

⁴⁴ *“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field.*

⁴⁵ *“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. ⁴⁶ When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it.*

⁴⁷ *“Once again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was let down into the lake and caught all kinds of fish. ⁴⁸ When it was full, the fishermen pulled it up on the shore. Then they sat down and collected the good fish in baskets, but threw the bad away. ⁴⁹ This is how it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the wicked from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*

⁵¹ *“Have you understood all these things?” Jesus asked.*

“Yes,” they replied.

⁵² *He said to them, “Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.” (Matthew 13:44-52)*

Heaven is a Treasure

When I was in high school, I had a friend whose parents owned a piece of land outside of Manistee. Every month, they got a check because there was an oil well on the piece of land next to theirs, and the geologists had determined that at least some of the oil they were pumping was coming from under the land my friend’s parents owned. I was really surprised to learn that. In 9th grade, when the TV show *Dallas* was all the rage, I associated oil wells with Texas and Alaska. I didn’t know there were any in Michigan. And, of course, there aren’t many and I don’t think the oil they’re pumping is plentiful enough or high enough grade that anybody is really getting rich off of it, so there probably won’t ever be a TV show named *Manistee* about rich oil families scheming against each other. But my friend’s family did get a check every month. I tell that story because it strikes me as a modern equivalent of the first parable that Jesus told in our gospel lesson for this morning. He actually told four total parables in these nine verses and what holds all four of them together is the idea of treasure. The point Jesus was making is simple and clear: **heaven is a treasure.**

I.

Both of the first two parables Jesus told make a point that we need to understand: **Heaven is a treasure that’s hidden in this world.** In the first parable, the kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then he went and sold everything he had and bought that field. In the second parable, you have a man who specializes in buying and selling pearls. In Jesus’ day, there were only natural pearls. Divers had to bring up oysters and find the pearls that were inside them. Most of those pearls had imperfections. So, merchants had to sift through the supply looking for perfect or near perfect pearls. This merchant finds one among all that supply that is worth more than all the rest. So again, he sells all that he has and buys it.

Maybe we can relate this to a more 21st century situation. Imagine you discover that a piece of land that’s for sale out in the country has a seam of gold running right below it. No one else knows. All you have to do is scrape together the money to buy that property and invest in some mining equipment and you will be a billionaire. But that’s the rub. It would cost hundreds of thousands of dollars, maybe even a million or more to do all that. To pull it off, you might have to mortgage your house and empty your savings and your retirement funds and borrow every cent you can from every bank and relative and friend. But it would be worth it, right? Once you struck gold, that mine would pay back your investment a thousand times over.

That is Jesus’ picture of heaven. It is worth more than all that we can accumulate in this life. The best things of this life are imperfect. They break. They disappoint. They have to be guarded because they can be stolen or ruined or lost. Even if we manage to keep them, our lives here only last a moment and then we’re done. But eternity will last forever. And the joy of heaven will be so perfect that the Bible rarely even tries to describe it. We just can’t imagine a world without pain or sorrow or conflict or fear, a world in which we see Jesus every day and rejoice over everything and everyone we encounter. Heaven is a treasure.

But that treasure is hidden for as long as we live on this earth. I can't take you there to see it. I can tell you what the Bible says about it, but I can't give you even a virtual tour. So to many people, it seems like a con. Think back to my gold mine illustration. What would your family say if you started liquidating everything to buy this piece of property out in the middle of nowhere because you were convinced that it would make you rich? Don't you think they'd try to talk you out of it? Wouldn't they ask you why no one else ever figured this out? Even if it's true, what do you know about gold mining? People would call you crazy. They would try to convince that you're being conned.

That's what many people today think about heaven. The other night, the movie *The Alamo* was on TV. As the defenders of the mission realized they were all going to die, they started talking about going to heaven. One of the soldiers said something like, "There ain't no heaven. Why you die, you're worm food and that's it!" Now, in the movie, another character answered and even got the last word because the movie was made in 1960. But so many people today think exactly that. When you die, that's it. Now, that's probably still a minority opinion, but it's growing. Even though most Americans do believe in some kind of afterlife, it usually does not involve your body rising. It usually has nothing to do with Jesus. If you're a good person, you go to some kind of "heaven" and if you're a bad person, then you get what you've got coming – but most people go "to a better place."

The heaven that Jesus promised is hidden because it's not a reward for being good. If we have to be good to get to heaven, no one is going to get there, because every sin condemns. The heaven that Jesus promised is hidden behind unbelief and sin. To find it, you have to find Jesus. Not just any idea of Jesus, but the Jesus of the Bible. The Son of God took on human flesh and came down here and lived as one of us. He did that so that he could be perfect in our place. He did so that he could die and pay for our sins. He did that so that he could rise and open the road to heaven for us, and then ascend into heaven and guide us down that road all the way to eternal life. But the human heart is hard and it refuses to see all that God has done. We hide Jesus and eternal life from ourselves. Only the Holy Spirit can lead us to find him.

But once you do, that Jesus and the heaven he won are the greatest treasures we could ever have. If we have to sacrifice everything that we have here for Jesus, if we have to lose our homes and our jobs and all the money we've saved, if we have to watch our loved ones die, to spend eternity with Jesus, then we should cheerfully do that. Otherwise, we are sacrificing endless centuries of eternal joy for minutes of pleasure here.

Are we willing to put Jesus and eternal life ahead of every else here? It's easy to say that we are when we're sitting here in church. But where the rubber meets the road is out there, in our homes, in our workplaces, in our schools, in all the places we go for entertainment and relaxation. Does Jesus come first out there? When our friends mock the faith, when our society denies all that God says and commands and promises, where do we stand? With Jesus on the road to heaven, or somewhere on the road to hell? Don't we all have to admit that it's easy to say the right things when we're in here, but we fall far short of living the right things out there? That is why Jesus says these things to us. He knows that we know all this. But he also knows how hard all this is to live. He knows how guilty every one of us is. And he took on flesh to save us from the hell we deserve. He lived a life of perfect discipleship so that God could say that we were perfect in following him, perfect in putting Jesus first in our lives, perfect in treasuring heaven above all the temporary things of this life. And Jesus died to pay for all our sins and failures, for all the times we let our society lead us astray, for all the times we indulged our sinful desires here instead of following him. And his blood washed all that sin away. He rose to guarantee to us that we are forgiven and we will live with him in heaven. The treasure is ours.

II.

And the rest of today's gospel lesson is all about how important that treasure is. **Heaven is a treasure that makes all the difference.** In the third parable, Jesus pictures professional fisherman dropping a net and scooping up all kinds of fish. That's the way they did it on the Sea of Galilee. So they had to separate the fish they could sell from the ones they couldn't. On Judgment Day, the angels will drop a net – not literally, but they will gather all people who have ever lived. And they will separate believers from unbelievers. They will separate those who have the treasure from those who don't. And those who don't will be cast into the fiery furnace.

The fiery furnace is hell. That image emphasizes the thing we think of most about hell: the fire. God chose to picture hell in terms of fire because burns hurt so much. The idea of being trapped in a burning building and having your whole body engulfed in flames is pretty the definition of the worst way to die.

Imagine, if your body were engulfed in flames and you couldn't die. It just went on and on and on. That's hell. The fire is not going to burn people up and then they're gone. Their torment will last forever. That's why Jesus said that there will be weeping in the fiery furnace.

But he also said that there will be gnashing of teeth. What does that mean? It's easy to read that as just another expression for suffering, but that's not how it's used in other places in the New Testament. In the book of Acts, Stephen gives a sermon in which he accuses the Jewish mob of murdering Jesus, and they gnash their teeth in response before they kill him. It was a sign of anger in Jewish society. So what does it tell us about hell? There is no repentance in hell. There is no peace in hell. Those who are condemned there spend eternity angry at God because he dared to punish their sins. And if you think about it, that only makes it worse. Think about that last time you were mad at someone. Was it pleasant? Did you like what you felt at that moment? Most of us would say no. In fact, being trapped in a situation when you're constantly angry and provoked is horrible. Hell will feel that way and it will hurt.

All that reminds us of what a tremendous treasure heaven is. Because Jesus lived and died and rose for us, we will not spend one second in hell. We have the treasure and the angels will carry us to heaven when we die. On Judgment Day, they will separate us from the unbelievers and Jesus will admit us to eternal life and eternal joy with him. But how did we get that treasure? That's the point of the last parable. Jesus said that every teacher who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings treasures out of his storeroom. He's talking about pastors and teachers, but the point is, the instruction about the kingdom – the gospel – brings us the treasures. Jesus speaks of new and old treasures because the gospel is the point of both the New and the Old Testaments. They both point us to Jesus. But it is the gospel and the gospel alone that gives us that treasure. When we hear it, the Holy Spirit comes to us and gives faith to us. He puts the treasure in our hands. He does that again and again and again until we reach heaven, until that treasure isn't hidden anymore, until we get to enjoy it every day with him.

The treasure is coming. We don't have it in our hands right now. We've bought the field, and the buried treasure is there. We've bought the pearl and we're keeping it in our safe and letting its value go up. We've bought the land and started to dig for that gold. And unlike that oil well that paid my friend's family a little money every month, our treasure will support us in the joy of heaven for all eternity. Everything is paid for and it is ours. We just have to wait a little longer to see it. But we will see it, because Jesus won it and gave it to us. He will bring us home to collect it. Amen.