

Matthew 13:44-58: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 13 verses 44 to 58 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. Again the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who on finding one pearl of great value went and sold all that he had and bought it.

Again the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers, but threw away the bad.

So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Have you understood all these things? They said to him, Yes. 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.

[1 : 1 3] And when Jesus had finished these parables, he went away from there, and coming to his hometown he taught them in their synagogue, so that they were astonished, and said, Where did this man get this wisdom and these mighty works?

Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas? Are not all his sisters with us?

Where then did this man get all these things? And they took offence at him. But Jesus said to them, A prophet is not without honour, except in his hometown, and in his own household.

And he did not do many mighty works there, because of their unbelief. At the end of Matthew 13, Jesus is concluding his body of teaching on parables. The parables address Israel's history, and the way that the kingdom comes.

I've noted that we find pairs of parables, and sometimes even triplets of parables. They're intended to be read alongside and in conversation with each other. The first of the parables here is the parable of the treasure.

[2 : 1 5] And the treasure found in the field is an unexpected find, in a field that belongs to some other party. The person who finds it must buy the field from an owner who does not know the value of what he possesses.

The kingdom in this parable is valuable above all else. The man who finds it must sell all that he has to obtain it. The treasure of the field eclipses the value of everything else in his possession.

He willingly surrenders all other possessions, priorities, and property to get this one field. It's the only thing that matters. It completely changes his attitude to his life, and all else is counted as nothing in order that he might gain the kingdom.

It calls for unreserved and complete self-investment. And the purchase of the man is characterised by joy, a joy that utterly overwhelms any sense of loss of the rest of his possessions.

And alongside this parable of the treasure, we find the parable of the pearl of great price. It's a counterpart, but there are also differences. The parable of the pearl of great price involves a treasure not that's to be found in a field, but one associated with the sea.

[3 : 21] And now it's a merchant that finds this treasure. The focus in this parable is not primarily on the treasure, but upon the finder. In the first parable, the parable of the hidden treasure, the kingdom of heaven is likened to treasure hidden in a field.

But in this one, the kingdom of heaven is likened to the merchant in search of fine pearls. The first parable emphasises joy, surprise and hiddenness. But the second doesn't, even though it has seeking as a key element.

The second focuses on the surpassing character of one particular example of a group of things being sought. So he's seeking for pearls, and he finds this one particular pearl, a pearl that is of greater worth than any other.

And so he begins by seeking for pearls, more generally, and he ends up in possession of one particular pearl. The parables have different nuances. They both emphasise the value of the kingdom, and the appropriate action that must follow is emphasised, that this selling of everything to obtain this one thing.

But the first one seems to have a focus more upon the land. We can think about the parable of the treasure, perhaps as a parable concerning Israel. There is this great treasure, the treasure of the covenant, hidden in this field, this field of Israel.

[4 : 39] And yet this hidden treasure of the covenant and the kingdom is not valued by the people who own it, is not truly recognised for what it is. But the person who recognises it, whether that's a faithful Jew, or whether it's Christ himself, or whether it's some Gentile proselyte, that person, recognising the true value, is willing to make the necessary sacrifice to obtain it.

The parable of the pearl of great price may be speaking more from the perspective of a Gentile God-fearer, or some other person who's coming upon the treasure of the covenant of Israel.

Among all these other nations, there is this one particular pearl of great price, and when he discovers the value of the covenant, when he discovers the value of the kingdom of Israel, he's willing to sacrifice everything to obtain it.

And so, as we've recognised already, paired parables need to be read alongside each other, recognising that they are both similar and different. They have slightly different shades of nuance.

They emphasise different facets of the kingdom. But placed alongside each other, they'll often reveal more than if they're read in detachment from each other. The parable of the dragnet follows.

[5 : 51] And even though the parable of the dragnet is not next to the parable of the wheat and the weeds, there seem to be a great many similarities between them. Sorting of good and bad, weeping and gnashing of teeth, the angels, the end of the age, division, all these sorts of things.

But there are differences. There's no enemy involved in the parable of the dragnet. There's almost an entire focus upon the negative punishment. We do find background in the Old Testament as well.

You can maybe think of Habakkuk chapter 1, verse 14 to 17. You make mankind like the fish of the sea, like crawling things that have no ruler. He brings all of them up with a hook.

He drags them out with his net. He gathers them in his dragnet. So he rejoices and is glad. Therefore he sacrifices to his net and makes offerings to his dragnet. For by them he lives in luxury and his food is rich.

Is he then to keep on emptying his net and mercilessly killing nations forever? Here nations and peoples of the Gentiles are compared to fish in the sea.

[6 : 54] And the Chaldeans are going through with their hooks and their dragnets and bringing people out. The imagery of the dragnet and the hook here is a negative one. It's one of actually overcoming or defeating people.

Related imagery could be found in Ezekiel chapter 32, verse 3. Thus says the Lord God, I will throw my net over you with a host of many peoples and they will haul you up in my dragnet.

It's a reference to Egypt in the midst of the seas. But there are positive uses of the language of the dragnet too and of fishing. In chapter 47 of Ezekiel, verses 9 following, And wherever the river goes, every living creature that swarms will live and there will be very many fish.

For this water goes there that the waters of the sea may become fresh so everything will live where the river goes. Fishermen will stand beside the sea. From En Gedi to En Eglim it will be a place for the spreading of nets.

Its fish will be of very many kinds like the fish of the great sea. So the dragnet can be used as a symbol both of blessing and of judgment. As in the case of the Pearl of Great Price, as a sea parable, this relates chiefly to the Gentiles as distinct from Israel.

[8 : 10] So Israel has gathered a great many people from the nations who believe in or have pledged adherence to the God of Israel and they are going to be divided too. This is the parable of the dragnet.

Jesus concludes this body of teaching by speaking about the scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven. Once again, Jesus is giving a saying that explains his use of parables. There are three blocks of parables here each with an explanatory statement and this is the one in this particular body.

It particularly relates to the disciples who will become teachers in the kingdom and they are to bring out both old and new things. Now we can see this maybe as bringing out truths from the Old Testament and maybe bringing out new truths of the gospel.

But it could also be a reference to what Jesus has already spoken about. He's spoken about things that righteous men and prophets long to see and hear and also to things hidden since the foundation of the world.

The things that the righteous men and prophets long to see and hear are the things that are new that Christ is bringing about through his ministry. But the things hidden from the foundation of the world are treasures that have been there all the time.

[9 : 19] The oldest things of all but yet they've never truly been revealed. So maybe what they're bringing out are not just the new things that are being accomplished by Christ but the very old things that are being brought into the light by Christ.

When we read the Old Testament as Christians we're not just bringing out truths that have been known since time immemorial. We're revealing something about what is old in the light of Christ.

The old treasure that has been hidden is being disclosed and now people can see its true value. Following this teaching Jesus spends time teaching in the synagogue of his hometown.

And Jesus has already challenged the primacy of biological family ties at the end of the previous chapter. And here his hometown's presumed familiarity with him and his identity prevents them from seeing him.

They just see him as the one that they're familiar with as the son of the carpenter. They know his family and his relatives. They know his mother, his brothers and his sisters. And they cannot see beyond that.

[10:21] They cannot see that this man from Nazareth could be anything more than a mere carpenter's son. We should recognize here the ongoing themes of hiddenness that have been in this chapter are once again at play in their failure to recognize who Christ is.

Also the themes of division. People are being divided on the basis of their failure to or ability to recognize Christ. And here in Jesus' own hometown, there are people who are hearing but not understanding, seeing but not perceiving.

A question to consider. There are two key parables in this section that speak of selling everything in order to obtain the kingdom. Jesus has already taught concerning our relationship to wealth in the Sermon on the Mount.

And here he returns to themes that invite reflection upon economic attachments and commitments and priorities. How could we reassess our economic values in the light of the teaching of the parable of the pearl of great price and the treasure in the field?

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