

"Weeds, Seeds, Hidden Treasures, and Pearls"
Sermon Series on *The King and His Kingdom*
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(Mt. 13:24-46)

Introduction.

Storytelling is an art form. It's one of the things I have loved about growing up in the South. Southerners know how to tell stories. I can remember as a boy listening to my Grandmother Blanton in Laurel, MS, tell us stories about when she grew up in the late 1800s in rural Mississippi. (The picture on the left is of my Grandmother Blanton when she was young, and the one on the right is of my youngest son Nate with my grandmother when she was 98-years-old!) We children were captivated by Grandma's tales of life on the farm and the simple ways of people back in the late 1800s, and she was a wonderful storyteller.

Jesus was also a great storyteller, and His teaching was filled with little stories that are called parables. Most of chapter 13 in the gospel of Matthew records parables Jesus told. Last week we looked at Jesus' parable of the soils, and this week we'll look at some additional brief parables the Lord in His teaching. The word "parable" literally means "something thrown beside something else." That is to say that a parable is essentially a comparison. Another definition that perhaps you have heard is that a parable is "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning." Something on earth is compared with something in heaven, so that the heavenly truth can be understood or grasped in a better way.

NT scholar C.H. Dodd has written: "At its simplest, the parable is a metaphor or simile drawn from nature or common life, arresting the hearer by its vividness or strangeness, and leaving the mind in sufficient doubt about its precise application to tease it into active thought." Jesus' parables reflected significantly on a contemporary situation, and they looked beyond it to the ultimate truth concerning the Kingdom of God.

Have you ever wondered why Jesus taught in parables? I think the first reason He did was to make people listen. He arrested their interest with stories that had a deeper meaning and significance. Second, He taught in parables to make His messages relevant. He spoke about things that were common to ordinary life. Third, Jesus taught this way to make abstract ideas very concrete. And finally, the Lord taught in parables in order to veil His teaching in some measure. We usually think that the parables were easily understood, but this wasn't always the case. We can look back with 20/20 hindsight, but the original hearers couldn't. And as Jesus said earlier in Matthew 13, "*The secret of the Kingdom of God has been*

given to you [disciples]. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables."

Having said this by way of introduction, let's now take a look at the parables in our passage. I want us to look at each of them consecutively in three groupings and consider the lessons they have to teach us about life in the Kingdom of God.

I. The Parable of the Weeds.

"Jesus told them another parable: 'The Kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and went away...'" (13:24,25). The pictures in this parable would have been clear and familiar to Jesus' Palestinian audience. Weeds were one of the curses every farmer had to deal with, and they didn't have herbicides or pesticides to help combat these problems like we do today. (The all-natural granola-types among us would be very happy with this. All the crops grown back then were totally organic!)

In the ancient Middle East there was a particular weed called the "bearded darnel" with which farmers had to deal, and in their early stages the weeds so closely resembled the wheat that it was impossible to distinguish one from the other. When both finally had "headed out," it was easy to distinguish, but by that time their roots were so intertwined that the weeds couldn't be removed out without tearing the wheat out as well.

In the end they had to be separated, because the grain of the bearded darnel is actually somewhat poisonous. It causes dizziness and sickness and has a narcotic effect. Even a small amount has a bitter and unpleasant taste to it. So, in the end it was usually separated by hand. The question the workers pose in the parable was, "Master, do you want us to go and pull up the weeds?" And the owner replied, "No, let them both grow until the time of the harvest. At that time, we'll separate them."

Here we see several principles which Jesus teaches through this parable. *First*, the story teaches us that there is always a hostile power at work in the world which is trying to destroy the good things God is doing. We should never be surprised when we encounter opposition from Satan whenever we try to sow the good seed of Christ in the world. There's an enemy out there who is sowing weeds while we sow seeds.

Second, this parable teaches us how hard it is to distinguish between those who are in the Kingdom and those who aren't. A person may appear to be a follower of Christ when in reality they aren't. Only the Lord knows the human heart. Appearances can be deceiving.

Third, this parable teaches us not to be too quick in taking action and instead be patient. If the reapers had had their way, they would have tried to tear out the

weeds, and they would have torn out the wheat as well. Judgment needed to wait until the harvest came. At the right moment in the end, there would be a time of reckoning.

The *final* and perhaps the most important thing this parable teaches is that in the kingdom of heaven judgment belongs to God, not to us. It's not up to you and me to sort out all these things. God alone is in the best position to decide about such matters. He knows the heart, and He alone is righteous enough to give an accurate and true verdict about a person's life.

II. The Parables of the Seeds and the Yeast.

"The Kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed....Though it is the smallest of all your seeds, yet when it grows, it is one of the largest garden plants and becomes a tree so that the birds of the air come and perch in its branches....The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed into a large amount of flour, until it worked all through the dough" (12:31-33).

The mustard plant in Palestine was very different from the mustard plant which we know in this country. To be strictly accurate, the mustard seed isn't the smallest of seeds. The seed of the cypress tree, for example, is a little smaller. However, in the Middle East the mustard seed was proverbial for being small.

Also, while it's not the case here in North America, in Palestine this little grain of mustard seed did grow into something very much like a tree. William Thompson in his book *The Land and the Book* writes, "I have seen this plant on the rich plain of Akkar as tall as a horse and its rider. With the help of my guide, I uprooted a veritable mustard-tree which was more than twelve feet high."¹

From this parable and the parable of the yeast we learn that in the kingdom of God, *a little bit goes a long way*. The Gospel is like a little seed. It's small but alive, and yet it has the power to produce big things, just like a little mustard seed can make a tree. The Gospel works its way into the world and into a person's life just like yeast works its way into dough. Pretty soon a person's life changes, and even the world can be turned upside down. In the kingdom of God, a little bit goes a long way.

We see examples of this throughout Scripture. From Abraham and Sarah – old and childless – comes a great nation. From Gideon and his little army comes an amazing victory. Young David, with his meager sling shot, defeats the mighty warrior Goliath. From Mary's delivery of a baby in a stable in Bethlehem comes the Savior of the world. And from unimpressive disciples comes a movement that turned the world upside down.

The great church father, Jerome, once wrote, "The preaching of the gospel is the least of all the teachings [of the world]. At first glance there seems to be no real truth in this teaching that proclaims a dead Christ and the scandal of the cross.

Compare this teaching with the systems of the philosophers, with their books, with the splendor of their eloquence, with their fine style, and you will see how much smaller the seed of the Sower of the gospel is than all the other seeds.

“But these others, when they have grown, show no vigor, no life, no vitality; flabby and faded, the whole batch grows into potted plants and into growths that are quickly withered and die; but this preaching, which seems so small in the beginning, when it has been sown either in the believing soul or in the whole world, does not blossom into a potted plant but grows up into a tree so that the birds of the heavens...come and dwell in its branches.”²

In the Kingdom of God, a little bit goes a long way.

III. The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and Priceless Pearl.

“The Kingdom of heaven is like a hidden treasure 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” (13:44-46).

Although the parable of the hidden treasure may sound strange to us, it would have sounded perfectly natural to the people of Palestine who heard it for the first time. In the ancient world there were banks, but they weren’t banks like we think of them today. And they didn’t have the FDIC insuring deposits like we do now. The usual place ordinary people viewed as safest place to keep their most cherished possessions was actually in the ground. You’ll recall that in the parable of the talents, the worthless servant hid his talent in the ground, because he feared he might lose it. That’s where most people put their valuables. It was like buried treasure.

Author William Thompson tells of a case of a treasure discovery which he himself came upon in the ancient city of Sidon. In that city there was a famous street of acacia trees, and some workmen, who were digging in a garden along the road, uncovered several copper pots full of coins. They had every intention of keeping the find for themselves, but there were so many of them, and they were so wild with their excitement, that their new-found treasure was discovered and claimed by the local government.

It turns out the coins had the image Alexander the Great and his father Philip on them. Thompson speculates that when Alexander unexpectedly died in Babylon in 323 BC, news about it came through Sidon, and some Macedonian officer or government official buried these coins with the intention of using them during the chaos which was bound to follow Alexander's death. When Jesus told this story, He told the kind of story anyone in the Middle East would recognize.

In the ancient world pearls had a very special value. People desired to own a beautiful pearl, not only for its monetary value, but also for its beauty. And they found pleasure in simply handling it and studying its beauty. The main sources in those days for pearls were the shores of the Red Sea and in far-off Britain, but a merchant would scour the markets of the world to find a pearl which was of surpassing beauty

What both of these parables teach is that in the Kingdom of heaven, what God has to offer is worth everything you have. It's worth any sacrifice you have to make in order to enter the Kingdom of heaven.

I remember that my greatest fear in becoming a Christian was that I was afraid of what I was going to have to give up in my life. I knew that in deciding to follow Jesus it meant that I was going to have to change my way of life, that I would have to give up some old habits and perhaps also give up some old friends. And more importantly I would have to give over the reins of my life to the Lord. It was so scary to think about that kind of loss, what I would have to give up, that I put off making the decision as long as I could. But then eventually I ran out of excuses, and I came to the realization that I was really making a mess of things on my own, and it was worth the risk.

But what I discovered when I did give over my life to Jesus was that my fears were so foolish and unfounded. I was worried about what I would lose in becoming a Christian, and I failed to fully understand all that I would gain in becoming a child of God. Salvation, a friend for life in the Person of Jesus, the power of heaven at my disposal through prayer, spiritual gifts to use for God's glory, a reason and purpose for living, the riches of heaven that await me, peace that passes all understanding, and incredible joy when you know God and live in the center of His will. All this and more God gave me when I came gave my life to Christ, and these parables remind us that giving away is a condition for receiving. You can't receive the riches of heaven when your hands are full of other things. It's just that simple.

The joy of discovery of the hidden treasure and the joy of finding the pearl of great value is the result of coming to see a new truth – the truth that God has so much He wants to give us. And when that happens, when we come to see life in a new way, our whole world can be transformed.

Conclusion.

This morning we've reflected on this collection of these parables which Jesus taught in Matthew 13, and we've come to see that in the Kingdom of God judgment belongs to the Lord; in the Kingdom of God a little bit goes a long way; and in the Kingdom of God what the Lord has to offer is worth everything we have. I close with this story.

In 1869, while scaling a sheer rock wall that towered more than 800 feet above the Green River in Utah, explorer John Wesley Powell found himself trapped on a tiny ledge. Unable to move without the risk of falling, he soon became exhausted. “My muscles began to tremble,” Powell recalled in his diary. “I thought, ‘If I lose my hold, I shall fall to the bottom.’” Suddenly, a companion named George Bradley had an idea. He stripped off his long underwear and extended the dangling legs down to Powell. With his heart in his throat, the one-armed Powell loosened his grip on the rock he was clutching, and he made a life-or-death grab for the waving cloth. It worked, and Powell was pulled to safety that day in 1869. He went on to chart the Grand Canyon, became a national hero, and later he headed both the US Geological Survey and the Bureau of Indian Ethnology.³

We, like John Wesley Powell, must make a life-or-death grab for the free gift of grace offered to us in X. We have to let go of those things to which we cling and hold onto tightly which have no power to save us, and we have to reach out in faith to the God who promises us new life in His Son. We must take Him at His word. And if we do, salvation, eternal peace, and the riches of heaven await us. Take hold of that free gift today.⁴

¹Quoted by William Barclay in *Matthew*, Vol. 2, p. 76.

²Quoted by Dale Bruner, *Matthew*, Vol. 2, p. 503.

³Cited in *Today In The Word*, August 1, 1994.

⁴From Signs of the Times, (#5264), cited by Tim Hearnon, Calvary Chapel, Downey, California