

The Treasure in a Field

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The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Matt. 13: 44

At first glance, this simple, one-verse parable creates a whirlwind of hope in our hearts. It promises a fortune hunter's dream for the mere cost of an infant's broken piggy bank. What we give up is a drop in the ocean compared with immeasurable abundance of what we receive. It is the ultimate investor's fantasy.

I've heard dozens of talks and read scores of articles on this simple parable. All of the talks and writings have made these simple points:

- There exists a treasure of such sheer magnitude that it shames Blackbeard's booty.
- The treasure can be ours merely for the cost of the shirt on our back.
- This means *all* we have. We must liquidate everything so we can buy that field. We host a huge garage sale, selling every possession, so we finally enter the real-estate office in our last remaining stitch of clothing—a bathing suit and flip-flops—and we spend our last remaining penny to purchase that field.
- We become rich beyond our greatest imagination.

But, the promise of this parable offers even more. After all, secular and religious thinkers alike know that financial wealth fails to satisfy; money can't buy happiness. This parable offers wholeness, satisfaction, purpose, true life, and joy. It offers what we most deeply and desperately desire. So this parable seems unimaginably hopeful.

Or is it so hopeful? Is it what it seems?

If this parable were merely about money, I suspect all believers would be rich and all the rest of the world would see our bank accounts, and they too would become rich believers.

To give up a little money to gain an abundance of money is frankly too simplistic. Almost everyone would be happy to sell their house, their cars and possessions, and to liquidate their 401k's, if the result were riches beyond belief. We'd be parting with thousands to gain millions.

Jesus is talking about more than giving up a little money to gain a lot of money. He is talking about a whole new life, a rich new life. And the cost is more than cash. The cost involves relationships, personal glory, emotions, idols, and sin.

Relationships. One man wanted to be with Jesus, but said he first had to bury his parents. He was saying his parents were almost dead; in fact they had one foot in the grave; maybe one and a half feet. He would wait to bury his parents and then he could follow Jesus. And Jesus tells him he must give up all, even his deepest relationships.

How many of us would be willing to give up wealth, but our happiness clings to our children or our spouses or our parents? Jesus says to gain the kingdom of heaven, we must give up our clinging even to good things like relationships.

Personal Glory. Where do we find our own personal applause, our own sense of, “I’m worth something, I’m important?” I know a man—let’s call him Arthur—who didn’t believe in God because his father didn’t believe in God, and his father was the kindest, most selfless man he knew. Arthur’s father gave money to the poor and time to the community. When Arthur’s mother was dying of liver cancer, his father cared for her, washed her, read to her, and attended her every need. Upon her death, his distraught father invited him into his office—a place Arthur had never been. On every wall and bookshelf were plaques and trophies and articles proclaiming the goodness of Arthur’s father; he was the man of the year, the city’s greatest citizen, and the town’s greatest benefactor.

Arthur gave his life to the Lord the next day. Because, he said, his father hadn’t been a selfless man; he had been the most selfish man Arthur knew. He hadn’t cared for others for their sake; he had cared for others for his own personal glory. He got personal self-applause from all his great works.

Where do we get our personal glory, our self-applause? Is it from being a very good person, from taking daily prayer time, from giving to the poor, from being a great parent or spouse, or even being heavily involved in ministry? To gain the kingdom of heaven, we have to give up all, including our own self-glory.

Emotionals. I once felt deeply betrayed, and the betrayal was costly. I knew I needed to rid myself of this root of bitterness, this unforgiveness. I’d even taught about the dangers of bitterness and unforgiveness. Yet it lingered. I couldn’t give it up.

What grudges do we cling to? Who are we now unwilling to work with? Against whom do we still hold a claim? What wrongs against us do we still remember? To gain the kingdom of heaven, we need to give up all.

Idols. We often go to God to get the things we most want. I know a man who once gave up Christianity because he hadn’t been accepted into Law School. When he’d originally become a Christian, his parents had literally abandoned him; he was on his own. He’d given up family, friends, and even money (his parents refused to help him with college expenses). He’d given all this up, but God hadn’t let him get into Law School.

From the outside we can see what he couldn't see at the time. His real god was Law School. When he later came to his senses, he told me it had been like he'd been asking his wife to find him a prostitute. If she really loved him, it would be the last thing she'd do. He'd been going to the Lord to get the god he was really worshipping.

We can't go to God to get our idols. Do we sometimes think we need God *and X* to be happy? All those X's reveal our idols; they are what we really worship. To get the kingdom of heaven, we need to give up all.

Sin. Sure, we know we should reject adultery, bank robbery, and murder. But the heart of sin is self-centeredness not merely external behavior. Why do we occasionally shade the truth? Why do we do good deeds? Why do we give up bad deeds? Isn't part of our motivation—for doing good and avoiding bad—the way we feel good about ourselves? Isn't there a bit of pride when we tithe, and don't we feel good about ourselves when we see what order we have in our lives ... especially compared with others?

If I gave my son ten dollars not to hit my daughter, at least my daughter wouldn't be hit. But could any of us say my son was acting with great morals? No! He'd simply be a mercenary. To get the kingdom of heaven, we need to give up all, even our selfish heart motivations behind our seeming good deeds.

Yikes! This parable doesn't seem as hopeful now, does it? We have to give up all, but we can't. And the parable doesn't say if we give up 50% we'll get half the treasure. We have to give up all to get any of the treasure. What are we to do?

If the parable of the Treasure in a Field is a morality story about us—like a biblical Aesop's Fable—we are doomed, because we can't give up all. But, when we see this parable as a picture of Christ, there is hope. An unbelievable unimaginable hope begins to stir our very soul.

Who, in the entire Bible and all world history, gave up everything? Only one person, Jesus. In this parable we see a picture of Jesus.

Think a moment. The parable begins, "The Kingdom of heaven is like...." Is it like us, trying (and failing) to give up all? Or is the parable a picture of Jesus, who truly did give up all?

He gave up the wealth and golden riches of heaven; and on earth he said, "Foxes have holes and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Luke 9:58).

He gave up the deepest relationship of all, the relationship with his father. Throughout the gospel, every time Jesus talks of God, he calls him "Father," or "Abba." Every time

but once. On the cross, he cried, “My God, My God, why have you abandoned me” (Mark 15:34). He gave up his relationship with his father.

He gave up glory and applause. Scripture says, “He emptied himself” (Phil. 2:7) and we humans mocked him and spat on him.

He gave up bitterness; while we were mocking and killing him, he prayed, “Forgive them” (Luke 23:34).

He gave up his own righteousness. Scripture says, “He became sin ... so that we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor. 5:21).

Can we see him doing this for us? Can we picture, with the eyes of our hearts, Christ giving up all? Can we see Christ—not us—fulfilling the parable of the Treasure in a Field?

We now see Christ in the parable, but where are we? We aren’t the great hero, giving up all; that’s Christ. But that makes *us* the treasure in the field. Really? Can we actually be the treasure God longs for? Time and again, from Genesis to Revelation, God speaks of his love for us; and it is that love which we need to understand deep in our hearts.

- The Lord your God has chosen you out of all the peoples on the face of the earth to be his people, *his treasured possession*” (Deut.7:6).
- They shall be Mine, says the Lord, in that day *when I make up my jewels*. (Mal. 3:17).
- For the LORD'S *portion is his people*... (Deut. 32.9).
- Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne? *Though she may forget, I will not forget you!* Is. 49:15
- Turn away your eyes from me, for they overwhelm me. SOS 6:5

When we study the parable as an Aesop’s Fable—one more morality lesson for us to follow—it will either crush us under the burden of its impossible demand, or it will make us look down on others who lack the self-control and discipline to give up as much as we have (which, by the way, is a self-delusion; we have NEVER given up all—and last of all, we haven’t give up our pride).

But when we look at the parable as a picture of Christ giving up all for us, and when we understand that we are His treasure, then our hearts are moved. We experience the true love we need, the true glory we need.

And guess what? Now we can give up anything, in response to his great love.

When I studied this passage and realized I was His treasure, and he’d give up all for me, I began to love that man who I felt betrayed me. The enormity of God’s love melted my heart to give up my anger and bitterness.

Knowing we are his love and his treasure empowers us to cease clinging to relationships—our identity doesn't have to reside in them. It enables us to give up money—what can it give that Christ's love hasn't already given? And it overwhelms our idols—what more beside Christ will ever satisfy?

Let's ask ourselves, "What are the hardest, most deeply hidden, things we cannot give up? Then let's understand in our hearts that we are His treasure. *"And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace."*

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