

The Greatest Treasure of All

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[0 : 00] Pray for his help with it before we come to it together. The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Speak to us now, Father, through your everlasting words that reveals everlasting treasure to us, that we might live for your glory.

In the name of Jesus, we pray. Amen. Colombian state secrets.

I wonder if that's what you expected to hear about when you walked in here this evening. Well, let me tell you about them. Or let me tell you about one, at least, just to whet your appetite.

Because one of Colombia's state secrets is the location of the San Jose. San Jose. San Jose.

[1 : 02] San Jose. San Jose. San Jose. San Jose was the name of a Spanish galleon. Big ship. It was sunk in battle off the northern coast of South America in 1708.

For more than 300 years, its location remained a mystery. Nobody knew where this ship lay until she was finally discovered just a few years ago in November 2015.

A month later, the president of Colombia announced the world the discovery of the ship. San Jose. San Jose. But he did not announce the location.

And I bet you can guess why. San Jose. San Jose was carrying some valuables.

And when I say some valuables, I mean 200 tons of gold, silver, and emeralds.

[2 : 07] With an estimated value of 17 billion dollars. That's a lot of treasure, isn't it?

17 billion dollars of gold, silver, and emeralds buried somewhere in the depths of the ocean. It's a little wonder the Colombian government aren't advertising its whereabouts.

But it's also a little wonder, is it, that the Colombian government are determined to recover it.

Apparently, it's still an ongoing process.

Apparently not easy to gather treasure buoyed in a shipwreck at the bottom of the ocean. But it's worth putting some effort in to get, isn't it? 17 billion dollars worth of treasure.

It is worth a little inconvenience to try and get your hands on. You don't just pass over something like that, do you? And leave it for the next person to stumble upon.

[3 : 09] When you find something of great value, you make an effort to go and get it. This evening we are going to see or hear about something very valuable. So much so that it is worth giving everything you have to get your hands on it.

We've been in Matthew 13 for a number of weeks now and we've seen, haven't we, as we've been going through these parables, that the surprising nature of God's kingdom, the surprising nature of God's kingdom is really what this whole section of Matthew's been about, all the way back from the beginning of chapter 11. Do you remember that question that John the Baptist asked? He asked Jesus, didn't he, are you the one to come or should we expect another?

John was asking that, wasn't he? Because he was surprised by the unassuming, unimpressive way in which Jesus, as king, was establishing his kingdom. And so he asked him, pretty up front, doesn't he? Is this it? Is this it? And Jesus, well, Jesus says yes, doesn't he? This is it. But he's been using these parables in Matthew 13 to explain to those who would come to him why the kingdom of heaven does look so unimpressive to the onlooking world and sometimes do us as well. Last week we saw that while the kingdom of heaven might sometimes appear pitifully small, as small as a mustard seed, Jesus knows that it is going to grow and grow and grow and grow and grow and grow and grow and grow. So that what once started as a tiny seed will soon dominate the horizon? The week before we were thinking about how the kingdom of heaven seems to be surrounded by sin and wickedness, not just a small kingdom, but an apparently weak kingdom. We saw, didn't we, that Jesus is patiently waiting for his kingdom to grow so that the harvest will be as bountiful as possible. Well, in our two parables this evening, we see once more that the kingdom of heaven

might not at first glance appear to be that impressive. But look under the surface and you will find something of incomparable value.

The value of God's kingdom, the worth of God's kingdom is the focus of these two parables. And we're going to look at this evening passage in just two simple points. God's kingdom is worth more than you can imagine. And it is worth giving up everything to get. And do that, we're going to span across both these parables with each of these points, seeing how they both together point us to this overarching point. But we'll pause for thought at various points to hear the nuances of each of the individual parables as we go through. So let's begin. Let us begin with our first point this evening, looking at the worth of the kingdom. God's kingdom is worth more than you can imagine. In each of these parables, Jesus compares that the kingdom of heaven doesn't need to something that is obviously valuable. You probably picked that up as we read through them. Treasure and pearls.

[7:12] Valuable? Yes, obviously. Great, point done. But it's always worth asking, right, why? Okay, why does Jesus choose those two things? Why not gold or silver or silk or diamonds or emeralds? Why treasure and pearls? And asking that question helps us, I think, just understand the specifics about what Jesus wants us to understand about the worth of the kingdom of heaven. So first we see the worth of the kingdom of heaven is hidden. It is not immediately obvious.

In verse 44, Jesus compares the kingdom of heaven to treasure, but where is that treasure? Where is it? It is hidden in a field.

Throughout this whole chapter, Jesus has been focusing on why the kingdom of heaven does not look as impressive as you think it might or think it should look.

And here Jesus is reminding us that just because it doesn't necessarily look like much on the surface, that doesn't mean there is not great treasures beneath what the eye can see.

To some people, looking at the kingdom of heaven will be like looking at a by-average field that has nothing to offer.

[8:49] It's just a lot of soil. But to those in the know, there is incomparable riches under the surface. Matthew's original audience would have been all too aware of that.

What does Jesus' reign on earth look like for them in their context, at their moment in history? A few house churches scattered across the Mediterranean, huddled together, many in fear of persecution. That would not have looked impressive or valuable, would it? They wouldn't have looked like households of great treasures. Imagine someone walking down the streets of a Roman village, and they pass by Nympha's house.

We don't know much about Nympha. We meet her very briefly at the end of Colossians, but we know that a church met in her house. A stranger walks by on a Saturday afternoon, and there is Nympha and a handful of her friends, maybe a dozen of them, and they're trying to sing together. They don't have hymn sheets or projectors, do they? Some of them know the words. Probably not all of them do. A few of them are just kind of opening and closing their mouths, like you do when you're trying to pretend you know the words, but you really don't.

[10:15] We've all been there, haven't we? You know, of the nine that do know the words, only four of them can sing in tune. And so, Mike or whoever, walking by on his way home from Sainsbury's, you know, lets out a little chuckle as he walks past.

There's Nympha and her friends, trying to sing about that Jesus guy they keep on prattling on about. Thoroughly unimpressive, isn't it?

Not worth stopping by, not worth a moment's notice, other than to be entertained in an otherwise tedious walk home. Anyone looks on at God's kingdom on the earth from a distance, and it might well appear nothing more than a barren field, nothing new to offer, nothing exciting to entice you in, but walk into that house.

Walk into that house, dig under the surface, you ask Nympha what she has, and you will find something so, so valuable.

Yes, it might be hidden. Yes, Christ's kingdom might not look impressive to the watching world. I mean, look at us. Right, a hundred or so people gathered in a building on a cold autumn evening, listening to a man talk about Colombian seawater.

[11:47] It's not that impressive, is it? But dig under the surface, and you will find treasure. We'll come to think in just a moment what that treasure is, but let's first of all hear what Jesus has to say of the value of this treasure by glancing down just to our second parable this evening.

Jesus says, 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.

Around the same time, Matthew was writing his gospel, there was a man called Pliny the Elder.

He's a Roman scholar, and he was penning his famous work, Natural History.

I say famous work. I imagine a lot more people have read Matthew than have read Pliny's Natural History. But Pliny recorded a story in his book of what is reputedly the most expensive meal in history.

Because apparently, a hundred years or so before Cleopatra, the famous queen of Egypt, probably heard of her, made a bet with a man called Mark Antony that she could put on a meal worth 10 million sesters.

[13:10] I don't know how you say it. Roughly 30 million pounds today. She laid out dinner before her guests, and it was an impressive spread.

But it was nowhere near the 30 million mark until she took off her pearl earring and dropped it in a glass of vinegar, dissolved it, and downed the lot.

And not only does that sound expensive, it sounds quite disgusting, but the point is that that was that. Mark Antony immediately conceded defeat.

One pearl, 30 million pounds done and dusted. When we read pearl, we might think something quite nice, but isn't really that valuable.

It's only for the last hundred years or so, right, that we've been able to form pearls, and so there's far more of them about now than there ever has been previously. Before then, natural pearls were all you could get.

[14:21] And apparently, it's a one in 10,000 chance of an oyster naturally producing a pearl, and even then, right, the likelihood is it wouldn't be much to write home about.

It wouldn't be a very valuable pearl. The point is this, when we read pearls in the Bible, we shouldn't be thinking just another thing in a long line of jewelry items.

They were exceptionally rare. And so exceedingly valuable. In fact, Pliny writes earlier in his book that pearls occupy the very highest position amongst all valuables.

That is what Jesus is likening the kingdom of heaven to here. Not just a pearl, but a pearl like no other, a merchant in search of fine pearls.

He knows his fine pearls, but he finds one pearl of great value. So let's put together those two things, and what do we get?

[15:33] What is the value of the kingdom of heaven? Well, it is not immediately obvious, but it is incomparably valuable. It might not look like much to the untrained eye, but there is nothing, nothing that compares to the worth of this kingdom.

And there is nothing in this world that compares to the worth of this kingdom, because this kingdom is not of this world. We heard earlier from 1 Peter 1 that Judy read for us, and I think that passage really helpfully summarizes this worth that we're talking about here.

Peter speaks plainly, doesn't he, of faith. That is, faith in Jesus Christ as more valuable than gold. I wonder if that's how you think of your faith this evening.

More precious than gold. Because it is through that faith that we are born again into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

And into an inheritance that can never spoil, perish, or fade. The kingdom of heaven does not promise you riches in this life.

[16:54] But it does guarantee you an eternal, imperishable inheritance in the kingdom to come. Do you know that's what's waiting for you? As you drag yourself out of bed on a Monday morning to trudge off to work.

As you get the kids ready for school, Jesus is busy getting a room ready for you in his kingdom. Inheritance that can never perish spoil or fade kept in heaven for you.

I'm sure you heard the news of Alex Salmon's passing yesterday. Came as something of a shock, didn't it? Completely out of the blue, out of nowhere.

All of a sudden, someone who always seemed full of endless energy was gone. It's a poignant reminder, isn't it?

That our days in this life are very short. And they could come to an end at any minute. And that determines, doesn't it?

[18:07] It determines the value of everything in this world. that we often hold so dear. We weigh up, rightly, don't we, the worth of something based on how long it will last.

If you're buying a car that's on its last legs, you'll pay a lot less for it than one that's got 100,000 miles left in it. The thing is, everything in this life comes with an expiry date.

Because we come with an expiry date. And so does this world. And so even the most valuable things this world has to offer, even if you dug up all the treasures of the San Jose, you might as well cover it, completely cover it with all those, you know, those yellow reduced stickers you get in Tesco.

You know the ones I mean? Because what do those stickers tell you? They say, don't they? Perishing soon.

Not as valuable as once thought. Brothers and sisters, that is how we should see every treasure of this world. Perishing soon.

[19:36] Not as valuable as once thought. But there is one treasure that is not and never will perish. And that is the kingdom of heaven.

That is why its worth is incomparable. There is nothing that compares to its value because there is nothing else.

There is nothing else that can save you and there is nothing else that will last beyond the short years of this life and into eternity. There is no greater treasure. There is no greater prize.

There is nothing else worth living for. This kingdom is worth more than you can imagine because even though it might be hidden at first, it is more valuable than anything else this world has to offer.

And if the kingdom of heaven is worth more than we can imagine, then it's going to be worth everything we've got. Second and final point this evening, worth everything you've got.

[20:49] I don't know if you noticed as we were reading through them, but both these parables have pretty much identical endings. The man who found the treasure in the fields went and sold all that he had so that he could buy that field.

The one who found the pearl went and sold all that he had so he could buy that pearl. And they realized the worth of what's before them.

They're willing, eager, eager to give up all they have to get their hands on it. It's significant, isn't it, that the man in the fields, he doesn't, does he, he doesn't kind of go off and begrudgingly take off, take out a mortgage and think, man, this is going to cost me a lot in the short term, but I suppose it's worth it for the long run.

No, what does he do? In his joy, he went and sold all that he had knowing what we have guaranteed for us in the future should give us genuine joy in the present.

This man is full of joy before he's got the treasure because he knows that he is one day soon going to have it. Hope for the future should bring joy in the present and hope for this future should make us ready to give up everything we have to get it.

[22:18] Jesus is not saying here that the kingdom of heaven can be bought for the right price.

What he is saying is that the kingdom of heaven is of such great worth that we should be ready, be ready to give up anything and everything in order to have it, in order to be part of it and in order to serve it.

Philippians 3, the Apostle Paul writes, Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

For his sake, I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I might gain Christ.

I count all things as rubbish in order that I might gain Christ. That is what Jesus is teaching you.

That is the same attitude he wants every one of his disciples to have.

When we know the true value of this kingdom, we will be able to say, I want to follow Jesus no matter what. I want to follow Jesus even if it means persecution or poverty because it means citizenship in the kingdom of heaven.

[23:49] I want to follow Jesus when it will cost me friends and family because I know the unsurpassable worth of knowing Christ.

I want to follow Jesus when it will bring me shame and solitude because then I will own the greatest treasure of all. Can we say that for ourselves?

I think we're able to say that more and more as we grasp greater the depths of just how valuable this kingdom of heaven truly is.

And I think that helps us answer the big question of this whole section of Matthew's gospel as well, doesn't it? Why does the kingdom of heaven look so unimpressive?

In part, because the kingdom of heaven's citizens do not value what this world values. The world will see a man selling all his possessions in order to buy what they think is a barren field and think, well, what a crackpot.

[25 : 04] But the one who owns the field, foolish as he might be in the eyes of the world, he knows, doesn't he? He's got the bargain of the century. The kingdom of heaven will look unimpressive because everything that the world values, this kingdom's inhabitants are ready to hand over, saying, we'll gladly give it all up in order to have the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus.

us. So do not expect this kingdom to look powerful and wealthy. Expect it to look poor and powerless because everyone in this kingdom is living for something far greater, holding on to the greatest treasure of all, even if not everyone can see it.

One of my favorite missionary stories is that of C.T. Studs. C.T. Studs was from a very wealthy family. He went to Eton and Cambridge, one of those.

And he was an incredibly gifted cricketer, which is probably why I like him. I like cricket. Sorry about that. So maybe not everyone's cup of tea here, but whether you like cricket or not, C.T. Studs was still very good at it.

He played in the original test match between England and Australia, the one that the Ashes were named after. When his dad passed away, he came into a large inheritance. Here was a man who could have had fame and wealth in the eyes of the world.

[26 : 39] He had it all right in front of him, but here is what he said. He said, I know that cricket would not last, and honor would not last, and nothing in this world would last, that it was worthwhile living for the world to come.

C.T. Studs gave up his cricket career, and he gave away his inheritance, and went and served as a missionary in China. His family tried to talk him out of it.

They couldn't believe what he was doing. He had to return after 10 years due to ill health, but it wasn't long before he was back in a boat, this time in India. After a few years in India, he had to return home again and was plagued by ill health stemming from typhoid and was advised when he was 50 years old, right, it's time to give up.

It's time to stop with these mystery journeys. So he went to Africa, where he set up the Heart of Africa mission. He would die 20 years later, at the age of 71, in a Bambi, deep in the hearts of the Democratic Republic of Congo.

He could have had all that the world held dear, but he was ready to give it all up, wasn't he? Because he knew where the greatest treasure of all lay.

[28 : 15] It wasn't in sporting fame, which he could have had, it wasn't in the wealth of this world, which he had and chose to give away. His treasure was in Christ, and he gladly gave up all that he had to follow God's calling in his life.

God might not call many of us or any of us to go to the heart of Africa for the sake of the gospel, but we can still have that same attitude that he did, can't we?

Ready, eager, to give up everything for the kingdom of heaven. Knowing the world, maybe even our family and friends, will look on in disbelief.

But we do so because we know we have a treasure worth more than we can imagine. and we too should be ready to give up everything else in this world for the sake of this kingdom.

Let us pray. Father, we thank you that the kingdom of heaven is worth more than all the riches that this world has to offer.

[29 : 34] and we thank you that you welcome us in as citizens of this kingdom simply by putting our faith and trust in Jesus. But we pray, Lord, that we too would be ready, eager, to give up anything and everything not only in order to be part of this kingdom but in order to serve this kingdom.

Even when the world looks on in disbelief, may we hold on to the certain hope we have in Christ, knowing that in him we have an eternal inheritance that will never spoil, perish, or fade.

In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.