

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

G. Campbell Morgan, D.D.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

MATTHEW 13:45, 46

THE parable of the pearl, while most evidently kin to that of the hidden treasure, is in advance of it, and in some aspects different from it. Essentially there is nothing here which we have not already dealt with. The central and acting Person is again “**a man.**” The search for, and the discovery of treasure dealt with in the last parable is also present. The thought of purchase at cost, to which we were introduced in the last parable, is also in this, “**He . . . went and sold all that he had, and bought it.**”

It is upon new emphases that our attention is principally centered when we come to a study of this parable. The man here is a merchant seeking treasure of a peculiar kind, “**goodly pearls.**” In this quest he is rewarded, as he finds “**one pearl of great price.**”

I need hardly stay to say that I do not accept the interpretation of the parable which regards the pearl of great price as the Saviour, and the merchant seeking and selling all to obtain the pearl, as the sinner. Such an interpretation, as we have already seen, contradicts the whole scheme of the teaching, and is out of harmony with all the facts of experience.

Let us first examine these new emphases of the pearl and the merchant, and then attempt to interpret the parable according to their suggestiveness.

While the actual wording of the parable introduces us first to the man who is a merchant seeking goodly pearls, I propose to commence examination by taking the pearl itself. “**One pearl of great price.**” We invariably speak of this parable as the parable of the pearl. It is that which arrests our attention, and, I think, according to the Master’s intention.

First remember, the pearl was not precious to the Hebrews.

In the Old Testament there are some wonderful and graphic descriptions of precious stones, “**stones of fire,**” as they are poetically called, but the pearl is not mentioned.

It had no place on the breastplate of the high priest.

When Job answered the criticism of Bildad the Shuhite in parable, he asks,

“**But where shall wisdom be found?**”

Then he proceeds to enumerate precious things which are not current coin in the market place where wisdom is to be sought, things with which wisdom cannot be bought.

**“It cannot be valued with the gold of Ophir,
With the precious onyx, or the sapphire.
The gold and the crystal cannot equal it:
And the exchange of it shall not be for jewels of fine gold.
No mention shall be made of coral, or of pearls:
for the price of wisdom is above rubies.”**

The root of the Hebrew word “**pearl**” suggests *something frozen*.

Now it is a striking fact that only in these cases is the word pearl mentioned in our Bible. Supposing, however, for the sake of argument, that the word pearl is the one intended, still remember it is quoted by the greatest of all the men of the East as not to be mentioned beside the worth of wisdom. Other stones are mentioned, even though dismissed, but he says, “**No mention shall be made of coral, or of pearls,**” thus signifying its contemptible value.

I have taken time to show this, because it is an interesting fact that the Hebrews did not count the pearl in the least precious.

One can imagine, therefore, when Jesus used the figure how surprised a look would come upon the faces of the Hebrew disciples gathered round Him. He had spoken in previous parables of the treasure hidden in the field, and they understood it; but when He particularized, and used the words “**pearl,**” “**goodly pearls,**” the thought was startling from the Hebrew standpoint.

These men were, of course, quite conversant with the fact that the pearl was held as a precious stone among the Gentiles. The study of the place of the pearl in Gentile usage is most interesting.

From recent investigations made in Egypt, it has been discovered that the decoration of ancient kings consisted largely of gold, inset with jewels, and occasionally with pearls. When we come to Nineveh, we find that the pearl was in greater use. An increasing value was gradually set upon it, until in our day it is accounted as the most precious thing in the East. It is, however, of Gentile value. Thus Christ took as an emblem of the most precious thing that which was most valuable according to Gentile estimate, but something which was outside Hebrew figures of speech, because outside Hebrew conceptions of value.

Bearing that in mind, let us go a step further. There are certain facts about the pearl we shall do well to notice.

First, the pearl is the direct product of a living organism.

So far as I am aware there is no other precious stone of which that is true.

In the next place, remember that the pearl is the result of injury done to the life that produces it.

“A pearl is found beneath the flowing tide,
And there is held a worse than worthless thing,
Spoiling the shell-built home where it doth cling
Marring the life near which it must abide.”

A grain, of sand intruding, something that hinders and injures and harms, is the root principle of the pearl.

But that is not the pearl. What, then, is it? The pearl is the answer of the injured to the injury done. The pearl is the injuring element transmuted by processes of covering until the injurious thing is turned into a precious jewel.

We all know the story of how in the shell of the oyster the pearl is formed. The intrusion of a grain of sand, or some other foreign substance; and then the covering of it with the nacre, or mother-of-pearl, layer after layer, exquisitely wrought, until at last the thing that hurt and harmed and injured has been made the basis upon which this whole pearl, a rare and beautiful jewel, is built up. So the pearl is the answer of the injured life to that which injures it.

Go one step further in considering this. What is the use of the pearl? It is to us wholly a thing of beauty, ornamental, decorative; but in eastern thought it is emblematic and symbolic.

From the artistic standpoint merely, it is regarded carelessly, but in those eastern countries, where all the lights and shadows of imagination play so wonderful a part, and every rare thing is symbolic, the pearl is an ornament symbolizing innocence and purity, and prized for its significance.

The equivalent Greek word, *margarites*, means *purity*. It probably is derived from an old Sanskrit word also meaning purity, and this fact is very suggestive. The pearl is the answer of an injured life to the thing that injures, and the pearl is the symbol of innocence.

That which has worked an injury, that which was impure and harmful, has been so dealt with by the very life it has injured that it is transformed into a thing of glorious beauty, and stands for ever as a flashing illustration of essential purity. But the pearl is more than the symbol or emblem of purity.

It stood for the triumph of purity over impurity, and the wearing of the pearl was not in its deepest significance the wearing of that which stood for innocence only, but for the mighty triumph of good over evil.

Turn for a moment to the other special emphasis, that of the merchant.

He is here one who is seeking goodly pearls. Yet it is impossible to think of him as seeking goodly pearls merely for his own sake or adornment. He is a merchant seeking goodly pearls for others, and the easternness of the picture is apparent.

Put yourself back into the eastern land, and watch the operation. His haste to purchase, his determination to purchase at any cost, is the eastern coloring of the picture, and shows that he has at length discovered a jewel so precious as to be worthy for the adornment of a king only; for in those eastern lands none but kings were allowed to wear the finest, and even in Persia to-day the discovery of any costly pearl means that it must find its way to the Shah.

Here, then, is a merchant, finding a pearl which is worthy of the king's acceptance, and which may be for the adornment of one who alone has the right to wear it. There are other pearls, but this is of supreme value, for it manifests the most wonderful victory, contains within itself the most resplendent beauty, and is therefore the most perfect symbol of all that such a jewel may represent.

Turning from this examination of the special emphases of the pearl and the merchant, let us in the light of these things think for a moment of what this parable really means.

At this point our Lord touches a mystery far deeper than any already declared. Here He speaks in the hearing of His disciples things they will only come to understand presently. This is what Paul speaks of as the definite and specific "**mystery**" of the Church.

In this parable Jesus shows that the chief, though not the final value of this Kingdom age is that during it there is to be gathered out and presented to God that which will be the finest, fairest, and most resplendent jewel that will ever flash upon His bosom in all the ages of eternity.

I know full well how imperfect these words are, and yet I have no other in which to clothe the thoughts. Out of the mystery of sin, and out of the mystery of evil, and out of the mystery of this age in which the Kingdom values seem to be so fluctuating and uncertain, there is yet to be found and gathered the chief jewel of the Father's house, the most glorious thing for His possession, which shall reveal to the ages to come, and to unfallen intelligences, the grace and glory of God.

Among the treasures of this age the Church of Jesus Christ is supreme. The finding of the Church, in this as in the previous parables, is not accidental. Its discovery includes discernment of it, the indication of it to others, and the obtaining of it.

The merchant came, not seeking promiscuously, but bent on finding this very pearl. Remember, no figure can ever convey all the infinite fact, and looking at it in its infiniteness we see the limitations of the picture, and its inability to represent the whole truth.

We see Christ discovering this precious pearl, bringing it to the light and then mark very carefully the words made use of concerning Him here "**when he had found one pearl of great price, He went and sold all that He had, and bought it**"

May I change that, and read, very literally, "Having gone away, has sold all that He had, and bought it." This does not for a moment mean that He went away from the earth to buy it, but that He went away from Heaven to buy it.

We are looking at the Kingdom from Heaven's standpoint, not from earth's. Earth has never seen the precious pearl, has no conception of it. The pearl has not yet found itself. The Church has never been seen by the eye of mortal man. We catch glimpses of its glory, but the Church itself has never been seen. But Christ has seen the Church from eternity. He sees it through all the processes of its working; His love is set upon what it is, and what it will be; and He patiently awaits the accomplishment.

This parable records the estimate placed upon the pearl in the sight of high Heaven. "*Having gone away*" from Heaven, "**He sold all that He had, and bought it.**"

It is a perfect picture of One Who, seeing a pearl of great price, surrenders place, possessions, and all, that He may purchase that pearl, and take it back with Him to the place which He left for its purchasing.

Turn with me once more to another Scripture, I Peter 2:4 and 7.

Here again while the figure of the pearl is not to be found, the great facts of which it is a figure are set forth perfectly.

"To whom coming, as unto a living stone, disallowed indeed of men, but chosen of God, and precious."

Mark that word "**precious.**" The "**precious**" stone," this is spoken of the Lord Himself. "**Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house.**"

I omit the rest, because it describes the issue, and I go to verse 7, which describes the process. "**Unto you therefore which believe he is precious.**" What preciousness? His preciousness. The Christ of God is here described as being precious, and you may read all values into that word.

- In character, precious;
- In conduct, precious;
- In all the facts of His great personality, precious.

All the things God values center in Him. Rejected of men, but precious to God is He. We come to Him, says the apostle, and are built up. "**Unto you therefore which believe he is precious;**" that is to say, all that is precious in Him, is communicated to us who believe. That is the whole story of the development of Christian character.

To the last, to the unending ages of eternity, I shall never have anything of myself of which to boast in the presence of God. I shall always boast in the values that have been made mine by communication the values of the Christ character. Anything excellent in us is the Christ-life realized in us. He is precious, and "**unto you therefore which believe he is precious.**"

That does not mean that you hold Him precious in your affection; but that the precious values in Him are communicated to you, and we who come to Him worthless and base, are changed into worth and preciousness because He communicates to us His own infinite value.

Such is the story of the pearl.

It is first of all base, a worthless thing, harming the life to which it comes. And here is a most remarkable and exquisite figure of what happens in the building of the Church of Jesus Christ. We “**were not a people**” I still quote from Peter, and he is quoting from Hosea we “**now are the people of God;**” we “**had not obtained mercy,**” we “**now have obtained mercy.**”

How has the change been wrought? We came to Him worthless, and it was in our approach to Him that He was wounded and harmed, injured and bruised. Yet the answer of the injured One to that which harmed, was that He made over to us in the mystery of His harming, all the virtues and glories of His own character.

As the pearl is the outcome of a hurtful thing transformed into beauty and innocence by the communication of the life it hurt, so the Church of Jesus Christ in its entirety consists of such as wounded Him, and yet from that very wounding, and because of it, there has been, and is being communicated to them His virtue, His grace, His glory, His beauty.

He Who for the moment in the parable is the merchant, is infinitely more than the merchant. He is not only the One Who sees the possibility of the precious Jewel, but He Who transmutes the unsightly thing into the thing of beauty, the impure thing into the thing of innocence; the One Who has lifted out of the troubled sea of human sorrow a people that shall flash in glory for ever upon the bosom of God, the chief medium through which He shall manifest His grace and His glory in all the ages to come.

This is the subject of the Ephesian Epistle.

The parable is silent about that final issue, because it is only dealing with this age, but we may follow the pearl in imagination until it flashes upon the bosom of some potentate. If we reverently inquire what becomes of the pearl that Jesus finds, we may turn to that Epistle and there see its destination.

Paul first of all prays that these Christians may know “**the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints,**” a phrase rich and gracious and glorious in meaning.

Notice carefully Paul did not pray that they might know what was the greatness of their inheritance in God, but what was the greatness of God’s inheritance in them.

The thought is not that the saints are made rich in God, but that God is enriched in the saints, that in them He gains something for His possession. I dare not say that if it were not the teaching of the whole Epistle, and I dare hardly say it if it were but the suggestion of a verse. But mark the argument of the great Ephesian Epistle, and see to what end it works out.

In it Paul distinctly teaches us in what sense God gains in the Church.

He tells us that:

- The Church is to be the medium through which His grace, His goodness, His love are to be made known to the ages to come.
- The Church is to be that through which the unborn ages will know the grace of God and the love of God.
- A little further on in the same Epistle, he tells us that the Church is to be the instrument through which angels, principalities, powers, the unfallen intelligences of other worlds, will learn the wisdom of God.

This Church, redeemed, purchased, purified, glorified, is forever more to be the instrument through which the grace of God and the wisdom of God will be made known to ages and to principalities and to powers, until we get to the close of the letter, and Paul with one flash of light says and reading, think of the pearl of the parable:

“Christ also loved the Church, and gave Himself up for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.”

The pearl of great price is found in the midst of human wreckage - is gathered out of it, exalted, and made the medium through which in coming ages the infinite truth of God’s grace and wisdom shall be revealed.

Thus does God gain in the Church.

- He gains nothing of *essential glory*, but He gains a medium through which He may manifest that glory.
- He gains nothing of *essential grace*, but He gains a people, through whom His grace shall be revealed as could be in no other way.

No angel can sing the story of God’s grace as we whom His grace has transformed.

Some of you remember that wonderful poem by Mrs. Barrett Browning, “*The Seraphim*.” Imagination call it if you will, but it is high and holy imagination.

She describes seraphim watching the processes of the Master’s work on earth, watching with wonder as their Lord and King stoops to its dark places and suffers along its ways, until the meaning of His work breaking upon the intelligence of the angel-watchers.

One turns to the other and says:

“Hereafter shall the blood-bought captives raise
The passion-song of blood.”

And the other answering says:

“And we extend
Our holy vacant hands
Towards the throne,
Crying, ‘We have no music.’ “

And by comparison it is true. When the ransomed reach the land of light there will be some things of which they cannot sing more perfectly than the angels; but they will be able to sing of His love as angels never will. No angel can put into these words so much as I can put into them, “**He loved me and gave Himself for me**” And when all earth’s anthems have ceased, that will be the highest music of the eternities.

So in this age He is building this Church. He saw the pearl when yet but a possibility, injurious, useless, far off in the deep, dense darkness. He gathered the offending thing into His own life, and it wounded Him, harmed Him, and slew Him, but,

“He death by dying slew,
He hell in hell laid low,”

and as He transmutes the evil thing that harmed Him by the impartation of His own blameless character and holy life, He is building a glorious body for Himself, to which He ever shall be the Head, and which shall, in union with Himself, be God’s chief adornment in the ages yet to come.

“He found the pearl of greatest price,
My heart doth sing for joy;
And sing I must, for I am His,
And He is mine for aye.”

He has drawn and lifted me who harmed Him, and bestowed upon me His nature, His character, and His beauty, and presently He will present me, oh, matchless wonder, even me, “**faultless before . . . glory!**”

Then, O blessed be God, He will send me forth to other worlds, to other ages, to other beings, to preach His Cross, that they, too, may know the glory of His grace. This Church of the living God, the chosen and elect company who will become in their union with Christ the medium of manifestation, is the pearl the Merchant saw; and to give which to God He poured out all that He had. Our hearts may rest assured that in all the apparent failure of the Kingdom ideal in the age not actual failure, for everything moves toward God’s ultimate the chief value, the chief glory, and the chief business, from Heaven’s standpoint, is the gathering out of the Church, and its preparation for a high and holy vocation in the ages yet to come, for that Church is the redeemed Kingdom of God.

~ end of chapter 38 ~

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