

Preparation for Heaven, part 4

Seeking Beautiful Pearls

a sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
Mitchellville, MD, July 25th, 2010

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Matthew 13:45-46).

We continue today with another in a series of parables about the kingdom of heaven, specifically about our preparation for heaven.

Last week we considered the story of the six groups of workers who were hired at different times of the day, but who at the end of the day were all paid the same. It seemed unfair to the men who had worked all day but in the parable the Lord made it clear that it is not so much the physical work that brings reward as it is the positive attitude, *the willingness to do the work*. In other words, the reward of heaven isn't “pay-back” for all the good you've done, it's the delight itself and the deeper insights that come from being engaged (committed). It's all about the process.

Now we're looking at a parable that compares heaven to a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, and we have to ask, who is this person, what is the precious pearl that he found, and what does it mean to sell everything and buy it? This, too, is clearly about the process but takes us to a very special and particular aspect of the heavenly life, namely, what is meant by that pearl.

First of all, what is “a merchant”? – Obviously one who buys and sells. But in spiritual terms what does it mean to buy and sell? It can't refer to earthly things since there are no earthly things in heaven. Instead there are spiritual things, and these are all aspects of wisdom and love, knowledge and affection, truth and goodness – and yes, of course, the uses that derive from these in relationships with others. Buying and selling and trading therefore all refer to the exchange of IDEAS and affections, getting and giving in ways that meet all participants' needs.

In the parable the kingdom of heaven is likened to this process because it is in such relationships that the peace and happiness of that kingdom grows. We learn and we share; we help one another feel and understand the blessings of spiritual life. We give and we take; we buy and we sell “items” of spiritual value, and in this way everyone benefits.

Now this merchant in the parable (who represents each one of us) is seeking beautiful pearls. As a merchant presumably he is not seeking in the sea, but in the markets and among private sellers. These could represent the thoughts and affections other people in our lives have to share, or they could represent things stored up in our own memories where they lie hidden, unused, waiting to be drawn out and shared, or to serve some other use. As we will see in a moment, though, these spiritual goods and truths in the last analysis all come from the Lord's Word.

So we, too (if you'll excuse the play on words), may go literally searching for “pearls” *in the Word*. And when we do, true to form, we will find that they are rare, that is, rarely mentioned. In fact, the only true references to pearls are in Matthew and the book of Revelation, not counting

one casual reference in Paul's first Epistle to Timothy. The first occurs in the Lord's famous saying that we should not "cast our pearls before swine" (Matt. 7:6) and the other two from Matthew are in this parable. As for the book of Revelation, three references occur in a negative context, speaking of the jewelry adorning the harlot who represented Babylon, which in turn represents our own self-love and love of controlling or dominating over others. The other two references are incredibly positive, describing the magnificent gates of the holy city, New Jerusalem which were all made of pearl, in fact each one a *single* pearl. This is *clearly* a symbolic or metaphorical reference, since no pearl could ever be big enough to serve as a gate for human use. But then again, so are ALL the references to pearls, which takes us to the point of this sermon.

As we know, stones represent truths – firm, solid truths from the Word. And *precious stones*, like rubies, sapphires or diamonds, represent truths that shine with the splendor of the spiritual meaning that is contained within them. Further, precious stones that appear in the Word as part of a foundation, or a crown, or other forms of adornment, represent relatively external truths: appearances or applications. These are the kind of truth we find in the stories of the literal sense of the Word, and they shine with a special glory that derives from the presence of the Lord's own love and light deep within them, despite the rough, crude context in which they often appear.

Now then, a pearl is a very special, organic type of gemstone, made by accretions (or layerings) of "calcium carbonate in minute crystalline form"¹ so that while not crystal *clear*, the gem still reflects a beautiful iridescence because of that layering. In other words, the light doesn't shine all the way *through* a pearl, but it *reflects* off of the tiny calcium crystals that have been cemented together in it.

Most pearls today are "cultured" by human intervention because, although very large and fine ones do occur in the wild they are extremely rare, hence their very high value and price. So in some ways it is easier to cultivate our own ideas of what is true and good than to search diligently for the truth as God gives it – in His Word. But the parable really focuses on that search.

And, we read, "when he had found one pearl of great price (he) went and sold all that he had and bought it." Price, naturally, is based on perceived value, so it's interesting to note that the original Greek of this sentence uses a word that actually means precious, or "of great value." So now, if pearls represent the spiritual goods and truths we find in the Word, what is the ONE PEARL of greatest value that we can discover and "own"? Do you know?

Is it the doctrine of charity? Is it the explanation of the spiritual sense of the Word? Is it the revelation about life after death? What about the spiritual love in marriage, or what we call "conjugal love"? How about the knowledge of correspondences? Each of these is a precious gem in the crown of revelations from the Lord, and one is actually called the precious jewel of human life, another the knowledge of knowledges (or concepts). But as you may recall from our third lesson this morning the ONE teaching thing that stands above them all, the ONE concept that is more valuable and important than all the others is that concerning the Lord, in short it is the knowledge and acknowledgment of the Lord Jesus Christ as the one God of heaven and earth.

¹ Wikipedia

Why? – Because the idea that we have about God really qualifies everything we do. It informs our sense of order, justice, freedom and responsibility. It defines our ideals and gives meaning to the hardships we suffer. *It is the pearl of great price*, the central truth of all revelation and the gateway to understanding everything about our spiritual lives.

This is why the gates of the holy city – the gates of entrance into the church and heaven – are all made of pearl, precisely in accord with the Lord’s own words in John, chapter 10 where He said, “I am the door of the sheep,” and again, “I am the door. If anyone enters by Me he will be saved, and will go in and out, and find pasture” (vv. 7 & 9). This is why the first and great commandment in Deuteronomy (6:4-5), and again in Matthew (22:37-38) and in Mark (12:29), is strictly about the Lord. It is why the Ten Commandments and most of the Psalms and all of the Gospels begin with the Lord. And it is why every single book of the Writings begins with an acknowledgment, if not a whole chapter or more, about the Lord.

In short, if we do not know and acknowledge the Lord’s authority in our lives we cannot really enter into the joy or fulfillment of **His** kingdom. We cannot participate with any confidence in the benefits that **He** offers.

This is not to say that people who don’t accept the Lord can’t be saved. We know *that* is a cruel heresy. Nor does it mean that we all have to be learned theologians! Nor again does it mean that the first thing we discuss with anyone about our faith must be the Lord. But to enter into heaven itself, or heavenly happiness, this is where it all starts. Therefore these teachings about the Lord are said to be “introductory truths.” They introduce us, by precept and example, to the epitome, indeed the very essence of heavenly wisdom and love, the Divine Human.

So in this parable when the merchant who was seeking beautiful pearls, found one very precious pearl, he “went and sold *all that he had* and bought it.” So did the fellow in the parable just before this when he found treasure hidden in a field. What, then, does it mean to sell *all that we have* for heaven’s sake?

Again, remember, it’s NOT about worldly things. The Lord Himself was clear enough that neither money nor material things in themselves are a problem. Rather the problem – which *should* concern us – is a love of these things that takes priority over the truth and goodness of heaven. Thus to sell what we have is to exchange our own ideas and affections for new and different ones that the Lord provides. It is, essentially, to divest ourselves of the pride of our own intelligence and, as we say in our traditional prayer, “the lust of power.” It is to be delivered “from sordid avarice and covetous desire, from all murmuring and discontent, from all ingratitude to (the Lord) and to our neighbor.”

These evils sound pretty bad, and most of us find it hard to admit that we are possessed of such things in ordinary life. But they are there in all of us, lurking just below the surface, and if we want to enter into a heavenly life we really have to get rid of them. This now takes us to the three *negative* references to pearls in Revelation 17 and 18.

Here we are shown a vivid picture of what these same evils really look like, and what we can expect if we associate ourselves with them. The image of course is of a great whore, “the mother of harlots,” a woman drunk with the blood of saints all dressed in scarlet and riding on a scarlet

beast with seven heads and ten horns – notably the same as the dragon that persecuted the woman clothed with the sun. It’s all very grotesque. But note that she was also “adorned with gold and precious stones *and pearls*....” What can THIS mean?

Well, again, the whole vision is symbolic, as is immediately clear when this woman is said to represent Babylon. But Babylon, in turn, represents the love of self and so the love of domineering over others, *specifically by using the goods and truths of religion to command respect and have its way*. This last part is what makes the vision so insidious.

Every one of us has the ability to mine the treasures of the Word and learn the things that make for a heavenly life. But when we USE these things to get our own way we commit a kind of profanation that is represented by harlotry. Oh yes, we “wear” the gold and precious stones and pearls of Divine teaching outwardly, but only to lure and persuade and control others for our own pleasure. The inner love in such cases is still only selfish, and so the precious things that normally represent truths are corrupted and instead come to represent attractive-looking falsities.

We won’t go into all the details of the rest of this vision, suffice it to say that the woman was cast down and that then the kings and the merchants of the earth and the shipmasters who traded for all her finery mourned and wept for her, not because of any virtue in them or her but “because no one would buy their merchandise anymore” (Rev. 18:11). What this means is that when the hypocrisy of using holy things to serve one’s selfish interest is exposed, then no one has to “buy into” those falsities any longer and the awful game of spiritual manipulation is over. This Divine judgment leads directly into the description of the fabulous new and holy city in the final chapters of Revelation where, as already noted, the pearl is restored as an image of genuine, introductory truths about the Lord, and where access to Him is provided for everyone in the marvelous new revelation of rational, understandable truths about Him.

We don’t have time to say much about the Divine warning not to cast our pearls before swine (that could be a whole sermon in its own right). For now just keep in mind what was said about profanation, and remember, it’s not all about “us and them,” it’s about what all the characters in the stories represent in each of us!

So, to conclude, we return to the merchant seeking beautiful pearls, and we note once more how this illustrates our process of preparing for heaven. We are certainly not all pearl merchants, but we should all be seeking the *pearls of wisdom* that the Lord provides in His Word. And when we do finally discover that greatest of all truths, that our knowledge and acknowledgment of Him is the gateway to heaven, let us pray that we, too, are willing to “sell all that we have” and do whatever it takes to get that knowledge – so that we may really have eternal life.

Amen.

Lessons: Jonah 1-2
Children’s talk: “Not my will, but Thy will be done”

Matthew 13:31-35 & 44-46;
Apocalypse Revealed #916
