

Chapter 53: The Parables of the Treasure, Pearl, and the Net

Matthew 13:44–50

As Jesus continues to teach about the kingdom of heaven, he shifts emphasis once again. The parable of the sower/four soils had given an explanation for why the word of the kingdom will produce such different results in different people. The parable of the weeds accounted for the ongoing presence of evil, even after Son of Man had begun his kingdom work of sowing the sons of the kingdom in the world. The parables of the mustard seed and the leaven had demonstrated how the kingdom will certain prevail in this world, albeit in a way that surprises and confounds the kingdom's friends and enemies alike. As Jesus concludes his parables of the kingdom, he applies his teaching thus far by declaring that *the kingdom of heaven is a double-edged sword*.

Surprised by the Kingdom (Matt. 13:44)

In the kingdom parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price, Jesus emphasizes the value of the kingdom.¹ First, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to “treasure hidden in a field.” This may sound like a fanciful premise to a story; however, we should recognize that the original would not have found this story unlikely. In the days before reliable banks, people often resorted to hiding their material wealth for a variety of reasons, such as for general, everyday security, specific impending threats (e.g., wars or raiding parties), or as a way of protecting wealth while on a journey.² If the person who hid that treasure died (whether of natural causes, in battle, or while on a journey), that treasure would remain hidden until someone encountered it. To be sure, it was rare even in those days to come across hidden treasure; however, there were greater chances of discovering such hidden treasure than there would be today.

In the parable, a man finds this treasure hidden in a field, and then covers it up. While some have expressed concerns about the ethics of buying a field without disclosing to the owner the knowledge of the treasure hidden in the field, commentators generally respond with two points that mitigate those concerns: (1) the man who found the treasure did not steal the treasure outright, but waited to take possession of the treasure until after acquiring the field as a whole; and (2) Jesus is not illustrating the ethics of the man, but rather the value of the kingdom of heaven. Elsewhere, Jesus is willing to illustrate his Father's faithfulness by comparison to an unjust judge (Luke 18:1–8). What we must always recognize, then, is that, while the details are important in the stories, our Lord does not mean

¹ Alternatively, Lenski characterizes the thematic development of the parables this way: “The four preceding parables show how the kingdom is bestowed (sowing seed) and how it operates (growing, permeating). Now Jesus shows how it is acquired.” (Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 541.)

² Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 575; Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 359.

for us to press the details to their furthest conclusions. Thus, Jesus is not teaching that we should take possession of the kingdom by fraud.

Instead, there seem to be two main points that Jesus illustrates by this parable: the hiddenness of the kingdom of heaven, and the kingdom's great value. Jesus has emphasized the hiddenness of the kingdom throughout the Gospel of Matthew (Matt. 11:25; 13:11, 33). In this case, the kingdom is hidden in plain sight (a field) where even the owner of the field does not realize what he has. As Jesus speaks this parable to a Jewish audience, it is likely that he is describing the function of the Scriptures. Elsewhere, Jesus tells the Jews, "You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life" (John 5:39–40).³ The plainness of the Scriptures hide the mysteries of the kingdom within their pages. When people despise the Scriptures, they are like the owners of a field who are willing (perhaps, eager) to sell away a possession that contains hidden treasure. Crucially, this parable describes to us the value of an invisible kingdom that we might otherwise pass by: "The excellence of the heavenly life is not perceived, indeed, by the sense of the flesh; and yet we do not esteem it according to its real worth, unless we are prepared to deny, on account of it, all that glitters in our eyes."⁴

The man in the parable, however, illustrates what we are to do with such treasure. When we find it—that is, when we encounter the treasure of the kingdom of heaven held out to us in the pages of Scripture—we should be willing to part with everything we possess in this life in order to lay hold of it. The point is not that we must do something to purchase or earn the kingdom, since the pages of Scripture make clear that one important aspect of the treasure of the gospel is that it comes to us freely. The point, rather, is that when someone "buys the field at such sacrifice, he possesses far more than the price paid (cf. 10:39). The kingdom of heaven is worth infinitely more than the cost of discipleship, and those who know where the treasure lies joyfully abandon everything else to secure it."⁵

Seeking for the Kingdom (Matt. 13:45–46)

In the next parable, Jesus once again emphasizes the "great value" of the kingdom; however, he teaches this lesson from a different perspective. Morris draws out the distinction well: "Whereas in the previous parable the man apparently stumbled across the treasure by accident when he had no such thing in mind, in this story the man knows quite well what he wants and is definitely on the lookout for the best in the way of pearls."⁶ This does not mean that *only* those who dedicate their entire lives toward "in search of" the kingdom will find it, since in the previous parable a man found it without necessarily looking for it; instead, the two parables "build on each other, and the key is not so much the mode of discovery as it is the total surrender that accompanies it."⁷

³ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, 542–43; *pace* Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 576.

⁴ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:130–31.

⁵ Carson, "Matthew," 376.

⁶ Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew*, 360.

⁷ Osborne, *Matthew*, 541.

Here again, the point Jesus wishes to illustrate is the extraordinary response of the one who finds the kingdom. Although the merchant is in search of fine *pearls* (plural), he is willing to sell everything he has—not only his business assets, but his personal possessions as well—in order to lay hold of a single pearl of great value. As with the previous parable, the point is not that we must earn or pay for the kingdom in some way; rather, that “though the heavenly life, and every thing that belongs to it, is the free gift of God, yet we are said to buy it, when we cheerfully relinquish the desires of the flesh, that nothing may prevent us from obtaining it.”⁸ Beyond that general application of relinquishing the desires of the flesh, Carson also plausibly suggests that Jesus may have in mind “the entire religious heritage of the Jews” as what must be exchanged in order to lay hold of Jesus as the Messiah.⁹ Indeed, the merchant acquired exactly what he was looking for in this fine pearl, but he did not necessarily plan on purchasing *this* pearl, and neither did he understand that it would cost him everything to lay hold of it. Nevertheless, due to the value of the pearl, he gladly made the trade, having found what he had spent his life seeking.

Sorrows from the Kingdom (Matt. 13:47–50)

In the final kingdom parable of Matthew 13, Jesus applies all the preceding parables—and, indeed, all of Jesus’ teaching about the kingdom (e.g., Matt. 4:17)—in one final image.¹⁰ In this parable, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to a net thrown into the sea that “gathered fish of every kind” (v. 47). The word “kind” is γένους (*genous*), which refers to *descent*. Thus, this word is related to the word for “genealogy” (γένεσις; *genesis*) that appears at the beginning of this Gospel (Matt. 1:1). Thus, it is an awkward way of describing various kinds of fish; however, this is “a natural way of emphasizing the universality of God’s judgment of people.”¹¹

In this parable, the fishermen drew the net ashore, sat down, and sorted the good into containers, while throwing away the bad. Osborne writes, “The basis of the separation of good from bad fish was probably ceremonial, i.e., clean and unclean (Lev 11:9–12, all without fins and scales, e.g., shellfish), but it could also apply to edible and inedible fish. Fishermen in the Sea of Galilee would separate at least twenty-four species of fish in the lake on the basis of both categories.”¹² Symbolically, this final separation implies two points. First, as in the parable of the weeds, we see that the final separation will not happen until the very end of time (Matt. 13:39–43). As the wheat must tolerate the growth of weeds in the field, so the good fish must tolerate the bad fish that swim in the sea.¹³ Yet, this toleration will not be perpetual, for the day is coming when God’s angels will separate the evil from the righteous.

Second, this parable serves as a warning that coincides with Jesus’ first words of his public ministry in the Gospel of Matthew: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17). That is, “the Savior is impressing upon his disciples, both for their own good and for the good of

⁸ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:132.

⁹ Carson, “Matthew,” 377.

¹⁰ Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew’s Gospel*, 546–47.

¹¹ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 224.

¹² Osborne, *Matthew*, 542.

¹³ Calvin, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists*, 2:132–33.

those to whom they were to bring the message, the absolute certainty, the irrevocable decisiveness of the coming judgment, in order, as far as possible, to prevent everlasting despair.”¹⁴ The kingdom is not a novelty to amuse us. The kingdom comes with lethal severity, bringing everlasting judgment on all those who do not repent. While the parable of the weeds put a special emphasis on the blessedness of the righteous to “shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matt. 13:43), this parable speaks primarily of the fate of the evil, who will be thrown “into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth” (v. 49–50). He who has ears, let him hear.

Discussion Questions

1. Review what Jesus has taught about the parables of the kingdom so far. What did he communicate by the parable of the sower/four soils? By the parable of the weeds? By the parables of the mustard seed and leaven? What do those tell us about the kingdom of heaven that Jesus has come to establish on earth? What purpose do the parables play in Jesus’ overall strategies for teaching his gospel?
2. What does the parable of the hidden treasure teach us (v. 44)? Does this parable suggest that the man had been looking for treasure when he found it? What does Jesus teach us by saying that the treasure was “hidden” in the field? What does the field likely symbolize? How does the man respond after finding the treasure? What does this parable tell us about the value of the kingdom? What makes Jesus’ kingdom so valuable to his people?
3. What does the parable of the pearl of great price teach us? What kind of person do you think the merchant might represent? What dilemma faces this merchant who, while searching for “fine pearls,” finds instead one single “pearl of great value”? Why is the merchant willing to sell everything that he has in order to possess that pearl? What does this parable tell us about the value of the kingdom for those who are seeking for salvation, satisfaction, and security?
4. What does the parable of the net teach us? What does “every kind of fish” represent in the parable? What does Jesus teach by describing the separation of the good fish from the bad fish? How much does he tell us about the fate of the good fish? How much does he tell us about the fate of the bad fish? Why do you think that Jesus ends his kingdom parables with such a strong warning for those who have not received his kingdom by faith?

¹⁴ Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel According to Matthew*, 579.