

July 27, 2008

Title: Pick Your Prized Possession Wisely

Text: Matthew 13:44-52

The Big Idea: Kingdom choices have eternal consequences.

Introduction

Let's begin by listening in on a "man on the street" clip in which interviews ask four questions: (Heaven and Hell, Sermonspice.com)

1. Do you believe in heaven and hell?
2. What do you think it is like in heaven and hell?
3. Where is heaven and hell?
4. Who goes to heaven and hell?

Our text today does not attempt to argue the existence of heaven or hell... it assumes the existence of both. Jesus very clearly declares the existence of the Kingdom of Heaven and then tells us what it is like or to what it may be compared. But the question remains. What is it?

What is the Kingdom of Heaven?

I. The Kingdom of Heaven is the most prized of all possessions.

- "The Kingdom of Heaven is..."

In the epic film *The Kingdom of Heaven*, set during the Crusades of the 12th Century, it is about the defense of the city of Jerusalem against the Muslims who were attempting to reclaim the city from the Christians. However claiming a city as a Christian city does not constitute the Kingdom of Heaven.

The Kingdom of Heaven is better understood as the invisible reign or rule of God in the human heart or in the lives of Christians in this world... in anticipation of the return of Christ and the establishment of his visible and eternal heavenly kingdom.

The Kingdom of God is expressed in the longing of the Lord's Prayer when we pray, "Thy Kingdom come. They will be done on earth, as it is in heaven."

The Kingdom of Heaven in the life of a Christian is the desire to be a person of God both now and evermore... it is to welcome the reign of Christ into one's earthly live and then live in anticipation of eternal life in heaven.

To what is the Kingdom of Heaven compared? The Kingdom of heaven is like a...

A. A Treasure Hidden in a Field

- **“The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy the field – and get the treasure, too!” Matthew 13:44**

This story would resonate with those to whom Jesus was speaking. They would get it... the ground was the only safe place to stash their stuff. People often would hide their valuables in the ground for safekeeping until they could return and reclaim it.

We are not altogether unfamiliar with the concept. I have a friend in Kansas who said his dad, having lived through the Stock Market Crash of 1929 with its Black Thursday, Black Monday, and Black Tuesday, the bank failures, and the ensuing Great Depression, kept his money buried in a can. Unfortunately, it is still buried in a can somewhere on the family farm.

This treasure was not hidden in Indy Mac Federal Savings Bank or invested in Enron, Fannie Mae, or Freddie Mac stock... it was tucked away safely in the ground.

The Kingdom of Heaven is also like a merchant who finds a pearl.

B. A Pearl of Great Value – Matthew 13:45-46

- **“The Kingdom of Heaven is like a pearl merchant on the lookout for choice pearls. When he discovered a pearl of great value, he sold everything he owned and bought it!” Matthew 13:45-46**

So we have two stories. One story is about a treasure hidden in the ground and another about a choice pearl. How are the stories of the hidden treasure and the pearl the same?

- 1. The treasures were of great value. There is excitement and joy when each is discovered.**
- 2. Possessing the treasure was worth the forfeiture of all others treasures. Both men sold everything they owned in order to purchase their treasure.**

On May 7, 1934 a Filipino clam diver was seized by a giant clam... inside the clam was an enormous 14 lb. pearl shaped in the image of a turbaned face. It was dubbed, "The Pearl of Allah."

It has a long and confusing history. I cannot vouch for or authenticate the true of this story but it is alleged that Osama bin Laden attempted to purchase the pearl as a gift to Saddam Hussein "to unite the Arab cultures," and it is said that Hussein was prepared to accept it as an overture of unity between al-Qaida and the Iraqi government. That was in 1999. (Aaron Klein, 2004 WorldNetDaily.com, October 29,2004)

More recently the pearl has been in a bank vault in Colorado Springs and according to a wrongful death ruling in the death of Eloise Bonicelli here in west Arvada in 2005. Her husband had allegedly hired a hit man to prevent her from filing for divorce and getting half of the Bonicelli family business. The Allah Pearl, which was partially owned by Joe Bonicelli, was to be sold and the \$32.4 million of the proceeds of the sale was to go to her children. (Dennis Huspeni, The Gazette Daily News, World's Largest Pearl Part of Lawsuit, May 6, 2007)

The Allah Pearl is appraised at \$60 million dollars. It is a pearl merchants dream. It is the pearl that compels a gem collector to liquidate all of his other precious gems in order to posses the one pearl of inestimable value.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like that pearl (and the treasure hidden in a field). It is worth whatever it takes to possess it. It is far better than any other treasure a person may possess.

How are the stories different?

1. One man happened upon the treasure unaware. Sometimes a person is surprised by God's grace... you may be such a person. You may have been at work, watching a television program, reading a book, talking with a friend or spouse, facing a crisis or having hit rock bottom when suddenly you realize whatever it is you are doing isn't working and the thing you need to do is receive the love of God in Christ and let him come into your life and turn things around.

2. One man was searching for the treasure. Others of us are more proactive about our spiritual pilgrimages. We are seekers. We know we are missing something and we are looking for answers to our spiritual questions. You may be such a person. You may have considered a number of spiritual quests before realizing a life in Christ was the answer for you.

The Kingdom of Heaven is described in the first two stories as something you possess and indeed it is. But it is more than something you treasure for now. It is something that ensures your wellbeing for all eternity.

We might think of the Kingdom of Heaven as the ultimate destination.

II. The Kingdom of Heaven is more than a possession, it is a preferred destination.

The Ultimate Destinations, Inc web site has a bar across the top that reads: Alaska, Caribbean, Disney, Europe, Hawaii, Italy, Mexico, Tahiti, Cruises. One ad in their site describes their planning service as, “The best vacation locations, hotels, and activities at each luxurious getaway.”

(www.ultimatedestinations.net)

Everyone has an image of what a preferred destination might look like. I have toyed with living in a Hogan on the Navajo Reservation... watching the sunrise in the east, basking in the vast landscape of the desert southwest, and then watching the sun set in the west. After reading Dick Proenneke’s *One Man’s Wilderness* and watching the PBS video *Alone in the Wilderness*, I have thought a year in a remote Alaskan cabin might be a preferred destination. Maybe an extended time in an Irish village, or the Scottish highlands, or a Greek fishing village on the Mediterranean might be preferred destinations.

The Kingdom of Heaven is something you possess or perhaps possesses you, but ultimately it becomes more than a spiritual state of being, it becomes a place... a destination.

The first two parables of the hidden treasure and the choice pearl are parables of grace. They are stories about how God lets us discover his gift of grace and mercy... of how we may receive forgiveness of our sins, the grace for living a good life, and the hope of heaven. The third story is a parable of judgment.

In this story Jesus said, “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a net.”

A. A Fishing Net

- “Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a fishing net that is thrown into the water and gathers fish of every kind. When the net is full, they drag it up onto the shore, sit down, sort the good fish into crates, and throw the bad ones away. That is the way it will be at the end of the world. The angels will come and separate the wicked people from the godly, throwing the wicked into the fire. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Matthew 13:47-50**

We are most familiar with sport fishing. Fly fishermen cast for trout. Bass fisherman use another technique to lure a bass from the weeds. When a fisherman wants to catch a catfish he drops a weighted treble hook baited with chicken livers onto the river or lake bottom and waits. Noodlers hand

fish for giant catfish under submerged rocks and ledges. Crab fishermen in the Bering Sea drop strings of baited crab pots marked with buoys. All of these kinds of fishermen are hoping to hook a specific kind of fish. The net described in our story is not like that... it is what we call a seine or a net like the drag net of a fishing trawler. It is stretched open and drug through the water catching every kind of fish.

Some say that that is the image of the church of Jesus Christ. Our role in the world is to be a seine or drag net... our job is to catch all kinds of people.

1. In the story, the fish are people.

Churches, like fishermen, often are fishing for certain kinds of people. There is a certain exclusivity about their intentions... the hook is baited in such a way to catch a certain segment of the culture.

- Exclusive fishing

Others gladly welcome all who come... we think of that as inclusive fishing. The net does not discriminate or discern between fish.

- Inclusive fishing

Churches typically take on a certain look of homogeneity in which there is a certain similarity about those who gather there, but that is not the intent. Churches are to be made up of all kinds of people.

2. In the story, the separation of the fish is the end-time judgment.

Just as I noted that it is our role in the scheme of things to catch people... in our story, it is not our role to separate or judge between which people are wicked and which are godly.

Conclusion

Interestingly the deciding factor at the separation the people at the end of time is whether a person is a wicked person or a godly person. This is not about the edibility of a fish or the sportsmanship involved in catching it. It is about whether a person is deemed wicked or godly.

Now it gets tricky, so stay with me. God's love is huge and all-inclusive.

- "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life."
John 3:16

- God loves and wants to net every person in the world. In II Corinthians 5:18-21 Paul wrote of God's efforts at reaching people,
- "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, no longer counting people's sins against them." II Corinthians 5:19

So we have a gracious and merciful God. Even in the earliest centuries of the church Christians were wondering why God was prolonging the day of Christ's return.

The Apostle Peter responded like this,

- "The Lord is not being slow about his promise to return, as some people think. No, he is being patient for your sake. He does not want anyone to perish, so he is giving more time for everyone to repent. But the day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly as a thief." II Peter 3:8-10

We have a gracious and merciful God, who "through Christ has suffered and died for all the sins of all the people of all time in order that he might bring us home safely to God. I Peter 3:18

So why is it that some people will be separated and like fish that are tossed aside and thrown into the fire?

We go back to John 3 to discover why.

- "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn it, but to save it. There is no judgment awaiting those who trust him. But those who do not trust him have already been judged for not believing in the only Son of God. Their judgment is based on this fact: The light from heaven came into the world, but they loved the darkness more than the light..." John 3:17-19

Robert Farrar Capon has written extensively on the parables of Jesus. I enjoy reading him, not because I always agree with him or am persuaded by his arguments... but he does make some rather profound and insightful, if not startling observations.

Capon says, "Hell is a courtesy for those who want no part of God's forgiveness." They could have gone, just as easily as the righteous, from the net into the bucket. There is no compelling reason for them to spend eternity gasping on the beach." (Robert Farrar Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment*, Eerdmans, PP. 132 and 137)

The parables of the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price are parables of grace... the parable of the fishing net is a parable of judgment. It must be understood in perspective. Everyone may discover and choose to possess the Kingdom of Heaven through faith in Jesus Christ. That is the story of beauty and grace. However, those who choose to not possess the Kingdom of Heaven experience the reality of the parable of the fishing net.

Choosing to possess the Kingdom of Heaven results in eternal life... Refusing results in “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

The Reuters News Service reported of Europe’s largest ever lottery of 66 million euros... if the prize was not claimed within six months, the money was rolled over and re-offered.

An man living in Milan Italy purchased the winning ticket but was in the midst of his daughter’s wedding and simply forgot to check his numbers. And by the time he got around to checking... the deadline for claiming the jackpot of a lifetime had passed. He had forfeited his prize. (PreachingToday.com. Reuters News Service, 8/19/03. submitted by Greg Asimakoupoulos)

Jesus ended the story of the fishing net with this profound and searching question: “Do you understand?” Matthew 13:51

This is the question of the hour: Do you understand? Have you chosen or do you choose to possess the Kingdom of Heaven or do you plan to forfeit your prize? Choose wisely!