

A Great Treasure

By Brad Allison on 3/21/2004

Scripture Reference *Matthew 13:44-46*

Once again in our study of Jesus' parables, we find two short parables covering the same subject. In the case of the two before us today, they speak of the subject of joy. Jesus makes the point in these stories that joy is the best indicator that someone has truly believed in Jesus. About 25 years ago, a friend of mine who was in Optometry school in Philadelphia decided to give me a test for color blindness. The test was simply to show me a page on which had been printed a number of colored dots. A person with normal vision would be able to see an image emerge from all the dots, whereas a colorblind person would only see a page of dots. I saw a page of dots, which proved my first-grade teacher wrong. She thought I didn't know my colors because I was either stupid or stubborn. She may have been right about that, but the bigger reason was that I was colorblind. The test showed it clearly.

This parable is a good test of true faith. What do you see when you look at Jesus? Those who are truly part of the kingdom have joy, the same kind of joy as this man who discovered buried treasure and the man who found the valuable pearl. The first parable, about the buried treasure, requires a little explanation. In order to understand this, you need to know that burying one's valuables in the ground was not uncommon in Jesus' day. Think about it. There were no safe-deposit boxes, and each person would have to bury his own valuables. The house would be the first place someone would look, so that would be a bad choice. But if you buried it in the ground, it would be much more difficult to discover. Even if someone knew you had buried it in the ground, without knowing the precise location, a search would take too long. So people commonly buried treasure in their fields for safekeeping, carefully noting its location for future retrieval. Undoubtedly, it would sometimes occur that the one who buried such treasure would die before telling anyone else where the treasure was buried. Others would buy the field without any clue of the treasure buried there. One day, someone happens to stumble upon that treasure while going about his work of digging in the ground. In order to avoid the discovery of the treasure by the rightful owner, he quickly covers it over and pretends not to have found anything unusual. With an excitement hard to conceal, he at once begins to make plans to purchase that field so that he can lawfully acquire the treasure buried there. Even though he has to liquidate all his assets, he does so joyfully because of the treasure that will be his once he buys the field.

It is this feature of joy that becomes the focus of the parable. We live in a region of the country where almost everyone claims to believe in Jesus, from the drunk in the Rescue Mission to the young couple living together without being married. It is easy to fool oneself into thinking that one possesses a genuine faith, when in fact there is no faith at all. I've never conducted such a poll, but I would imagine that if we asked people in Birmingham whether they believed in Jesus or not, an overwhelming majority would answer yes. But is a person saved just because they can say they believe in Jesus? Our parable teaches us that a true grasp of Jesus by faith is always accompanied by joy. I want us look at this joy today, noticing three things about it. First, we want to see the necessity of joy, then the results of joy, and finally the means to joy.

I. The Necessity of Joy

After the man discovers the buried treasure, "in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." His central motive is joy. It's not hard to imagine his enemies making fun of him as he liquidates all his assets in order to buy the field. "What a fool!" I can hear them saying. "He's selling everything he has just to buy some dirt. He probably won't even

have enough money left to plant the fields next season.” I can imagine his friends and family members gathering together to express grave concern for him, perhaps even wondering if he is still mentally stable. Whenever you liquidate assets hurriedly, you often get less than their full value. But at every objection that is voiced to him, he wears a little smile. He knows something they don't. There's a treasure buried in that field worth hundreds of times more than the purchase price he is trying to raise. Every objection only increases his joy as he anticipates their response when he buys the field and then reveals the treasure.

Jesus' point is not difficult to discern. Jesus himself is that great treasure, and if we comprehend anything of his value, we will gladly give up everything else in order to receive him with joy.

Illustration: Back in 1997, *USA Today* reported the results of a Roper Starch Worldwide survey of the wealthiest 1 percent of U.S. households. These households numbered 1 million and had an annual income of at least \$250,000 or a net worth of at least \$2.5 million. They were asked what they would be willing to pay for various commonly viewed sources of happiness. At the bottom was being president of the United States, which these respondents would only be willing to pay \$55,000 to secure. Next from the bottom was “great beauty” at a price of \$83,000. In order from less to more valuable the next items were as follows: “reunion with a lost love” (\$206,000), “eternal youth” (\$259,000), “talent” (\$285,000), “great intellect” (\$407,000), “true love” (\$487,000). But the item of greatest value was “a place in heaven”, for which these respondents would have been willing to part with \$640,000 on average (10/24/97).

What Jesus is trying to teach us here is really a great irony. On the one hand, heaven can't be bought. It costs nothing to us because Jesus has paid for it. But on the other hand, it costs everything, because if you're not willing to give up everything else joyfully, you haven't understood the treasure Jesus is offering. A few years before he was martyred in South America missionary Jim Eliot said it like this: “He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” A clear mark of true faith is that you have seen something of the value of Jesus. You have learned to treasure him to the point that you receive him with joy.

Let me try to make this as pointed as I can. A person is only converted to Christ when he becomes like this man in the parable: impelled by joy to sell all he has in order to have this treasure in Jesus. John Piper calls this “Christian hedonism” and he explains it like this. “You are converted to Christ when Christ becomes for you a treasure chest of holy joy.” He says that the issue is not “Can you make a decision for Christ without the incentive of joy, but should you? Would it do you any good if you could? Is there any evidence in Scripture that God will accept people who come to him out of any other motive than the desire for joy in him?” Piper concludes not. This means that those who make a decision for Christ only out of a fear of hell have not truly come to Christ. Should we fear hell? Absolutely, because Jesus told us to (Matt. 10:28). But if fear is the only motive, there is no genuine saving faith. Or if duty is the only motive, there is also no saving faith. There simply must be present an element of joy that comes from treasuring Jesus. Joy is a necessary part of faith.

II. The Results of Joy

Just as there can be no true faith without joy, so there can be no joy without two other things: pursuit and a willingness to risk and lose all. Note how because of his joy in the treasure, this man pursued it. It's not an easy thing to liquidate your assets, as he did in order to buy that field and secure the treasure. If you've ever sold a house, you know that it takes some effort and follow through. In the same way, joy results in the single-minded pursuit of

that which is the object of joy. The opposite of this kind of pursuit is passivity, the tendency just to wait and see what happens. I see such passivity both all around me and in me. Our Men's Fraternity group has been looking at this topic of passivity, and we've been learning that true masculinity rejects passivity. It doesn't do what I often do. God will convict me about something I need to do or pursue, and I will put it on the back burner, saying, "I'll get to that sometime in the near future." But several weeks will pass and I don't get to it. It never gets moved to the front burner of my life, and before long, it even gets removed from the back burner as well. Men, does such a thing ever happen to you? What's the answer to that? Notice that the man in our parable is not passive. He actively pursues something, the purchase of this field. Acquiring it becomes the focus of his life because of his joy in the treasure it contains. How did he defeat passivity? By joy. How are we going to defeat passivity? By an increasing level of joy in Jesus. So the first result of joy is learning to pursue that which is worth pursuing.

The second result of joy is a willingness to lose everything else besides the object of the joy. This man, as well as the pearl merchant, counted it a little thing to lose everything he had. He was so joyful because he was losing that of little value in order to gain that of great value. What would you conclude about someone standing on the deck of a ship hitting golf balls into the ocean? I would conclude that he has enough golf balls not to miss a few that are lost forever. A mark of true joy is the recognition that in Jesus we have such a great treasure that the loss of everything else is not really that great a matter.

Illustration: That's not to say that losing some things won't hurt a little. On Wednesday of this week, I was reminded of the fact that we live in a fallen world when three things happened to me. First, on my way to speak at Restoration Academy that morning, someone pulled out in front of me on Highway 119 and I had an accident. About two hours after getting back in the office from speaking at Restoration, I received a phone call from someone with my credit card company, reporting that there had been some unusual activity on that card. She asked me to verify that I had charged \$2500 to Avon, among several other charges. Someone had stolen our credit card number and charged several thousand dollars on our account. Then, that evening, I was trying to pull together all the information I needed to respond to the request from the State of Alabama to send them proof of our itemized deductions. I realize that in the big picture, all of those things are only minor losses, but they are losses nonetheless. If there is no overarching treasure in Jesus to which we can flee, these little losses can steal away our joy. But those who have learned to treasure him can take refuge in the security of that greatest of all treasures even as we experience loss throughout our lives. Let me be quick to say that such a treasuring of Jesus doesn't take away the pain of our losses. It still hurts, and in the case of significant loss it hurts significantly. But it can't touch our greatest treasure, which is kept for us in heaven.

Our response to loss is a test of where our treasure is. Whenever a loss occurs, we will say to ourselves, "At least I still have" Whatever we put in that blank is our treasure. It can be a job, money, family, beauty, or any number of things. Lately God has been giving me some insight into something I treasure other than Jesus. It's getting stuff done. When I'm feeling a little down, I will often resort just to accomplishing some task in order to feel better about myself. Like the alcoholic returning to his bottle, I go to task accomplishment to dull the pain of life. Whatever you take refuge in when things aren't going well is where your treasure is. What is your response to loss? Is Jesus the treasure it takes you to?

III. The Means to Joy

The parable is clear about the way we get such joy. It is by learning to treasure Jesus. I want us to consider just a few of the ways Jesus is a precious treasure. I'm sure you could speak of many ways that Jesus is precious to you. I want to mention just a couple of ways I find him a precious treasure. First, the blood of Jesus is precious to me, because it alone can cleanse of sin. I am like many of you: not a little sinner but a big one. The blood of Jesus is able to cover over all my sin, in spite of its largeness. The blood of Jesus is like the blood of the Passover Lamb: when God sees it, the angel of death passes over and I do not receive the destruction my sins deserve. I am thankful for the blood of Jesus. It is a precious treasure.

I am thankful that Jesus has delivered me from a fear of death. Before I was converted, I would occasionally have nightmares about dying. Since finding Jesus, God has given me a peace and delivered me from the fear of death. Jesus is a precious treasure because he alone can bring such peace.

I am thankful that Jesus shows me what God the Father is like. I see in Jesus such patience with his disciples, and I realize that the Father is like that as well. I am thankful for God's patience with me, even though there are sinful patterns in my life that have been there for decades. Like Jesus with Peter, though he was wishy-washy for long periods of time, Jesus called him a rock. In the same way, Jesus shows me that the Father is that way with my sin.

I am thankful that my future is a bright one. I can look to the future without anxiety or dread, because Jesus has been raised and is now seated in heaven. And he tells me that he has gone ahead of me, and I will soon join him. No matter what happens in this life, my future is secure because of Jesus. Jesus is precious indeed!

CONCLUSION:

I want to point out one final truth about this parable before closing. One of the things required to make this story work is that the value of the treasure was hidden from the original owner of the property. He had this treasure right under his nose, and he knew nothing of it. He thought it was just a bunch of dirt. There are many today who look at Jesus and see little value there.

There's an old story about a wealthy man who died and, seemingly, left no will. His only son had pre-deceased him, and there were no other obvious choices to inherit his wealth. The state moved in to take care over as executor of his estate and to auction his house and its contents. The man had had a servant who was poor, but who loved the man and especially had loved his son. Since he didn't have much money, he knew that he wouldn't be able to buy much at the auction, but that was okay because all he wanted was a portrait of the son that had been commissioned years earlier. He was able to acquire it for almost nothing because no one else really wanted it. When he took it home and was preparing to hang it on his wall, he noticed that the back was slightly open and seemed to have something inside it other than the picture. Upon further investigation, he discovered some paper that turned out to be the man's will. Upon it was written these words. "I bequeath my entire estate to the person who valued my son enough to acquire this portrait." We too get everything as we learn to treasure the Son. May God help us to treasure Jesus and to be filled with great joy as we do so!