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“God’s Free Grace Is Expensive”

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One of the great challenges in reading the Bible is to be sure we always do it subjectively rather than objectively. That is to say we should not read it as a far-off, historical document to be viewed from a distance. We are to immerse ourselves in it. We are always to find ourselves in the text. And so the question of the day is clear and obvious, *“Am I like the farmer or the merchant who sold all he had to possess the treasure?”*

As the Lord makes clear, the pearl of great price, **the treasure in the field is the kingdom of God.** Understand well, this kingdom is not a place with boundaries, but a relationship. The treasure is the glorious awareness that the gracious promise of God places me in relationship with him, includes me in his special family. To possess the Kingdom is knowing and trusting that Jesus Christ has bought you with a price, and the price is paid in full. To live in the Kingdom of God is to live under the rule of the King, knowing that He is my Savior and my Master, and deeply aware that this is a rare privilege and a costly treasure.

**The big surprise here is to know that it is hidden!** It is always something of a shock to realize how little God makes of himself. He doesn’t overwhelm us. He doesn’t make a big splash. He doesn’t call a press conference to announce his arrival. Many reject Him because they say there is no evidence, and they don’t understand how he can allow this or that to take place. They, of course, are confident they are wiser than He. He doesn’t force himself into our consciousness like some repetitious obnoxious TV commercial.

There was **someone who once wanted Jesus to “market the Kingdom”** in Madison Ave. He offered Jesus world-wide publicity, even a world-wide rule if he would just fall down and worship him. You know his name, Satan. It certainly must have been an attractive offer, no suffering, and no crucifixion.

**But, no, He came through the hidden door,** in the poverty of a stable birth, making himself known in the lives of the little people of the world, the blind, the lame, the lepers, and the socially unacceptable. Why? Because he did not want the Kingdom to be presented like a CBS TV special. He didn’t want people clamoring after him because it was the popular thing to do. Remember how he again and again told people not to talk about his miracles?

**Each of us must discover this wonderful treasure for ourselves.** We must come to Christ not because church leaders tell us to do so, or even because father or mother has encouraged us, or because peer pressure makes it seem appropriate. I have a deep fear of Christianity

becoming the “in thing,” the newest fad, when it is politically correct to be a follower of Jesus. If this happens, something is out of sync, and lots of people have missed the point. **Jesus doesn't parade before us. Rather, he stoops so low** that we can all understand that He is one of us. I may be poor, but Jesus was poorer. I may feel forsaken, alone and empty, but Jesus was more so. I may have to suffer defeat, ridicule and agony, but Jesus more so. He is the treasure hidden in the field, and if the field of life is not too dirty for him, then my hands, dirty with the muck of guilt and failure, can be taken into His hands, and I can be his brother.

**The field, of course, is our lives, the stuff we live with and complain about.** And here is a little lesson, a side-bar, if you will. Consider how often our burdens, once uncovered and examined, become great treasure! Can't you hear that farmer curse when the plow hits the treasure, convinced that the treasure is just another confounded stump or rock? Even so, pearls are often hidden in the pain and monotony of daily life. Can we be patient enough to see God's plan through to the end? Do we really believe, as St. Paul tells us, *“that all things work together for good for those who love the Lord and are called according to his purpose?”*

But here is **the great lesson and challenge of the text.** Neither the merchant who found the pearl, nor the farmer who uncovered the treasure, expected to find anything of value. The discovery is a gift...and yet the gift carries a great cost. They sold everything they had to obtain it!

There is a **great paradox that lies at the heart of Christ's teaching.** What comes to us as a free gift, what we cannot earn, nevertheless demands a response! The free grace of God is expensive!

Now the **value of the gift should make the cost seem inconsequential, trivial.** The merchant did not hesitate to sell all he had to possess the treasure, but there IS cost! The last thing our Lord wants to offer is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called *“cheap grace”* preaching forgiveness without requiring repentance, offering communion without confession, promising heaven without the cost of discipleship.

**Make no mistake, there is a haunting “either-or” about the Christian life.** Either pick up your cross and walk with Jesus, denounce self and your favorite forbidden pleasures, your flagrantly sinful life style, or live without Christ, and die without Christ.

**Our big mistake is judging what it is like to pick up the cross** and walk with Jesus. We imagine this a near intolerable, burdensome condition. Those who caricature Christians as pinch-faced and dour obviously don't know any real Christians. Jesus says, *“The yoke is easy and the burden is light.”* The farmer goes *“with joy”* to sell all he had. There is no long, sorrowing face, no complaining about the high cost. He has discovered the treasure,

the free gift placed before him. He knows what it is worth and he is delighted with the option before him. The high cost seems trivial. I regularly take note of the fact that the most self-sacrificing, saintly, sensitive, caring people I know are also the most contented, joyful and at peace with themselves and the world. This is no accident or fluke. It simply reflects their awareness of the value of the treasure.

Have you ever known anyone who said, *“You know, I was once deeply involved in the life of the church. I was raised in the church. I wouldn’t have dreamed of missing worship. But now my lifestyle has changed. I am so busy. I have so many other interests. I still believe, of course, but I just don’t seem to have time anymore for church and all those volunteer activities?”*

I can tell you that I’ve talked with scores of people who repeated some variation of that theme. It would seem that the cost of discipleship is too high. And I was often tempted to brow-beat them, to scold them until they paid the price, no matter how grudgingly. There are people who think that’s the pastor’s job, to chase down the back-sliders and make them feel guilty enough to get back on track.

**But the problem, I’ve come to realize, is not the high cost. The problem is that people lose their vision, their perspective.** We can’t seem to see the treasure in the midst of the muck. We look at the pearl and mistake it for a rock.

**We live in a rich culture, in a very materialistic and hedonistic culture.** We are bombarded with temptations. It is so easy for us to slip-slide away from the values that define the disciple of Christ. Until we encounter a crisis! Do you remember, as well as I remember, the days and weeks which immediately followed the tragedy of 9/11? When the whole country was jarred out of complacency, sobered, with deep anxiety about our future? And for a few Sundays the church pews were filled to overflowing? We were suddenly reminded that some things are more important than other things.

**I’ll say it again. The problem is not that the cost is so high, but we lose our vision, our perspective, our sense of value.** We stumble over the treasure, and think it is a stump. We look at the pearl and think it is a rock. Do we really have to experience a major crisis in our lives to get things in focus?

And for those **around us who have seemingly lost the way**...our friends, and family members and neighbors, our task is not to scold or browbeat them but to show them the treasure! To share our vision and our experience of possessing the pearl of great price. What we have to offer is the wonder of God’s rich and forgiving love, the Gospel of the crucified and risen Christ which draws us into the family of God. **When people see the treasure clearly, then everything else looks different...**

- **The earth** – no longer a scene of frustration, toil and sweat, but God’s marvelous creation, there to point us to God’s glory.
- **Our neighbors** – not a burden or a threat to my security, but brothers and sisters who may need my help and support.
- **The Church** - not a place to grimly and grudgingly “*do our duty*” but a place to celebrate and sing and serve with others who know the joy of having the treasure.
- **My faith** - not a spiritual supplement, like vitamins, to add a little zest to my diet, but the one thing needful, the core and center of my existence.

**But before any of that can happen, we must see the treasure!**

**Spirit of God, open our eyes to see the treasure. Let us see it fresh and clear, the treasure of Jesus Christ, the one who was rich, yet for our sake became poor, who died that we might live, and lived again that we might never die. Open our hearts to give ourselves away, following the path of discipleship, and enable us to rejoice in doing it because we know the value of the treasure. Amen.**