

Matthew 13:44-46

Maybe you've seen Indiana Jones, or the National Treasure Movies or something like that, an incredible adventure across continents and against strong opposition where someone goes on an epic treasure hunt – it's always very exciting.

But imagine that you were simply doing a bit of fruit or vegetable picking in the summer holidays, endlessly trudging away everyday, picking strawberries or potatoes and then suddenly there in the ground – a glint of gold. You dig down deeper and deeper – whatever it is its enormous and its covered in jewels too!

So what do you do? Well, you cover it back up with soil, go home, raid the piggy bank, empty your savings account, sell the car and the house and everything you have so that you have enough cash to go back and tell the farmer that you have so loved working in the field that you want to buy it.

It's a little unbelievable, but you are offering the farmer so much that he can't refuse. The deal is done and the field (with the buried treasure in) is now yours! Perhaps you have paid over the odds, but you know that it's worth it – it's a bit like being a Liverpool fan and hoping Kenny Dalglish knows something we don't about Andy Carroll - £35 million! Buried treasure – we hope.

So why does Jesus tell this story and the similar one about the merchant; the professional jewel buyer who finds a pearl better than any other that he has ever encountered, one which so enthralled him that he too sells all that he has just to have this beautiful thing?

Well, Jesus has been telling stories to the crowds about the Kingdom of heaven and the pictures in those stores weren't always very positive or very encouraging, but because Jesus was talking to the crowds, those stories reflected the picture that the world has of the Kingdom of God, sometimes flawed, sometimes unattractive. In comparison to the here and now, the brightlights and the attractions of the world, the Kingdom of God can seem distant and unappealing.

However, these stories of treasures found are told in a different setting, to a small group of people. Verse 36 of Matthew 13 tells us that Jesus left the crowd and went into a house and his disciples came to him and ask him to explain a little of what he has been talking about; now Jesus is alone with the disciples; those who are hungry for the Kingdom Heaven and so he tells them and us what the Kingdom of God is like for those who seriously seek after it.

And Jesus says it is just like those men in the stories who find something of such incredible value that they know it makes sense to give up everything in order to have it.

In Marks' Gospel Jesus is approached by a man who believes that he has lived a good life, "What can I do to inherit eternal life?" He asks, in other words, "what can I do to earn my way into God's kingdom." Jesus' answer to him is to be like the man in these two stories - sell everything he has, give it to the poor and follow him.

Many people might like the idea of being able to buy a place in heaven, but when it come to the crunch its harder than they think, the rich young man just walks away. Whilst the kingdom of God looks good, but he's not prepared to give up everything he has for it, he passes up on an incredible treasure, something eternally beyond price for the comfortable life now.

The reality is that we can't buy our way into heaven. The Kingdom of heaven is so amazing, so beautiful and wonderful that we should joyfully give everything up for it, we should be like the men in the stories Jesus told, but in our heart of hearts we know that we are too often more like the rich young man who couldn't bear to give up everything worldly even for an eternity with God.

What hope is there for us?

Well, lots, you see, these stories need to be read in two ways; first they tell about us pursuing God (as John Piper might phrase it); the reality that we need to recognise how valuable to us the Kingdom of heaven is, that we need to listen to Jesus when he calls us, that we need to see everything else as worthless compared to knowing him.

But secondly we need to also read these stories the other way round where you and I are not the seeker, we are the treasure and Jesus is the treasure hunter.

In ancient times they didn't have banks, so if people had something precious that they wanted to keep they would often put it in a jar and bury it underground, but then for all sorts of reasons that buried treasure could become lost.

Now, what can be described as "God's treasure in the world"? Gold, silver, pearls (which in the ancient world were worth more than gold)? No, none of those things. In the Bible we discover that human beings, you and me, we are the pinnacle of creation, we have been made in the very image of God, we are knit together by him in our mothers wombs – we are the treasure; God so loved the world that he sent Jesus to save – us!

But we have become lost from God, we have buried ourselves away and it breaks God's heart. In the Old Testament God condemns the religious leaders for not having "brought back the strays or searched for the lost" (Ezekiel 34:4) before announcing 12 verses later "I will search for the lost and bring back the strays." And do you remember the stories Jesus tells about himself? The shepherd who searches for the lost sheep, the woman who searches for the lost coin, the father who is desperate to seek out his two lost sons? Talking about himself in Luke 19:10 Jesus says, "For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

Jesus seeks the lost, again in the words of John Piper, we can only pursue God because he has first of all pursued us. How wonderful it is to be described as "lost", because lost means that you are wanted; we never say that we have "lost" rubbish, we only ever talk about having lost something which is precious and you and I are precious to God.

And the man in the stories "finds" to treasure, he "found" the pearl of great value and when the man finds the treasure and the pearl, what does he do? He gives up everything to win it back. Listen to 2 Corinthians 8:9; "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." On the cross Jesus gave up everything, he sold himself into the hands of sinful people to pay the greatest price – his life for ours. And so Paul tells the Corinthians, "You are not your own; you were bought at a price." (1 Cor 6:19-20)

You see, the rich young man thought that he could earn his way into eternal life, but the price is beyond us who are lost. Only God can find us and only God can pay that great price. Eternal life is a free gift to us – we are found, rescued, saved and restored, but that salvation comes at an enormous price which God himself has paid.

But look how the man in the story feels about it. We can be filled with joy when we discover the kingdom of God because Jesus joyfully gave up everything to win us for God (Hebrews 12:2). Imagine finding a treasure chest but never being able to open it, that's what the kingdom of heaven would be like if Jesus hadn't given himself for us on the cross.

But to God we are treasure, lost treasure, far away from him, unable to save ourselves and God joyfully, not angrily, or grudgingly, but joyfully came as a man and died on a cross to buy us back because we are so precious to him.

One of the better known treasure hunts in modern times is the quest to find the rumored wealth known as the "Beale treasure." The hunt began when an eccentric man, who left the East for the gold and silver mines of the West, returned home, supposedly hid a vast amount of wealth, then disappeared forever. All he left behind were several messages written in a mysterious code. One of those messages when deciphered told of the treasure and its approximate location. The other documents, then, would narrow down the site. Since the Beale documents first came to light, thousands of man-hours and hundreds of thousands of dollars have been spent attempting to break the codes and find the legendary treasure.

God has found his treasure – you and through Jesus he has revealed the wonders of his grace, that when we discover the treasure of the Good News of Jesus we have found something worth more than we could ever own or earn and it is not hidden behind riddles and codes, the mystery of God's love has been made clear – all we need to do is allow ourselves to be rescued by Jesus and trust in him to have paid the price for us. Amen.