

In 1989, a man walked into a Pennsylvania flea market. As he perused the market's wares, he spotted what he called a "dismal painting." As dismal as the painting was, he thought the ornate frame that bordered it was beautiful. The vendor priced the frame at \$4, so the man paid \$4 and left. But when he got home and removed the frame, he discovered a folded piece of parchment behind the painting. Further investigation revealed that that paper was an original copy of the Declaration of Independence. At auction two years later, it sold for \$2 million; a profit of \$1,999,996! One man's \$4 trash, is another man's \$2 million treasure.

But what defines something as "treasure"? Is it just monetary value? Couldn't it be argued that a centuries-old family photo album, or a toddler's raggedy security blanket are valuable treasures also? Depending on their perspective, a person might see one thing as treasure, while another sees trash. So how can we know what's really valuable in this world? Is it all just personal opinion?

Jesus tells three parables in Matthew 13 to help us answer that question. Jesus often used parables--stories using earthly illustrations--to help people learn spiritual truths. Likewise, Jesus uses these three parables to teach us a spiritual truth—what constitutes **Truly Valuable Treasure** in God's eyes, why that treasure is truly valuable, and how we should use that treasure.

First, Jesus illustrates, **"The kingdom of Heaven is like treasure hidden in a field."** When Jesus says "the kingdom of heaven," he's talking about "God's ruling activity." Everything God does for people— especially the gospel good news of Jesus' saving work.

Because there weren't banks in Jesus' day, people often buried their money for safe keeping. In this parable, a man is digging in a field when he unexpectedly unearths a huge treasure. Quickly estimating the value, he does a joyful fist pump, and runs off to sell all his possessions so he can buy that field. Jewish law stated that the land owner also owned everything on that land—including the treasure!

Second, Jesus pictures the kingdom of Heaven **"like a merchant looking for fine pearls."** In antiquity, pearls were extremely valuable. And so this merchant, an expert in the pearl industry, finds the most beautiful, flawless pearl he'd ever seen. He immediately runs off and sells everything he owns so he could purchase this priceless pearl.

Did you notice what both men have in common? When they found their treasure, they immediately run off and sell everything they own to purchase it.

Can you imagine that? Leaving church today, as you drive, you see "it," something you just have to have on the side of the road. You immediately hop out of your car and put a "For Sale" sign on the windshield; you call a realtor and put your house on the market; you sell your stock, your cabin, your boat, and everything else you own, so you can possess that invaluable treasure.

But that's crazy, right? No one would do that! That is, unless the treasure was more valuable than everything else. We wouldn't think the man in the field was crazy for selling \$100,000 worth of stuff so he could own the \$2 million treasure in the field, or if the merchant sold his \$1 million pearl inventory to purchase one pearl worth \$10 million. People would give up everything for the treasure, if the treasure is more valuable than everything else.

And in that we see the truth Jesus teaches us. The gospel is the all-important, truly valuable treasure! And as such, we should be willing to sacrifice everything else in order to have and keep this gospel treasure.

That's really hard to put into practice though, isn't it? Especially when people often try to convince you the gospel is trash. "Really? You give money to your church? What a waste!" And those voices build on top of the myriad other things vying to be the most valuable treasure in our lives, and pressure us to sell spiritual wealth so we can possess the world.

Where our heart is found reveals what we've determined is truly valuable treasure. The man who thinks earthly wealth is his truly valuable treasure will quickly run off and sell his time in the Word, the spiritual leadership of his family, and godly business ethics to possess the earthly wealth he values. The woman who believes that validation and acceptance from others is her truly valuable treasure will quickly run off and sell her identity in Christ, her biblical worldview, and her godly lifestyle to possess the earthly approval she values.

We get the picture. And we feel the guilt. Because whether it's money, fame, family, football, gossip, lust, lies, approval, self-righteousness or subjective morality, we've all fallen for Satan's lies that everything else is our truly valuable treasure, selling off Jesus and the gospel to possess it. We've all sold truly valuable treasure...for trash.

How quickly our hearts voice angry objections! "Wait, you're saying my job, my money, my family, my friends, my status is...trash?" "But those things are more important right now! I can worry about God later." "Those things make my life happy, how can they be trash?"

Certainly, God fills our lives with blessings we can rightly view as valuable. The two men in the parables certainly didn't think that none of their other possessions were valuable. But if either had been unwilling to sell their \$1,000 mule to possess the treasure, they'd be trading something invaluable for something only moderately valuable.

That's the way the gospel changes our perspective. When the gospel becomes the truly valuable treasure in our lives, everything else is marginalized. Valuable, yes, but not ultimately valuable. However, something valuable becomes trash if it prevents us from possessing invaluable spiritual wealth.

But how can we know the gospel is truly valuable treasure, and not something else? Is it just personal opinion? Jesus explains why in his third parable. ***The kingdom of heaven is like a net in a lake that caught all kinds of fish. When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up. Then they collected the good fish...but threw the bad away. This is how it will be at the end of the age.***

The gospel is the only truly valuable treasure, because this world will end. Right now, everyone swims along freely and unimpeded like fish in a lake. But eventually, the nets get pulled up, and the fish are sorted. On Judgment Day, Jesus will return, and everyone will be judged and separated-- believers to Heaven, and unbelievers to Hell. And none of the other things we thought made our lives valuable—money, fame, or how impressive we looked to others-- will have any value. All that will matter then is your faith.

And that's why the gospel is the only truly valuable treasure. Because through the gospel, the Spirit brings us to faith, and keeps us in that faith in Jesus as Savior, which promises us eternal life. Spiritual wealth is the only treasure that pays eternal dividends.

But the law's threats of being thrown into ***"the fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"*** isn't enough. It's impossible to joyfully give from our earthly wealth for the sake of spiritual wealth through the law. You still grit your teeth dropping your envelope in the plate. I still groan dragging myself out of bed to do gospel ministry. We still cling tightly to everything else, unwilling to give it up to possess the perfect pearl. That's why that truly valuable treasure is so important. Because only through the gospel can we joyfully do such things!

An all-consuming desire for the gospel can only come from the good news that Jesus' all-consuming desire...was for you. That Jesus viewed you as the greatest treasure; the treasure that drove him to willingly give up everything—his power and glory as true God—so that he could purchase you from Satan and hell with his suffering and death. Jesus still views you as his priceless treasure, interceding for us, giving his righteousness to rebels like us who so often treat him like disposable trash. That's why we can joyfully give up everything else for the sake of the gospel. Because Jesus joyfully gave up everything so you would be his!

So practically, what does that look like? Does God demand that we move into monasteries and practice self-deprivation? Do we have to give away everything and become hermits living in desert caves? Should we give every last penny to Forward in Faith and live in a cardboard box under a bridge?

Not at all! Stewardship means having a proper understanding of how God wants you to view and use your treasure. Stewardship means realizing that everything you own is a gracious gift from God's hand. Stewardship means realizing that everything in this world is temporary, except the gospel. It means trusting that you could be gunned down at a concert, lose everything in a hurricane, or go bankrupt on a failed investment, and NOTHING can take away the greatest treasure you already possess through faith in Christ. Stewardship means you can joyfully give from your earthly wealth to support gospel ministry, trusting that God will provide for and care for you as you move forward in faith.

When God promised to give King Solomon anything he asked for, he could have focused on his earthly life and requested power or riches. But instead, Solomon focused on eternity and asked for ***"a discerning heart... to distinguish between right and wrong."*** He asked for spiritual wealth! But God blessed him physically also! Solomon's annual income equated somewhere around \$330 million a year!

Now, I'm not saying God will make you a billionaire like it's an "I do this for you, you do this for me" thing. No, we can joyfully give everything for Jesus, because Jesus already gave everything for us! We can trust his promise, ***"Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."*** As you give to God, he will provide everything you need, and will bless you with spiritual wealth beyond compare!

I can't imagine how that flea market vendor felt when he found out his \$4 trash was \$2 million treasure. That's what unbelievers think...that being a Christian, giving of your wealth to support the gospel is nothing more than \$4 trash. But the reality lies below the surface. A sacrificial life that values spiritual wealth over all else possesses a truly valuable treasure worth more than all the gold in the world. An eternal treasure. The treasure that is yours through Christ—our hidden treasure, our priceless pearl.