

EASTER 2020

In 1799 a twelve year old boy named Conrad Reed skipped church and went fishing in a little creek that ran through his family farm near Fayetteville, North Carolina. In an attempt to spear a fish, young Conrad Reed missed but his spear struck an interesting looking gold rock, which he carried home. The rock rested out on the front porch until one day his father went into Fayetteville and took the rock along to show to a jeweler. The jeweler recognized the seventeen pound rock as one very large gold nugget and offered to buy it from John Reed for whatever price he wanted. John Reed, thinking it was only a pretty rock sold it for what was then a week's wages - \$3.50. It's real value was more than a thousand times that amount.

Most of us, upon hearing that story get kind of a sinking feeling in our guts and wonder how incredibly ignorant it was of John Reed to sell a 17-pound gold rock for \$3.50. John Reed soon learned that he had made an unthinkable mistake but after that, though farming was their main focus, in their spare time they began to mine for gold in the creek that ran through their farm and in the end became quite wealthy. They discovered a 28-pound gold nugget the same year. Today Reed Gold Mine is a historic landmark, and you can still go and pay to pan for gold there.

We may think that the Fayetteville jeweler who bought that rock was a crook and a cheat, but he knew treasure when he saw it. He offered John Reed whatever price he wanted for that golden stone. It was John Reed who placed it's value at \$3.50. They both held the same gold stone, John Reed simply failed to recognize its value.

Understanding the value of things is important. One of the things that this Covid-19 pandemic has done is that it is reminding us all of what is truly important in life. What is really valuable in life and what is not. Things like politics and sporting events and entertainment news are not really being talked about right now. People are asking fundamental questions about life, hope and significance.

Today is Easter. Isn't it interesting that at the very worst and darkest days of this pandemic, we look outside and we see spring. The trees are budding, the flowers are coming up. There is new life everywhere! The days are getting longer and warmer, as if to remind us that the darkest days are behind us and there are better days ahead.

In the middle of these dark days is Easter. Like spring itself, it is a reminder of new life and hope. Light instead of darkness. Today we celebrate the fact that almost 2000 years ago Jesus went to the cross and died in our place so that we could have life. He rose from the dead and is alive today and with us wherever you may happen to be right now. That fact is the greatest truth of all time. It is the most important event that *has* ever or *will* ever happen. It is a truth that many who are listening to me today understand, but billions living on this earth today do not understand.

I have had many amazing days during my 56 years on this earth. The birth of my children, getting married to my amazing wife, there have been some great days. The greatest day was when as a young man I understood the truth of Easter and gave my life to the risen saviour. Like the gold rock, there are many today who fail to recognize the value of what a relationship with Jesus really is, but those who have experienced it see it's true value. I understand the difference that walking with Jesus makes.

I want to read a passage of scripture today that we often do not associate with Easter, but I think it is relevant. Today I want to speak about the kingdom of heaven.

Mat 13:44-46 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.

We see in these verses two parables. There are 3 common elements in these parables about the Kingdom of Heaven. In each case, we see that something is;

1. Discovered

In both the stories something is found. Notice the difference though between the two. In one story it seems the man just came across the treasure by accident. We are not told all the details, but it does not seem likely that a man would be digging and searching in another man's property for treasure. He was probably just passing by and came across the treasure by accident. He was not looking for it when he found it.

In the other story, the man is a merchant. He clearly knew what he was looking for. He searched and searched. When he saw the pearl of great price he immediately understood it's value. He knew that he had found what he had been searching for all his life.

Like these two men, there are many who come to Jesus in these same ways. There are those who come to Jesus after a thorough search, and there are those who just stumble upon Him by accident.

Maybe you are listening today and you have been searching for Jesus your whole life. You are a seeker of truth and you have looked into different faiths and ideologies. Maybe today for the first time you are hearing and discovering for yourself what real truth is.

Or maybe you are listening today by accident. Maybe a friend told you about this service or you just stumbled onto this live stream by accident. Though it may seem accidental, I do not believe that you are listening to me today by accident. You may not have been looking for Jesus, but He has been looking for you your entire life. Whatever the case, I hope you can see the value in Easter. I hope you understand what it really means.

A rock hound named Rob Cutshaw owns a little roadside shop outside Andrews, North Carolina. Like many in the trade, he hunts for rocks on the weekends and then sells them to collectors or jewelry makers. He knows enough about rocks to decide which to pick up and sell, but he's no expert. He leaves the appraising of his rocks to other people. As much as he enjoys the work, it doesn't always pay the bills. He works other jobs to help put bread on the table.

While on a dig one day, Rob found a rock he described as "pretty and big." He figured the rock was worth a few hundred dollars, but he would have taken less for it if someone had wanted it. He put the rock up for sale in his shop but no one showed any interest, so he kept the rock for 18 years in a basket under his bed. In 1987 he was watching the news and saw that a man in Arizona had bought a stone in Arizona for \$10 that turned out to be a massive sapphire. He wondered if that might be what his rock was as well. He took it into a gem cutter to have the rock cut and polished.

The blue rock that Rob had kept under his bed for two decades is known today as "The Star of David." It is a 2100 carat sapphire and is worth millions of dollars. He did not see the value in what he had, so it sat for years under his bed.

Maybe you do not yet see the value in Easter. Maybe you are not sure of what value a relationship with Jesus may be. I encourage you to ask God to open your eyes and show you the truth.

In both parables something of value was first discovered...

2. Desired

In both cases the men knew that what they had found was valuable. They also knew that there was going to be a cost associated with obtaining what they desired. Notice that that neither of them seemed to be interested in taking a short cut. The man who found the treasure did not try to go at night and steal the treasure. He knew that if he did that he would spend the rest of his life hiding it, that he would not be able to enjoy it.

When we lived in Kuwait I would often leave my bible on my seat at the front of the church while I was greeting people at the back. In just a few years I had my bible stolen 3 times. I would go back to my seat and find it missing. I remember one time it was between services, and all my sermon notes had been in the bible. I had to run back to my office during the singing to print out my notes again! One of the things I always wondered was this; how can anyone be blessed reading a stolen bible? How can you enjoy something and find help in something that clearly tells you that what you have just done is wrong?

The man who found the treasure did not try to steal it. Likewise, the merchant did not try to cheat the owner of the pearl of great price. He carefully weighed his options and decided to sell everything he had in order to invest in it.

Pearls were perceived in the first century in much the same way we view diamonds today. They were the most valuable gem in the world at that time. If you owned a pearl, you owned a fortune. There was a good reason why pearls were so expensive. Pearl hunting involved immense danger. The fine quality pearls are obtained from the pearl oyster. Since that oyster thrives at an average depth of 40 feet, a pearl isn't a treasure you just stumble across as you walk along a beach. Pearls aren't found like that. In biblical times they were obtained at great cost in human terms -- many people died while pearl hunting. They didn't have the equipment that's available today.

First century pearl hunting equipment consisted of a rope and a rock. A pearl diver would tie a large rock to his body and jump over the side of a little boat, allowing the weight of the rock to carry him down to the oyster beds. He risked danger from sharks, moray eels and other creatures to scour the mud below for oysters. An average of only one oyster in a thousand contain a pearl. All the while, he had to hold his breath and hope he wouldn't drown.

When we lived in Kuwait, pearls were held in high regard. The city of Kuwait actually started as a center for pearl diving. People first came to Kuwait in the 1800s from what is today Qatar as pearl divers. It was this business that formed the economy.

You can see why pearls were so precious. The Jewish Talmud said, "pearls are beyond price." The Egyptians actually worshipped the pearl, and the Romans copied that practice. When women wanted to show their wealth, they put pearls in their hair. When a Roman emperor wanted to show how rich he was, he would dissolve pearls in vinegar and then drink them in his wine, in much the same way that a millionaire might light his cigar using a hundred-dollar bill.

The merchant who found the pearl understood what he had found, and he was willing to give everything he had in order to own it. He understood that there was a price associated with receiving it.

In order to purchase our salvation, Jesus gave everything he had. He died on the cross to pay a debt that we could never pay. When he said from the cross "it is finished" He was really saying "Paid in full."

Our salvation cost Jesus everything He had, and while salvation is a gift in that we cannot purchase it ourselves, following Jesus always has a cost. Sometimes we do not do a very good job explaining that to people. Receiving the gift of salvation that Jesus offers means making Jesus Lord of our life. It does not mean simply saying a quick prayer and then thinking that you can do whatever you want for the rest of your life. The kingdom of heaven has a price.

Mar 8:34-35 Then he called the crowd to him along with his disciples and said: "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. 35 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Jesus today has many who love his heavenly kingdom, but few who carry his cross; many who yearn for comfort, few who long for distress. Plenty of people he finds to share his banquet, few to share his fast. Everyone desires to take part in his rejoicing, but few are willing to suffer anything for his sake.
-- Thomas a Kempis

In both parables something of value was discovered and then desired ...

3. Delighted

In both cases something was found and then purchased. Lastly, it was enjoyed. Notice that it says that the man who found the treasure went and "in his joy... sold all he had." He did not regret it. It was not something he had to do or hated doing. It was joyful.

Have you ever wanted something so you went out and bought it but then had buyer's remorse? You realized that what you wanted was not worth what you paid for it? That is not the case in these stories. In both cases the people knew that what they were receiving was worth far more than what they were paying. They were joyful because they knew that what they had paid was worth it.

Jesus' point in these stories about desiring the kingdom of God is that when people come to understand how good God is, they want him. They don't just love him. They like him. – John Ortberg

Would a person who won a million dollars in the lottery regret spending that \$1 on the ticket? Of course not. What they received was far greater than what they invested.

Several years ago, USA Today did a survey of the wealthiest 1 percent of U.S. households. These are people that have an annual income of at least \$250,000 or a net worth at least \$2.5 million. They were asked what they would be willing to pay for various sources of happiness. At the bottom of the list was "being president," which was worth only \$55,000. Next lowest was having "great beauty" which was valued at \$83,000. The next three items made a huge jump in value. For "reunion with a lost love" the rich were willing to pay \$206,000; for "eternal youth," they were willing to pay \$259,000; and for "talent," slightly higher, at \$285,000. "Intelligence" was worth \$407,000, and "true love" \$487,000.

The fondest and most expensive wish on rich folks' lists is "a place in heaven," which was worth \$640,000 to them, more than eight times that of "great beauty," and more than twice the sum for "eternal youth" or "talent."

Actually, the respondents were wrong about the worth of heaven. Salvation is worth much, much more than \$640,000. It has infinite value and it cannot be bought. Is a relationship with Jesus valuable? Absolutely. Jesus said;

Mat 11:28-30 Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

Following Jesus means being yoked to Him, and some people see that as a negative thing. They say that they want to be free, to not be yoked to anything. The reality is that all of us are born yoked to something. We are yoked to sin and the devil and death. Deciding to follow Jesus and live your life for him is simply choosing to be yoked to Him instead of the devil. When we are yoked with him, He carries the weight. He bears the burden.

My decision to follow Jesus cost me my life, but what I have received from Jesus is a million times better than anything I could have ever found on my own. And I am only talking about the here and now, I also have eternal life ahead of me. Is the kingdom of heaven worth it? Of course it is.

I think the challenge was put very nicely by the Sunday Times journalist Matthew Parris – a man, who by his own confession, is not a Christian. Parris wrote: “The New Testament offers a picture of God, who does not sound at all vague. He has sent His Son to earth. He has distinct plans for each of us personally and can communicate directly with us. We are capable of forming a direct relationship, individually with Him, and are commanded to try. We are told that this can be done only through his son. And we are offered the prospect of eternal life – an afterlife in happy, blissful and glorious circumstances if we live this life in a certain manner. Friends, if I believed that, or even a tenth of that, how could I care which version of the prayer book is used. I would drop my job, sell my house, throw away all my possessions, leave my acquaintances and set out into the world burning with desire to know more and, when I had found more, to act upon it and tell others. Far from being puzzled that the Mormons and Adventists should knock on the door, I am unable to understand how anyone who believed that which is written in the Bible could choose to spend their waking hours in any other endeavor.” -- Matthew Parris

The kingdom of heaven is valuable. It changes everything about us. It is worth it.

Up until now I have said that *we* are the characters in the story. We are the ones who find the pearl of great price and discover the treasure in the field. However, if you think about it, we are not the finders – we are the ones who were found. Easter reminds us that Jesus is the one who was willing to give everything he had to purchase us. He is the merchant, you are the pearl.

John 3:16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

God so wanted you so much that he was willing to give up everything He had to purchase your salvation. He did it joyfully knowing that you were worth it.

Hebrews 12:2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

We are the joy that was set before Him. We are the treasure. We are the pearl. If you struggle with your identity and think you have no value, remember that to God you have infinite value. You know that because that is what God was willing to pay for you. He did it not because He had to but because he wanted to. Because He loves you.

A widow, shortly after her husband's death, was going through his papers. She found a couple of old certificates, yellowed with age. One of the certificates said Coca-Cola on it, so she figured maybe it was an old sales receipt. Not really understanding what they were she figured they were worthless so she threw them away. A couple of weeks later she had a call from her lawyer, asking her if there were any other assets to be dealt with in the estate. The lawyer asked, "Did you find the stock certificates that your husband had? He told me years ago once that as a young man back in the 60s he invested \$10,000 in Coca-Cola." Those papers she had thrown away as worthless were stock certificates worth over 3 million dollars.

She saw them. She had them in her hands, but she failed to see the value in them. I urge you not to make the same mistake today.

Jesus loves you. He died on the cross for you. In uncertain days, Easter reminds us that ultimately in life there is only one thing that really matters. When all has been said and done, some day all of us are going to die and stand before God. This pandemic reminds us that day may come much sooner than expected. Jesus is alive. He is with you and wants to save you. Accept Him today.