

Hidden Treasure and Costly Pearl

Matthew 13:44-46

(The following text is taken from a sermon preached by Gil Rugh.)

1. A Variation From the Common Interpretation of the Parables
2. The Hidden Treasure
3. The Costly Pearl
4. A Distinction for Jews and Gentiles
5. The Point of the Parables
6. The Overwhelming Importance of Securing Possession
7. Assuring Participation in the Kingdom

Two of the parables in Matthew 13 probably provoke more discussion and disagreement regarding interpretation than any of the others. These parables, the subject of this study, are the parable of the hidden treasure and the parable of the costly pearl.

1. A Variation From the Common Interpretation of the Parables

Matthew 13:44 contains the parable of the hidden treasure: **“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.”** The common interpretation of this parable by most dispensational interpreters is that the nation Israel is the treasure hidden in the field which is the world, and that Jesus Christ came and gave everything He had to purchase the nation Israel for Himself.

The parable of the costly pearl is given in verses 45 and 46: **“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.”**

The common interpretation of this parable by most dispensationalists is that the pearl refers to the Church, and Jesus Christ came and purchased the pearl for Himself providing redemption for the Church by His death.

In these common dispensational interpretations both Israel and the Church have been secured by Christ for Himself. Even though I am a dispensational interpreter, I do not follow these interpretations. I have no problem with the truthfulness of the statement regarding Jesus Christ securing for Himself the nation Israel and the Church by His death and resurrection. But I do seriously question whether that is Jesus’ intent in giving these two parables.

As noted in previous studies, I do not believe that the Church is in view in Matthew 13. Rather, the subject is the kingdom of heaven and conditions relating to the first coming of Christ and leading up to His Second Coming. Even though there are direct applications from these parables which can be made for the Church, the prime interpretation of these parables is not for today. Therefore, this study is going to take a different approach, one which I feel is the most accurate of all the possible interpretations.

In the parables Jesus has given previously in Matthew 13, He has described those who will become part of the kingdom, He has discussed various kinds of hearts and He has talked about wheat and tares. The emphasis of Christ in these parables is on what is involved in becoming a son of the kingdom, a term referred to in Matthew 13:38.

Stated simply, the emphasis of these two parables is on what one has to do to secure the kingdom for himself. The difference in emphasis shows that one finds the kingdom when he is not looking for it while the other finds it after diligently searching.

2. The Hidden Treasure

The first parable compares the kingdom of heaven to a treasure hidden in the field (Matt. 13:44).

It was common in biblical times to bury precious things in the ground. Since Palestine was frequently ravaged by wars, precious things were buried in the ground and marked so the owner could find them. Then if war came and the owner had to leave his property to find safety, his valuables were hidden in the ground and he could come back later and dig them up. But as sometimes occurred, people were occasionally deported in war and never returned to their land. In such cases the treasure was buried in the ground and no one knew it was there. Perhaps much later someone would accidentally find the treasure while plowing in a field. Many people may have been walking right over the treasure without knowing it was there. If someone accidentally found a buried treasure, it would be to his advantage to go and sell everything he had to purchase the field, because the law indicated that the one who owned the field owned the treasure. The goal would be to secure the treasure for himself regardless of the cost.

To be consistent in interpreting what Christ has been emphasizing in Matthew 13, the hidden treasure refers to the kingdom that Christ has been offering. A kingdom and its king are synonymous because the kingdom centers in the king. By rejecting its king, a nation rejected his kingdom. By believing in the king, the people acknowledged their willingness to accept his kingdom. Therefore, the treasure hidden in the field refers to the kingdom Christ was offering. Even though it was overwhelming in value and importance, it was unrecognized and unknown by the bulk of the people. They did not know what it was and did not accept it.

There is an application in this for Christians today. We present the truth of salvation in Jesus Christ and offer eternal life at no cost to all who will believe. But the multitudes in the world fail to recognize the great value of this treasure. The application is clear in that the Word of God reveals a treasure of great value, yet to the bulk of those who are unbelievers, this great treasure remains hidden and unknown.

Jesus also referred to such hidden treasure in Matthew 11:25: **“At that time Jesus said, ‘I praise You, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that You have hidden these things from the wise and intelligent and have revealed them to infants.’”** These great truths have been hidden and are like a buried treasure. You can be standing right over it and not know it is there. You can be within inches of it, yet you may be blind to it. This is true concerning Jesus Christ and what He was proclaiming.

Luke recorded the events as Jesus came to the city of Jerusalem near the close of His ministry. Jesus wept over the city saying, **“If you had known in this day, even you, the things which make for peace! But now they have been hidden from your eyes”** (Luke 19:42). Jesus is their Messiah, the One who could bring them salvation, peace and the security they were longing for, but He was a treasure hidden from their eyes. They were blind to that treasure and did not know it was present.

This great treasure, however, is sometimes found even by those who are not actively looking for it. There are a number of examples of this kind of individual in the New Testament. The woman at the well in Samaria recorded in John 4 was not looking for the King, nor was she looking for the kingdom. She was a Samaritan woman who had simply come to the well to draw water. Yet as Jesus confronted her with the truth about Himself, she believed in Him, then went to bring the people of the city back to hear Him to see for themselves if he was the promised Messiah. Saul was not searching for Christ on the road to Damascus. This man, who became known as the great Apostle Paul, was opposing Christ, yet he came upon that great treasure and the salvation that is found in Him.

This seems to be the point of the parable of the hidden treasure. The great treasure of the kingdom and its King is present, yet many do not know it is there or recognize it, but some stumble upon it. The parable views salvation from the human aspect. No one questions the sovereign work of God in bringing these people to Jesus Christ, but humanly speaking, they are not pursuing or actively looking for the kingdom.

The prophet Isaiah recorded a statement which fits very well with what Jesus is illustrating in this parable. **“I permitted Myself to be sought by those who did not ask for Me; I permitted Myself to be found by those who did not seek Me”** (Isa.65:1). Those who were not seeking came upon this great treasure.

3. The Costly Pearl

The parable of the costly pearl is recorded right after the parable of the hidden treasure (Matt. 13:45-46). In order to

be consistent in the interpretation, the pearl of great price represents the kingdom and the King. The kingdom is of great value and of great beauty. Some find it as they are searching for costly pearls; this is a picture of those seeking for the Messiah. They responded to the message of John the Baptist as he introduced Jesus Christ to the nation and became Christ's followers.

Individuals have experienced salvation by both means. Some have met someone at work who shared the gospel with them and they believed even though they were not looking for it. They were not consciously thinking about such an experience, but were exposed to it. They recognized it to be the truth, and in the grace of God they believed. Others had an emptiness, a recognition that something was missing, and were seeking for truth. Again, that is the result of the work of God in drawing people to Christ. Such individuals were in a pursuit of truth and were looking for an answer.

God addressed Israel many times in this way instructing them that when they wandered from Him and became confused and lost in their wickedness, they were to turn again and search diligently for Him. Israel is instructed in Deuteronomy 4 that if they pursue after other gods, they will be judged and scattered throughout the world. Then He instructs them in Deuteronomy 4:29, **"But from there you will seek the Lord your God, and you will find Him if you search for Him with all your heart and all your soul."** If there is hunger in the soul for God, they are to seek for Him and they will find Him. This will happen in the Tribulation as the events of that period are used by God to bring pressure upon Israel and drive them to a hunger for their Messiah. As a result they will begin to search for Him so that when the message of the gospel of the kingdom is proclaimed, multitudes in the nation will believe in the Messiah and find Him and His salvation.

God instructed the nation Israel in Isaiah 55:6, **"Seek the Lord while He may be found; call upon Him while He is near."** That is what is pictured in Matthew 13 as a man searches for a costly pearl. Then God speaks of His plan to restore Israel in Jeremiah 29:11-13: **"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for calamity to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon Me and come and pray to Me, and I will listen to you. You will seek Me and find Me when you search for Me with all your heart.'"**

This passage shows the diligence that should characterize Israel in their search for God. The parable of the costly pearl shows the nation hungering after the kingdom. Amos 5:4,5 provides similar instruction: **"For thus says the Lord to the house of Israel, 'Seek Me that you may live. But do not resort to Bethel and do not come to Gilgal, nor cross over to Beersheba; for Gilgal will certainly go into captivity and Bethel will come to trouble.'"** In the parable of the costly pearl, the picture seems to be depicting those who would be searching for the Messiah and His salvation.

4. A Distinction for Jews and Gentiles

If you are going to make a distinction between Israel and the Gentiles in these parables, the parable of the hidden treasure fits the Gentiles while the parable of the costly pearl seems to fit Israel. The Gentiles were not searching for the King or the kingdom, yet many of them were privileged to believe in the Messiah. However, the Jews supposedly were searching for the kingdom, yet that kingdom was hidden from their view. In the coming Tribulation, a great number like the sand of the seashore from every tribe, tongue, people and nation will believe the message of the gospel of the kingdom even though by and large they are not searching for the Messiah or for His coming kingdom.

The parable of the hidden treasure fits the Gentiles, because Isaiah 65:1 speaks of God's being found by those who were not searching for Him, a reference in the context to the Gentiles finding salvation in Jehovah as those who will come to Christ even though they are not looking for a Messiah. They, in effect, stumble upon Him. But by the events God is using in the lives of the people of Israel, they will be driven to seek after Him until they recognize that Jesus is indeed the Messiah. As a result of their search for Him, they will believe in Him because of the grace of God. At that time there will be the national conversion of Israel which is referred to in Romans 11.

The conclusion of both parables is identical. The one who finds the hidden treasure or the costly pearl sells all he has in order to buy the prize.

5. The Point of the Parables

This interpretation of these two parables of Matthew 13 leaves one major problem that bothers many. In both parables

the individual goes and sells everything he has and buys the field with the treasure or the pearl. For many, such an approach is incompatible with our concept of salvation.

Entrance into the kingdom is only by being born again. Jesus said to Nicodemus in John 3:3, **“Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God.”**

Salvation in every dispensation is a result of the grace of God. In order to experience God’s righteousness, it has been essential for man to believe in the revelation God has given of Himself. As far back as Genesis 15:6, Abraham believed God and God credited it to Abraham as righteousness. Anyone who has ever been saved from the beginning of time until eternity is saved by faith in the revelation God has given of Himself. That revelation centers in the person and work of God’s Son, Jesus Christ. When a person believes in Christ as the One who loved him and died for him, he experiences God’s salvation. That is true whether you are talking about entering the kingdom or about salvation for people who will become part of the Church today.

Then how does it fit to give up everything and purchase your salvation? Can one purchase entrance into the kingdom of heaven? When you understand the analogy that is being drawn, it is not so hard to understand. Follow me closely on this interpretation so you do not think that I am a heretic saying you can buy salvation. That is not what these parables are saying.

The point in buying or purchasing something is in securing it for yourself, having it as your possession. The point Jesus is driving home in these parables is that when one sees the overwhelming value of the kingdom and its King, there is a desire to obtain that for yourself no matter what the cost. Salvation, of course, is free. The point of buying in this parable is to secure the item for yourself. We say the same thing today when we tell someone that we bought an item. We are not speaking of the price we paid but rather the fact that the item has become our possession.

If you ask someone if he is buying the car he drives or leasing it, the question you are asking relates to whether the car belongs to him or someone else. Behind the concept of purchasing in this parable is the concept of securing it for yourself. This parable pictures a person who will let nothing stand in the way of his coming into possession of the King and His kingdom.

This analogy is drawn from the Old Testament. Solomon wrote in Proverbs 23:23, **“Buy truth, and do not sell it, get wisdom and instruction and understanding.”** He is not saying that if you come up with enough money, you can acquire the truth. If you read the opening chapters of Proverbs, you will see that wisdom and truth are not purchased with money. Solomon is making the point that if you buy the truth, you acquire it for yourself and you should not give it up for any reason. The goal is to get wisdom, instruction and understanding for yourself. You are instructed to keep it in your possession and not to sacrifice the truth for anything. The emphasis on buying the truth is not on paying money for it necessarily, but rather the emphasis is on doing whatever is necessary to secure the truth. It may cost you to stand for the truth. That is fine. Do whatever is necessary to secure it for yourself.

The invitation is given to Israel in Isaiah 55:1 to secure for themselves the blessings of God without paying any money: **“Ho! Everyone who thirsts, come to the waters; and you who have no money come, buy and eat. Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.”** In this verse, the idea behind *buying* is really securing for yourself. When Jesus was addressing the disciples in these parables, they understood that they must do whatever was necessary to secure this precious possession for themselves.

Jesus used this same approach in Revelation 3 as He wrote to the church at Laodicea. This church thought it was wealthy and needed nothing. Yet Christ said they were **“wretched and miserable and poor and blind and naked”** (Rev. 3:17). So He tells them in Revelation 3:18, **“I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and that the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see.”** Can these things be purchased from Christ? No. His salvation is a free gift, but you can buy it from Him from the standpoint of securing it from Him. You can acquire from God whatever is necessary for you to be righteous before God.

6. The Overwhelming Importance of Securing Possession

As has been demonstrated, the point of buying the field or the costly pearl in Matthew 13 is to secure it for yourself.

What is the emphasis of selling all that one has? The point is to recognize the overwhelming importance and value of the King and the kingdom so that nothing keeps you from it. In the context of true biblical faith, there must be the realization that Jesus Christ alone is the One in whom you place all your confidence and trust for your salvation. Apart from that there can be no salvation. Until you recognize the overwhelming importance of the King and His kingdom, you cannot possess the kingdom because you are not willing to trust Christ alone.

This emphasis appears several times in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus said in Matthew 5, **"If your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. If your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to go into hell"** (vv. 29,30).

The point of this passage is not to throw away your eye or cut off your hand. Rather, the emphasis is that you should not let anything—not any of the parts of your body, nothing at all—keep you from the life that is found only in Christ. You must see that He is more important than your body.

Jesus said in Matthew 6, **"But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you"** (v. 33). Jesus must take priority over our physical needs of shelter, food and clothing. We are to seek His kingdom first. That means He must take priority and precedence over everything else. We must recognize that He is *that* important.

Matthew 10 also emphasizes that Jesus Christ must be first. **"He who loves father or mother more than Me is not worthy of Me; and he who loves son or daughter more than Me is not worthy of Me. And he who does not take his cross and follow after Me is not worthy of Me"** (vv. 37,38). Family members cannot take precedence over Jesus Christ. He must take priority. You must sell all to secure the kingdom. You must see Him as the One who has priority or you are not willing to trust Him.

Jesus does not offer Himself as one of many options or as added security to the other things you may be trusting. Some people trust their riches, their family, their church, their baptism or their good works. They also try to add Christ into what they are trusting thinking that cannot hurt anything. It is as though He is just another block to be added to the things they are trusting. But that is not acceptable. Jesus Christ says you must see Him as first and foremost. When you place your trust in Him, you must abandon your trust in anything and everything else. You cannot place your faith in Christ as your Savior and also have your faith in your baptism, your good works or your family ties. The Book of Galatians deals with that concept. If you are trusting Christ plus anything else, you are under the curse. You must be willing to abandon everything because your faith is in Him alone. You must see the overwhelming importance of Christ, His kingdom and His salvation.

Again in Matthew 19 the rich young ruler comes to Christ with a question. I understand this passage to be in the context of salvation. This young man does not ask Christ what he can do to be a better follower of Him. He asks in Matthew 19:16, **"Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may obtain eternal life?"** The issue is the acquisition of eternal life.

Jesus Christ said to him in Matthew 19:21, **"If you wish to be complete, go and sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me."** Jesus told him to abandon everything and place his total confidence in Him. He was to let go of everything else and rest only in Christ. This young man experienced a tragedy. **"But when the young man heard this statement, he went away grieving; for he was one who owned much property"** (v. 22).

It is amazing that this rich young ruler came to the Messiah of Israel to find out how he could have eternal life as his own possession. Jesus told him to abandon everything and place his faith in Him alone. The young man said that was too much. Can you imagine a person saying that is too much to pay for eternal life? Ask yourself how much that rich young ruler was worth. How much does he have today? Did he make a good choice? His choice was ridiculous!

Jesus is saying there must be a willingness to sacrifice everything in order to have eternal life. He asked that young ruler if he really understood who Christ was and if he was willing to trust Him. Jesus does not ask everyone to give away everything to become His follower. But Scripture indicates that He demands of everyone the same attitude. A

person cannot be saved until he recognizes that Jesus Christ alone is the Savior and trusts Him alone as the One who loved him and died for him.

7. Assuring Participation in the Kingdom

It is not clear to me how much detail one must go into in his mind before he can trust Christ in this way. When I was saved as a young person, I did not stop and figure out if I would have to give up my bedroom or anything that I owned.

But I did know at that point that Jesus Christ was the most important thing in the world to me and that whatever else transpired, I wanted Him to be my Savior. I believe there must be that kind of commitment to Him. It is not possible to trust Him partially while holding on to riches in case it does not work out. Neither can one hold on to church membership or baptism in case Christ is not adequate. You must recognize who Jesus Christ is and what the issues really are. When a person comes to salvation in Christ, he must recognize that Christ is most important. As the message of the kingdom is proclaimed to people by His followers, they must recognize that this is more valuable than anything else. It does not matter what else happens, the most important thing in all the world must be that they belong to Jesus Christ and have their life in Him.

This was true of the Apostle Paul. He related the glory that was his before he became a follower of Christ in Philippians 3. Before he was saved he was powerful and honored and he had prestige, influence and probably a degree of wealth.

But when he met Jesus Christ on the road to Damascus, everything was downhill for him from that day on humanly speaking. He wrote, **“But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view 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 so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith”** (Phil. 3:7-9). Paul said that Christ was the most important thing in his life. It was essential that he have Christ’s righteousness. To him everything else was nothing and worse than nothing. He was glad to lose it all to have Jesus Christ.

That is the attitude Christ is talking about in these two parables of Matthew 13. We saw in our study of the parable of the soils that one of the things that keeps people from Christ is persecution and pressure from family members. Another is hearts that are full of the lusts of the world: the love of money and the cares of this life. Those things choke the Word of God so that it cannot bear fruit. Those were the things that kept the rich young ruler from trusting Christ in Matthew 19, and those things still keep people from believing in Jesus Christ. Jesus goes on to talk about how difficult it is for a rich man to be saved. That is true because it is hard to quit trusting yourself and your accomplishments and abandon yourself without reservation to total trust in Jesus Christ.

This is what Jesus is talking about in Matthew 13. The subject is the kingdom of heaven. It is like a treasure hidden in a field. Some stumble upon it. This may describe your condition. You may not have been looking for anything as you started reading, but now you have been confronted with the reality that Jesus Christ is the Savior, and you can have eternal life from Him at this very moment. On the other hand, you may be one who has an intense longing. You may have been searching for something to fill the void in your life for as long as you can remember. You need to recognize that Jesus Christ is the Savior. He is the One who can bring meaning and purpose to life. If you really understand the issue that you are a sinner and apart from Christ there is no salvation, then you will be willing to trust Jesus Christ alone as your Savior whatever the cost.

If you have not trusted Him yet as your Savior, what stands between you and Christ? What do you think is more important than eternal life? Your family, your job, your prestige, your influence, the pleasures you now enjoy?

Looking back now, it is clear that the rich young ruler made a bad choice two thousand years ago. Whatever he had then is gone, and he has nothing now. In two thousand years what difference will it make what you now have? Will it matter how your family treated you, what kind of job you had, whether life treated you well or harshly? No. But it will matter if you had a personal relationship with Christ. There is nothing so costly as that for which we exchange eternal life.

For those of us who have trusted Christ, this kind of abandonment to Him is to characterize us throughout our lives and not just when we make the decision to believe in Him. That is how we are to live our lives every day. He is to be more important to us than anything else, more important than life, family or possessions. Our relationship with Him is to be

evidenced by faithfulness. He is to take precedence over everything else in our lives. We are to love Him most and honor Him with our lives.