

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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THE PARABLE OF THE PEARL

Matthew 13:45-46

The kingdom of God as proclaimed by the Lord Jesus is described as something exciting and extremely valuable in the parable of the pearl. Let's read that story.

Matthew 13:45. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, 46 and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it.

In search of pearls

Like the parable of the hidden treasure, the parable of the pearl of great price has two interpretations.

1. Some commentators say that the merchant is Jesus. The many pearls for which He seeks are potential believers and the one precious pearl is the church, the full body of believers.
2. Others say that the merchant represents people who seek after spiritual things (pearls). In their search, some discover Jesus, the pearl of great price.

Our study today is based on the second interpretation.

The Lord Jesus, in this parable, says that the kingdom of God can be compared to a merchant. This businessman was in search of pearls, of fine pearls. One day, in the course of normal business, he spots one particular pearl. It is the finest pearl he has ever seen! He knows that this is a chance of a lifetime. He has to get that pearl. After evaluating his assets and making all kinds of calculations, he decides to sell all his belongings in order to buy that one perfect pearl.

In the times of Jesus, pearls were highly valued, perhaps even more so than gold. It was a status symbol of rich people. When Paul wanted the women of his day to dress modestly, he wrote, *not with braided hair or gold or pearls or costly clothing* (1 Timothy 2:9).

Something holy

What does Jesus want us to understand in this parable? What does this pearl represent in the Lord's teaching? Jesus uses this word 'pearl' twice. This is the second time here in Matthew 13. The first time, we find it in Matthew 7:6.

Matthew 7:6. Do not give dogs what is holy; and do not throw your pearls before swine,

lest they trample them under foot and turn to attack you.

There are three things that need to be highlighted in this passage. Firstly, notice the parallelism. The word ‘pearl’ stands in relation, in parallel, to the words ‘what is holy.’ Do not give what is holy to dogs. Do not cast your pearls before swine. So, ‘what is holy’ and ‘pearls’ stand in parallel; ‘dogs’ and ‘swine’ stand in parallel.

Parallelism is a well-known biblical style in which the same thing is stated in parallel form. It is often used in Proverbs as well as in the Psalms. In Matthew 7:6, it immediately gives us the clue that when Jesus is speaking about pearls, he is thinking about something that is holy.

The second thing we must mention is that what is holy has to be discerned. The same thing applies to a pearl. The value of a pearl has to be discerned. You see, dogs don’t discern the difference between something that is holy and something that is not holy. That is why Jesus says, ‘Don’t give what is holy to dogs.’ Dogs don’t understand what is holy. Similarly, we should not give pearls to swine because pigs don’t understand the value of pearls. They are only interested in food. If you give them something they can’t eat, they might trample it under their feet and they might even attack you. Therefore the pearl, like what is holy, has to be discerned. Its value has to be recognized.

This gives us the clues that we need. We realize that the pearl in Jesus’ own language represents something that is holy. And because it is holy, it refers to something spiritual. Of course, what is spiritual has to be discerned. The apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:14 that spiritual things must be discerned spiritually. *But the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him; nor can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.* A non-Christian doesn’t have that faculty. He doesn’t have spiritual discernment and therefore he cannot know spiritual things.

From this, we begin to understand that in the Lord’s teaching, the pearl is a picture of something that is holy and spiritual. And only somebody who has a certain amount of spiritual discernment will be able to value it.

Thirdly, notice that Jesus speaks of ‘your pearls’. *Do not throw **your** pearls before swine.* These pearls are actually something that we can possess. This holy thing is something that we can make our own.

Looking for wisdom

Now, what might that thing be? Can we describe it more specifically? Well, let’s turn to the OT to see if there is something on this line. In Proverbs 3:13-15, we read about the most valuable possession.

Proverbs 3:13. How blessed is the man who finds wisdom, and the man who gains understanding (notice the words ‘find’ and ‘gain’. What he finds is wisdom. He gets spiritual understanding).

14 For its profit is better than the profit of silver, and its gain than fine gold (this man is compared to a spiritual merchant who is seeking something of great value).

15 She (wisdom) is more precious than jewels (or ‘pearls’ as some translations have it); and nothing you desire compares with her.

This passage is saying that many things are very desirable in this world but none is more valuable than spiritual wisdom or spiritual understanding. It is more precious than silver. It is more precious than gold. It is more precious than jewels. It is more precious than anything you could desire because, as we read in the book of Proverbs, it is through wisdom that you come to know God. It is through wisdom that you come to have eternal life in God.

Notice that wisdom and understanding are precisely what the pearls represent. It is something that has to be understood at the spiritual level. It is something that is holy because it brings us to God. And we find that this is what the book of Proverbs says about wisdom, the wisdom from above.

We find something quite similar in Job 28:12-20.

Job 28:12. "But where can wisdom be found (we have here a person who is looking for something very precious. He is looking for wisdom. This reminds us of the parable of the pearls in which a merchant was looking for precious pearls. He probably asked himself, 'Where can I find fine pearls?' The question in Job is quite similar. 'Where can I find wisdom?')? And where is the place of understanding?

13 Man does not know its value (there is nothing in this world that is equal to the value of wisdom. In his search, the merchant found one fine pearl – it was more valuable than all the other pearls), nor is it found in the land of the living.

14 "The deep says, 'It is not in me'; and the sea says, 'It is not with me.'

15 "Pure gold cannot be given in exchange for it, nor can silver be weighed as its price.

16 "It cannot be valued in the gold of Ophir, in precious onyx, or sapphire.

17 "Gold or glass cannot equal it, nor can it be exchanged for articles of fine gold (the value of wisdom is compared to gold, silver and jewels).

18 "Coral and crystal are not to be mentioned; and the acquisition of wisdom is above that of pearls.

19 "The topaz of Ethiopia cannot equal it, nor can it be valued in pure gold.

20 "Where then does wisdom come from? And where is the place of understanding?

You see, we can compare the situation in this passage to a merchant looking for spiritual jewels. And we are told that the most precious of all is wisdom. Where can we find it? 'The kingdom of God is like that,' the Lord Jesus says. 'It is like a person who is searching for spiritual wisdom and spiritual understanding, which lead to eternal life in God.'

The word of God makes wise

So then, where can wisdom be found? The OT is not without an answer. In this respect, Psalm 19:7 is very enlightening. This is what we read.

*Psalm 19:7. The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul; the testimony of the Lord is sure, **making wise** the simple.*

The word of God is something precious to those who seek after it. It is the source of wisdom to all who are ready to receive it. It is also the source of power because it has transforming effects. 'The law of the Lord makes wise the simple.'

Now we begin to see that the pearls that Jesus speaks about in Matthew 7:6 – 'don't give your pearls to pigs' – refers to the teaching of God, to the word of God. The word of God is something that is holy. It has to be spiritually discerned. And it is something that we can have as our own possession. Paul says to the Colossians, *Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom* (Colossians 3:16)... We have the word of Christ in us. And when we let it remain as a rich treasure in our heart, it will make us wise.

You will remember that when we studied the earlier parables, the parable of the sower for example, we mentioned that the word of God is in fact embodied in one person, namely Jesus Himself, who is called the 'word of God' in John 1:1. Jesus is the very embodiment of God's word. The word of God is fully expressed in Jesus. Paul writes in Colossians 2:3 that Christ is the one *in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge*. We have been talking about spiritual wisdom and spiritual understanding, and where we could find it. Well, here it is. Wisdom and understanding are to

be found in Jesus. 'In Him are hidden wisdom and knowledge.' If we go back to our parable, this means that Jesus is that pearl of great price. He is the pearl that the merchant so badly wanted.

Now, consider the picture of the pearl in this way. The roundness of the pearl represents the perfection of Jesus. The radiance of the pearl, the way it shines when you look at it in the light, represents the beauty of Jesus. The whiteness of the pearl represents the holiness of Jesus. Remember also that the pearl is produced by suffering. A speck of sand makes its way into an oyster. The oyster, to protect itself, secretes a substance which surrounds the intruder. That secretion gradually forms the pearl. And so, the holiness of Jesus is the product of suffering. We read in Hebrews 5:8 that 'though He was a Son, He was perfected through suffering.'

One single pearl

Notice the uniqueness of this pearl. It says here, *one pearl of great value*. This is not one pearl among many pearls. It is one pearl. Jesus is a person with no comparison. There is nothing to compare Him with. As the merchant was looking for pearls, suddenly he sees that one pearl. Being an expert, he knew that it was unique in its beauty. It surpassed any other pearl he has seen that he considered it a fair exchange for everything else he owns.

But is it wise to lose everything for this pearl? Perhaps it is better for him to have a collection of cheaper pearls and still be able to keep some of his assets. In fact, from a business point of view, it is rather unlikely that a merchant would sell everything he has to acquire one single pearl. It is not advisable, we are told, to put all that we own in the same basket. But this is not the point of the story. We have to understand it as a matter of priorities. The action of the dealer should lead us to reflect on the value of the kingdom of heaven in relation to all the other competing things in this world. Focus on that one pearl. 'One thing is needful,' Jesus said to Martha. 'Don't be distracted by all the other things (Luke 10:41).' Once you have it, once you have Jesus, you don't need to search for something else. Hence the emphasis is on the fact that this is *one* very special pearl, whose value eclipses all others put together.

Total self-surrender

The parable emphasizes also the fact that there is a cost to be reckoned with. We can't have that pearl for nothing. Having that precious pearl is going to cost us everything. If it does not cost us everything, we have to wonder whether we really have that pearl. We may have discovered the pearl. But discovering the pearl is not equivalent to having the pearl. That merchant, having seen the pearl, had to sell what he had before he could own the pearl.

The idea of giving up everything for the sake of the kingdom is found in many places of the Lord's teaching. Remember the rich young man who wanted to enter the kingdom. 'Teacher, what must I do to have eternal life?' Jesus told him the same thing. 'If you want to enter into life, if you want that pearl, go and sell your possessions. Give them to the poor and follow Me.' The parable of the pearl makes it clear that Jesus' call to the rich young man was not an individual one which, conveniently, doesn't apply to anyone else. It is in fact the only way to enter the kingdom.

Of course, salvation is not something that can be bought. It is a gift. What is meant by 'selling all that he had' is that Jesus demands our heart. He demands a total commitment on our part. You remember that a lawyer asked the same question to Jesus. 'Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?' 'Keep the commandments,' the Lord Jesus said. And what are the commandments? The commandments are summed up in this phrase: you shall love the Lord your God with all your being and your neighbor as yourself (Luke 10:25-28). At the heart of entering the kingdom is a relationship of complete devotion to God, a devotion that places God at the center of one's life. It is a response that involves the whole person – the heart, the soul, and the mind.

It is Jesus who offers the pearl to people traveling along life's highway. He offers Himself. Some of these travelers are searching for what is spiritually valuable. For these people, the OT has a wonderful promise. Moses says to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 4:29, *But from there you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find Him if you seek Him with all your heart and with all your soul.* The promise here is that you will find the pearl of great value if you search for it with all your heart and all your soul. God will be found by those who search for the truth with great determination. These are the kind of people who say, 'If I find God, I will commit myself to Him.'

The significance of this parable lies in two obvious features: (1) first, the idea of finding something tremendously valuable, (2) and second, the necessity of selling everything in order to get it.

What does Jesus mean to you? Is He just an ordinary pearl? Or is He worth more than all that you possess? In fact, if you can truly appreciate His value, selling everything to acquire that pearl will not be seen as a sacrifice. For what we have is nothing compared to the value of Jesus. We are not talking about some religious teacher. We are talking about God manifest in the flesh. We are talking about One whose value is without price. The apostle Paul makes a similar point in Philippians 3:7-8 where he speaks of *the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ.* For Paul, this pearl of great price is worth everything. All the valuables that he could ever have, he counts them as valueless when he compares them to Jesus.

Can you think of Jesus as that beautiful pearl that is worth more than everything you have?