

Today, we're returning to our study of the Gospel of Matthew, and we have come to last few verses of chapter 13. Matthew 13 is a collection of eight different parables. We've already looked at the first four: the parable of the sower, the parable of the weeds, and two short parables of the mustard seed and the yeast.

All these parables begin with the same words, *"The kingdom of heaven is like..."* The kingdom of heaven refers to the reign or rule God has in our life when we come to know Jesus and trust him as our Savior and our king. In Matthew 4:23 it says Jesus went around *"proclaiming the good news (gospel) of the kingdom."* So this message of the kingdom is **the good news**, that's why we call it *the gospel*.

Today we're looking at the last four kingdom parables in this chapter. All four point in some way to the true value or worth of the kingdom of God. Why is it called "gospel?" Why is it such good news? Why is this something worth seeking after and investing our time and resources in?

I heard a story about a guy named Stan Caffy. He and his fiancé were getting ready for married life, cleaning out their respective garages and selling everything to Goodwill. Between the two of them, they sold an assortment of clothes, bicycles, tools, computer parts, and one tattered copy of the Declaration of Independence that had been hanging in Stan's garage for years. But Stan's trash turned out to be another person's treasure. It turns out that particular version of the Declaration of Independence was a rare copy made in 1823. A man named Michael Sparks spotted it, and he bought it for \$2.48. Sparks later auctioned it for \$477,650. Not a bad profit. Caffy, the previous owner, wasn't a sore loser. He said, "I'm happy for the Sparks guy. If I still had it, it would still be hanging here in the garage, and I still wouldn't know it was worth all that."

I wonder if it is possible to think of the Gospel in that way? I mean, what's practically worthless to one person, is a gold mine to someone else. We determine what something is worth to us, and that determines what we ultimately are willing to give for it. It was in that spirit Jim Elliott said those words so often quoted, "He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose."

In each of the parables we're looking at today, there's something found. In the first two parables, it's something very valuable: buried treasure and a pearl of great worth. In the third parable it's a great catch of all kinds of fish, some edible, and others not.

And in the fourth parable, it's a storeroom of valuable objects both new and old the owner of a house brings out of his attic.

### **Gospel Gain**

Let's start by looking at the first two parables, which belong together. In these two parables, we see two kinds of people making an exciting discovery; they discover the gospel of the kingdom

**"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.**

**"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 13:44-46)**

### **The buried treasure**

In the first story, we meet a man behind his plow. The sun beats down on him. It's the end of the day, and he's slumped over. He just wants to finish his work, collect his wage, and get home. But suddenly his plow strikes something beneath the soil. The animals jump in their traces. The plowman wakes out of his half sleep. He falls on his knees and begins to claw through the dirt. He finds a ceramic jar, pulls off the top and sees a gleam of gold. His heart jumps. He puts the lid back on, glances to the left and the right, and buries the jar again. He heads off to the landowner and resigns from his job. He goes home, sells everything he has, returns to his former employer, and offers a fair sum to buy the land.

This story would have rung true with those who heard it in Jesus' day. In Palestine, buried treasure was common. For centuries that land was under threat of invasion. Whenever that happened, if you had something valuable you wanted to protect, you simply hid it where you could: in a tree trunk, a wall, a cistern, or in the ground. Chances are you'd soon be captured and carried away never to see the treasure again. But if you did return, you'd know where to look.

Jesus says there are people like this plowman. They're not really out looking for anything in particular. They're just trying to make a living and get through life. Without expecting it, they discover something. They discover the good news of the kingdom. In Romans 10:20 the apostle Paul says, *"I was found by those who did not seek me; I revealed myself to those who did not ask for me."* The pages of the New Testament and the pages of history are peopled with those who weren't looking for, but

somehow discovered, the message of Jesus, and it changed their lives. Remember the shepherds? They are out on a cold, windy night, just trying to make a living, and all of a sudden a heavenly host announces a newborn king. Soon, those shepherds were jumping fences to see for themselves—a treasure they weren't even seeking, and it turned their whole life around.

There are people who've stopped believing anything could surprise them. We can become so jaded. We've seen it all. We've lost the sense that anything could really change our lives. We feel like the empty man in middle age in the poem written by T.S. Eliot who said, "For I have known them all already, known them all: Have known the evenings, mornings, afternoons, I have measured out my life with coffee spoons..." He's come to expect nothing, and nothing can surprise him. But the good news is, at any moment, that person can be surprised by hidden treasure in the person and rule of Jesus Christ.

What is this treasure? It's the reality of the Gospel; it's the kingdom of God breaking into this world. It's the good news that there's a God above who created us, knows us and loves us. There is a God who sent Jesus to die for us so we can be forgiven and freed from guilt and shame. And because he died and rose again, our lives are reshaped into one of meaning and purpose as the kingdom brings redemption to all creation. It's the offer to begin the eternal kind of life here and now. With all that, we discover he's worth more than anything we deemed of value before this great discovery. The way of the kingdom is greater than the pursuit of any other kingdoms, and it is worth selling everything to find the way of Jesus.

### The priceless pearl

But that's not the only kind of person out there. There are also those who are serious seekers who after meaning and purpose in their lives. They're always asking questions, always seeking, and always asking why. Jesus tells another story about seekers that is a bit different from the first story. Unlike the plowman, a pearl merchant is on the hunt for something of great value. He's not a dealer with a little shop. He's a wholesaler on a grand scale. He runs a pearl emporium. He travels to pearl sheikdoms on the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. In Jesus' day, pearls were the most desired of all gems, like diamonds today. Cleopatra had two pearls worth four million dollars. Jesus said this man found a pearl like that—of great worth. Just like the plowman, he made the wise decision to part with everything he had to purchase this one thing of great value.

Like this pearl merchant, there are people who are seekers. They're seeking meaning and purpose. They're seeking something to fill the emptiness that enters their life when they put their phone down long enough to be still and look at themselves. Maybe like the pearl merchant, they have the resources to travel great distances and invest a lot of time and money in their pursuit

of happiness, but it always eludes them. Well, here's the good news. In the person of Jesus, in the goodness of the kingdom, he came to usher in, they can find something better than they ever dreamed possible.

The New Testament is filled with people like this. In the book of Acts, I think of Lydia, a single adult, a traveling business woman, a trader in purple dye, who left her home for the city of Philippi. When she arrived, she looked for a synagogue, seeking for something to give meaning and purpose to her life, but she couldn't find one. So she went down to the riverbank, hoping to find someone to talk about the deeper issues of life. She ran into the apostle Paul who shared the good news about the love of Christ with her. The Bible says the Lord "*opened her heart to believe.*" (Acts 16:14) She found that one pearl of great worth, Jesus Christ.

Some of us seek pearls in our career, but it turns out to be a stern taskmaster. The more you achieve, the more you work, and it doesn't answer the cry of your heart. Some seek it in human love, but that doesn't satisfy because people so often fail us. Some seek it in raising a family, in having awesome kids, but soon the kids will be grown, and you'll wonder what to do with yourself. Whatever it is, as the old song says, you're just "*Chasing After the Wind.*"

But what do the plowman and the pearl merchant have in common? One thing: At the moment of decision, they both put everything on the table, which stood between them and the treasure. Again, it wasn't a hard decision, there was even joy in it because they saw the far greater worth of what they found, and nothing they gave up could even be compared.

A story is told about a blind Indian beggar who sat beside a road, fingering the rice in his little bowl. Wearing only a loincloth, he sat in poverty beside a road that stretched into nowhere. The scarce travelers occasionally gave him a little rice. One day he heard the thunder of a chariot in the distance. It was the grand entourage of the maharajah. This had never happened before. Surely the great one would stop and give him baskets of rice.

Indeed, the golden chariot of the maharajah stopped before the poor beggar. He stepped down, and the beggar fell before him. Then the sky seemed to fall in. "Give me your rice," said the maharajah. The beggar scowled and reached into his bowl and thrust one grain of rice toward the maharajah. "Is that all?" said the maharajah. The beggar cursed and threw him one more grain of rice. The maharajah entered his chariot and was gone.

The angry beggar sat down and fingered the remaining rice he'd hoarded in his bowl. He felt something hard, different from the rice. He pulled it out. It was one grain of gold. He poured out his rice and found one more grain of gold. He realized had he trusted the maharajah; he could have had a grain of gold for every grain of rice.

We rob ourselves because we do not want to let go of our “rice,” and all along God is ready to pour out more than we can contain. That’s why I’ve called this section, “Gospel gain...” The apostle Paul made this discovery, and wrote these words, *“I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ”* (Philippians 3:8).

A lot is at stake here. If the plowman decides to play it safe and go on with his plowing, and if the pearl merchant won’t let go of his ship in order to buy that one pearl, they miss out on something far greater. It’s like what C.S. Lewis wrote, “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.” A lot is at stake. Do we want mud pies or a holiday at sea? This is what the next parable is about.

### **Gospel Judgment**

**“Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous and throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (verses 47–50)**

It’s called the parable of the net. Everyone listening would have related to this story. They’d seen fishermen on the shores of the Sea of Galilee tie a net between two boats and then drag it along until it was filled with fish. They’d pull it to the shore and begin to sort through the catch of the day. They’d put the good fish in baskets and throw the bad fish away. There were some fish that would be considered unclean according to Jewish law, and others that were just inedible.

Jesus says this is a picture of what will happen at the end of the age. The fish are those of every tribe, tongue and nation gathered at the final judgment. A wide net has been cast—there’s an open invitation for all to enter the kingdom of God. The fishermen are compared to angels at the end of the age who’ll separate the wicked from the righteous, throwing the wicked into a furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. This is biblical imagery for Hell. We’re not talking about a literal furnace here, but a place of separation from God, a place torment.

This is one of those things most of us don’t like to talk about—judgment and hell. But I think judgment gets a bad rap. Think about it. We call judges in our Supreme Court “Justices.” Why? Because their rulings are supposed to be just and bring about justice. Nobody complains if a justice punishes a lawbreaker

for breaking a law. Well, here Jesus depicts God as the ultimate Justice. Our laws are imperfect. His are perfect. Our justices are imperfect. They don’t know everything, but God knows all. That’s why I’ve called this “Gospel Judgment.” It’s the good news that one day Jesus will come and judge the living and the dead. When you read today’s news and hear of everything from murders, to sex scandals, to kidnappings, to terrorism, don’t you long for justice? I do!

But here’s something to remember. God is not only a God of justice; he’s a God of mercy and grace. And the cross is where both mercy and justice meet. When Jesus cried out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me,” God’s righteous wrath toward sin was poured out, and he took upon himself the heat of the fiery furnace we deserve. The cross is where both justice and mercy meet.

So in the end, the separation of the righteous and the wicked is the separation of those who’ve embraced the cross and those who’ve rejected it. One of my favorite writers and preachers was John Stott. He was an Englishman, and he once talked about the difference between the cross and the scales. He described how crossing Waterloo Bridge and looking northeast, you have a fine view of the city skyline, and in particular of two domed buildings, the Old Bailey (the central criminal court) and St. Paul’s Cathedral. At the pinnacle of each dome is mounted a significant symbol. At the top of the Old Bailey stands the classical god of justice—blindfolded (for impartiality), wielding the sword of justice in her right hand, and holding a pair of scales (for the sifting of evidence) in the left. At the top of St. Paul’s is a great golden cross. Stott writes, “Many people think Christianity is a religion of the scales. They imagine that every time they sin, God flicks it into one pan, while every time they do a good deed, he flicks it into the other. And they are hoping against hope that the scales may just tip down in their favor. But no, Christianity is not a religion of scales, but of the cross. For if the scales stand for our unfinished works, the cross stands for the finished work of Christ. It tells us Christ died for our sins once for all, that we are forgiven. It invites us to come to Christ saying, “Nothing in my hand I bring. Only to the cross I cling.”

So, in the end, the separation between the righteous and the wicked will be a separation of those who’ve embraced the cross and those who’ve embraced the scales. And if we put this together with the first two parables about Gospel gain, we might say that if you really understand gospel gain, you’ll embrace gospel judgment. You’ll see God’s judgment as good news and embrace Jesus as the One who paid for your sin and fulfilled justice.

### **Gospel Students**

The final parable is a little different from the first two. I actually believe it was designed as a summary of all the parables

in Matthew 13 because Jesus prefaces it with a question to his disciples.

**“Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asked.**

**“Yes,” they replied. (verse 51)**

I find this amusing because if you read on it's quite clear the disciples really didn't understand what he was talking about. But Jesus doesn't argue with them about this. He takes their answer at face value and offers up another parable that points to what they might become, if in fact, they do really understand all these things.

**He said to them, “Therefore every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.”**

**When Jesus had finished these parables, he moved on from there. (verses 52–53)**

Here Jesus pictures a homeowner with a bunch of stuff in his “storeroom,” which is like his garage or perhaps his attic. We all have a place where we store stuff. Some even rent storage space where you can pay a bunch of money and store all your extra stuff. And wherever we store our stuff, we usually put things both new and old there. So maybe we keep all our old high school yearbooks or even heirlooms we've inherited from our parents. But we also put that new artificial Christmas tree we bought last year, and the new luggage we just bought, and the new ugly sweater Aunt Mabel gave us for our birthday. And, of course, as Jesus says, we bring this stuff, both new and old, out of our storeroom when we need it.

But what does all this point to? Jesus says the teacher of the law who becomes a disciple in the kingdom is like that. Certainly, Jesus has these very disciples in mind, as well as any of us who become followers of Jesus. Becoming a disciple is becoming a student of Jesus. As we learn from Jesus, as we obey his teaching, then we're able to bring out of our own storehouse, which is our own heart, truth that's both new and old. It's “old” because it's rooted in the Old Testament scriptures, and it's “new” because it shows how Jesus is the fulfillment of the Old Testament scriptures.

This should encourage us in two ways. First, it encourages us to really be his disciples; to put ourselves under his teaching.

It's not just about head knowledge, but it's about internalizing and applying what we've learned. It's about practicing it. And as we do that, God will grant us more and more insight, and we'll share that with others. That's the second encouragement—that we can become a person who blesses others with the insights, both new and old, we're learning from him. Have you ever been around people like that? It's a delight. They're not trying to impress anyone with how much they know. What they say is an overflow of what's in their heart, and it's both new and old. It's anchored in timeless truth, but it's freshly put and relevant for today. Matthew himself is a great example of this as his Gospel is a storehouse of both the new and the old. It has more quotes from the Old Testament than any other book, but it's all centered on the explosive new truth found in Jesus.

This reminds me of a verse in the book of Isaiah that's encouraged me quite a bit lately. In Isaiah 54:13 God is looking forward to a time when, **“All your children will be taught by the Lord, and great will be their peace.”** All of us who have children teach them, right? And if we're followers of Jesus, we teach them about the Lord—about who he is and what he wants for us. But what we really want for them to be taught by the Lord. We want them to hear and obey his voice. We want them to bring out things both new and old out the storeroom of their own heart. It starts with us. It starts with me as a disciple—learning, growing, and obeying. It starts with me living that life. And it's so attractive that those closest to me, like my kids, want that too. They turn to the Lord, and he teaches them.

It all starts with Gospel gain. May you make the great discovery of the gospel and see what you gain through it is far more valuable than anything the world might offer. And when you do that, may you also embrace Gospel judgment, taking hold of the cross rather than the scales because it's through the cross that justice was done and we're forgiven and made righteous in his eyes. When you discover Gospel gain and embrace Gospel judgment, may you also become Gospel students who are taught by the Lord and bring forth out of the storeroom of your hearts things both new and old.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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