

The Parable of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Value
Matthew 13:44-46
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Parallel passages may be found in Mark 4:30-32 and Luke 13: 19-21.

The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid again; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it. Matthew 13:44-46 NASU¹

These two parables are paired together for greater emphasis of the principle idea being conveyed to the hearers. Our ears have grown accustomed to hearing thoughts presented by our Lord in pairs. Consider the following examples:

1. Matthew 6:26ff. The birds of the air and the flowers of the field are paired together to show us that we should not worry about anything in this life or even life itself.

2. Matthew 7:6 pairs dogs and swine to demonstrate to us the absolute necessity of taking care with our words and considering carefully the temperament and spiritual maturity of our audience.

3. Matthew 9: 16-17. The pairs in this case are new cloth on an old garment and new wine in old wineskins. They emphasize the point that the new covenant is not compatible with the old forms.

4. Matthew 10: 24-25. Disciples are not above their teachers, nor slaves above their masters. Again, the use of pairing emphasizes the point—namely that if Jesus was maligned and abused we, being of His household, can expect the same sort of treatment.

5. Matthew 12: 25. A kingdom divided against itself is laid waste and a house divided against itself have the same end: they cannot stand.

Two pairs of parables.

The mustard seed is paired with the leaven and the hidden treasure is paired with the costly pearl. Paired parables share a common theme while at the same time offering significant differences, as we shall shortly see. Taken together, paired parables provide reinforcement and emphasis that reinforce the central teaching, making it more unforgettable.

The Hidden Treasure: central point and meaning of the parable.

The parable reveals to us the superlative worth of the kingdom of Heaven. The treasure is worth every sacrifice necessary to secure it, and once secured to maintain it. Moreover, there is a consummate joy in discovering the value of the kingdom of heaven. “. . . and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field” (Matthew 13:44).

¹ New American Standard Updated Version, used with permission.

The moral responsibility of the finder.

The parable is not dealing with the legality or morality of the man's acquisition of the field. The emphasis is not on the field, his actions or himself. The parable clearly is dealing with the single topic of the incredible worth and value of the treasure, the kingdom of heaven. But modern readers are sometimes troubled by the actions of the man who finds the treasure. After all, if we found some money wouldn't we seek the proper owner? And if we found a treasure buried in a field, would we not properly consider it the property of the owner of that field and our duty to inform him? But the point of the parable is not to give instruction on what we should do when finding a buried treasure. Indeed, how often might that occur in our life times? The instruction given here tells us how to respond to the discovery of the immense value of the kingdom of heaven.

Zeroing in on the Hidden Treasure.

Why would a treasure be hidden in a field? Some commentators assert that the treasure is a silver or gold mine, or perhaps of a vein of valuable ore discovered by the man. If this were indeed the case then a subsequent difficulty follows immediately: The wording of the parable, “. . . which a man found and hid again . . .” (Matt 13:44), definitely conveys the sense that a treasure, such as a treasure chest or clay jar with gold coins, is discovered and then hidden once more. Those who advocate a vein of rich ore offer that the man “hid” the treasure by keeping quiet about his find.

A better explanation is that the treasure was indeed a treasure chest or volume of perhaps gold coins contained in a clay jar. Since there were no bank vaults or other safe repositories for wealth, burying one's gold and silver was not an unreasonable idea. However if the owner died or was killed, it is quite possible that the treasure would remain buried indefinitely. Such treasure jars are discovered even today. Doubtless we have not found them all. They were hidden by their owners so that conquering kingdoms or marauders would not be able to take hard-earned savings away from the subjugated owner.



A wonderful example of a coin hoard was uncovered at Tel Malot in 1998. Some 26,000 bronze coins were discovered in a single large jar, subsequent to excavations by a company laying a pipeline. These particular coins dated to the fourth-fifth centuries AD, although several coins were found to be of earlier minting, dating to the Hellenistic period (fourth-first centuries BC). [Photo: Tel Malot excavations. http://www.archo-logic.com/tel_malot.html]

Finding such a treasure would indeed be rare, probably a once-in-a-life-time occurrence, but the idea would not be unheard-of or far-fetched. Finding an exposed vein of precious ore, on the other hand—well, a great deal of credulity would be required even to imagine that if someone casually encountered such an

outcropping he would realize what it is or even have the savvy to know how deep it might go and the value it might yield if mined.

The great bargain.

Whatever the treasure Jesus had in mind when He spoke the parable, we can be much more certain about the main point: When the man buys the field he purchases for himself a huge bargain. The comparison is drawn between the huge value of that treasure and the kingdom of heaven. Once he catches a glimpse of this most beautiful and extensive treasure (the kingdom of heaven), the man who finds it joyfully abandons all else to secure it. Any costs to himself (in this case the cost of discipleship) are greatly outweighed by the bargain. Not that I wish to minimize the cost of being a disciple. “Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after Me cannot be My disciple” Jesus said (Luke 14:27). Certainly the cost of discipleship should be counted carefully and never underestimated. However, in comparison to the value of the kingdom of heaven, there can be no question as to the ultimate worth of this transaction being in the favor of the man who buys the field. What we receive greatly overwhelms any sacrifice we may be called on to make. Indeed, the parable itself tells us that “from joy over it” the finder sells all he has and buys that field. The joy of the find should not be overlooked by the reader today. Even when preaching and teaching on the responsibilities and duties of the kingdom, we should not overlook the immense joy that it is to discover the kingdom of heaven and the wonderful impact it has upon us when we embrace it.

Are we the treasure?

A grossly invalid interpretation of the parable of the Treasure Hidden in the Field holds that we ourselves are the treasure and that the finder is Jesus. Once seeing us, in the field as it were, He with joy goes to the cross, in effect selling all He has and buys us with His precious blood. But a simple reading of the parable reveals the unacceptability of this interpretation: “*The kingdom of heaven is like . . .*” are the opening words of the parable (emphasis mine). The kingdom is likened to a treasure. The “we are the treasure” interpretation requires a double comparison: The kingdom is like a treasure is like a person. Obviously such a position requires us to insert words that are not there. The parable does not say or even imply, “The kingdom of heaven is like a person . . .”

The Pearl of Great Price: central point and meaning of the parable. “Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls . . .”

Once again we see that the point is the supreme worth of the kingdom. This passage is linked to verse 44 by the word “again,” a sure indication that we are dealing with the same subject in paired parables.

Distinctions and differences:

Though the parables are one in message, the distinctions are interesting. One man has found a hidden treasure within a few minutes, perhaps walking across or working in a field. The other man finds a valuable treasure (the pearl) after a lifetime of searching. In the first case the find

was happenstance. In the second case, the find was the consummation of the life's work of a diligent man. In the first case the man's business was not seeking buried treasures (we may safely assume), but in the second case the man's business was seeking fine pearls, and we may safely assume he knew those which were valuable and those which were common. Derrett summarizes it well: "One wins eternal life after a struggle of years, another finds it in one hour."²

It would not be difficult to expand upon this distinction of one finding salvation quite by happenstance and another by long searching. In fact, such happenings do indeed occur. However, since this point is not really the teaching of either parable, I will leave this trail for exploration on another day.

Paying full price:

Knowing the proclivity of middle-eastern merchants to bargain, we might have expected the pearl merchant to do a bit of negotiating. But without making any pretenses about the value of what he has found, a man who was accustomed to bargaining apparently pays full price. This single find so surpasses anything else he has seen that he considers it more than fair to himself to give *everything he owns* in exchange for this single pearl. What a poignant lesson in how valuable the kingdom is. The merchant knows that he is getting the better end of the bargain. A lifetime of searching has taught him that there is no finer pearl than this. Just so, a man who may have spent his entire life searching for the answer to life's puzzle, upon finding the kingdom of heaven through our Lord Jesus Christ, is wise to sell out all and buy it. The person who understands the worth of the Kingdom of God gladly exchanges all his old life and gains eternal life. [Photo: The Imperial Hong Kong Pearl weighing 127.5 carats. From pearls.com.]



One final note: the parable does not imply that works of righteousness are what procures the kingdom's benefits. Jesus is not and never has been interested in our religious efforts and what they will buy. Once a person grasps this truth he can be truly liberated. We exchange our old life for the new and eternal life of the kingdom. What a great bargain for us. What joy this should give us as we ponder upon it. Jim Elliott, martyred missionary to the Auca Indians of South America, said it best: "He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

² J.D.M. DERRETT, *Law in the New Testament* (London 1970), p. 15.