

Matthew 13:44-52 The King and His problem Parables of Treasure, Pearl and Net

We come to the final three parables in this cluster. The parables are short and to the point but within them are layers of possibilities.

In many ways parables are riddles. We're meant to engage with them. We're meant to examine them to wrestle with our understanding of what they are trying to teach. That teaching can have many layers depending where you focus your attention.

In many ways too parables are dangerous because they make you think and analyse and then make decisions. It's those decisions that confirm your standing with God. They determine whether you live within God's mercy or stand before His judgement.

Each parable can be looked at individually and many sermons have then examined the imagery and explored the nuances and fine detail Jesus uses. Alternatively you can step back a bit and look at the similarities. If you do that you can see possible linkages between the Treasure and Pearl and how they might influence the parable of the net. The first problem it then raises is how do you stop just reading into the parables what you want to see. That's why we have to wrestle with them.

If we do step back we can see that the Treasure parable and the Pearl parable raise the same basic issue from the same basic imagery. Both have an object of unique unimaginable value. Both have a man absolutely committed to getting that object. Both show that the cost of that commitment is to give up everything. So the question posed by Jesus to those who listened to Him, to His inner circle of disciples, to each generation and to us 20 centuries later is really "What cost are you prepared to bear to be part of the kingdom of heaven?"

Jesus is quite clear. There is only one priority - Him. There is only one thing Jesus wants from each of us - everything - our total commitment. In return Jesus gives all of Himself to take our judgement so we can live under God's mercy.

That applies to the seeker and the disciple alike. Whether seeker or disciple it raises serious questions we have to address. The problem is that the answer to the questions are literally life defining. God gives us a choice.

The right answer leads to living under God's mercy. If we reject God's mercy then all that leaves us with is His wrath and judgement.

It's a challenge for every generation and was especially a challenge for Jesus's generation as they had rejected Him in chapter 12. So much so that Jesus had warned them they were close to committing the ultimate sin - accusing Jesus of working for the Devil.

Which leads to the parable of the net. I don't believe it's an accident that it's the last in this cluster of parables. This parable is the most direct indication of the judgement that awaits everyone at the end of the age. Jesus explains that judgement is a separating out - the wicked from the righteous. That's where we start wrestling and begin to examine the imagery Jesus used.

Again many sermons have been devoted to exploring and explaining the imagery. If you step back a bit though one question becomes rather glaring "What defines the righteous around which selection is made?". What is distinctive about them that separates them from the wicked?

Suddenly the wrestling with the parable of the Treasure and the Pearl makes more sense. These parables by their focus on commitment and the cost of that commitment make sense. They are describing the qualities of the righteous.

The parable of the Net adds another layer to the other parables in chapter 13. It's almost as if they've been adding their bit to understanding the judgement described in the parable of the Net.

Questions to reflect on

1. I said parables were riddles and dangerous - do you agree? How have you wrestled with parables? Does it help to see what others have understood? Have you changed any views or behaviour as a result of a parable?
2. Parables were directed at a specific audience - the Jews in Jesus' time. Why are they still relevant to us in the 21st century?
3. Which excites you most about parables - to dig into the detail of the imagery or to step back and look for a bigger picture? What are the pitfalls of each approach?
4. I tried to draw out the costs of seeking a relationship with Jesus - reflect on your own journey. What challenged you most? What finally convinced you to "step over the line"?
5. I also tried to draw out the costs of being a disciple and the difference between "working out" and "working for" your salvation. Do you agree with this distinction? What have you found most difficult in "working out"? If a friend asked, how would you explain it in your own words?
6. I reflected too that we find it almost impossible to comprehend the value God places on each one of us and the height and depths of His love for us - to the extent of sacrificing His Son. How would you put this in your own words to talk to a curious friend or even stranger!
7. I drew distinctions between the either/or of Judgement and Mercy. Jesus took that judgement upon Himself on the cross so we could live in God's mercy. How would you explain that to a non-Christian? To a fellow Christian challenged by the thought of judgement?