

Something of Value

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks, and morning to you all. Good to be back with you. It's amazing how time goes by. I was thinking to myself, I probably preached here about six months ago, and it's over a year, but time goes by.

Thanks for handing the reading, Alan. It reminds me of when I had to preach in front of 800 pupils at a high school in Pretoria and left my notes behind.

Oh, it was terrible. I just managed to get through it, so I think Alan did very, very well. All right, well, we'll have our Bibles open there in Matthew 13.

We're looking at the parables of the Pearl of Great Price and Hidden Treasure, and our title is just Something of Value. We know the story well, and let's have our Bibles open there, and we'll have a look at those in a moment.

And people do see value, don't they, in different ways and in different things. I remember many years ago, I was invited by a, I think they were a Taiwanese couple who had moved into a house about two doors down from the church where I was serving as rector in Pretoria.

[1 : 0 9] We're going back now a good ten years or more. And they invited me around for dinner one night, and so I duly went around, knocked on the door, and I think it was Hubby who opened the door.

And as I walked in, the lady of the house was kneeling on what appeared to be a sheet on the floor in the living room, and was lovingly polishing what appeared to me to be a normal garden variety brown rock from anybody's garden.

Well, I was amazed to see this, and after we had said hello and exchanged the pleasantries, I asked her, what were you doing?

And she said to me, no, this is her passion. In fact, her and her husband's hobby, their passion, this is their life, this is what they do. They collect rocks.

Not diamonds or emeralds or sapphires, to my amazement. Rocks. And I kid you not, this is a true story. And I said, oh, and what do you do with all of these rocks?

[2 : 1 3] And she showed me this magnificent display cabinet on the side of the living room wall with these low-voltage lights illuminating all these, to my mind, ugly garden variety rocks.

And I didn't really know what to say. And she said, well, this is a very, very serious hobby. And there are collectors all over the world, especially from the Far East, and they have rock conventions.

And they trade and they sell rocks. They exchange rocks. They publish full-color catalogs. They have sites on the Internet. And I wasn't quite sure whether they were pulling my leg.

But I soon realized they were telling the truth. And she said to me, do you see that rock I was polishing on the living room floor? And I said, yes. She said, that would probably fetch me about 100,000 rand at a collector, a collector's conference.

But I'll never say that, she said, it's going to become the heirloom for my kids. So then a rather naughty thought entered into my mind at that point. And I said, well, if I go back to the church flower beds, and I get some rocks out of the church flower beds a few hundred meters away, will I be able to get a couple of hundred thousand rand for the church for those rocks?

[3 : 26] And she said, no, no, you won't. And she gave me the typical smile of an insider to an outsider. And she said to me, you just don't know the hobby.

You think that these are just normal rocks. But it's taken me 25 years to identify which ones are the valuable ones as compared to the ones that are not.

And I remember driving home that night after having a very pleasant dinner with them, shaking my head and just saying to myself that what one person values in life, in other regards, is absolutely mundane and completely unexceptional.

And I must say, I didn't get the point at all. And I was reminded again of the story this week when I studied the parables of the pearl of great price and the hidden treasure there in Matthew 13 in front of you.

Because if you look at the passage, you'll see that the two parables are related to each other, essentially saying the same thing. And I think that what Jesus is trying to say to us is that both parables are about how people come to see the true value of Christ.

[4 : 36] The true value of knowing Jesus and perceiving the kingdom of God for what it truly is. And in each parable, the two individuals, if you look at your text, do three things.

First, they find. Second, they sell. And then thirdly, they buy. So we'll look at those three headings. Let's see then, verse 44 and 46, firstly, how they find.

Now, Jesus says they find the kingdom of heaven. So before we look at this idea of finding the kingdom, let us first of all appreciate how Jesus describes Christianity.

Because he describes it in a way that differs sometimes from the way we define the faith. We might say we go to church or we believe in God or we gave our lives to Christ.

And I'm sure there's a place for those descriptions. But Christ doesn't summarize the faith precisely the way we do. He speaks about Christianity or the gospel as the kingdom of heaven.

[5 : 44] So he's describing Christianity as the rule of God's influence in the gospel in our lives and in the world. So the term kingdom implies the influence or the control of God's gospel over you and I and our society.

It's God's power and presence, gospel presence in the world. But what does it mean to find the kingdom? First of all, have a look at Matthew 13 and verse 44.

We read, The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field which a man found and hid again or covered up. Then 45, 46, Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls who are finding one pearl of great value.

So our first man wasn't looking for the kingdom, interestingly, but God revealed it to him anyway. Now again, it's interesting that Jesus speaks about finding something.

Because when you find something, it means it's not immediately visible. It's not obvious to people. The kingdom might be present in the world around us, but these parables indicate that to most people, the power of God, the power of the gospel, the cross is hidden.

[7 : 03] People just don't see it or appreciate its power and value. Now that might be true, possibly, for you. Maybe you've come along today as a visitor and you find Christianity fairly interesting, but you don't really understand the power of the gospel.

Well, a lot of people are like that. People might see a church building down the street. People know that churches get together. People get together and attend church services on a Sunday.

People know that there are believers, that they attend Bible study, but they just don't understand what the fuss is all about. The world just seems to go on the way it always has with all of its problems.

It seems to be completely devoid of God's influence. And to folk like this, Christianity will ultimately appear to be pointless.

Perhaps you have family members who believe that. Perhaps a lot of folk in your work environment who follow this way of thinking and living. Christianity appears to be pointless.

[8 : 07] Well, let's see how these two men found the kingdom. Well, the first man finds the kingdom as a treasure in the field. In the ancient world, they never had banks or safes or safety deposit boxes.

What they used to do is bury their wealth. In fact, in 2008, underneath a car park in Jerusalem, they found quite a big hoard of gold coins. So, the point is that in the case of the first individual, this man is probably wandering along, perhaps through his life, coming home from work, who knows, when in the metaphor, in the parable, he discovers the kingdom quite unexpectedly.

The point is that not everybody discovers the power of God's gospel, the power of the kingdom in precisely the same way. Some seek for it, others don't.

This man found it quite unexpectedly. I suppose that's how I came to understand and appreciate the power of the cross. As a teenager, my folks started to attend St. James Church, Kenilworth, such a long time ago.

And we normally attended on a Sunday night, and the gospel was preached, and I heard the gospel many, many times. And to this day, I can't really explain it. It's a supernatural reality.

[9 : 20] But one Sunday night, I was sitting in the service. I heard the gospel, and all of a sudden, the glory of Christ was revealed to me truly for the first time. I'd heard the gospel before, but nothing like I heard it that Sunday night.

I felt overwhelmed with God's presence and power. And I suddenly realized that I needed to know the Lord. I needed to know Christ. I needed to know this gospel and understand this gospel more than anything else.

The lights went on for me. At that moment, in a way that I can't quite understand, everything else in my life just paled into insignificance. I accepted that I needed to know Jesus more than anything else.

Now, let's have a look at the second man, because he's different. He's actually looking for the kingdom. I'm reminded here of Matthew 6, verse 33, where Jesus says, Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

Well, here you've got a picture probably of a dealer in fine stones. Here you've got a man who probably travels the ancient world. He probably attends all the top markets, buying and selling precious stones.

[10 : 34] Now, they tell me that in the ancient world, the most precious stone of all was not a diamond again, or an emerald, or a sapphire. It was actually a pearl. The pearl was prized in the ancient world above all other precious stones.

So, here you've got this dealer. All his career, we can imagine this man has been traveling around the world, and he's looking for that one great catch, that one priceless jewel which will be for him the defining moment of his life, the find of a lifetime.

It will redefine who he is. It will redefine his life. And that is what drives him year after year after year. And then one day, after many years, unexpectedly, to his amazement, his dream comes true.

He discovers the greatest, the most flawless, the most precious pearl ever found. He's found the kingdom, and he reaches out, and he looks around, and nobody else seems to notice.

And he takes it for himself. So, here you've got these two men in the parable. They're different. They come from different lives.

[11 : 53] The one is looking for the kingdom, the other one isn't. They find the kingdom. Now, the second thing that they do, and this is very interesting because if I was telling the parable, I would probably tell it very differently to the way Jesus does.

Isn't it interesting that when the Son of God talks about how we find the gospel, he uses terms and phrases that we probably wouldn't. So, for example, isn't it interesting that Jesus says, secondly, after finding, they sell.

It's very interesting. They sell what they have. First they find, then they sell everything. They don't just sell.

They sell everything they have. The first man, verse 46, who on finding one pearl of great value went and sold all that he had and bought it. The second man, the jewel merchant, went and sold all that he had and bought it.

So, the treasure of the kingdom, Jesus is telling us, is different to all other treasure. When you encounter it, you not only understand its value, but it revalues or devalues everything else in the world, everything else you have.

[13 : 08] It's a treasure of such priceless value that when you have truly found it, and when you truly discover it and perceive its real value, you are willing, in principle, to lose everything else just so that you can possess it.

And what strikes me is the fact that nobody forces these men to sell that they have. Christianity, the Lord Jesus says, is not about forcing people into the kingdom.

It's something that they do voluntarily because the treasure has changed them from within. All the other treasures, of course, that we find, they don't necessarily change us, and if they do, it's not always for the good.

But this treasure changes the person, the man or the woman, who discovers it. Nobody forces them. Incredibly, they sell everything they have, and they do it voluntarily with joy.

And then thirdly, they buy. So verse 44, the first guy, in his joy, he goes and sells all that he has, and he buys that field.

[14 : 22] And then secondly, who on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. So Jesus points out that owning the kingdom of God, possessing the power of the cross of Christ, knowing and loving the Lord Jesus Christ is never a passive thing.

It's something that we actively reach out for. We live in a very passive church-going age, don't we? We live in a day and age where people are passive receivers of the gospel on a Sunday morning across our churches in Cape Town.

We've become consumers, have we not? We consume the gospel like everything else. We are passive recipients of the gospel. We need to be reminded, we need to be challenged, that if we are going to truly know the power, the life-transforming power of Christ and his cross, we're going to have to reach out for it.

We're going to have to take up our cross daily. Perhaps that's one of the reasons why you have found in your own life the power of God has not really released itself, despite you attending church once in a while.

Or maybe like many South Africans, you haven't actively reached out with all of your heart, with all of your energy to know Christ, to know the cross of Jesus, to take up that cross every day.

- [15 : 51] Jesus is saying that if we want to own this treasure, to know the power of Christ, to perceive the true life-transforming potential of the gospel, we've got to buy it.
- Not with money, of course, but with the will. The will, the desire to give, the desire to take up the cross, to serve, to give up on other things sacrificially.
- Only then will it be ours, says the Lord Jesus Christ. The commodity of the kingdom only becomes ours, according to the proportion with which we are willing to sacrifice for it.
- So buying here in the Lord Jesus' language implies great personal sacrifice. And until these men are ready in principle to part with all they have, the treasure will not be theirs.
- Jesus is clearly teaching us that it is only when we perceive the things of the gospel as being the most important and precious of all things in the world, to the point that we will sell all that we have if we have to, in order to get these things, it's only then that the true power of Christianity will be unlocked for us.
- [17 : 05] Of course the Lord Jesus is not saying that to become a Christian you've got to sell everything you have, but in principle if that is what we have to do, we'll be willing to do it. That's what he's saying. Now of course if we as churchgoers had to write our own version of the parable for the busy 21st century, I wonder what we would write.
- What would we say? We might say something like this again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls who on finding one pearl of great value bought it, adding it to his large existing collection of other fine stones.
- See that's how we would rewrite the parable, wouldn't we? I mean be honest with yourself. I'm sure that's how I would rewrite it. You see that's the difference between Christ's version of the parable and ours.
- For Jesus, the gospel is the most precious treasure of all. Nothing else can compare to it. It just stands out. But for us, the kingdom is just one of many treasures.
- For those of us even as Christians, it's not that we as established churchgoers deny the great value of the gospel. No, it's just that, well, there are other things that are just as, or even more important than the kingdom.
- [18 : 23] You see, that's the difference between Christ's view of the gospel and the kingdom, and our own. And this is why the kingdom's power and priceless value has become mostly lost, I suspect, on the 21st century middle class church in Cape Town.
- I wonder whether or not we're experiencing a certain measure of God's displeasure on us as the church. Having been a pastor in a middle class culture myself in Pretoria for over two decades, I wondered about that one.
- I wonder whether or not God is sad about our materialism and our lack of commitment, and our lack of drive to be part of the gospel, to be part of sharing the gospel.
- So, in conclusion, I need to ask you a question, don't I? And I'm not going to ask you whether or not you go to church, because that's a pretty dumb question, isn't it?
- Because here you are. I'm not even going to ask you whether or not you go to Bible study or believe in God. I'm going to have to ask you something else. The question I'm going to ask you is the question I think Jesus wants to ask you, and that is, have you found it?
- [19 : 41] Have you found the pearl? Have you really found it? I think of that interesting but bizarre visit to that Taiwanese couple all those years ago and their collection of rocks.
- It was quite frustrating leaving their home because I just didn't understand what all the excitement was about. How could something so mundane, so everyday, be worth so much to these folk?
- Well, many people feel the same way about Jesus and the gospel, but I do think that we all need to be brutally honest with ourselves.

You need to be brutally honest with yourself. Can you really say that you found it? Can you really say that you found the pearl of great promise?

You know, the reason why you are still alive is because God has got work for you to do. That's why you're here today. But you see, the great work that God has for all of us is ultimately meaningless if we don't understand the true power of the kingdom of God.

[20 : 51] Tragically, I suspect that many church-going people actually pass by that pearl on a Sunday morning on their way to church, leaving it unnoticed. I think that the church nowadays, certainly in South Africa, has made the idea of being a Christian too easy for people.

It's almost as if the church is saying it's pretty basic, it's pretty easy to be a Christian. Just believe in Jesus and everything will be okay. No real commitment, no real passion, no real drive or will to know Jesus.

To come to Bible study after a long day, a long work day on a Wednesday night, to passionately pursue the knowledge of Christ from the pages of Scripture. Now, I think nowadays the church has made it easy for us to think that we are Christians when we are not.

So I won't ask you today, do you believe in Jesus? I'm sure you do. Instead, I'm going to ask you this, have you found it? Have you found the pearl of great price? Have you found the pearl?

Can you see it there? Sitting in the sand? You see it? Look. Laughed at by others. Ignored by others who walk by.

[22 : 08] Can you see it? If you don't look again, have you truly found it? Well, of course, nobody can hide the way he lives.

Is that not so? Not for long. You can hide who you are in the way you speak and even in the way you dress, but you cannot hide the way you live. Your lifestyle will always catch you out in the ends.

Example, when you come under pressure in your busy lifestyle, what is the first thing that often has to be compromised? These are not the things of the kingdom of God. When we say that the kingdom is everything to us, well, inevitably, for most of us, our lifestyles reveal us to be liars.

When we look at our lives, the gospel is clearly not revealed to be the most important thing to us. You're an exception. Good for you. I'm talking about the rest of us. See, let me illustrate this by ending with another parable.

I'm going to give you a parable of my own. It's actually not a parable. It's a true story. And it's a story which illustrates the story of so many of us. It is a parable, a true story, which illustrates our own lives.

[23 : 20] It's about Homer and Langley Collier. And they were sons of a respected New York doctor. Both had earned college degrees. In fact, Homer had studied at Columbia University to become an attorney.

And when old Dr. Collier died in the early part of the last century, his sons inherited the family home and estate and a very large sum of money. And the two bachelors were financially secure.

But the Collier brothers lived in almost total seclusion. They boarded up the windows of their house and they padlocked all the doors. And all their utilities, the water, the electricity, well, they were all shut off because they were never paid for.

And nobody was ever seen coming and going from the house. And though the Collier family had been quite prominent in New York society, almost no one remembered Homer and Langley by the time the Second World War had come to an end.

And then on March the 21st, 1947, police received an anonymous tip-off that a man apparently had died in the boarded-up house. And unable to force themselves through the front door, they entered the house through a second-story window and inside they found Homer Collier's corpse on a bed clutching the February the 22nd, 1920 issue of the Jewish Morning Journal, although he had been totally blind for years.

[24 : 38] This macabre scene was set up against an equally macabre backdrop. The brothers were bizarre collectors. They collected junk. The house was crammed with junk, broken machinery, refrigerators, auto parts, boxes, appliances, folding chairs, broken musical instruments, rags, and literally tons and tons of moldy old newspaper.

Virtually all of it was utterly worthless. An enormous amount of debris blocked the doorway. Investigators were forced to continue using the upstairs window for weeks in order to get in and out.

And nearly three weeks later, as the workmen were hauling tons of debris away, another grisly find was made. Langley Collier's body was found buried under a pile of rubbish some six feet away from where Homer had died.

Langley had been crushed beneath the crude booby trap that he had built to protect his precious collection from intruders. The garbage removed from their home after four weeks of labor weighed 140 tons.

Nobody ever discovered why the brothers stockpiled so much junk. And that's a true story. Friends, isn't the tale a metaphor illustrating so many contemporary human lives?

[26 : 16] Is that story perhaps in a certain sense about you and your life and your priorities? Perhaps that's why your life is empty right now and hopeless.

Perhaps that's why your relationships have broken down because your priorities are wrong. Instead of pursuing the gospel and making right with God, you've been pursuing other silly, trivial things.

We accumulate so much stuff, don't we? In the hope that one day we'll find that one thing, that one pearl of great price which will make us happy.

But you see, the more we buy, the less contentment we find. Does that happen to you? So many of us waste our lives pursuing frivolities, frivolities, empty things that cannot satisfy.

And in so doing, we pass by the only thing that can truly free us and fill us, the pearl of great price, which is Jesus himself. So in conclusion, let me ask you again, have you found it?

[27 : 28] Honestly say that you are right with God. Have you found it? How can I know, you ask? I'm not so sure if I have found it.

How can I know that I have truly found it, Mark? What test can I take to see whether or not I've really found the pearl of great price? Well, the answer is actually simple. If you have found it, you will want this day to know Jesus more than anything else.

And you will take whatever steps you have to, make whatever changes in your life you have to, in order to possess him for yourself.

Amen. Let's pray. Our Father, Father, we are a needy people. Our hearts long for happiness, for fulfillment, for hope, and for meaning.

Lord, I pray for many of the folk, perhaps in this congregation, have lost their way, have passed by the pearl, and instead are embroiling themselves in all kinds of other things, chasing the material frivolities of this world, things that cannot satisfy.

[28 : 56] Lord, help us all this morning to truly perceive that pearl for what it is, and no matter what the cost, to embrace Jesus and his cross for ourselves.

Amen.