

Parables Session 5

Introductory Comments

1. Typical readings of these parables make them an allegory of one sort or another. For example, some read the parable of the man and the field as an allegory of spiritual joy: that what's most important in our lives is not the possession of treasures, but the joy in discovery of the treasure that is faith, or Christ, or the Kingdom itself. Some read the parable of the pearl of great price as an allegory for discipleship, where the focus is on the person who chooses to seek the kingdom. Thus, the merchant is the metaphorical disciple seeking the pearl that is the gospel, the good news of the kingdom; he thus sacrifices everything he has in order to obtain it. Others cast Jesus as the merchant, or Jesus as the pearl itself, or even the Church as the pearl. These are some of the common interpretations with which you may be familiar.
2. The problem with such allegories is (once again) not that they're wrong. They are often viable. They're just often detached from historical context or they represent a domesticated, toothless understanding. What traditional views of these parables often do is state something obvious; they neither challenge nor surprise us. Rather, they tend to confirm standard Christian views. And as we've said, the nature of a parable is not to be obvious or standard. The intent of a parable is to provoke, challenge, and upend.
3. Another problem with traditional readings of these parables is that they may use keys for interpretation that the original audience would not have used. Most of our interpretations of these parables come from the third century and later, which means we may be either assigning meaning that wasn't there originally, or missing meaning that the original audience would have understood.
4. Also, many allegories of these parables (especially the pearl of great price), tend to turn the kingdom of God to which the merchant and pearl are compared into a commodity or an obsession. For some readers, the kingdom, like the pearl, can be "bought," usually through sacrifice; this makes the kingdom a commodity. Others concentrate on the seeking, making the treasure (in the first parable) or the pearl (in the second) an obsession.
5. For our purposes we will resist the temptation to look at these parables as allegories. And because there is more scholarly material available on the second parable (the pearl), we will spend more time there. As we look closer at the merchant's search for multiple pearls and his unexpected decision to purchase only one, we may discover a reading that allows us to recognize what is of ultimate importance. And as we realize that once the merchant obtains his pearl of utmost value, he is no longer a merchant, we might discover a challenge to our own identity.

Questions

Read Matthew 13:44-46

1. **When you hear the word "merchant" today what descriptors come to mind?** In our language, "merchant" has a largely positive connotation. While there are exceptions (perhaps Shylock in "Merchant of Venice"), merchants are generally seen as socially respectable, hard-working and independent shopkeepers. **Any guesses as to how "merchants" were seen in the biblical context?** The positive connotations all but disappear. The Greek word used for "merchant" here is *emporos*, and the only other place it is used in the New Testament is in Revelation 18:3, where the Roman Empire is depicted as a whore, where the "kings of the earth" who have "committed fornication with her and the "merchants of the earth" who "have waxed

rich through the abundance of her delicacies” are now weeping and mourning because Rome has fallen and there is no one to buy their decadent cargo any longer. And in the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint) this same word *emporos* is almost universally negative, being associated with deceptive dealing (i.e. someone who tries to sell you something you don’t need at a price you don’t want). So, a “merchant” was likely no fine fellow to Jesus’ audience.

2. **To what exactly is the Kingdom of heaven compared?** In the more traditional, allegorical readings the pearl is the most desirable thing one could have and so it is made to symbolize Christ, or the gospel, or the Church, or the kingdom itself. But that is not exactly what the parable says. The “kingdom of heaven” is not compared to the pearl, but to the merchant who, seeking fine pearls, sells all he has for one fabulous item. If the pearl becomes the focus for the kingdom, we risk defanging the parable.
3. **Can anyone guess how pearls were valued in Jesus’ day?** According to Pliny, a Roman author of that time, pearls held the “topmost rank among all things of price.” Their price was, literally, above rubies. They are jewels that the majority of people would never have even seen, except maybe in art. It is also true that, while oysters themselves are not kosher, the pearl itself would not have been forbidden from any Jew. This association may be why, however, that pearls are never (indisputably) mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, whereas other precious stones like rubies, sapphires, and emeralds are. While they are seen as valuable, however, pearls are sometimes given a negative connotation in the New Testament, particularly in 1 Timothy 2:9, where pearls are included in a list of things to be avoided because they are showy and immodest. Similarly, Rev. 18:12-13 considers pearls to be ostentatious accessories connected to the “merchants of the earth.” So, while they are valuable, pearls can be fraught with danger.
4. **What is noteworthy in HOW the merchant seeks?** In his seeking, the merchant is not an obvious epitome of wisdom. First, he changes course midstream: seeking fine pearls, he gives up his quest not when he has a sufficient number of pearls, but when he finds only one. Thus, we must be careful to avoid saying, “See, he’s found exactly what he’s looking for” or “He’s finally found the meaning he was searching for.” The merchant wasn’t looking for “meaning,” he was looking for a commodity to “merch” (sell). And he wasn’t looking for that “one special pearl.” Instead, once he finds the magnificent pearl, he liquidates his holdings to buy it.
5. **What is the difference between the man who buys the field and the merchant who buys the pearl?** The merchant has obtained something he desires most, but it’s something that cannot nourish him in itself (or shelter, or clothe him). The man who bought the field could ostensibly support himself with that field and then, when he finds the treasure again, support himself further. The man with the pearl has sold everything to get this one thing – something that he could admire and display, to be sure, but something he could not live off unless he sold it again.
6. **What happens to the merchant after he finds the pearl?** In the gaining, he has not only fulfilled a desire he didn’t know he had, he has also changed his identity. He had been looking for fine pearls, but he buys only one. By finding that pearl of ultimate worth, the merchant stops being a merchant. Thus, he redefines himself, and we must see him anew as well. What is he? What do we make of his example? What does a former merchant “do” with a pearl? How do we locate ourselves in the parable?
7. **What does the merchant, and ultimately the parable, teach us about ourselves?** For one, we are continually seeking, whether the object is fine pearls, a new job, another degree, or spiritual fulfillment. But each time we find our goal, it turns out to be ephemeral. There is always a new necklace, a new career, a new form of study, a nagging sense that we have not done what we need

to do. We flit from desire to desire, never permanently fulfilled, always somewhat discontent. The merchant's actions show that knowing one's pearl removes all the other wants and desires.

Will we know what we truly want when we see it? The merchant has removed himself from the realm of buying and selling, seeking and finding, wanting and wanting more. Not only can the cycle be broken; the merchant demonstrates that one can step out of it entirely. And on another level, this parable asks, "Can we assess what is of ultimate value in our own lives, not simply in terms of relative worth, but in terms of ultimate concern? Are we willing to step aside from all that we have to obtain what we want?"

Jesus cared about prioritizing. In light of the inbreaking of the Kingdom of heaven, which is already here as his followers found manifested in his presence and yet to come as manifested by the full presence of justice, we are forced to act. We are forced to determine what we must do to prepare for this new reality. What do we keep and what do we divest? How would we live if we knew that ultimate judgment was coming on Wednesday? Once we know that material goods will only collect rust or dust, and once we know that the only thing that counts is treasure in heaven, surely we must find a new way to live. Questions like these, that provoke, disturb and challenge – this is what a parable is supposed to do!

****For next session, read Luke 10:30-35, The Good Samaritan*