in a culture where we love to take religious ideas and sort of refashion them in a way that fits our sensibilities, right? I mean, think about mindfulness, right?

I used to be a therapist and mindfulness was all the rage when I was a therapist. Mindfulness comes out of the Buddhist tradition and it's a way of cultivating a sense of detachment from the material world, right?

But it's taken off in our culture primarily where? In huge corporations that have learned that if they teach their employees mindfulness, it will increase productivity.

Isn't that a bit ironic? Or, you know, many of us do yoga and we love yoga, but, you know, yoga came from a tradition that yoga was originally used as a way to enable your body to stay in the same position so you could meditate longer, so that you could transcend any sense of yourself.

[23 : 15] But yoga has kind of become fodder for Instagram feeds and a market for \$100 Lululemon yoga pants. We as a culture like to take religious ideas and repurpose them, right?

Along the lines of our values. And we've done the same thing, maybe even worse, with Christianity. You know, Christianity is good, but let's infuse it with some materialism and commercialism and individualism, you know? Then it'll fit us.

And what this parable shows us is that the kingdom of God doesn't work that way. It can't, by definition, work that way. The kingdom of God is not something that we take and fit into our lives.

The kingdom of God is a reality into which we fit. And that's why it calls everything in our lives into question. You know, this reminds me of the story from Rosaria Champagne Butterfield who wrote a book called *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*.

She's a bit like the pearl merchant. If John Shore is like the day laborer, she's a bit like the pearl merchant. She describes herself in her book as an agnostic, liberal, lesbian activist university professor.

[24 : 27] She, at the time that this happened, was writing a book about the Christian right. And she was doing a lot of research, not only on the Christian right, but on the Christian faith as a whole. And she's essentially looking for dirt.

She's looking for anything that she can kind of use to make the points that she wants to make in this book. And she's looking for fodder, and she says that she very unexpectedly, through a number of relationships that she developed, came face to face with the reality of the living God.

And this is not something that she was looking for. It's actually something that she was attempting to disprove. And that led to what she says she can only describe as a train wrecked life. A train wreck, right?

And here's what she says about it. She says, that night, that night, I prayed and asked God if the gospel message was for someone like me. I viscerally felt the living presence of God as I prayed.

Jesus seemed present and alive. I knew that I was not alone in my room, and I prayed that if Jesus was truly a real and risen God, that He would change my heart. And if He was real, and if I was His, I prayed that He would give me the strength of mind to follow Him and the character to become a godly woman.

[25 : 38] I prayed for the strength of character to repent for a sin that at the time I didn't feel like sin at all. At the time, my sin felt like life, plain and simple.

She says, I prayed that if my life was actually His life, that He would take it back and make it what He wanted it to be. I asked Him to take it all, my sexuality, my profession, my community, my tastes, my books, my tomorrows.

And then she says this, and this is why I really like this quote, two incommensurable worldviews clashed together. The reality of my lived experience and the truth of the Word of God.

So this is the kingdom of God breaking into somebody's life. The kingdom of God is a reality that is not commensurate with our experience.

In other words, they're not equal. That when this reality, the kingdom of God, breaks into your life, it is the reality into which we are taken. That's why it's all or none.

[26 : 41] Everything gets redefined by this, by the kingdom, because it's so much bigger than us. You know, personally, one of the great privileges of what I do is the people I know and the people whose stories I get to hear.

And I've known personally and know personally people from Hindu backgrounds and Muslim backgrounds who have had to sacrifice friends ever seeing their families again, ever living in their home countries again, and have had to live in exile for the sake of the kingdom of God.

And they feel thankful compared to what many of their brothers and sisters have had to experience. I've known single men and women, straight and gay, who have decided with joy and voluntarily to give up the possibility of family, of kids, of all of those things that we so value for the sake of the kingdom of God.

And I hear these stories and I look at these acts of faith and I immediately ask myself, what have I sacrificed? What would I be willing to sacrifice if it came to that?

And I sometimes wonder, do I have the foggiest idea of what the kingdom of God really is compared to somebody like that? The world looks at things like this and the world says, that is crazy, that's insane, those people are getting ripped off, they have no idea, I thought they were smarter than that, I can't believe they would do something like that, they got hosed.

[28 : 15] And the question is, why do they do this? Why do they look at something like the kingdom and why do they see it as being something so valuable that it's worth sacrificing anything to gain it, regardless of what it is?

And the answer is this, that the core of the kingdom of heaven is this, Jesus is king, which means his opinion is the only opinion that matters.

But here's the thing, to him, to him, you are the priceless treasure, you are the pearl of great price. To him, to the one who is king, when he looks at you, when he looks at you, he sees someone who is so immeasurably valuable, that you're worth sacrificing anything to gain.

And the gospel is exactly that, that Jesus is that sacrifice. And when we look to him and look what he's done for us, we realize you are God's treasure, you are God's pearl.

And he's given everything so that he could have you, so that you would forever belong to him. And knowing that is worth anything to have.

[29 : 44] Let's pray. Father, we do not pretend to fully understand these mysteries. Lord, we dabble on the edges of deep mysteries.

and Lord, as we stick our toes in and attempt to grasp what is before us, we pray that you would make that which is not knowable, knowable, that you would make that which we cannot understand clear, that you would impress upon our hearts the reality of your love until it breaks our hearts, until it melts our hearts.

Lord, we pray that this would be for your glory and for our good. In your son's name, Amen. Amen.