

is like a merchant in
search of fine pearls,
who on finding

the
Kingdom
of
God

one
pearl
of
great
price

sold all that he had
and bought it.

Matthew 13:45

Calligraphy by Sr. Sylvia Bielen, 1980

The Pearl of Great Price

Matthew 13:34-46

INTRODUCTION

“If your eye is sound, your whole body will be full of light; but if your eye is not sound, your whole body will be full of darkness.” For many years I did not understand these words of Jesus from the Sermon on the Mount. (Matt. 6:22-23) Then I discovered that the word for “sound” in the original Greek means “single” and I realized that Jesus is talking about absolute undivided loyalty to God. The life that will be full of light, the life with a future, is the life that is focused on God and God alone.

If ever anyone lived with a “single” eye it was Jesus himself. He and the Father were literally “one” in will and purpose. Everything Jesus said and did was a reflection of God’s presence in his life. In this respect Jesus is the “model” of the life God intends for each of us. He revealed the good news of a God who loves us and calls us into a relationship with himself which becomes the most important thing in our life. The life that is “full of light” is a life totally built around this relationship with God.

There are many things which threaten this relationship and undermine our loyalty to God. The greatest threat, according to the teaching of Jesus, is our money and possessions. What is there about money that tempts us to put God out of the center

of our lives? Is it the power that money represents, the security it seems to give us? Or is it the pleasure money can buy for us? Anyone taking the life of Christian discipleship seriously must confront these questions because the way to God is narrow and there are few who find it—largely because of money and possessions.

The whole issue is puzzling, however, because money is a necessity in this life and it can be used to accomplish so much good. The fact is, Jesus never said that money in itself is evil. On the contrary, money can be used to enhance our relationship with God. Examples of this “lighter side” to the problem of money may be found in the Gospels right beside the most severe warnings. But what factors make the difference? How is it that the same wealth and possessions may separate us from God or bind us more closely to him? In what ways is it possible to use our money to give glory to God?

These are vital questions because we all face daily decisions about our material wealth. But the answers depend on how seriously we take the teaching of Jesus about the undivided loyalty to God symbolized in his words about “the sound eye.”

The starting point for understanding any specific point in the message of Jesus is our relationship with God and the “light” that relationship brings to our lives.

COMMENTARY

The four Gospels are the best-known books in the Bible. Not only do they appear first in order, but they contain practically all we know of the life and teaching of Jesus. They are not biographies in a strict sense, but “evangelical biographies,” a special literary form whose main purpose is to proclaim the “good news” of God’s saving act in Jesus Christ. Because of similarities in content and general purpose, the Gospels need to be studied together. They also need to be examined separately, because each has a particular purpose and character of its own.

The Gospel of Matthew is often ranked “first among equals.”

Its unique value was recognized by those who placed it first in the New Testament canon, and it has maintained a lofty position in the life of the church ever since. Renan, the French scholar, spoke of Matthew as "the most important book in the world."

The thirteenth chapter of Matthew's Gospel contains several "parables of the kingdom." A parable is a story from the realm of nature or human life which usually aims to teach one point, although it may have allegorical traits, as Jewish stories often had. The parable was not a new form of illustrating truth, but Jesus used it with a mastery never surpassed. He used parables not only to illustrate and clarify truth but also to capture the imagination and lead to obedience.

The "twin" parables of the "pearl" and "treasure" are good examples. The first (vs. 44) is about a treasure hidden in a field. The story sounds strange today, but to persons in the time of Jesus it would sound natural and familiar to talk about buried treasure. In the ancient world the ground was the safest place to keep valuable possessions. In the parable of the talents, for example, the unprofitable servant hid his talent in the ground. (Matt. 25:25) According to an ancient rabbinic saying, the earth is the only safe repository for money. In this parable a man found such a treasure, buried in the field by someone other than the present owner, who did not suspect its presence. By buying the field, the finder would obtain legal title to the treasure. The parable does not discuss the morality of this act, just as in the parable of the unjust steward where the character of the steward is irrelevant. (Luke 16:1-8) The point of the parable is that the finder realizes he has stumbled upon something of immense value and he is willing to sacrifice everything else in order to obtain it.

In the second parable (vss. 45-46) a merchant is seeking fine pearls. The fact that he is actively looking for pearls, while the man in the former parable stumbles on the treasure by chance is also beside the point. The parable teaches that having found the "pearl of pearls," we will be eager to sell everything in order to obtain it.

It is striking to note that Jesus built both parables around our human desire for material things. Even today there are people who will spend all their money to search for buried treasure. Countless others will spend hard-earned wages on state lotteries, hoping to "strike it rich." Today, also, pearls hold a special place in the hearts of men and women. People desire to possess lovely pearls, not only for their beauty, but especially for their monetary value. The desire, often greedy and avaricious, which material treasures arouse in us is the point around which Jesus builds the parables. If we act this way toward earthly treasure, how much more will we spare no effort and consider no sacrifice too great to attain the kingdom (reign, rule) of God! Our relationship with God is the most valuable thing conceivable, so priceless that in comparison with it all other goods lose their value. On another occasion, Jesus spoke of it as "the one thing needful." (Luke 10:38-42)

The same desire for material things which makes the point of these parables so striking is at the same time the greatest threat to our relationship with God. This theme occupied a dominant place in the teaching of Jesus. He tells us, as we have already seen, how important it is to have a "sound" eye and not let ourselves be diverted by riches. He insists quite directly that we cannot serve God and mammon. (Matt.6:24) Anxiety about food and clothes and other material things demonstrates our lack of faith in God. We should "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" and all these things shall be ours as well. (Matt.6:33)

In the story of the rich young ruler Jesus says that it is almost impossible for the wealthy to enter the kingdom of heaven. "It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle!" (Mark 10:17-31) According to this teaching we cannot be both wealthy and "rich toward God." In the parable of the rich fool (Luke 12:13-21), Jesus talks about a man whose farm prospered and yielded more than he needed. According to worldly wisdom he did the right thing in storing up for the future. But Jesus called him a fool because he was rich in things of the earth but not rich toward God. Further, in the parable

of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), Jesus shows how a rich person who keeps his wealth and refuses to respond to human need is condemning himself to eternal torment. The conclusion to all of this is uncompromising: "Sell your possessions, and give alms; provide yourselves with purses that do not grow old, with a treasure in the heavens that does not fail, where no thief approaches and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Luke 12:33-34)

This teaching on the negative side of wealth is so overwhelming we are apt to miss the brighter side of the picture altogether. But Jesus did suggest that it is possible (though rare) for money and wealth to enhance our relationship with God. He pointed to the poor widow's spontaneous giving as an example of a person who was not only free from the bondage of things but was able to use her coins to express her love for God. (Mark 12:41-44) He told the parable of a good Samaritan whose mercy included not only binding up the wounds of a man who had been beaten by robbers, but also using his money to pay for further treatment and care. And he used the story of Zacchaeus to show that it is possible for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. (Luke 19:1-10) Zacchaeus began to transfer his treasure from earth to heaven by repaying all that he had taken illegally and by giving half his wealth to the poor.

By looking at the dark side (money as a threat to our relationship with God) and the bright side (money as a way of enhancing our relationship with God) of this subject, we gain a deeper appreciation for Jesus' single-minded devotion to God. Money is not evil in itself. Money is essential for life in this world. Money can do a great deal of good. But absolutely nothing, including money and the power it represents, must be allowed to come between ourselves and God. God, and not our material wealth, is the source of light and "life."