

Sermon preached at Faith Presbyterian Church, Springfield, Virginia,
on Sunday, April 23, 1995, by the Rev. W. Graham Smith, D.D.

MATTHEW 13:45-46

“The Kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

PEARLS OR PEBBLES?

When Jesus told this story, immediately there was conjured up in the minds of the people who heard it a picture of an Eastern bazaar or market-place. Some of us have seen an Eastern bazaar; we have all at least seen a *picture* of one as it exists, almost unchanged, to this day, a seething mass of men and women and children and animals, crowded together into an ancient market-place, the tumult of sound almost unbelievable, the sight indescribable, and the smell intolerable!

When I was a boy, I lived in a small town in Ontario, Canada, and the great adventure of each week was to go downtown on Saturday night! The main street was jammed with people, and the fun and excitement were tremendous for a small boy! You see, in those days on Saturday night, the farmer would hitch the horse to the rig, or get the Model T to percolating, and he and the whole family would drive into town and pull up by the curb and park. Now the ostensible reason was to shop, but that was just the obvious reason. What they were really there for was to get caught up on the local news, watch the passing parade of people, see their neighbors and friends, and just incidentally to stock the larder for the coming week.

Well now, take that small-town Saturday night in Canada, and change the stores into flapping tents, change the cars into ox-carts, change the horses into camels, add a thousand sounds and smells, and there you have it — an Eastern bazaar!

Of course, buying and selling was a very different thing in that day from what it is today. For instance, it wasn't like one of our modern gleaming supermarkets where you walk in and see all the prices clearly marked, and you fill up your cart and push it to a slot where a pleasant young lady beeps up the total on a mechanical wonder, and you pay, and there's no argument. It wasn't like that in an Eastern bazaar. You see, there were no fixed prices. If you saw something that you wanted, you said, “How much?” and the merchant named a price — twice what he expected to get — and you made an offer of half you intended to pay. Then there began a prolonged process of bargaining, accompanied, of course, by much waving of the arms, calling on the gods to witness the perversity of this thief you had been thrown together with, and insults to the ancestors of this crook who would so grievously cheat you! And after perhaps an hour or two, you finally agreed on a price. You paid what you expected to, and he pocketed what he hoped he would get, and everyone was happy! This comedy wasn't only the means of doing business back in that day; it was the entertainment of that time as well.

Now into this interesting scene there comes the pearl merchant of Jesus' story, and the minute he makes an appearance, the word goes swiftly down from tent to tent: “The jeweler is

here!” You see, he was a quite extraordinary man. He travelled the then known world from India to the Mediterranean, carrying all his possessions upon his person, bartering for precious stores, and if you caught him at just the right moment, he could tell you the most fascinating stories of distant and exotic places. I can see him now as he comes to the top of the street and starts down between the crowded booths, his white clothing blowing round his thin body, his skin burned a deep brown by constant exposure to the Eastern sun, his brown eyes darting everywhere, his practiced gaze missing not a thing.

But as he walks down the way, suddenly he stops and stiffens almost imperceptibly, because he has seen it — the thing for which he has been looking all of his life — a pearl, but *such* a pearl, big, lustrous, beautifully formed, perfect. You know, of course, that the pearl, in Jesus’ day, was the superlatively valuable jewel. As we regard the diamond today, they regarded the pearl. And trying not to betray the emotion that is welling up in his breast, the jeweler, poker-faced, walks over nonchalantly to where the merchant is, picks up an amethyst, a ruby, a garnet, asks the price, and then, almost indifferently, picks up the pearl, hefts it in his palm, and enquires: “How much?”

Immediately the merchant hovers over him — “A magnificent pearl, the buy of a lifetime”; surely, he would like the pearl! Again he says, “How much?” and the merchant names a price. Without so much as the flicker of an eyelid, the jeweler makes a swift mental calculation, and he realizes that it’s going to cost him every single thing he has in the world! And then the haggling begins, all kinds of insults filling the air. Half a dozen times he turns away, only to be pulled back by the importunity of the seller, until finally, when *hours* have gone by, after much searching of his own soul and many doubts, he spills out all of his jewels upon the board, tumbles out all of the coins in his little leather bag — everything he possesses is spread out upon the board — and the deal is finished. He owns the pearl of great price, but it has cost him every single thing he has in the world!

“The Kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

Do you know that every parable Jesus told has to do with what He called ‘The Kingdom of God’ or ‘The Kingdom of heaven’? What is the Kingdom of God? Jesus tells us in the Lord’s Prayer. He says: “Thy Kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth That is to say, God’s Kingdom comes when His will is done on earth. For you and me, to be in ‘The Kingdom’ is to accept and to do the will of God. It is an unconditional surrender of ourselves to Him in which we say, “Lord, I want You to be in complete control of my life.”

Let us then turn to this parable and draw some truths from it which, I trust, may be helpful in terms of your own personal commitment to God’s will for *your* life.

1. Isn’t it suggestive to find the Kingdom of God compared to a pearl?

To ancient people, as I have mentioned, the pearl was the jewel above all jewels. It was the loveliest of all possessions, a pure joy to own and to admire. So Jesus is surely telling us that

to do the will of God is no grim, gray, unexciting thing; it is a lovely thing; it is attractive, challenging and supremely worthwhile. Beyond the discipline, beyond the sacrifice, beyond the self-denial, beyond the cross, there lies the supreme loveliness which is to be found nowhere else. In a word, there is only one way to bring peace to the heart, joy to the mind, and beauty to the life, and that is to *accept* and to *do* the will of God.

Mind you, there are other pearls, but there is only one pearl of great price. The Christian is the first to admit that there are many fine things in this world, things in which we can find exquisite loveliness, and their loveliness is enhanced when we view them through the lenses of our Christian experience, for Christianity is the true humanism.

We can find loveliness in knowledge and in the reaches of the human mind. We can find it in art and music, in literature and science, in sport, and all the triumphs of the human spirit. We can find loveliness in serving our fellow human beings, even if that service springs from humanitarian rather than from purely Christian motives. We can find it too in human relationships, in the sacred intimacies of home and family life.

Now these are all lovely, but they are all lesser lovelinesses. The supreme beauty and fulfillment lie in the acceptance of the will of God for your life. That is the pearl above all pearls. You see, nothing else works; nothing else *will* work. If there is anything that has been authenticated, it is this—that the new patterns of living just let you down in times of crisis.

I remember many years ago calling on a family in the congregation I was serving, and when the lady opened the door, she said, “Come in, Pastor, and sit down. I’ll go and call my husband and the other members of the family. I’ll be right back.” I was about to lower myself into a chair when all of a sudden, I heard a gasp behind me, and she said, “Oh, not that one!” I turned ‘round and said, “Why not that one?” And she said, “Oh, that’s an antique; it would never hold you. Sit over here if you don’t mind!” Well, I sat over there. And do you know what I did? I looked at that chair, and I said to myself: “Fundamentally, that is a *dishonest* chair! That chair says, ‘Sit in me,’ but if you take it at its word, it will let you down!”

There’s many a modern philosophy of life that says to you, “This is the way to stop worrying and start living,” or “This is the way to get the most out of life. Just take life by the throat and seize from it every last ounce of gratification it can give. Go out into life and make your bundle; get all you can get. That’s the way to really live it up.” The only trouble with *that*, my friends, is that when you are really confronted with the grim realities of life, it will let you down every time.

As a matter of fact, material things can give you nothing more than marginal benefits. When you get right down to the rough edges of life, money can’t buy you a thing. For instance, what good is money when all of a sudden one day the telephone rings, and an obviously disguised voice on the other end says, “I hate to tell you, but your husband is cheating on you”? What good is money when the doctor looks you sadly in the eye and says, “I’m awfully sorry, but you have an inoperable malignancy”? What good is money when there’s a knock on your door, and a policeman says, “I’m sorry, Sir, but there’s been a ghastly accident, and your son didn’t make it”? You see, when you have to face up to life where it is really lived, at the rough

and rugged edges of it, you will find that material things can't do a thing for you.

The fact of the matter is that life was made to work one way, God's way, and it doesn't work any other way. Built into that very fabric of the universe, built into our own human nature, are certain fundamental realities that we call laws, and one of them is that you and I must live in obedience to the purposes of Him Who created us in His own image. If you leave God out, there is no center to life, and the whole thing disintegrates. If I knew anywhere else where I could find the ultimate answers to life and destiny, I would be there, but they are found in *Christ*; they are found in the relationship of your life to your Maker Who is also your Redeemer. Living under His Lordship, we are set free from the sense of guilt and shame, issuing in that buoyant newness of life that the Bible calls "eternal life."

Yes, it is significant to find our Lord comparing the Kingdom of God to a pearl.

2. Jesus is saying in this parable that life is a market-place, and there are things you can have from life, but if you want them, you must pay for them.

There is a Spanish proverb which runs: "Take what you want," says God; "take it and pay for it." Life is indeed a market-place: Isn't it true that every day you live, you *spend* something of immense value? Isn't it true that you spend time, you spend your energies, you spend your life? The question is: What are you getting in exchange for your life? What is it you count so valuable that you're willing to spend your whole life to get it? Well, I'll tell you something; a great many people are being taken in by the market-place of life today; a great many people who could get pearls are getting nothing but pebbles.

"Take what you want — and pay for it!" Doesn't that bring right into focus the whole question of self-sacrifice? Whenever we speak of a life of self-denial and self-sacrifice, we invariably think of how costly a thing it is to live a good, clean, controlled, useful life of commitment to God and of service to our fellow human beings, living for the highest and the best. And I would never minimize this stern fact that to be a disciple of Christ is a very costly business. Did not our Lord Himself say, "Anyone who does not carry his cross and follow Me cannot be My disciple" (Luke 14:27). Of course it's no cheap or easy thing to be a true Christian.

But it costs even more to live the other kind of life! Everything we choose, whether good or evil, we pay for. When a person chooses to live a wasted, selfish, dissipated life, we call it self-indulgence, but in reality, it is self-sacrifice—the costliest self-sacrifice a person can make—for by living that kind of life, he gives up everything that most renders life worthwhile. He sacrifices talents, opportunities, ideals, self-respect. It is like throwing pearls on the counter to buy pebbles.

Surely George Washington lived a sacrificial life, but so did Benedict Arnold. God said to both of them: "Take what you want; take it and pay for it!" Surely Christ lived a sacrificial life, but so did Judas Iscariot, poor fellow! — with one of the greatest chances a man ever had, giving it all up for thirty pieces of silver and a rotting memory.

We all have to live a life of self-sacrifice. Let's stop being fooled by the idea that you can

choose between self-indulgence and self-sacrifice. All we can really choose between is two kinds of self-sacrifice. Take what you want — the good or the evil — take it and pay for it.

Dr. Harry Emerson Fosdick, once in an address to young people, made this revealing and beautiful statement:

I thank God now in my elder years that I did not make some sacrifices when I was young. I had to choose, as all you young people must, which should be my aim, a Christian home with its deep fidelities and satisfactions on one side, or on the other, a loose life of sensuality. Well, I chose! Long before I met the girl I married I wrote her a letter in which I said that somewhere on earth I knew she was alive and waiting for me, and that some day we would meet, and that in the meantime I was going to keep my fidelity to her as true as though she now were mine. You say that cost. Of course it cost! But now in retrospect, think what it would have cost had I made the other choice, to have surrendered all the deep and sacred satisfactions of these lovely years for a mess of pottage!

Satan gets people to be Judas Iscariots and Benedict Arnolds, to give themselves up to the “new morality” as it is called, telling them not to sacrifice but to indulge themselves. He persuades the Esaus of the world to sell their birthright for a mess of pottage. Don’t ever imagine that it is self-sacrifice to give up the low for the high, but *not* self-sacrifice to give up the high for the low.

“Take what you want — take it and pay for it!”

3. Jesus is saying in this story that the pearl merchant had a purpose in life. There was one thing he counted important in life, and he let nothing stand in his way until he found it.

Most of us believe, almost superstitiously, that some day, down the road, we’re going to stumble on a ready-made happiness. “I think I’d be happy if I could just land this exciting job with its opportunity for rapid promotion... If I could just have a better paying job so we could get the things we need... If I could only travel... If we just had a nicer home... If I could just get married...” And on and on it goes.

But the simple truth is that to think that way is to forget a principle at the heart of life, and that is that happiness is not something you find; it is something you create. When you were born, you were given two things, existence and opportunity, and these are the raw materials out of which, under God, you can make a worthwhile life. You never “find” happiness, just as you never “find” steel; you have to refine it out of the rough ore; just as you never “find” a beautiful statue; you have to carve it out of the quarried marble; just as you never “find” great music; you have to compose it out of the eight-note scale.

We have a great Savior, and we can put Him at the center of our life, or we can crowd Him out to the edge and put our own desires into the center. We say, “I’m going to be done with that ugly thing in my life; I’m going to devote my life to Christ in full commitment and make my years on this earth really count for Him.” But somehow, we put it off; we don’t press our search

for the Pearl of great price; we disobey God's call to do what we know He wants us to do with our life. And suddenly, one day, on the twilight side of life, like a bolt it strikes you: "Here I am, sixty, seventy years of age; I've lived all these years, and I haven't got a thing to show for it that really matters!" We let the Pearl slip through our fingers, not because of any gross improprieties, perhaps, but just because we *meant* to use our opportunities to do what God wanted us to do, but *never did!*

Let me finish by telling you a story written by one of the great short-story writers of a former generation: the story of an American who was suddenly rich, and being a multi-millionaire, he wanted to break into high society. But he was a rude and unlettered man, and the people in high society just wouldn't have anything to do with him. So, thinking he might soak up some culture, he took a trip and travelled though Europe. He was returning, first class, on board an ocean liner, and every day he would take a walk on the promenade deck. On the ship there was a group of prominent people whose names appeared in the Social Register, and every day he would break into that little circle and try to get to know them, but every time they would give him the cold shoulder and rebuff him. One day, as usual, he burst into the group, and they were about to turn away when he reached into his pocket, brought out a small chamois bag, and squeezed out of it on to the palm of his hand a pearl, and suddenly everyone turned back and gasped. They had never seen such a jewel. It was absolutely exquisite, and they asked him where it came from; never had they seen anything comparable to it. And he told its history. It had been in crowns in Europe. This pearl, in fact, was a priceless legend. All of a sudden, he realized that these people, whom he was interested in impressing, were watching him; and tremendously taken by it, and almost unconsciously, he hefted the pearl and caught it again. And there was a gasp from the audience, and they said, "Good gracious, man, if you dropped it, it would be gone!"

"Oh," he said, "That's nothing," and he threw it up again, and up it went, looped over and down, and he caught it. And he looked around, and all those people he was so anxious to impress were watching him, just aghast! Carried away by it, he took the pearl and threw it up again, and up it went, luminous and beautiful, speeding up, looping over and down, and out went his hand, and he caught it. And still they watched him, speechless. And so, just *intoxicated* by their interest, again he threw it, and up it went, up and up. It looped, he stepped forward, he had it perfectly judged, he put out his hand; just then the ship gave a sickening lurch, the pearl slipped through his fingers, bounced on the deck, and rolled over the edge and down into the water, gone forever. And he stood there like the fool he was.

I wonder if some of us do exactly the same thing? We let the Pearl of great price slip through our fingers—the real, first-hand, intimate relationship with the Savior — His transforming Presence within our human life to make it whole, to bring insight and understanding and power. Intending, but always putting off, we let the only truly valuable reality in life slip through our fingers, and we settle for a lot of frothy, meaningless, dying baubles, and we *miss* the Pearl of great price!

Don't ever let that happen to you!

Now none but Christ can satisfy,

None other, Name for me!
There's love, and life, and lasting joy,
Lord Jesus, found in Thee!

Indeed there is, and these blessings will be found nowhere else but in Christ.

AMEN.