

The Parable of the Pearl

by A.W. Pink

The parable of the pearl teaches that God seeks the sinner and forms the Church through His power and grace, making it a precious and valuable gem in His sight.

Scripture: Matthew 13:45

Topics: "Identity in Christ", "Salvation"

Description

A.W. Pink expounds on 'The Parable of the Pearl,' emphasizing that the merchant represents Christ, who seeks and values His church, the pearl of great price. He critiques the common interpretation that suggests sinners must seek and purchase salvation, arguing instead that it is God who seeks the lost and that salvation is a gift, not a transaction. Pink highlights the beauty and unity of the church, formed through Christ's suffering and grace, and the importance of recognizing that believers are not their own but belong to Christ. He calls for a deeper understanding of our identity in Christ and the implications of being His purchased possession.

Transcript

The Prophetic Parables of Matthew 13

Chapter 6:

THE PARABLE OF THE PEARL.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it" (Matthew 13:45,46). First of all, let us deal briefly with the popular and current interpretation of this parable. When we say "popular" we mean, particularly, that which has been given out principally (though not exclusively) by Arminians. The general conception of its meaning is this! Christianity is likened unto one who earnestly desired and diligently sought salvation.

Ultimately his efforts were rewarded by his finding Christ, the Pearl of great price. Having found Him, as presented in the Gospel, the sinner sold all that he had: that is to say, he forsook all that the flesh held dear, he abandoned his worldly companions, he surrendered his will, he dedicated his life to God; and in that way, secured his salvation. The awful thing is that this interpretation is the one which, substantially, is given out almost everywhere throughout Christendom today.

That is what is taught in the great majority of the denominational Sunday School periodicals. During the last twenty years I have examined scores of Sunday School teachers' aids in which an exposition of this parable has been found. The one which I have just given is an outline of that which has commonly been advanced. Now, against that popular interpretation let us name three or four objections which are fatal to it. First, we are told this parable teaches that the sinner earnestly and diligently seeks salvation.

But the truth is there has never been a single sinner on this earth who took the initiative in seeking salvation. The sinner ought to seek salvation, for he needs it badly enough. He ought to seek it, for God commands him so to do: "Let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts: and let him return unto the Lord." "Seek ye the Lord while He may be found," is His command; but fallen man, the sinner in his natural state, never does and never will seek the Lord or His salvation.

How was it with the first sinner? When Adam sinned, and in the cool of the evening of that first awful day, the voice of the Lord was heard rolling down the avenues of Eden; what did he do? Did he hasten to the Lord and cast himself at His feet and cry for mercy? No, he did not seek the Lord at all; he fled. The first sinner did not "seek" God--the Lord sought him: "Adam, where art thou?" And it has ever been thus. How was it with Abraham? There is nothing whatever in Scripture to indicate that Abraham sought God; there is not a little to the contrary.

He himself was a heathen, his parents idolaters worshiping other gods--as the last chapter of Joshua tells us--and the Lord suddenly appeared to him in that heathen city. Abraham had not been seeking God; it was God who sought him. And thus it has been all through the piece. When the Savior came here He declared, "The Son of Man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). But perhaps there are some saying in themselves, "I cannot deny my own experience; I know quite well there was as a time when 'I sought the Lord.'" We do not deny it; what we would call attention to is, there was something before that.

What caused you to "seek" the Lord? Ah, the truth is, you sought Him because He first sought you--just as truly as you love Him because He first loved you. It is not the sheep that seeks the Shepherd; it is the Shepherd who seeks the sheep; and having sought the sheep, He creates in the heart of that sheep a desire after Himself, then it begins to seek Him. Thus, to make this parable teach that the natural man, an unconverted sinner, is seeking Christ, "the Pearl of great price," is to repudiate Scripture and to dishonor the grace of God.

In Romans 3:11 are these words, and they are final: "There is none that seeks after God." No, there is not one. There are multitudes that seek after pleasure, and seek after wealth, but there is none that seeks after "God." He is the great Seeker. Oh that He may seek out some poor, needy souls now, and show them their need of Him, and create in their hearts a longing after Himself. O Spirit of God seek out Thine own. In the second place, we are told in the popular interpretation of this parable that, having sought and found Christ, the Pearl of great price, the sinner sells all that he has and buys it, But that cannot be, because the sinner has nothing to sell!

Righteousness he has none, for Isaiah 64:6 says that all our righteousnesses are as "filthy rags." Goodness he has none, for Romans 3:12 tells us "There is none that doeth good, no, not one." Faith he has none, for that is God's "gift" (Eph. 2:8). The sinner has nothing to sell. The popular view of this parable turns God's truth upside down, for He declares that salvation is without money and without price (Isa. 55:1). In the third place, to say that the sinner sells all that he has and buys the one pearl of great

price--buys Christ--is positively awful!

What a travesty! What a blasphemy! If there is one thing taught more clearly than anything else in Holy Writ, it is that salvation cannot be purchased by man: "Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us" (Titus 3:5). "The gift of God is eternal life" (Rom. 6:23'). If it is a "gift" it is not to be sold or bartered. Let us give now what we believe is the true interpretation of this parable. "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchantman."

The "man" referred to is Christ, as He is all through this chapter. The "man" that sowed the good Seed in the field in the first parable is Christ. The "man" referred to in verse 24 at the beginning of the second parable is Christ, and the "man" in this parable, the "merchantman," is the Lord Jesus. Now, notice five things concerning this "man." First, he desired this goodly pearl: "the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchantman seeking goodly pearls: who when he had found one pearl of great price went and sold all that he had, and bought it."

The parable begins by intimating that the Merchantman had set His heart upon this pearl. The pearl represents His church in its entirety, and that people, that church, the Lord Jesus desired. This is something which altogether passes our comprehension. What was there in us poor, fallen, depraved, sinful creatures to awaken His desire? "What was there in us That could merit esteem, Or give the Creator delight? 'Twas even thus, Father! We ever must sing, For so it seemed good in Thy sight."

That is the only reason. Now let us turn to two or three scriptures which bear out this thought--Christ's desire for a people. "So shall the King greatly desire thy beauty" (Ps. 45:11). O wonder of wonders, that He, the King, should greatly desire poor, sinful worms of the earth! In the light of that, recall those blessed words of His in John 14--how they lay bare the very heart of the Savior--"Let not your heart be troubled: you believe in God believe also in Me. In My Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you.

I go to prepare a place for you." How that speaks forth His love for His own people! How precious they must be in His sight! "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again"--beautiful as that place may be, perfect as that place is, it does not satisfy the longing of His heart until that place is occupied by those for whom it is prepared. "I will go and prepare a place for you, and if I go . . . I will come again, and receive you unto Myself; that where I am, there you may be also."

How that tells out the intense desire of the heart of Christ which will not be satisfied until He has His own blood-bought people around Himself! Compare Ephesians 5:25; Revelation 3:20! The parable then begins by intimating the desire of Christ for this "pearl." The second thing is that He regarded this pearl as being of "great price." That is what has staggered so many of the commentators. Even Mr. Spurgeon used to think that such language could never be true of poor sinners of the earth, that it could only be appropriate of the Christ of God.

It is staggering--that not only should Christ desire you and me, but that we should be of "great price" in His sight! It only illustrates what we are told in Isaiah 55: "My thoughts are not your thoughts . . . as the heavens are higher than the earth . . . so are My thoughts than your thoughts." Yes, they are. Would any redeemed sinner have formed such a conception in his own mind if God's Word had never so told us--that we were of "great price" in His sight? No, I am sure none of us would; for God's people are not of "great price" in their own sight, let alone the sight of the Lord Himself.

O think of it, that we were of "great price" in His sight! There is an intimation of this in that wonderful 8th chapter of Proverbs, where we are taken back into the eternal counsels of God, and are permitted to witness something of the relationship that existed between the Father and the Son before earth's foundations were laid: "Then I was by Him as One brought up with Him: And I was daily His delight." And then in the 31st verse we read the words of Christ, spoken prophetically or in anticipation: "My delights were with the children of men."

"My delights": O my brethren and sisters in Christ, not only were we present in His thoughts, not only did we stand before His mind in the eternity of the past, but His heart was fixed on us; His affections went out to us. We were His "delights" even then. "My delights are with the sons of men." It may be asked, "Can you understand that?" And we say, No, dear friends, we cannot: our poor little minds are altogether inadequate for rising to such a level: we can only bow in wonderment and worship where we cannot understand.

In the third place, we are told that the Merchantman not only desired this pearl, and esteemed it of so great value, but He sold all that He had--words easily uttered, I am afraid sometimes glibly spoken. If our minds were incapable of rising to the level of the thought that has just been expressed, who amongst us is capable of gauging what it meant for the Lord of glory, the Creator of the universe, to sell all that He had? He who was rich for your sakes became poor--poorer than any of us have ever been; much poorer.

So poor that He occupied a manger--that one day we might occupy a mansion. So poor that He had not where to lay His head--in order that you and I, who are amongst His favored ones, might rest our heads forever on His sacred bosom. "He who was rich for your sakes became poor, that you through His poverty might be rich." In the fourth place, this Merchantman sought the pearl. "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchantman seeking." This points a contrast from what was before us in the preceding parable.

In the fifth parable the treasure was "found": in the case of the pearl it was "sought." The distinction appropriately expresses the difference between God's earthly election, the Jews; and God's heavenly election, which are, for the most part, gathered out from the Gentiles (Acts 15:14). Turn to Ephesians 2:17; "And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh." Were not all sinners "far off" from Him? Were there any sinners that were "nigh" to Him?

In one sense, No. In another sense, Yes. Spiritually all of Adam's race were "far off" from Him, yet dispensationally the Jews were "nigh," and the Gentiles were "far off"; but they both needed the word of peace preached to them. He preached "peace to you which were far off (that is, the Gentiles) and to them that were nigh" (that is, the Jews). Hence, in the first of these two parables the treasure was "found"; it did not need "seeking!" It was already in the land when the Christ of God became incarnate: the Jews were already there in outward covenant relationship with God--with the Word of God in their hands, the temple of God in their midst, and so on.

But in the next parable, where the Gentiles are in view, they not only had to be "found," but they needed to be "sought!" They were "afar off" from God in every way. O the minute accuracy of Scripture! Now notice in the next place, the Merchantman bought the "pearl." There is no need to enlarge on that, except perhaps to quote 1 Peter 1:18, 19. ". . .not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot."

It was at the Cross that He bought the pearl, and the price that He paid was His own precious blood. Let us now consider the "pearl" itself, and admire the accuracy, beauty, and fullness of this figure that Christ selected for portraying His Church. First, notice its unity. "A Merchantman was seeking goodly pearls, and when he had found one pearl of great price." Let us observe, however, that this Merchantman had several pearls. He was seeking goodly pearls, and, of course, if He sought them He found each one.

Yes, Christ has several pearls. There are quite a number of distinct companies among His redeemed. The Old Testament saints is one, and so on. But attention is here focussed on "one pearl" in particular: the unity of God's saints of this present dispensation is what is referred to. "In Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, bond nor free, male nor female, for we are all one" (Gal. 3:28). Now, it is a significant fact that a pearl is the only gem whose unity cannot be broken without destroying it.

I may take a diamond and cut it into two, then I have two diamonds. I may take a lump of gold and divide it into two, and I have two lumps of gold. But if I take a pearl and cut it into two, I have nothing: I have destroyed it! A pearl significantly stands for the unity of the saints of this present dispensation. In the second place, a pearl is the product of a living creature, and it is the only gem that is. Not only so, but it is the result of suffering. Away down in the ocean's depths there lives a little animal encased in a shell; we call it an oyster.

One day a foreign substance, a grain of sand, intrudes, and pierces its side. Now, God has endowed that animal with the faculty of self-preservation, like He has all others of His creatures, and it throws out, exudes, a slimy substance called nacre and covers the wound, repeating the process again and again. One layer after another of that nacre or mother-of-pearl is cast out by that little animal on the wound in its side, until ultimately there is built up what eventuates in a pearl.

So that a pearl is the product of suffering. How wonderful the figure! How accurate the emblem! The Church, the saints of this dispensation, are the fruitage of the travail of Christ's soul. The pearl, we may say, is the answer to the injury that was inflicted upon the animal. In other words, it is the offending particle that ultimately becomes the object of beauty: that which injured the oyster becomes the precious gem. The very thing that injured the animal, the little grain of sand that intruded, is ultimately clothed with a beauty that is not its own and covered with the comeliness of the one that it injured.

How manifestly is the Author of the Bible and the Savior of our souls the Regulator of everything in nature. Yes, He saw to it, when He created the oyster, that it should furnish an appropriate type and figure of His Church. In the third place, the pearl is an object that is formed slowly and gradually. It does not come into existence in a single day. There is a tedious process of waiting while the pearl is being slowly but surely formed. And so it has been with the Church. For nineteen centuries now that, of which the pearl is the figure and type, has been in process of formation by the power and grace of God.

Just as the oyster covered the wound in its side and that which pierced it with one layer after another of the beautiful nacre, constantly repeating the process, so out of each generation of men on earth God has called a few and added them to that Church which He is now building for His Son. In the fourth place, notice the lowly origin of that which is a type of the Church. That beautiful pearl originally had its home in the depths of the sea, amid its mire and filth, for that is where oysters congregate.

They are the scavengers of the ocean. Down in the ocean's depths, amidst the mire, is that precious gem being formed. What a lowly origin! Yes, and that is to remind us, and to humble us with the remembrance of it, that we, who have by sovereign grace been made members of Christ, had by nature our origin in the

filth and mire and ruin of the fall. Compare Ephesians 2:11, 12. In the fifth place, the pearl, as it is being formed down there in the ocean's depths, is not seen by the eye of man.

It is a secret formation; none but God witnesses its building up. In like manner, that Church which Christ is now building, that body of His which is now in process of formation, is unknown and unseen by the world. I am not speaking of the visible churches, I am talking about that Church, which is now being built (see Ephesians 2:21; 4:16, etc.), and which as it is being formed, like the oyster, is unseen by the eye of man. Your life is hid with Christ in God (Col. 3:3). Significant, too, is the fact that just as the pearl is found not in the mines of earth, but in the sea, so the Church of this dispensation is composed mainly of Gentiles--the "waters" figuring such, see Revelation 17:15.

In the sixth place, we learn from this figure that in the eyes of God that Church is an object of value and beauty. That little object, hidden from the eyes of men, is being fashioned into a precious gem, which shall yet reflect the light of heaven and become an object of beauty and admiration in the eyes of all who see it. Turn to 2 Thessalonians 1:10, "When He shall come to be glorified in His saints (not only in Himself), and to be admired in all them that believe." That is speaking in the language of the pearl.

First, the Lord Jesus will "present to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle, or any such thing; but it shall be holy and without blemish" (Eph. 5:27); second, when He returns to the earth itself, He will bring with him His complete and beautified Church and it will be an object of admiration to all who behold it. To a wondering universe Christ will yet display His glorified Church. In the seventh place, see how in the figure Christ here selected, we have an intimation of the honorable and exalted future that the Church is yet to enjoy.

That little object in the ocean's depths, unseen by the eye of men, which is being gradually built up, ultimately has a position and a place in the diadem of the king. That is the destiny of the pearl of great price: it becomes the jewel of royalty; for this it has been made. And so we are told, "When Christ, our life, shall appear, then shall you also appear with Him in glory" (Col. 3:4). And again, "That in the ages to come (that is yet future) He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us" (Eph. 2:7).

Ah, my friends, many of God's people today may be poor and despised and hated by the prominent and great of this world, but just as surely as the pearl of great price of lowly origin ultimates in a position of dignity and honor and glory, so those who now are last shall be first. In closing, let me sum up in two words of practical application. First, to the unconverted. O my unsaved friend, let this parable show you once and for all the utter impossibility and the needlessness of attempting to purchase your salvation, of seeking to win God's approval by some works and doings of your own.

The pearl in this parable is not a Savior whom the sinner has to "buy." "By grace are you saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God . . . not of works lest any man should boast." And what is the word to those of us who by the grace of God have been saved? This: the pearl has been purchased by Christ: we are the purchased property of another! You are not your own, but "bought with a price" (1 Cor. 6:20). To what extent is that Divine truth regulating our lives?

How far is that fact dominating our daily walk? We are not our own; we belong to Christ! Do we realize that? Are we living day by day as though we realized it? Does our walk manifest it? Not our own--the property of another! Then should we not say, "For me to live is Christ?" Can any of us truthfully say it? "For me to live is Christ?" Is it true that I have only one aim, only one desire, only one ambition; all my efforts concentrated on the honoring, obeying, magnifying of Christ?

O my friends, the poor preacher cannot honestly say it. By the grace of God he may say that is his desire. But O how far short he comes of attaining to it in his daily life. May God help all His people to realize in their souls that they are not their own: no longer free, no longer have the right to plan their own life, to say what they will do or what they will not do: no longer any whatever--the purchased property of Another. Our answer to that ought to be, "For to me to live is Christ." O may Divine, enabling grace be granted to us so to live!

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