

Barratt Ministries Challenge

Issue 69

The Treasure

The Kingdom Series Part 8

by Alex Robertson

Up to this point in our study of the parables of the kingdom we have seen the destructive, corrupting work the devil has done to the pure word of the kingdom. Jesus' parables in Matthew 13 were prophetic when they were spoken, and now with hindsight we can clearly see the history of the church in them. The radical, confrontational word of discipleship which Jesus preached quickly became watered down, compromised and corrupted after the death of the apostles. The Christians, from being a persecuted minority standing against the world, now began to embrace the world, until by the 4th century the church had become enmeshed in politics and philosophy, and Christianity had become the official religion of the Roman Empire. But this "Christianity" was a far cry from what Jesus had preached – in fact it is no exaggeration to say that it bore no relation at all to the gospel of the kingdom. This is the state of events we find at the end of the parable of the leaven – mixture, compromise, corruption.

This pattern of decline repeats itself in every church, in every move of God, and in every person's individual life. There is a natural tendency towards compromise and corruption, no matter how well we begin. But take heart – thus far we have only seen the devil's plan. God also has a plan – and actually, if the truth be known, the devil's plan is only a part of God's plan. God is in total control. When he allows Satan to do anything, it is always because it suits his own purposes.

God's plan: separation

God's plan is the opposite of Satan's. Satan seeks to corrupt, to create compromise and mixture; God seeks to purify and separate: "that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people" (Titus 2:14). In the next 3 parables we see the plan of God to progressively separate and purify his people, in 3 separate ways: separation by redemption, separation by suffering, and separation by judgement.

First comes the parable of the treasure (Matthew 13:44). "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field." A single verse, but full of meaning – once we have the key. The key comes in asking the questions, who is the man, and what is the treasure?

The most common interpretation of this parable is that we are the man, and the treasure is Jesus (or the treasure is the kingdom). Perhaps we are drawn to this interpretation because the parable talks of "selling all you have", which is the instruction Jesus gave to the rich young man. But under closer examination, this interpretation does not make sense. For instance, we do not 'find' Jesus, actually

he finds and chooses us. Also, what can we sell to enter the kingdom, or to 'obtain' Jesus? What price can we give to buy the kingdom, or buy Jesus? We can't – it's the free gift of God's grace. And as it is actually the field, not the treasure, which is bought, and the field generally means the world, how can we "buy the world" – or anything else – in order to obtain the kingdom? Again, we can't. And if the treasure is Jesus, why would we hide him when we have found him? That doesn't make sense either.

The other way round

However we look at it, the parable just doesn't stand up with this interpretation. But what if it's the other way around? What if the man is Jesus? Then it would be Jesus who buys the field, and as the field seems to symbolize the world in the other parables, that would mean Jesus buys the world. Did Jesus do that? Yes, he did exactly that! He paid the price for the whole world. "And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). But Jesus did this, not because the world is of any value to him; what he valued was the treasure hidden in the world. What is that treasure?

When God brought Israel out of Egypt, he called them his treasure. "Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people" (Exodus 19:5). "The Lord hath chosen Jacob unto himself, and Israel for his peculiar treasure" (Psalm 135:4). And it's the same with God's people in God's kingdom now. We are a peculiar people, different, separate, special – we are God's treasure! For this treasure Jesus was willing to "sell all" and pay a great price. And he certainly paid a great price. Though he "thought it not robbery to be equal with God, he made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross." (Philippians 2:6-8). Jesus truly "sold all he had", his glory with his Father, to become a man in the likeness of sinful flesh, to die at the hands of his own people, to be the sacrifice that would pay the price for sin for ever.

The beginning of the plan

But paying the price for our forgiveness is only the beginning of God's plan. The purpose of grace is so we can begin to fulfill God's desire for us. Hidden within us is what Jesus saw in the future: a new, glorified, immortal, resurrected people, manifesting God's character, obeying and loving him, ruling the world under the kingship of Jesus. And to that extent we, the treasure, are still "hidden in the field". The kingdom, and the manifestation of the resurrected sons of God, remains a mystery to the world. Although "now are we the sons of God, it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him" (1 John 3:2). One day, when Jesus comes and sets up the kingdom on earth, the treasure will be manifested – and all creation is waiting for that day: "the earnest expectation of the creature [creation] waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God" (Romans 8:19).

So redemption is the beginning of God's plan to separate his people. But in order for us to become the treasure and fulfill God's plan, several things have to happen. Firstly we must accept and

respond to the call of Jesus. For those who do not respond, the price has been paid, but in vain. (The terrible, tragic fact is that people will go to the lake of fire when the price has been fully paid to forgive them and redeem them to God.) Then we must respond to the call to discipleship, the call to be separate. It is one thing to be “bought with a price”, but if we don’t realize it and act like it, if we don’t submit to the lordship of Jesus, then again it is in vain. Paul makes it clear that although we are children of God, an inheritance in the kingdom is for those who are prepared to submit to Jesus in all things, and for those who are willing to suffer with him in order to reign with him (2 Timothy 2:12). “The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together ...” (Romans 8:16-17).

Paul’s perspective

But if we have been awakened to this fact, if we have realized that God wants complete ownership of our lives, and we are willing to submit to that, then we can join with Paul in his perspective and his vision. Paul knew that it was all worth it: “... For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God” (Romans 8:18-19).

But the kingdom is only for those who see and who submit. Many Christians “see and do not perceive”. They hear the words of Jesus, but “seeing, they see not” (Matthew 13:14,13). Those who do see must submit and obey. It’s a restricted gate and a narrow way. Few find it, even within the church. Not everyone wants to be separate; not everyone wants to be purified. The appeal of the devil’s counterfeit kingdom is strong. It appeals to the flesh with its mixture of worldliness and godliness. It appeals to Christians whose hearts are covetous, because it allows them to be covetous “in the name of the Lord”. It appeals to Christians who want power and glory. It appeals to Christians who want success and praise and a good reputation. It appeals to Christians who are “at ease in Zion” (Amos 6:1) – those who want a problem-free life, a life where they can basically live how they want to live and come to church on Sundays, a Christianity without cost, a cross-free Christianity.

It’s about you!

Don’t “tut-tut” when you read that list, and think about all the people you know who fall into that category. It’s you and me as well. Remember, the pattern of the parables repeats itself in every Christian’s life. We all get corrupted, we are all liable to get seduced into compromise, none of us have pure motives, and we all need the repeated call to separation and purification. We all need reminding that we are not our own, and that we must give an account of every day, every action, every word, at the judgement seat of Christ. Don’t read it for others – read it for yourself, realize you have been redeemed, bought with a price; get your perspective right, get your vision back, and start living for the kingdom!

EXPERIENCES FROM LIFE

by Joanna Barratt

The Peculiar People

Some years ago I went to a prayer meeting in a church I was attending for a short time. The congregation sang a song together: "Speak O Lord, speak to me, speak and I'll be swift to answer Thee", which we all sang with fervour, during which I was given a vision by God. In the vision I was sitting in the congregation praying and heard an earth-shattering, thundering voice call to the people, telling them to come outside. It was so real that I opened my eyes to see if anyone else had heard the voice, but they all had their eyes shut and their heads bowed and nobody made a move. I closed my eyes and again heard the voice. I knew now that God was talking and the voice was so strong and powerful that I was afraid to disobey, so in my vision I got out of my seat and left the building.

The vision continues

Once outside the church doors I looked around and was surprised to note that nobody else had left their seats. The other people in the congregation (in the vision) remained seated in their comfortable seats and carried on singing and praying. I wondered what was going on and asked the Lord if this was really necessary. The thundering voice told me to walk and again I felt the fear of disobeying so I walked.

I walked for a while and came to the edge of the town, the pavement had ceased and I had to walk across fields, but still I had the compulsion to continue walking. I came to the foot of a mountain and expected God to tell me why He had called me from the church. I asked the Lord again if this was really necessary, but there was no voice just the compulsion to continue and the fear to disobey so I began my journey up the mountain.

It was beginning to get dark. I looked at my watch and noticed that it was time for the people to be coming out of church now so I looked back to where I had come from. As I was part way up the mountain I could look down and see the people leaving the church, chatting to each other and making their way to their individual homes. I thought about my own home and would have loved to be doing the same. I was completely alone and would have loved the company of some of the other saints from the church. Again I asked if this was really necessary, but the Lord called me on. I was getting quite cold now and as I began to climb higher I looked down and saw the church members sitting in their nice warm houses by their fires, drinking hot beverages and eating supper. My stomach began to growl as it felt deprived of the comforts it was used to, but still I was pushed on to continue my journey.

“Is it really necessary?”

I climbed higher and higher until the grass no longer grew and I had to walk on rough rocks. I hadn't been prepared for this climb so the flimsy shoes I was wearing began to fall apart. It wasn't long before they had broken off completely and I was forced to walk without them. Darkness fell, I had no torch, and couldn't see clearly. I was cold, hungry, lonely and very tired. I looked down below and could see the lights on the in the houses. I watched as people began to take off their dressing gowns and slippers and slip between the fresh, clean sheets of their comfortable beds in their nice warm houses and longed to be down there with them doing the same. I asked the Lord again if this was really necessary, but I had already heard God's voice and was afraid to disobey so I wearily carried on my way.

It seemed like the journey took forever but at last I reached the top of the mountain. In the darkness I saw the outline of an altar - a stone slab erected on some stones. My heart began to pound. Instinctively I knew what was expected of me and shrank away in terror. As I was crouching on the ground afraid to move, I heard the song I had sung in the church that evening ring out in my ears ... “Speak O Lord, speak to me, speak and I'll be quick to answer Thee” ... I was faced with the starkness of my own words, is that all it was - words - or did I really mean what I sang? At last I edged my way towards the altar and with tears in my eyes lay down upon it. Nothing happened. I looked around the base of the altar and saw and knife and then the awful realisation, that God expected me to kill myself, hit me. “Oh God,” I cried from the depth of my soul. “Is this really necessary?” The voice didn't thunder out a command like I had heard in the church, but though it was soft and gentle it still carried the same weight and I feared to disobey. My spirit was willing but my flesh kicked and screamed. With all my heart I wanted to serve God but my physical body rejected the very thought of pain. I cried out to God for help and then plunged the knife into myself.

The release of the spirit

It was then that I seemed to look from outside my body at what was happening. As the knife killed my flesh, so it released my spirit. My body lay prostrate on the altar, but my spirit rose as light as a feather. I watched as my spirit began to skip and dance upon the mountain top. It wasn't affected by the cold, nor did it feel hunger, these feelings could only be experienced in the flesh, but once the flesh had been put to death my spirit was free to serve God with complete abandonment. I tripped down the mountain back to my home but had been transformed. I lived my life amidst others, but I was totally different from them, with a brand new focus. I realised why the journey had been necessary. I had to crucify the flesh in order to live to God.

Jesus' whole plan was to buy the treasure in the field. Not everyone who calls themselves Christians are his special treasure. He wants to purify for himself a peculiar people, men and women who are completely different from the norm.

Being different

Being different is not always pleasant. The Bible tells us in Romans 12 that we are not to be conformed to this world, but that we are to be transformed by the renewing of our minds ... we are to think about things differently to how the majority of people think. Christmas was always a difficult period to get through when I worked in the world. The firm's Christmas Party was the highlight of the year for them, but was always dreaded by myself. At these functions the staff blamed the free alcohol which always flowed in abundance for their immorality and adulterous affairs. They knew I was 'teetotal' but would try their best to lace my drinks so that my morals would also be loosened. I had to run from some firms like Joseph did from Potiphars' wife. From 2 other firms I was neatly got rid of after the Christmas Festivities for refusing the advances of my married bosses. They said I hadn't acted as they had predicted - I was a very unusual girl!

I can understand problems in the world - that is to be expected when you are a Christian. But it is also hard to be different from the norm in Church where you are also expected to fit into the pigeon hole. I joined the church Music Group when I was 16 years old. I had always felt a sense of destiny and knew that I wanted to serve God. There were 5 guys in the group besides myself and we were all members of the church. We worked hard at our skills and talents and put a lot of effort into becoming proficient on our instruments. We bought good equipment. God spoke to us prophetically saying that there was a work for us to do and that He would use us after He had worked on us.

We prayed regularly together and initially had a single vision, to minister to the Lord by singing Christian songs we had written ourselves in churches or in concert. But then some members wanted to go round the pubs and clubs saying that we could sing some worldly songs but also slip some of ours into the programme as a witness. This didn't gel with either Maurice or myself - the rock group U2 is a good example of how Christians end up when they try this approach! In frustration the group began to split up, some members wanted to do other things, others got married and settled down with their partners in other towns, or got involved in other ministries. But Maurice and I both believed what God had said when He had spoken prophetically to us. No matter what adversity has come our way we would not let go of the vision. Many people, even Christians, have thought of us as peculiar, but then that's a good sign isn't it? Isn't that what God is trying to prepare for Himself ... a peculiar people?