

Hidden Treasure, the Pearl, and a Discipled Scribe

*Again, the kingdom from heaven
is like a treasure hidden in a field.*

—Jesus Christ

The next two parables, “The Hidden Treasure” (E.) and “The Pearl of Great Price” (E’), are the central parables of the second peak of this chiasmus¹ and describe the great prize a believer can gain when he obtains an inheritance in the Kingdom from Heaven. These two treasure parables are set between the explanation of “Tares Sown Among the Wheat” (D.) and the parable of “The Dragnet” (D’), both of which concern the judgment at the end of the Mystery Age when good and bad disciples are gathered and then separated. The two judgment

¹ Double Chiastic Structure of the Parables in Mathew 13

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| A. The Soils Sown with Seed | (understanding of productive disciples) |
| B. Tares Sown Among the Wheat | (disciples produce good fruit) |
| C. The Mustard Seed | (growth of the Kingdom) |
| C’ The Leaven in the Meal | (growth of the Kingdom) |
| B’/D. Explanation of “TSAAtW” | (disciples → good fruit)/(day of judgment) |
| E. The Hidden Treasure | (the prize/reward) |
| E’ The Pearl of Great Price | (the prize/reward) |
| D’ The Dragnet | (day of judgment) |
| A’ The Discipled Scribe | (understanding of productive disciples) |

parables form a bracket around the chiasmic structure's second peak to emphasize the great prize of inheritance in the Kingdom from Heaven.

Jesus concludes this cluster of parables concerning the Mystery Age of preparation for the Kingdom from Heaven with a final (eighth) parable describing "The Treasures of a Discipled Scribe" (A'). The theme of these final three parables emphasizes the treasures of a disciple.

"The Hidden Treasure"

Jesus tells His disciples another parable concerning the Mystery Age of the Kingdom from Heaven: "Again, the kingdom from heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and hid; and for joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field" (Mt 13:44). The idea of a "treasure hidden in a field" is to engender in one's mind the greatest conceivable treasure: a treasure which, once discovered, is worth selling everything one owns to obtain.

The interpretation seems to be quite straightforward. An individual finds the greatest of treasures in the field ("field" normally refers to the Promised Land/commonwealth of Israel); he recognizes its great value and is filled with joy because of its discovery. The plain interpretation is that an individual (believer) discovers the importance of seeking the Kingdom of God and its righteousness (Mt 6:33). Having found this great treasure, the believer gives up "all," sacrificing everything that he has in this life in order to "buy" the field and obtain the treasure (by obedience to God's Law). Remember that "joy" is the emotion which Jesus connects with the rewards a believer will receive for doing God's will (Mt 5:11-12). Furthermore, Jesus tells His disciples to give up the things of this life in order to gain them in the world to come (Mt 10:38-39; 16:24-27; Mk 8:34-38; Lk 9:23-26; 17:33; Jn 12:25-26).

In spite of this, many theologians reject the plain interpretation for theological reasons. For example, J. Dwight Pentecost disagrees with the plain interpretation (above):

While this view [the plain interpretation] is possible, it has a major difficulty in that it would seem to indicate that people enter the kingdom through their own sacrifice and by their efforts. Since entrance into the kingdom is based on the new birth (John 3:5), this [view] would teach a false doctrine of salvation (Pentecost, 1982, 60-61).

Unfortunately, Pentecost, like many traditional theologians, is confusing Jesus' teaching concerning the new birth (justification by faith) with His teaching concerning entrance into the Kingdom from Heaven. Pentecost is correct that no one can earn his way to become a child of God; the initial aspect of salvation, described as justification by faith, is a free gift which one receives when he believes the gospel that Jesus is the Christ whom God sent to be the Savior of the world (Jn 1:12; 3:16; Ac 2:36). Jesus clearly indicates that a believer is one who has been born again, which means he will not be sent to the Lake of Fire but will live someplace on the New Earth forever (Jn 3:3, 16; cf. Rev 21:24-22:5). Jesus also says that, if a believer is to be eligible to enter the Kingdom of God, he must be born of both water and the Spirit² (Jn 3:5). On the other hand, an unbeliever (one who has not received Jesus as the Christ and thus is not "born again") cannot even see³ the Kingdom of God (Jn 3:3), let alone be eligible to enter.

Many are confused about entrance into the Kingdom of God because they do not understand Jesus' teaching that, although all New Covenant believers are offered this covenant privilege, some of them will not enter the Kingdom of God. Some believers will be excluded because they are lacking righteousness, specifically, because they have not obeyed the Law of Christ (Mt 5:19-20). Some believers will be excluded from living inside the Kingdom of God because, instead of overcoming the evil of sin, they have allowed sin to overcome them (Mt 5:29-30; 18:8-9; Mk 9:47). Some believers will be

² "Water" likely refers to water baptism in which a believer commits to keep the New Covenant; "Spirit" likely refers to the Holy Spirit, the sign of the New Covenant.

³ Only believers will live on the New Earth and see the New Jerusalem.

excluded from the Kingdom of God because, during their ministry, they have not done the will of God the Father but have done their own will instead (Mt 7:21-23). In light of the possibility of their exclusion from entering the Kingdom of God, Jesus warns His disciples:

Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it (Mt 7:13-14).

Truly, the treasure found in Jesus' gospel of the kingdom is worth more than any treasure in this present world.

“The Pearl of Great Price”

The second parable in this chiasmic couplet is “The Pearl of Great Price.” Jesus tells a similar story: “Again, the kingdom from heaven is like a merchant seeking beautiful pearls, who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it” (Mt 13:45-46). The pearl of great price, like the treasure in the field, refers to the Kingdom from Heaven, a prize which a believer can find and for which he might sell all in order to obtain an inheritance in it.

Again, the interpretation seems to be quite simple and straightforward. An individual believer comes to understand the importance of seeking the Kingdom of God and its righteousness (Mt 6:33), here represented as a pearl of great price. After having found this great treasure and recognizing its immense value, the believer gives up “all,” sacrificing everything that he has in this life, in order to “buy” the pearl and obtain this great treasure (Mt 10:38-39; 16:24-27; Mk 8:34-38; Lk 9:23-26; 17:32; Jn 12:23-26).

The main difference between “The Pearl of Great Price” and the previous parable about the treasure hidden in the land is that this parable's treasure (a pearl) is from the sea. “The Pearl of Great Price” has a Gentile flavor. As previously mentioned, throughout the Bible the Jews are often represented by the “land” and, conversely, the Gentiles are often represented by the

“sea.”⁴ In this reference to a pearl, Jesus seems to be looking forward to the inclusion of Gentiles in His kingdom, if they likewise become His disciples indeed, obeying His New Covenant (cf. Mt 8:10-12; 28:19-20; Jn 8:31-32).

In either case, in the book of Acts, Jesus’ disciples provide good examples of self-sacrifice, suffering, even giving up this life to obediently serve Christ. After having been imprisoned and beaten for their ministry in Jesus’ name, the Apostles are joyful when they realize that their sacrifices in this life make them “worthy” to obtain the prize, the Kingdom of God (Ac 5:41). No doubt they remember Jesus teaching: “Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom from heaven. . . . Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven” (Mt 5:10-12).

“The Treasures of a Discipled Scribe”

After Jesus teaches these parables concerning the Mystery Age of the Kingdom from Heaven, He asks His disciples if they understand. Of course, they answer Him, “Yes, Lord” (Mt 13:51). For good measure, Jesus tells one more treasure parable in order to emphasize the importance of their understanding: “Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom from heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old” (Mt 13:52). This short parable describes a disciple of the Kingdom from Heaven in a new way, as a “scribe.” What is significant here is that this scribe is “instructed concerning the kingdom from heaven.”

According to Jewish tradition, to earn the designation of “scribe,” one must first become proficient in the Hebrew language and the information in the (Old Testament) Scriptures in order to ultimately become an expert concerning the Law of Moses. The Jewish people expected scribes to understand the technicalities of the Old Covenant and looked to them to answer questions and settle disputes. Jesus acknowledged the position

⁴ Cf. Ps 65:7; 144:7; Isa 17:12-13; 40:15; 41:5; 42:4, 10; 49:1; 60:5; Jer 46:7-8; 47:1-2; 51:55; Eze 26:3; Dan 7:2-3; 9:26; Nah 1:4; Rev 17:15.

and authority of the scribes: “The scribes and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. Therefore whatever they tell you to observe, observe and do” (Mt 23:2-3).

Historically, the position and responsibilities of a scribe developed over time. From their beginning, the work of a scribe was basically that of an accountant: he would simply “inscribe” (tally) the number of something (like people or stars, Gen 15:5; 16:10; or corn, Gen 41:49). A scribe might be expected to give a report of his tally; thus he would “recount the details” to his superior (Gen 24:66; cf. 37:9-10; 40:8-9; 41:8, 12, 49). Since scribes were trusted servants who often acted as accountants, during King Josiah’s reign they were entrusted with overseeing the funds of the temple (2Ki 22:3-7, 9; cf. Neh 13:13).

When the Jews were taken to Babylon as captives, the scribes took on an immensely important role: they became responsible for guarding and accurately maintaining the Scriptures, the written copies of God’s Word. After their release from Babylonian captivity, most of the Jews who returned to Jerusalem no longer spoke Hebrew, but spoke Aramaic as their primary language; therefore, since the time of Ezra, scribes have been interpreters of the Old Law, because the Scriptures were written in Hebrew (Ezr 7:6, 11; 8:1, 4, 9, 13). Generally, there are scribes in every nation who are expected to be experts in matters concerning the law of that nation (Est 8:9; Mt 2:4; 17:10; Mk 12:35). Thus, scribes might also be called “lawyers” (Mt 22:35; Lk 7:30; 10:25; 11:45, 52; 14:3; Ti 3:9; 13).

In this eighth parable, Jesus tells His disciples that “instructed scribes” are to bring new and old treasures out of the storehouse. The Greek word here translated “instructed” is a verb form of the word “disciple” (*mathēteuō*, “to make disciples,” cf. Mt 27:57; 28:19; Ac 14:21); thus, a better translation would be “scribes discipled concerning the kingdom from heaven” or “discipled scribes of the kingdom from heaven.”

Who are the “discipled scribes” in this parable? The nation of the Jews already had many scribes who were experts in the Law of Moses. These scribes were often trying to find fault with

Jesus Christ and some became His adversaries.⁵ In this parable, Jesus is describing a new kind of scribe. He has just instructed His disciples about mysteries of the Kingdom from Heaven and has asked if they understand these new things. Having instructed His disciples, Jesus gives them a new title: “scribes discipled concerning the kingdom from heaven.” Now they, being “discipled scribes,” have a new responsibility: explaining God’s New Law to His people.

Why is Jesus telling His disciples that they are to be scribes? Are they magically going to be more expert in the details of the Law of Moses than the existing scribes who have spent their lives studying the Old Law? No, it would be unreasonable and illogical to think so. There is a major difference between Jesus’ newly discipled scribes and the existing Jewish scribes. While the existing scribes are already experts in the Old Law of Moses, Jesus is teaching His disciples to be experts in the Law of the Kingdom from Heaven. What is the Law of the Kingdom from Heaven? It is the New Law given in the New Covenant—the Law of Christ handed down by Jesus to His disciples (Mt 5-7) and explained in His teaching and parables.

How can one be certain that this is what Jesus means when He describes them as “scribes discipled concerning the kingdom from heaven”? First, He uses the word “scribe,” a term denoting someone who is an expert in the law of the land, and He uses this term to describe the new role which His disciples are to fulfill. Second, He identifies the specific kingdom which they are to serve; the Kingdom from Heaven (the messianic kingdom) will require the expertise of these new scribes. Third, Jesus has just instructed His disciples concerning the mysteries of the Kingdom from Heaven and has asked them if they understand. Certainly, a significant purpose of His teaching is to “disciple” His disciples so that they will be “scribes discipled concerning the kingdom from heaven,” enabling them to explain this information to those whom they will disciple in the future.

⁵ Cf. Mt 9:3; 15:1-2; 21:15; Mk 2:6, 16; 3:22; 7:1-5; 11:18, 27-28; 14:1, 43, 53; 15:1, 31; Lk 5:21, 30; 11:53; 15:2; 19:47; 20:1-2, 19, 46; 22:2; 23:10; Jn 8:3-6.

The last reason is most interesting: Jesus describes the treasures these disciples will bring out of the treasury (storehouse) as being things “new and old.” If “old” describes the Old Covenant and its Law, then “new” describes the New Covenant and its New Law. Once these new scribes understand the New Covenant, they will also better understand the Old Covenant and teach things which the existing scribes, and even the Old Testament prophets themselves, have not understood (cf. 1Pe 1:10-12). Notice that Jesus puts the “new” in front of the “old,” emphasizing the change brought about by this new age—the new has priority over the old.

Even with the change from the Old Covenant to the New Covenant, the Psalmist’s description of the value of God’s Law remains unchanged:

The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul;
The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple;
The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
The commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes;
The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever;
The judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether.
More to be desired are they than gold, indeed, than much fine gold;
Sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb.
Moreover by them Your servant is warned,
And in keeping them there is great reward (Ps 19:7-11).

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The law of Your mouth is better to me
Than thousands of coins of gold and silver (Ps 119:72).