

# Meeting With Christ

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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 HIDDEN TREASURE (1)

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### Matthew 13:44

Matthew's chapter of parables (Matthew 13) contains two parables that form a pair. We can say that they are twin parables because they are almost identical. We are talking of course about the parables of the hidden treasure and of the pearl. Even though they are very closely related, we will study them separately. Let's begin with the parable of the hidden treasure.

*Matthew 13:44. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.*

### Two views, two lessons

This parable begins with the familiar introductory phrase 'the kingdom of heaven is like this ...' Here Jesus is comparing the kingdom of heaven to a hidden treasure. He tells the story of man who found a treasure hidden in a field. This discovery made the man happy. He quickly buried it and went home to sell all that he owned so that he can buy the field and get the treasure.

There are two main interpretations of this parable.

- Some say that Jesus used this parable to describe the immense value of the kingdom of heaven. It is so valuable that it is worth sacrificing anything to gain it.
- Others say that Jesus is the man and the treasure in the field represents people who are in the world. According to this view, Jesus sees the treasure of men in the world, and seeing them He sacrifices everything to save them.

In our lesson today, I will argue in favor of the first interpretation. Then in the next lesson, I will expound the parable of the hidden treasure from the point of view of the second interpretation. You are invited to examine the basis of each position and draw your own conclusions.

### Eternal life in the kingdom

The Lord Jesus says, 'The kingdom of heaven is like this ...' What is the kingdom of heaven? The kingdom of heaven can be translated as the government of heaven. It is the government of God, the rule of God. And when we use the term 'government of God,' we are referring to the way of life which is under God's government and where God is the king. So if you are in the kingdom of God, it means that God is king in your life. In all His teaching, Jesus constantly emphasizes that the true Christian must live under God's rule. When God is ruling a person's life as king, then you know that this person is an authentic believer.

But some Christians have God in their lives as a 'constitutional' king. You know that most kings and queens nowadays have no political or military power. They are kings only in a symbolic way, having virtually no power to make decisions in the affairs of the state. God cannot be king in your life in this kind of way. You are a true believer only if Jesus rules in your life day-by-day, moment-by-moment.

When you go to the NT epistles, you will find that the word 'kingdom' is seldom used. The reason is easy to explain. It is because the whole kingdom of God is summed up in the person of Jesus. That is the reason why Paul, instead of speaking about being in the kingdom, speaks about being in Christ. To be in Christ or to be in the kingdom, it is exactly the same thing. They both refer to a new way of life, this eternal life that God gives us. And it is only in Christ, only in the kingdom, that you have this treasure. This 'in Christ' life of the believers is also called eternal life in the NT. Having eternal life does not just mean that you are going to exist forever. More importantly, it means that the life of the kingdom of God is within you. It means that you have God's life inside of you. His holiness, His love, His power, His joy, His peace, all this becomes part of your life.

### **Questionable transaction**

So the kingdom of God is like a treasure that has been hidden in a field. We don't know who put it there and how long ago it was there. In the absence of banks, it was quite normal in those days for people who wanted to preserve their valuables to bury them in a field rather than hiding them in a house. The field is a safer place to hide something. In the parable of talents for example, the unprofitable servant hid his talent in the earth to keep from losing it. Ancient Palestine, as you know, was often ravished by war. If someone buried a treasure in his land and then were killed during a war, the secret about the hidden treasure would be lost. Sometimes however, accidental discoveries of a treasure can happen.

In the parable, the man who found such a treasure may have been a hired labourer or a renter. He may have been plowing the field, digging a ditch, or planting a tree. We cannot be absolutely sure. Whatever the case, he hit something hard that did not sound like a rock. He continued to dig and eventually found a treasure, most likely in a clay jar containing coins and jewelry. It is easy to see why earthen jars would be used: they kept out the dampness and they could last almost indefinitely in the soil.

So this man was getting quite excited. He was already thinking that the treasure could become his if he did a few things. With a plan in mind, he quickly put the treasure back in its place, covered it up, and went home. He knew that he can have the treasure if he could manage to convince the owner of the field to sell him the part of the field where the treasure is buried. He was not very rich but he was willing to go as far as to sell all he possessed to get the finances that he needed. So he went away, sold all that he owns, and bought the field to get the treasure.

### **In accordance to Jewish law**

This is a perplexing story. It seems that the man, in buying without revealing the presence of the treasure, has taken advantage of the owner of the field. We can certainly call into question the legality and the morality of his actions. It could be argued for example that the initial owner of the field would have never sold his land had he known that there was a treasure buried in that land. But would that be a good argument in a Jewish court of law? Not really.

Consider this question. Does the treasure belong to the owner of the field by right? No. Under Jewish law, that treasure does not belong to the owner of the field. Because when he bought that field, he simply bought the field and nothing else. He could not have bought what he did not know was

there. Even if there was a treasure in it, he could not claim it as his because he didn't know it was there when he first bought the land. That is the way Jewish law reasons.

We read in the Mishnah that 'If one sees an ownerless object and falls upon it, and another person comes and seizes it, he who has seized it is entitled to its possession.' Therefore this treasure does not belong to the owner of the field unless he himself found it. And since he did not find it, he had no right in the treasure. And therefore there is no reason why he should be told of it. You can see that the transaction of the parable was entirely in accordance with Jewish law. There was nothing dishonest about the finder's conduct.

## **A hidden treasure**

The parable portrays the kingdom as something exciting and extremely valuable. That is the reason why Jesus compares the kingdom to a treasure. There is nothing more precious than the kingdom of God. This is also the point of the parable of the pearl. The merchant was able to see the value of this pearl. When he found it, he sold everything he had to buy it.

But the kingdom of heaven is not just like treasure. The Lord Jesus described it as a treasure found hidden in a field. The treasure is hidden. You see, something may be very valuable, but this doesn't mean that it will automatically be recognized by everyone. If you asked me to look at the Mona Lisa, and let's suppose that I have never heard of that painting, I don't think that I would get too excited about it. I tend to prefer paintings showing flowers, trees or rivers. These are the things that catch my attention when I look at a painting. But I am not an artist. The Mona Lisa may be an exceptional painting, you cannot expect that its value will necessarily be obvious to me.

In the same way, spiritual things and eternal truth don't necessarily make sense to people. When you preach the gospel, many people may listen, but they will not understand. They listen to the word of God but its life giving power does not touch them at all. So it is hidden in the sense that they are blind to the spiritual world. For others, it is a life changing experience. They say, 'This message is very special. It cannot come from human beings. It must be the word of eternal life.' As Paul says, 'The message we preach, it is hidden to some people. It is hidden to those who are perishing. They look, but they don't see (2Corinthians 4:3-4).' The kingdom of heaven is a treasure. But few people will discern its value.

## **Getting the treasure**

There is another point that we need to explore. How was this treasure acquired? Well, the story tells us that the man had to sell everything to get it. Now, does that mean that he earned this treasure since he bought the field? Does that mean that we can somehow get eternal life by our own works and efforts? The Lord Jesus said elsewhere, 'Seek and you will find. Strive to enter by the narrow gate.' Is He not talking about efforts?

Notice the perfect balance of Jesus' teaching. The treasure is a gift. The man could buy the field but not the treasure. Eternal life is a gift from God to us. Because it is priceless, there is absolutely nothing we can do to earn it. It is simply beyond anyone's power to purchase it. But on the other hand, this does not mean that God requires nothing from us. In fact, He expects that we give up everything for Him. The kingdom is the treasure to give up everything for.

I would like to explain this from the perspective of love. You see, we can understand faith in terms of love. Love is something that freely gives itself to you but it also makes a demand upon you. Love is something that is priceless. You cannot buy anybody's love. The richest man in the world cannot buy the love of the poorest woman. The richest woman in the world cannot buy the love of the poorest man. Now, when a person loves another one, and gives himself or herself to that person, we

can say that it is a free gift. But although love is self-giving, it also has an expectation. When Jesus loves us and gives Himself for us, it doesn't mean that He doesn't expect anything from us. What does He expect? The only proper response to love is love. When Jesus loves me and gives Himself to me, the most appropriate response is for me to love Him and to give myself to Him.

Let us realize this. When God gives us eternal life, when He gives His own life to us, He expects in return that we give our life back to Him. If we accept Jesus' love towards us, then the only proper response is to say, 'Lord, I give myself totally to You.' The apostle Paul expresses it in those terms. *He died for all, that they who live should no longer live for themselves, but for Him who died and rose again on their behalf* (2Corinthians 5.15). We live no more for ourselves but for Jesus our Savior.

### **Carried away by joy**

And we do this out of the joy that motivates us. This is another point of the parable. Joy is the engine of change. The man in the parable was carried away by his joy. The joy that he felt motivated him to change his life completely, to sell absolutely everything he had and to buy the new precious reality. *And from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has, and buys that field.* From the man's point of view, he was not making a sacrifice by selling every. It was a joy! The joy of the discovery of Jesus, in whom are hidden 'all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' (Colossians 2:3), has always moved people into life-changing decision and acts of renunciation.

You know, it is not by telling people to make sacrifices that they make sacrifices. It is not first of all by preaching God's law that people do God's law. It is first by telling people about God's treasure that people make the necessary sellings in the following of God.

All teachers and preachers desire their people to get moving in their spiritual life, to 'sell all that they have' and to live for the kingdom. They exhort them to various acts of piety – to give more time and money to the church, to pray more, to be more dedicated. All these exhortations need to be expressed from time to time. We should understand, however, that they can easily turn into a crushing burden of 'musts' if the believer is not first carried away by the joy of having Jesus in his heart.

The motif of discipleship is joy, the joy that causes the zeal of selling everything. Again, notice the perfect balance. There is joy, but there is also a demand. Joy enables selling, but only selling gets the treasure. In other words, obedience to Jesus' commands must complement joy in Jesus' treasure if we are ever to have the treasure.

The relation between finding and selling is the relation between grace and human responsibility. This is well illustrated for example in the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21-35) where the finding is the gift of divine forgiveness and the selling is the responsibility of human forgiveness. So selling is a consequence of finding, not a condition for it. But once found, selling becomes a condition for having, having the treasure, having the kingdom.

### **The alternative interpretation**

We will conclude our lesson with this question. Could this finding of treasure refer to Jesus finding us? Maybe this parable is showing us that Jesus has given up everything of His divine glory in order to find us, the treasure. This is, if you remember, the alternative interpretation of the parable that we mentioned at the beginning of the lesson.

It is true that Jesus gave up everything so that we can be saved. But is that the point that Jesus is making in this story? I would like to raise these objections.

First of all, did you notice how the man found the treasure? It was an accidental discovery. He didn't know that the treasure was there. He was just doing his work when he accidentally came upon this treasure. When the Lord Jesus came into the world, did He find us by accident? Of course not. He is actually seeking us. So how can the treasure symbolize us?

Secondly, man is never compared to a treasure in the Scriptures. Rather the man in sin is described as being sick or lost in the Bible. It is only after we come to Christ that we have this treasure in earthen vessels (2Corinthians 4:7).

The third point we need to notice is that the treasure does not originally belong to the person who found it. But we, right from the start, belong to God. We are His creatures. That is why we are called 'lost'. We cannot be lost unless we belong to Him in the first place.

And fourthly, the idea of selling all in order to obtain the kingdom always applies to discipleship. That is the lesson that we learn from the account of the rich young ruler who wanted to enter the kingdom and who was told to sell everything and follow Jesus. In His teaching, Jesus never speaks of it in connection with Himself.

These arguments help us to see that the treasure has to be Jesus Himself, and that it is we who find that treasure by God's grace.

In our next lesson, we will defend the other interpretation. We will explain the problems that we have when we say that Jesus is the treasure and we will try to show that it is better to take the view that man is the treasure.