

“Treasure in a Paper Bag”

Matthew 13:44-46

Series: God is Closer Than You Think Week 2. The Choice

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One of John Ortberg’s relatives—a young woman and her husband—bought and fixed up an old house. While working on the attic, the husband found an astonishing discovery – an old paper bag. Well that’s not so astonishing. The surprise was inside the bag – thousands and thousands of dollars! Since the bills were decades old, that treasure must have been buried in the attic for ages. Was it a miser’s savings or a bank heist? There was no way to tell who stashed it there.

The husband asked his wife, “What is the ethical thing to do?” “Maybe we should call John,” she said. The husband paused for a moment and said, “No—he’s a pastor. He’s so ethical. He’ll tell us we have to give it back. Let’s call a lawyer instead.” The lawyer said they could keep it. They still felt funny about it so they called Pastor John. He also said they can keep it ... as long as they tithed ... to a pastor who is a relative.

As incredible as it is to find a treasure in the attic, it would be more unbelievable for the owners to stuff it back in the gap between the joists and rafters and forget about it. With mortgage payments, college loans, deeper debt and ever-mounting inflation, it would be crazy for them to ignore this vast stash of cash which can lighten their load.

Yet that’s what disciples do every day. Jesus tells us there is a priceless treasure waiting for us. Not gold reserves but a godly relationship. The power and presence of God are waiting to give you strength, guidance and peace. God’s great desire is to be with us. Yet he still leaves room for us to choose to be with him. Today we’ll talk about our choice to find God’s treasure: a relationship with him. To begin, Jesus tells us to dig in.

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden 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.
Matthew 13:44

When Paul Stringer and I participated on the archaeological dig which uncovered Biblical Bethsaida, the team discovered more than broken pottery and mosaic tiles. Buried below the floor of a home they uncovered a stash of gold coins. Apparently builders buried coins in the foundation for good luck. In an age without vaults, banks or safes, burying your valuables under the house or in the ground was the most secure method.

Finding a treasure is **Rare**. Perhaps that’s one definition of a treasure: it’s one of a kind. What possession is priceless to you? It may be very old or irreplaceable. Maybe it was passed down through the family or it’s attached to a memory. Treasures are also **Valuable**. It may have sentimental value or historic value. It may not fetch a single bid on Ebay but to you it’s worth all the world. The treasure Jesus describes in this story is rare and valuable. But it possesses two more qualities: it brings **Joy**, it requires **Sacrifice**. Not every treasure brings joy. In fact, most treasure stories end in misery for the hunter.

Yet this discovery fills the finder with such overwhelming joy he is willing to give up everything he has to have it. All his possessions pale in comparison. Why? Because nothing can destroy this treasure. It lasts forever. No one needs to convince him, command him or twist his arm. He would be a fool to let it go.

What is the treasure Jesus offers? Nothing less than the Kingdom of heaven. What is the Kingdom of heaven? It is a relationship with Jesus Christ – a relationship that strengthens us and saves us. In *The Last Crusade*, Indiana Jones is willing to risk his life to get the cup of Jesus because it is the only thing that can save his father from death. That's a fairy tale. No cup can do that. But the One who held that cup can. Jesus is the real treasure. Today, He can make you a part of His eternal Kingdom. He can fill you with His abundant life which begins now and continues on through death into eternity.

If the treasure of Jesus Christ is so great, why doesn't everyone reach for it? Some don't think salvation is *rare*. It is popular today to say everyone will be saved regardless of what they believe or who they believe in. You are labeled offensive, intolerant or insulting if you say Jesus Christ is the only way to Father (John 14:1-6). Yet to say all will be saved with or without Jesus is being offensive and insulting to God. In effect, you are saying the Father was a fool to send His Son to die on the Cross for our sins since salvation can be reached in multiple ways. I don't want to call God a fool. If you have to choose between pleasing people or God, I choose God. Paul says,

If a living relationship with God could come by rule-keeping, then Christ died unnecessarily! Galatians 2:21, *The Message*.

For Indiana Jones there was only one path across the chasm to the Holy Grail. There is only one Way across the chasm of sin to reach God and that Way is Jesus.

Some don't consider Jesus *valuable*. We've been convinced by our culture that temporary things are more valuable than eternal gifts. The devil is very clever on this one. He doesn't always choose clearly bad stuff. He entices us away from God with things which are good but not the best. Sleep is a good thing. Work is good. Exercise is good. Time with your family is good. But to substitute these things for spending time with God through worship, prayer, Scripture reading or service is not the best. On the other hand when you put God first, He makes all those other things better. The saddest cases are when people trade Jesus for things which will rust, rot or fade away such as popularity, power or possessions. Jesus, the best treasure, is within reach. Don't give Him away.

Stan Caffy and his fiancée each had a home and garage filled with stuff. To consolidate their things the two of them gave to Goodwill clothes, bicycles, tools, computer parts and a tattered piece of paper in a frame which hung in Stan's garage. A man named Michael Sparks purchased the framed document for \$2.48. That scrap of paper turned out to be a rare copy of the Declaration of Independence made in 1823.

Sparks later auctioned it for \$477,650.¹ What an incredible loss. And yet countless people throw away the freedom of Jesus Christ, a treasure beyond your wildest imagination.

Some are unwilling to *surrender* their lives to have this treasure. They are too busy, too preoccupied, too wrapped up in life to give time to God. Often they feel being a Christian seems boring and restrictive. It cramps your style. They fail to realize there is more joy in being with the Lord than anything this world offers. Whatever you do, don't wait another minute to receive the treasure He wants to give you.

Europe's biggest-ever lottery, Super Enalotto, stood at 66 million euros. An Italian man living on his old-age pension purchased a ticket outside of Milan. On the day the winning lottery ticket was revealed, the man was preoccupied with the details of his daughter's wedding. In the midst of the wedding chaos, the father of the bride forgot to redeem his lottery ticket. According to Italian news agencies, by the time he realized he guessed the correct six-figure number, the deadline for claiming the jackpot of a lifetime had passed. He forfeited a prize never to be repeated. What was in his grasp and reserved for him, passed him by. Feeling faint, the man, who wished to remain anonymous, was hospitalized.²

The greatest treasure of all time and eternity is waiting for you. The treasure of Jesus Christ can be yours if you give your life to Him. How can you be sure? Look at the second parable:

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.
Matthew 13:45-46

This story is identical to the first one with one very important twist. The kingdom of heaven is not a treasure, not even an extremely valuable pearl. Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant – one who knows a great treasure when he sees it and is willing to give his all to have it. Who is that merchant? Jesus. Who is the pearl of great value? You. He came from heaven to search for you. When He finds you, in His joy, He gives His life for you. And if you are that valuable to Him, He is never going to let you go.

So how do you make the choice to move closer to God? If you want the treasure you have to dig in. You will need to take a step and do something. This may mean setting aside time each day to pray and read Scripture. There are many Bible reading plans in the Bible App. You can draw closer by attending worship whenever you are in town and watching online when you are not. I strongly recommend joining a Growth Group – a community of disciples who are seeking to get closer to God together. And one of the best ways I know to grow closer to God is through the Alpha Course. We are offering a Taste of Alpha on February 2 at 4:30 pm. Several Growth Groups are doing the Alpha Course including the four I lead. If you have never taken the Alpha Course or it's been a long time, now is your time. If you have taken the Alpha Course then would you make it

¹ Associated Press, "Sold! One Declaration of Independence Copy," MSNBC.com (3-23-07).

² Reuters News Service (8-19-03).

a goal to bring one person not from Woodside with you? God is offering an incredible treasure to you. Don't throw it away.

When I think about a treasure in a paper bag I'm reminded of a story by Robert Fulghum entitled, "What My Daughter Taught Me About Love" in which he almost missed one of life's greatest gifts. It goes like this:

One of my keepsakes ... is a small paper bag. Lunch size. Though the top is sealed with duct tape, staples and several paper clips, there is a ragged rip in one side through which the contents may be seen. This particular lunch sack has been in my care for maybe 14 years. But it really belongs to my daughter, Molly. One morning, Molly handed me two bags. One regular lunch sack and the other one with the duct tape. "Why two bags?" "The other one is something else." "What's in it?" "Just some stuff – take it with you."

At midday, while hurriedly scarfing down my real lunch, I tore open Molly's bag and shook out the contents. Two hair ribbons, three small stones, a plastic dinosaur, a pencil stub, a tiny seashell, two animal crackers, a marble, a used lipstick, a small doll, two chocolate kisses, and 13 pennies. I smiled. How charming. Rising to hustle off to all the important business of the afternoon, I swept the desk clean into the wastebasket – leftover lunch, Molly's junk and all. There wasn't anything there I needed.

That evening, Molly came to stand beside me while I read the paper. "Where's my bag?" "What bag?" "You know, the one I gave you this morning." "I left it at the office, why?" "I forgot to put this note in it." She handed over the note. "Besides, I want it back." "Why?" "Those are my things in the sack, Daddy, the ones I really like. I thought you might like to play with them. You didn't lose the bag, did you Daddy?" Tears puddled in her eyes. "Oh, no, I just forgot to bring it home," I lied. "Bring it tomorrow, OK?" "Sure thing – don't worry." As she hugged my neck with relief, I unfolded the note that had not got into the sack: "I love you Daddy."

Oh. And also – Uh-Oh. I looked long at the face of my child. She was right – what was in that sack was "something else." Molly had given me her treasures. All that a 7-year old held dear. Love in a paper sack. And I had missed it. Not only missed it, but had thrown it away because "there wasn't anything in there I needed." Dear God. It wasn't the first or the last time I felt my Daddy Permit was about to run out.

It was a long trip back to the office. But there was nothing else to be done. So I went. The pilgrimage of a penitent. Just ahead of the janitor, I picked up the wastebasket and poured the contents on my desk. After washing the mustard off the dinosaur and spraying the whole thing with breath freshener to kill the smell of onions, I carefully smoothed out the wadded ball of brown paper and put the treasures inside and carried it home gingerly, like an injured kitten.

Sometimes I think of all the times in this sweet life when I must have missed the affection I was being given. A friend calls this “standing knee-deep in the river and dying of thirst.” So the worn paper sack is there. Left from a time when a child said, “Here – this is the best I’ve got – take it – it’s yours. Such as I have, give I to thee.” I missed it the first time. But it’s my bag now.”

Our Heavenly Father reaches across the stars and says, “Here – this is the best I’ve got – take it – it’s yours.” He hands us his greatest treasure wrapped, not in a brown paper bag, but in the flesh of a new born baby, in the life of a man who hangs on a tree. God paid the highest cost of all when he gave us His Himself. Sometimes, in our anger pride, fear, and distraction we throw his gift away. Sometimes we simply miss the miracle. We miss the note that says, “I love you.” But maybe this is the year and this is the day to receive His treasure and make it your own.

God gave Himself to you. This year, why not return the favor?