

# Eleventh Sunday after Pentecost

## GOD DIGS FAITH

Matthew 13:31-33, 44-52

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Analysis by Marcus Felde

31He put before them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed that someone took and sowed in his field; 32it is the smallest of all the seeds, but when it has grown it is the greatest of shrubs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and make nests in its branches."

33He told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

. . . .

44The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

45Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls; 46on finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.

47Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind; 48when it was full, they drew it ashore, sat down, and put the good into baskets but threw out the bad. 49So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

51Have you understood all this? They answered, "Yes." 52And he

said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

*Author's Note: The following interpretation may seem totally wrong to you. (Maybe in a few years it will seem crazy to me!) Let me defend it a little up front.*

*The parables about Treasure Chest and Invaluable Pearl are very similar, yet their main difference is striking. One says the kingdom is "like the treasure," one says the kingdom is "like the treasure seeker." Commentators seem to universally prefer the former, as if these parables were intended to reinforce the maxim, "Seek first the kingdom of heaven."*

*I am not so sure. If the Pearl parable had come first instead of second, might we not have thought the "kingdom of heaven" was the seeker? Perhaps faith is the pearl/treasure which God seeks, and which he delights to find. Then the parables would illustrate not "Seek first the kingdom . . ." (Matthew 6:33) but "The Son of Man came to seek and to save that which is lost" (Luke 19:10). Or, to stay within Matthew's gospel, more precisely: "Truly I tell you, in no one in Israel have I found such faith. I tell you, many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the heirs of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth"(Matthew 8:10-12). "That might explain why Jesus likens a scribe (i.e., an "heir of the kingdom") who has been trained for the kingdom (i.e., has faith) to "the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."*

*This reading makes these parables not of advice but of judgment. But do not parables have that character more often than not? No one could claim that the third parable of this series—Fish*

*Sorting—is not about judgment!*

*Yet the judgment, here as ever, is not on race or nation or deeds but on . . . faith. “When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?” (Luke 18:8).*

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## **DIAGNOSIS: Not Worth Owning**

**Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) :** *Some Are Worth More Than Others?*

The Treasure/Pearl/Fish triptych does not depict our external or internal problems, but cuts to the chase: Those who are worth less are doomed. They will not continue forever to be God’s people.

But who are worth less? The “bad” and the “evil,” according to verses 48 and 49. Although we are not without more precise criteria for judging people, any observation-based judgment will be fallible. It may be that the tax collector will go home justified, rather than the Pharisee! Who knew? Jesus can seem offhand or arbitrary when he speaks of particular bad behavior, since he is eager to get to the heart of the matter (see below).

**Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) :** *Cheap Piece of Plastic*

Sins originate in hearts where, in the absence of faith, Self-love Ltd. manufactures shiploads of imitation goodness. If we do not have faith in Jesus, if we do not love the Father because of Jesus, then we are not the real article. Our beauty and worth are finally in the eye of The Beholder, and when he puts on his jeweler’s loupe he knows from plastic. This stuff does not belong to the Kingdom.

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) :** *Sold!*

“All that he had” he sold. Because the One who seeks “treasure” is serious. God really seeks faith. No kidding. So the judge’s gavel is an auctioneer’s gavel. “Gone.” It’s over. This fish is not for eating, this pearl for wearing, this treasure for banking.

## **PROGNOSIS: Purchased with His Own Blood**

### **Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *Bought!***

On the flip side, Someone is buying. A pearl is being bought at great cost. Now, “sold all that he had” is taking on a different appearance. The Son of God pays a steep price to own the invaluable pearl, namely his own life, “all that he has.” If God did not really want a people to be his own and live under him in his kingdom, would he have given his only Son to die for us? We are prized! We are the fine pearl.

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Faith Makes Fine***

Nothing in us makes us valuable—it is God’s valuing us that makes us precious. But when we claim (on the strength of Jesus’ promise) to be the pearl, what do we point to? What is it that Jesus seeks, elicits, praises, encourages, and rewards? Faith. Faith that touches the hem of his robe, climbs a tree to see him, puts a huge two cents in the treasury, turns around and says thanks, and so on. It is the faith hidden in these actions that makes the pearl fine.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Pearl, Be Beautiful***

Nothing in us makes us intrinsically valuable, yet when God’s gracious act of valuing us enough to die for us meets with our loving him for valuing us, we do in fact shine with heavenly luminosity. God’s People-pearls glow with deeds of love. Glitter with acts of worship. Shine with thoughts of peace. All because he loved us first.