

Forgiveness in Christ  
Matthew 13:44-52  
July 30, 2023

Dear Friends in Christ,

This morning we have before us a collection of short parables that our Lord teaches in Matthew 13. It may seem at first to be a hodge-podge collection of stories, but this is not the case; our Lord is at work to teach us much about His Church and its mission. Let's take a closer look at each of them.

We'll take the first two parables together, where our Lord teaches, that the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for the joy of his discovery he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. 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. We look at these two parables together because they have such a similar theme: In each one, there is something precious that a man redeems by giving up all that he has.

At the same time, there's an important difference: The pearl is on display for all to see, while the treasure is hidden in a field. We'd better talk about that treasure in the field, because it sounds like the man who finds it is trying to rip off the man who owns the land.

At the time of Jesus, there were no local bank branches on every corner of town, so people had to hide their money to keep it safe. One option was to bury it in a field, so that only the owner knew where it was; at times, however, the owner would die or just forget where he had buried the treasure. Therefore, the law of the land stipulated that if someone found a treasure while cutting through a field, he could not simply pick it up and walk away. However, he could cover up the treasure, go to the owner of the land and offer to buy the field. If the owner knew about the treasure, he could refuse to sell or could get the treasure before he sold.

But the point of the law was this: In order to get the treasure, the finder could not just take the money, but had to redeem the whole field. This teaches us about our Savior: In order to save all who would believe in Him, Jesus died for the sins of the world. He has redeemed all by His death on the cross, suffering God's judgment for the sins of believers and unbelievers alike. He has done this so that whoever believes in Him will not perish, but have everlasting life (Jn. 3:16).

In both of these parables-the hidden treasure and the pearl, Jesus is the One who is giving up everything to get the treasure. These parables are sometimes preached as if He is the treasure and pearl, and that we make Him our Savior by giving everything for Him. True, He is a priceless treasure; but what do we have that can purchase His salvation? We are sinful, and our righteousness is but filthy rags.

On the other hand, the Scriptures declare that Jesus gave everything that He has in order to redeem the world, for He wins salvation by His holy, precious blood, and by His bitter suffering and death. In these parables, Jesus is the One who gives all to redeem the world, that He might ransom the treasure.

Therefore, dear Christians, you are the treasure. You are the pearl of great price, for the treasure of the parables is the Church, the people of God. Despite your sin and guilt, God the Father almighty cherishes you so much that He has paid a great price for your salvation—the death of His Son. You were dead in your trespasses and sins, so the Son of God came to this field and unearthed you from that death. He washed you clean in your Baptism; He continues to polish and preserve you by His Word and Supper. He has given everything at the cross to redeem you, and you are His treasure.

Why does our Lord use two parables to make this point? Let's go back to the difference between the two: The pearl is on display for all to see, while the treasure is hidden in the field. It serves us well to note that the Church is both visible and hidden. It is visible: You can tell that there is a Church on earth because there are visible signs. There are church buildings, Christian bookstores, journals and magazines, nativity scenes and all sorts of Christian mission groups. It is obvious to the world that the Church exists, just as the pearl is obvious as it is on display in the parable.

However, the Church is also hidden: Christians are saved by faith, and faith cannot be seen. Therefore, the true Church, those who are the people of God, cannot be discerned by man. We cannot stand on a street corner and look at a crowd and say, "I can see that that one is a believer and that one is not;" there is no secret 3-D tattoo on foreheads that only Christians can see. Or, in parts of the world where Christianity is prohibited by law, there may be no church buildings or public displays; but there may well be Christians who worship underground. On the contrary, there are many organizations that claim to bring Christ to the nations, yet they may not preach the Gospel. In such a case, it looks visibly like the Church, but it is not. In other words, while we can look and see visible proof that the Church exists, the true Church is hidden. There will be unbelievers in the visible Church until the Last Day; but they are not part of the true Church, those whom the Lord knows to be His own. In all of this, however, these two parables announce a great truth.

In places and at times, the Church's presence will be obvious to all. In other places and at other times, the Church will be hidden, driven underground and known only by faith. But it does not matter: The Lord knows His people He knows all things, visible and hidden. He has given His all at the cross, shedding His precious blood in order to redeem His people. He will not forsake His Church, His treasure, after paying such a great price to redeem her. The Lord knows and remains faithful to His people for as long as this world lasts.

But this world will not last forever: Judgment Day is coming. And that's the topic of the next parable, the dragnet. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was cast into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. When it was full, men drew it ashore and they sat down and sorted the good into containers, but threw away the bad. So it will be at the close 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.

It is especially simple to explain a parable when the Lord provides the explanation. The dragnet represents the final judgment, and it is chosen with care. Unlike a fishing lure or a fly, the dragnet is not discriminating: It captures everything in its path and leaves nothing behind. All the fish are then sorted when the catch is hauled up on shore. This portrays the Last Day, when the Son of Man returns, and all His holy angels with Him. There will be a judgment of all. The righteous will

be delivered to heaven, and the unrighteous will be sentenced to eternal condemnation. This is the Word of the Lord, and this parable is supported by the rest of the Scriptures.

Many will object to this doctrine of judgment and hell, and many will use it as an excuse to deny the Savior. "It's so unfair," they will say. "How could a loving God allow so many to perish, toss them away to destruction like so many bad fish?" The question sounds legitimate, but it is terribly uninformed. We respond with the Scriptures. First, remember the parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl. All of us, by nature, are un-redeemed. All of us by nature are lost and condemned in our sin. God is not to blame for this. One might just as well blame doctors for disease or aid workers for famine.

By nature, we are all destined for destruction. The world therefore responds, "If God is God, then why doesn't He do something about it?" The answer is, of course, that He has. The parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl both tell us that He has given His all to redeem the whole world. He has given His Son to suffer. He has judged His Son for the sins of all the world! At the cross, the Lord has won enough forgiveness so that no one need be condemned. "Well, then," snipes the world, "How come so many are condemned? This loving Jesus of yours certainly seems to be a merciless 'hanging judge.'" This just shows the blindness of sin. Jesus is not a hanging judge who desires the death of the wicked; He is the Judge who has been hanged on the cross for the sins of all the wicked. He has given His life and shed His blood for all people, so that He need not judge them. Talk about mercy! How many judges offer to suffer execution in order to set the guilty free? The world is still not satisfied, but rails, "If He's died to redeem the world, how come He doesn't just save everybody?" The answer is that the Lord does not force people to be forgiven; they can cling to their killing sinfulness if they prefer. He does not coerce people to be His disciples. He offers love and forgiveness, mercy and salvation to all; but He compels no one to be saved. Therefore, unbelievers are not condemned because the Lord is not merciful; they are condemned because they have rejected His mercy. This Judge, whom unbelievers reject, has died to redeem them. What more can He do?

So, the parable of the dragnet gives solemn warning and cause for joy. The warning is that those who do not believe in Jesus will be condemned on the Last Day. The cause for joy is that believers, the Lord's precious treasure, will be gathered and kept in the kingdom of God forever. So, what does this have to do with you and me today, prior to the Day of Judgment? There's one more parable to go.

Jesus said to them, "Have you understood all these things? They said to Him, "Yes, Lord." Then 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."

Jesus is now speaking to His disciples alone, and He is preparing them to be His apostles. Throughout the parables of Matthew 13, He has taught them about the kingdom of heaven. He has taught them about the Gospel. He has taught them about missions. Do they understand what He has taught? Yes, and it's vitally important that they do so. Why? Because He will send them forth to teach. They are His scribes, entrusted with the preservation and proclamation of His Word. They are to care for His house, His Church. And as His householders, they are to proclaim this treasure of salvation. They will declare that Christ is the Savior, for all the Scriptures of both Testaments declare Him to be the Redeemer of the world.

The disciples are householders, not homeowners. They do not own the treasure; they manage the treasure that belongs to the Lord of the house. They manage His treasure, not their own. They proclaim His Word, not their own message. If they change the message, they have moved to a different household.

We continue in the one, holy Christian and apostolic Church; in other words, we proclaim the same message as those apostles did. Pastors publicly preach the Word and administer the Sacraments; all Christians receive the forgiveness that Christ has won, and then go and help their neighbor. They help their neighbor by faithfully performing the jobs that they have, and by helping them in a pinch. They help their neighbor by telling them about Jesus as the opportunity arises. They help their neighbor by their tithes and offerings at church, so that the public proclamation of the Word continues.

And it is the public proclamation of the Word the message of sin and grace, of Christ and cross - that is the treasure we are given to give. If we fail to proclaim Christ and Christ alone, then we are no longer doing our Lord's will. Therefore, week after week, we declare the forgiveness of sins; and, of course, this means that we must talk about the sin that needs to be forgiven.

And there's the rub: The world doesn't like to hear about sin, and once again makes all sorts of misguided objections. In hearing of God's condemnation of sin, many will respond to the Church by saying, "And who are you to judge me? Who are you to condemn how I live? How dare you!" The true response is simple, supported by the parable of the householder: "We are no one to judge you; we are simply telling you what God's Word says about your sin. He is the judge, not us. This is His Word, not ours. Even so, He does not want to condemn you. That is why He is warning you of your sin now, before the Judgment. That is why He has died to save you from judgment. We do not warn of your sin in order to condemn you; we warn you of sin so that you can be saved FROM condemnation." That is the job of the Church, according to the parable of the householder: To proclaim the precious message of the Lord's salvation. A There is one Savior who has redeemed the world; all other gods are false. Therefore, we proclaim the one who has given up everything to save His people.

Therefore, as we conclude, we see that all of these parables have a common theme: Missions. Evangelism - the giving of the forgiveness of sins. The parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl declare Christ's redemption of the world by His death on the cross, and His faithfulness to His people. The parable of the dragnet teaches that all who believe will be saved from judgment by the forgiveness Jesus has won for them. And the parable of the householder tells us the message that we proclaim: The message of the crucified and risen Savior.

The message that you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.