

Matthew 13:44-52

⁴⁴ “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure buried in a field, which a person finds and hides again, and out of joy goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. ⁴⁵ Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls. ⁴⁶ When he finds a pearl of great price, he goes and sells all that he has and buys it. ⁴⁷ Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net thrown into the sea, which collects fish of every kind. ⁴⁸ When it is full they haul it ashore and sit down to put what is good into buckets. What is bad they throw away. ⁴⁹ Thus it will be at the end of the age. The angels will go out and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be wailing and grinding of teeth. ⁵¹ “Do you understand all these things?” They answered, “Yes.” ⁵² And he replied, “Then every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old.”

Context

These two parables are unique to Matthew, following immediately upon the parables of the mustard seed and the yeast, and, in some cases, a narrative about Jesus’ use of parables.

Parable of the Sower	Matthew 13:1-9	Mark 4:1-9	Luke 8:4-8
Reason for Parables	Matthew 13:10-15	Mark 4:10-12	Luke 8:9-10
Interpreting the Sower	Matthew 13:18-23	Mark 4:13-20	Luke 8:11-15
Purpose of Parables		Mark 4:21-25	Luke 8:16-18
Parable of the Weeds	Matthew 13:24-30		
Parable of the Mustard Seed	Matthew 13:31-32	Mark 4:30-32	Luke 13:18-19
Parable of the Yeast	Matthew 13:33		Luke 13:20-21
Jesus’ Use of Parable	Matthew 13:34-35	Mark 4:33-34	
Interpreting the Weeds	Matthew 13:36-43		
Parables of Hidden Treasure and Pearl of Great Price	Matthew 13:44-46		
Parable of the Net	Matthew 13:47-50		
Parable of Treasure New and Old	Matthew 13:51-52		

Since these unique parables follow a private explanation of the Parable of the Weeds without indication of a change of scene or audience, the simplest explanation is that somewhat a change of pattern, Jesus is preaching to the disciples, privately and in parables. Which runs afoul of what Jesus has already said about private explanations. This leads many commentators to suggest that once again, these parables are given in public. Many scholars point to the similarities of the Weeds and the Net and suggest they are doublets meant to drive home Jesus’ point.

Our gospel continues the themes of the kingdom parables which began with the start of Chapter 13. The first two parables (*Hidden Treasure and the Pearl*) continue the development of the theme of whole-hearted response with which the parable of the sower concluded. The third parable (*the Net*) is closely related to the parable of the weeds, and emphasizes again the division which the preaching of God’s kingdom brings.

The parables discourse (Chapter 13) ends with a saying that expresses well the ideal to which the evangelist aspired: the ability to see the radically new act of God in Christ in the light of the Old Testament tradition. Such a person understands the relation between the new (Christ) and the old (Jewish tradition).

Commentary

Hidden Treasure

Buried treasure is the stuff of popular stories in every age and while out “pirates” no longer sail the Seven Seas we seem content with stories of lottery winners. Given Israel’s location at the crossroads of major powers to the north and east and to the south (Egypt) there is a long history of wars and rumors of war playing out upon the promised land. “Buried treasure” was a realistic possibility. Before banking was generally established, to hide wealth in the form of coins, metals or jewels in a jar or box in the ground was a recognized way of securing it, especially in times of crisis; the famous Copper Scroll from Qumran Cave 3 lists the locations of huge caches of precious metals and other buried treasure. But consider Mt 25:25, where a talent of gold is buried. The “talent” was equivalent to almost 20 years of daily wages would have been a “treasure” worth finding.

In the face of a rumor of war or war itself, a family might well bury their valuables. If no one survived the battles or sieges, there was indeed buried treasure to find. There were also rabbinic guidelines for what one did when finding such treasures. Even if you were the rightful owner of the land, you were obligated to make a reasonable search for the rightful owner of the buried valuables. Failing to find the original owners, the land owner could rightfully take possession of the treasure.

Presumably in this story the current owner of the field was unaware of it. The finder (presumably a worker employed by the land-owner) really has no immediate rights to the treasure even after he legally purchases the land. But he understands what is at stake and sells all that he may possess it. Many commentators have noted that it is the same with humanity – we have no right to salvation – it is an unmerited gift from God – so when it comes, grab it without hesitation or qualm. So it seems. The man’s action is dictated by pure self-interest, as is that of the person who opts for the kingdom of heaven. The “sacrifice” of all that is sold is no hardship: it is done out of “delight,” not out of a sense of obligation. Once the kingdom of heaven is truly understood, nothing else can compare with it in value. Cf. the OT theme of wisdom as being like hidden treasure (Prov 2:4; Job 28; cf. with a rather different twist, Sir 20:30).

A Pearl of Great Price

Pearls were as highly valued in the ancient world as they are today, and were a conspicuous way of displaying wealth (1 Tim 2:9; Rev 17:4; 18:12, 16). Huge pearls form the gates in the symbolic new Jerusalem (Rev 21:21). Unlike the man who discover the buried treasure and could presumably live off his treasure once he had secured it, this pearl merchant, though initially a man of some substance, is apparently impoverishing himself to acquire something supremely beautiful and valuable which he could admire and display but could not live off unless he sold it again.

Its point is the same as that of the treasure, an issue of priorities. The fact that what the dealer had to sell included presumably other, lesser, pearls might however have led the hearers to reflect on the value of the kingdom of heaven in relation to other competing ideologies; once you have it, you need no other. Hence the emphasis on the fact that this is just one pearl, whose value eclipses all others put together.

Two Parables

Matthew apparently intends the parable of the treasure to be interpreted together with the parable of the pearl, which immediately follows. The two parables do have common features: (1) In each case only a brief vignette of a crucial situation is given, without enough details to evaluate them as realistic stories. The interpreter should, therefore, be wary of filling in the gaps from pious imagination, but concentrate on what the parable does, in fact, portray. (2) The primary common feature is surely central to the meaning of each: The protagonist goes and sells everything for the sake of the one thing. This is the

action of both the plowman and the merchant. This movement of the story as a whole is to be compared with the kingdom of God, for the kingdom is “like” neither the “treasure” of v. 44 nor the “merchant” of v. 45, but in each case somehow like the story as a whole. In each case, the protagonist acts with the single-minded response of the “pure in heart.” From the story in Mark 10:17-31, Matthew and his community had long known of the kingdom's demand of “all,” and of one who had failed (cf. esp. Mark 10:21, where selling everything and giving it to the poor is connected with true “treasure”).

The two parables are also different: (1) The plowman is doing his regular work, not looking for or expecting anything special, when he comes upon the treasure quite by accident. The merchant is actively seeking, knows what he is looking for, and still finds something beyond all his expectations. The kingdom can become real in either way (cf. 9:2, 22). (2) The great joy of the plowman is emphasized, but is altogether absent from the merchant. This does not mean that the merchant's selling everything in order to obtain the pearl was joyless, but it does mean that (subjective) joy is not the main point of either parable. (3) What the merchant did, although it may not have measured up to everyone's understanding of common sense, was unquestionably legal. The same cannot be said of the plowman, whose action may have been questionable, both legally and morally (we are not given enough details to know for sure). The disposition of buried treasure found on someone else's property was widely discussed in Roman legal discourse. Some of Matthew's readers may have expected a law-abiding plowman to have reported his find to the owner of the field rather than cashing in on it himself. Sensitive contemporary readers may wonder about the ethics of cheating the owner of the field out of his treasure, even if it was perfectly legal. The story does not legitimize the man's actions. Jesus was certainly able to use questionable actions of characters in his parables to picture the urgency of acting to gain the kingdom while the opportunity is there (cf. Matt 12:29's use of breaking-and-entering imagery, and more subtly, Luke 16:1-13).

In the story of the pearl, there is no moral or legal question at all, but still a surprising and provocative action. In the first-century Mediterranean world, the pearl was often a symbol of the highest good (as diamonds sometimes are in modern Western culture). Thus salvation is pictured in the Gnostic “Hymn of the Pearl” as the finding and safe return of a pearl lost in an alien land. Some scholars see both the parable of the treasure and the parable of the pearl as advent/reversal/action, expressed in the parallel sets of verbs in vv. 44 and 45-46: finds/sells/buys.” The advent of the kingdom, sought for or not, brings about a reversal of values, leading to the crucial action that obtains the new. This action, puzzling and out of step with those who live by the old values, is central in each of these parables.

The Net Cast Widely

The net pictured here is a large dragnet, usually about six feet deep and up to several hundred feet wide, positioned in the lake by boats and requiring several men to operate (hence the plurals of v. 48). The picture is realistic, portraying an ordinary event with no surprising twists: The net brings in “every kind” of both good and bad fish, which are then sorted, the good being kept and the bad thrown out. Whatever the original meaning of the parable, Matthew's own ecclesiastical application already appears in the telling of the parable itself. The bad fish are called “rotten” (*sapra*), inappropriate to fish that have just been caught, but used four times previously in Matthew's description of bad “fruit” (works) presented by Christians, where it is appropriate (7:17-18; 12:33 twice). The fishers “sit” for the sorting, as will the Son of Man at the end (19:28; 25:31).

This parable then, like that of the “Wheat and Weeds,” is one of judgment. It echoes not only the separation and destruction of the wicked, but also the motif of a mixture of good and bad until the time of final separation. The dragnet is inevitably indiscriminate in what it catches. As long as the fish remain in the lake, and indeed in the net, they remain undifferentiated. It is only when they come up for final scrutiny that some will be preserved and others destroyed

The Parable of the Net Explained

This interpretation is very like that of the parable of the weeds, vv. 36-43. Like the preceding interpretation, it concentrates entirely on the fate of the wicked, whose destiny is to be cast into the furnace of fire, with weeping and gnashing of teeth—all typical Matthean language for eschatological judgment, but not appropriate to fish, which are buried or thrown back into the water, not burned. The interpretation, allegorical as it is, does not represent the net to be the church, the fishers to be evangelists, etc. Matthew seems intentionally to forego the obvious opportunity to relate the parable to the story of the call of the fishers in 4:18-22. The parable is not a picture of evangelism, “fishing for people,” but a parable of final sorting and separation.

Understanding Parables

The opening description in 13:3 and the concluding transitional comment at 13:53 indicate that Matthew considers everything in between to be parables, including v. 52. Thus, although commentators have liked to find exactly seven parables in the chapter, Matthew apparently considered the concluding picture of the scribe to be a parable as well, a parabolic concluding picture on the use of parables.

The picture comes as an elaboration of the disciples' affirmative response to Jesus' question. They claim to understand. These words added to Mark are to make clear that, for Matthew, understanding is not an optional element of discipleship.

Matthew understood that parables were constructed from a “treasure” of conventional metaphors, in which, for example, “king” or “father” customarily point to God, “harvest” or “accounting” to eschatological judgment, and such. “Both Jesus and Christian scribal teachers did this. The uniqueness of Jesus does not consist in the invention of radically new images, but in the surprising use to which they put the repertoire of familiar images. Vocabulary and style, as well as theology, indicate that

Matthew affirms both the old and the new (see 9:17). Like a skilled scribe, he brings out of his storehouse the treasures of his Jewish past (Scripture, stock of traditional imagery, perspectives, and concerns), as well as older Christian tradition (Mark). But he does not merely repeat the past. Alongside the old but introduces the new, presenting the old in a new light. Reclaiming it for the new situation in which he finds himself, seeing all thing in the light of the Christ event and the coming of the kingdom. Even the unexpected order of “new and old” may be important: it is the new that provides the key to the appropriateness of the old, not vice versa

Notes

Matthew 13:47 net: The Greek *sagēnē* [EDNT 3:222] means a seine net which is either dragged between two boats, or is load out by a single boat and drawn to land with long ropes.

Matthew 13:48 net: The Greek *sapra* [EDNT 3:228] refers to either inedible fish or unclean seafood (*cf.* Lev 11:10-12) not having fins and scales

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