

Matthew 13:44-52 – “Treasures, Pearls, Nets and Scribes”

(Pew Bible Page: 819)

Intro: “Treasures, Pearls, Nets, and Scribes” – four Kingdom parables that close Jesus’ discourse on the mysteries of the Kingdom. And I can’t help thinking that these four parables are appropriate to close our study of the mysteries, because so far as I can tell the meaning of them seems to be a mystery to many commentators! As I prepared for this evening, I found an amazing amount of discord and disagreement among my usual helpers – some saying the parables were about one thing, others about another. What to do? I believe I’ve found a pathway through the difficulties, so let’s get started. The Big Idea seems to be:

Proposition: God has revealed to His people the mysteries of the Kingdom so that we will pass them on to others who come behind us.

Billboard:	(v.44)	A Treasure
	(vv.45-46)	A Pearl
	(vv.47-50)	A Net
	(vv.51-52)	A Scribe

As I noted above, sorting out the interpretation of these parables has caused a lot of ink to be spilled by good commentators over the years, and almost everyone I consulted had a different point of view concerning the meaning of the first two of the parables, “The Hidden Treasure,” and “The Pearl of Great Price.” The Parable of the Net didn’t cause nearly so much angst and that of the Scribe was a piece of cake, but those first two! Wow! Before I explain a possible pathway through the meaning of those first two parables, let me point out the difficulties one encounters among the commentators.

One group – quite a sizable group – takes a traditional path through the parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price. This group sees these two parables as virtually identical in meaning that sinners are seeking the treasure of salvation and the pearl of the gospel, and that these are of such great value that the sinner must give up all else to purchase them. Some good applications are made from that line of thought, but it carries some fatal flaws as well. The first objection is that sinners don’t seek salvation or listen to the gospel willingly. The “work around” suggested by the committed Calvinist commentators is to point out that God’s grace is secretly at work in the hearts of some so that they will seek His kingdom. That’s plausible but not in the text so it must be added by the interpreter. Our Arminian friends don’t face that problem since they believe that anyone can seek salvation without any divine prompting, thank you very much. A second and perhaps more serious objection to this point of view is that sinners simply don’t have anything with which to purchase salvation even if they wanted it. Indeed, the whole idea that salvation can be “purchased” by sinners is anathema to the doctrine of salvation by grace through faith. In any event, the seeking sinner would have to purchase the whole world to obtain the treasure, and what sinner has the resources to do that? We come to Christ with absolutely nothing to offer for our redemption, as the Bible makes clear. So, this interpretation seems to my mind at least to have insuperable difficulties.

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A second group of commentators sees the man finding the treasure and the merchant seeking the pearls, not as a sinner, but as Christ Himself. This interpretation says that God so loves the world that He gives everything He has to rescue His treasure and purchase His pearl, the lost. But how can we be sure that the seeker is the Lord? And why are we given two parables with the same meaning? The answer to that last question is given by both the first group of commentators and the second: that the repetition of the parable simply means that the point is important and is being specially emphasized. Maybe, but I wonder if you smell a dose of “special pleading” in that answer as I do? “Special Pleading” is an “argument in which the speaker deliberately ignores aspects that are unfavorable to their point of view”¹ to get themselves out of a hole.

Finally, a third group of commentators departs from group two by telling us that, yes, Jesus is the Seeker, but the point of the Hidden Treasure parable concerns the nation of Israel, while the point of the Pearl of Great Price parable refers to the Church. It’s an attractive solution, but a great deal of eisegesis must be applied to get us there, and that’s never a good sign. Nevertheless, I have come somewhat reluctantly to the conclusion that this third group has the best path to understand the meaning of these two parables. Let me explain why I have come to that conclusion.

I believe that the right solution is that the Seeker in both parables is Jesus and that the parables are distinctly pointing to two different groups, and I have come to that conclusion because of the context into which the parables are set. These two parables are placed between the Parable of the Weeds, and the Parable of the Net – two parables with virtually the same point: that the world awaiting Jesus contains two kinds of humanity, and that when Jesus comes again a final separation of those two will be forever accomplished. The thing to realize here is that these two accounts form “bookends” that enclose the Parables of the Treasure and the Pearl indicating that the meaning of the two parables is related to the meaning the two bookends. This was also true of the Parable of the Soils and Jesus’ inserted explanation for why He taught in parables. Why Jesus taught in parables was related to the meaning of the Parable of the Soils. When things are placed in the middle, between two bookends there is likely a relationship we should pay attention to. In this case, since both of the “bookends” point toward the ultimate resolution of the make up of the Kingdom, it is reasonable to conclude that the proper interpretation of these parables has something to say along that line. So, the context points us toward the climactic peopling of the Kingdom.

The context also gives us a determinative clue as to the identity of the seeker. In the parables that have gone before, the Sower in the Parable of the Soils and the Man who owned the field in the Parable of the Weeds – both were identified as our Lord. It would be strange if the figure were changed here and the Seeker suddenly and without interpretive warning was changed to a seeking sinner. So, the Seeker is the Savior, and that makes sense because we know that He indeed did give His everything to purchase the Field (the World) so that He could secure the Treasure and the Pearl. So far, so good. But how can we justify the suggested difference in the parables saying that the Parable of the Hidden Treasure

¹ Oxford Languages Dictionary

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speaks of the nation of Israel – the Jewish people in other words – and that the Parable of the Pearl speaks of the Church?

Again, we must go to the context for help. The section we are studying concludes with Jesus saying, **Matthew 13:52 - 52** *And he said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old.”* Jesus pointed to something old and something new that *“Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven”* will use to teach those who come behind him, and this at least suggests that armed with an understanding of the mysteries of the kingdom, the disciples can teach accurately about the Kingdom using both the Old Testament and New Testament revelations. Ok, that thin gruel, I know. But let me bring more context into the picture in support of the interpretation.

That the Treasure is the Jewish people is supported by the fact that the nation of Israel is identified in two Old Testament passages as God’s “treasure.” Like the treasure, the nation of Israel has been hidden away in the World since shortly after the time of Christ’s ascension, and will be brought back to life and included in His Kingdom at His return.

That the Pearl of Great Price is the Church is suggested by the fact that the Scripture identifies the Church as a unity (cf. Eph. 4:4-6); unlike a diamond or other gemstone, a Pearl cannot be divided. Further we are told, a Pearl is a product of suffering as is the Church (cf. Eph. 5:25). Also, like the Church a pearl grows gradually. And finally, like the Church a pearl is hidden away inside the oyster until one day it is finally revealed. These things are simply suggestive, but they seem to be at least plausible pointers supporting the contention that the Treasure is the Jewish people, and the Pearl is the Church.

Context helps us in another way as well. One way to check one’s interpretation is to ask the question, “Is this point supported elsewhere in Scripture, or is this the only instance?” There are at least two other places in Scripture that seem to support this contention. The most noteworthy is in Revelation chapter 11, the famous passages about the two witnesses. Helpfully, we don’t have to wonder who those witnesses are because chapter 12 of Revelation identifies them as Israel and the Church. A second place in Scripture that supports the interpretation is Romans chapter 11 where we are assured that God is not finished with the Jewish people and the nation of Israel, and that the Church is grafted into His plan as well.

So, the long and short of it is that though I am not thrilled with the hermeneutical gymnastics we had to go through to get here, it is at least plausible that the proper interpretation goes like this:

(v.44) The Hidden Treasure – Christ is the seeker that has found a treasure in His people Israel. He has hidden them away in the field of the world until all is completed, and He comes to buy back the world and reclaim His people, the Jews, at His return. This is helpful to us because it points to the fact that Christ loves the Jewish people and has a plan for the restoration of Israel at His Second Coming.

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(vv.45-46) The Pearl of Great Price – Again, Christ is the Merchant seeking pearls and finding one single Pearl of Great Price in His Church that is worthy of giving all He has so He can acquire it. This is helpful as well because it reminds us that Christ loves His Church and treasures the soul of each one He has bought with His precious blood.

(vv.47-50) The Net – We need not tarry here. This is simply the bookend that closes the discussion of who Christ is seeking during the time we are awaiting His return for His Treasure and His Pearl. The parable brings us back to the end of the age, where we were left at the close of the Parable of the Weeds. Like that parable the point is that there will be a separation between the true and the false when He returns. Those who are His will be gathered into His Kingdom and those who are not His will suffer eternal perdition.

(vv.51-52) The Scribes – And finally the APPLICATION comes in this final parable and can't be left out by any means. What is the point of all of this? The point is that Scribes were teachers, and like the Scribes of Jesus' day, the disciples (and that includes you and me) – those who have “*ears to hear*” and can understand the mysteries of the Kingdom – are to be busy teaching others the mysteries of the Kingdom, both from the Old Testament Scriptures and from the New until Jesus comes again. The older commentators are quite insistent: Understanding these parables of the Kingdom must happen and applying them to today's situation is essential. So, let's make some effort to do that.

The Parable of the Soils tells us that the heart of the issue is the human heart. We must pray that God will do what only He can do – prepare hearts to receive gladly the good news of the gospel.

The Parable of the Weeds tells us to expect Satan to push back against the Church's invasion of his Kingdom by planting counterfeit believers among true believers. These counterfeit Christians will attempt to enervate the Church's witness by spreading false doctrine and encouraging moral laxity among believers. Forewarned is forearmed, so we should be on our guard against this peril.

The Parable of the Treasure warns us not to fall into the trap of antisemitism for Christ loves the Jewish people and will include those among them who trust in Him when He comes to establish His Kingdom.

The Parable of the Pearl of Great Price reminds us that we are loved so much that Jesus gave His all to save us and include us in His Kingdom.

The Parable of the Net spurs us on in the work of evangelism because it reminds us that there will be a great separation between the redeemed and the lost when Jesus comes again.

The Parable of the Scribes encourages us to bring out of our storehouse both the old treasures and new so that those who come behind us can fully appreciate the mysteries of the Kingdom as they await our Lord's return.

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Conclusion: Now, “Having come to an end we will stop.” But before stopping I will point out that Christ has dedicated a whole chapter of His gospel to these parables of the Kingdom, and He intends that those who have ears to hear will understand them, be encouraged by them, and pass them on to those who come behind. May God encourage our hearts to hear and obey the lessons of the Parables of the Kingdom.