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THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE Matthew 13:45-46

Reuven lived in a hard land at a hard time. To live in a small country that had been overrun and occupied by a ruthless oppressor like Rome was bitter for everyone. The working people were ground down by the occupying army, by the never-ending list of punitive laws handed down from the distant emperor, by the ever-increasing taxes imposed by the traitorous tax-collectors among their own people, and by the outrageous burden of religious rules enforced by the vassals of the High Priest, all of which made daily life frustrating and almost impossible.

Reuven's uncle had been an influential man because of his wealth and political connections, and since he was childless he had taken his nephew, Reuven, into the business as an apprentice pearl-merchant. The uncle was delighted when Reuven showed such an aptitude for the trade. In time he could glance at a handful of pearls spread on a table and instantly assess their value. And if one or two pearls were of unusual quality he could pick them out unerringly, although as a shrewd dealer he was careful not to tip his hand.

The uncle was long deceased and the business was now Reuven's, but because of the Romans, the taxes, the bandits on the highways, the religious police, and the periodic uprisings among his kinsmen against the hated invaders, business was uncertain and difficult. Then that day, that very special day came along. A caravan came down from the distant Chaldees on its way to Egypt. The master of the caravan sought out Reuven and led him to a secluded place. He said, "I want to show you something." He reached into an inner pocket for a pouch, extracted a small bundle of soft, black cloth, slowly and dramatically opened his hand, and nestled in the midst was a single, lustrous pearl. In spite of himself, Reuven's breath caught in his throat and his heart stopped. Pearls were not only his business, but they had become his passion. He had seen hundreds, thousands of pearls, but he had never seen one like this. It was simply perfect. It glowed with an inner fire. It was...priceless!

The old trader grunted with satisfaction when he saw the effect the pearl had on Reuven. He already knew from his past experience and from talking to experts that he was holding a very special treasure. But Reuven's reaction was an added confirmation. "Very nice," Reuven said. "What will you take for it?" "Oh, no!" responded the old man. "You can't afford this pearl. I'm taking it to a certain dealer who can pay my price." Reuven quietly persisted: "What is your price?" The old man quoted a price that was, as he had said, far more than Reuven could afford. And the old man was adamant: "That's my price and I will not take one shekel less!" Reuven was conflicted. The price was out of his reach, but he knew something the old trader did not know. Reuven was a master pearl merchant, and evaluating pearls was not only his business but his special gift. He had an intuitive genius when it came to analyzing pearls. And while the old trader knew that this was a valuable pearl, he had no idea of its real worth. This pearl was the find of a lifetime. It deserved to be placed in the tiara of a queen or in the crown of a monarch. It was worth a fortune, a literal fortune. Reuven's heart was beating wildly. "Give me two or three days," he said in a voice as calm as he could make it, "and I will find the money to buy it." "Really?" the old man replied. "You can raise that kind of money?" "Yes," Reuven said, "I can do it."

He hurried to his shop and immediately started liquidating his stock, all of it. He discounted his pearls and other jewels and the silver and gold necklaces and rings. He ran to his neighbor who had been trying to buy his shop in order to expand his business and made a deal with him for his shop and furnishings. He ran to his home and started removing some of the inherited furniture and valuables that had been in his family for generations. His wife became alarmed. "What are you doing? Have you gone crazy?" He told his wife that he was also going to make a quick sale of their home. She nearly fainted. He whispered to her conspiratorially, "Don't worry! I will soon buy you the villa down at the coast that you have always wanted." Reuven had a strange look on his face, fevered, intense, and Miriam became convinced that her husband had lost his mind.

He was like a man possessed. He had to have that pearl! He had to have it! He sacrificed all that he had saved,

everything that he owned. Things that had always been supremely precious to him suddenly seemed like straw, if only he could get that pearl! And he bought that pearl, and he knew that he was the one blessed beyond measure in giving everything for it.

When I was thirty years old I had a beautiful wife and three children, with a fourth soon to be born. I had been in the Navy for a brief time at the end of World War Two, had graduated from university with a business degree, had a good job, a nice brick home, and a secure future. But I was empty inside and lived with an unfocused anxiety. I used alcohol and other things to fill up the emptiness, but it wasn't working.

And then a certain pearl merchant came through my neighborhood, called me aside to tell me about something valuable he was carrying, but to me at that time it did not appear to have any value at all. He persisted, invited me to attend his adult Sunday School class, which certainly seemed to be a pointless thing for a grown man to do. But because Doris and I had been raised by parents who took us to church, we felt vaguely guilty for not having our kids in church, so we started taking them to Sunday School and church, and in the process we became involved in church activities. We especially enjoyed the friendships, the every-Sunday volleyball games and group picnics. And I started listening to the spiel of the Sunday School teacher, a geologist with Texaco, as he shared the gospel with an intensity that I had never heard before.

I didn't get it for a long time, but after several months something started to happen. The scales gradually fell from my eyes, and then came a day when I saw that Christ was the Pearl of Great Price! He was what I had been yearning for all of my life. What He offered was a treasure beyond imagination. I invited Him into my heart and life, and I wept almost constantly for three days and nights. The reality of what I had been given kept growing in ever-widening dimensions. In a few years Doris and I sold everything we had and bought that pearl. At thirty five years of age I resigned my job, we sold our house, and I entered seminary to train for ministry. There were many among family and friends who said that I was crazy, "Oh, Glenn has got religion and has gone overboard!" They did not, could not understand. I made a big mess of my walk with the Lord. There were whole seasons that were darkened by my backsliding and foolishness. But Christ does not give up on us easily when we sign up as part of His gang, and because of His faithfulness I have returned to the arms of a welcoming Heavenly Father and remain convinced that I made the best deal of my life when I purchased that Pearl.

In the early history of western expansion of our country, God's kingdom was expressed through several streams of faith, and one of the most vibrant was Methodism. Hundreds of young men became converted to Christ and offered their lives as "itinerant preachers," traveling preachers, who went into the wilderness on horseback to offer Christ to the early pioneers. They suffered desperate privation, often going hungry, often sleeping on the ground in all kinds of weather. There were no doctors or hospitals. They were ravaged by sickness and accidents and violence. **The average lifespan of one of those preachers after entering into that ministry was four years!** But the gospel took root in early America.

In many parts of the world today the experience of those early Methodist preachers is being replicated in Muslim lands, Hindu lands, Communist China, Cuba, Chiapas in Mexico. Rolland and Heidi Baker did their PhD's at King's College, University of London in 1992, and at the same time planted a church among the homeless, the drug addicts, and the alcoholics on the streets of central London. They have lived and served in the poorest slums of Asia and Indonesia and are now planting a church in Mozambique, the poorest nation on earth. Heidi says that she has been shot at five times, beaten, thrown in jail, and fasted one-third of her adult life, so she knows a bit about suffering and anguish. But she counts it all as joy. "If I am not in love, then I want to quit!" God has used the Bakers to this time to start 10,000 churches in Mozambique and the surrounding nations. This is, of course, a God-thing, and He is free to do this kind of nation-changing work because of the love and sacrifice of two of His kids.

We don't dare compare our lives and dedication to these noble ones. Their secret is in seeing, perceiving, discovering, the Pearl of Great Price. When I have grown cold and fallen away from my commitment, and there have been too many of those times, it has been when I have gotten my eyes off of Him and onto something else. I forgot who He is and the great, inexpressible gift He has brought to me.

Has that Pearl been revealed to the eyes of your heart? *"When you seek Me with your whole heart, then I will be found by you."* God will never, never, never be satisfied with a half-hearted, luke-warm commitment from you and me. He loves us passionately, emotionally, desperately, to the extent of the Cross. What He wants, what He holds out as an expectation, is that we will return His love with all our heart, soul, mind and strength....and that we demonstrate that love by laying down our lives for our neighbors.



FOLLOWING JESUS

(A few days ago, Jim Schnell and I spent a weekend at one of the prisons in Canyon City. Following is an expanded version of the first message of my seminar. Since I don't have a white-board to draw on, as I did at the prison, you will have to use your imagination.)

On the board I drew two squares. Above the first square I wrote, BAD PERSON; and above the second box, GOOD PERSON. This is an account of two guys, one bad and one good, and how they can get into heaven. Who could I use as a bad person? I know one really well. Under the title, BAD PERSON, I wrote "Glenn." Then I filled up the box with S's, for Sins. This is a true account of my life. Oh, yes, there have been some Righteous Acts, so I wrote a few tiny R's in among the S's. When God looks at my life, it doesn't look very favorable for me, does it?

Above the second square, titled GOOD PERSON, I wrote the name "Billy," for Billy Graham. Then I filled up his box with R's, for Righteous Acts, and I wrote a few tiny S's in among the R's for his sins. So is Billy going to earn his way into heaven because all of his righteous acts outweigh his sins? No? Why not? You are right! We can't earn our way into heaven. In fact, the Bible tells us in Isaiah 64:6 - "***We are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags.***" Whoa! God is not telling us that our sins are filthy in His sight, but that our good deeds, our highest and best acts, are filthy to Him. So Billy is just as lost in God's sight as I am. Right?

Now I drew another box on the board with the title, PERFECT PERSON. Who is a perfect person? Yes, you are right again: Jesus. And in his box I put one big R, in the color red, filling up the entire box. Jesus doesn't have any S's in his box, and His righteousness is of a different quality than ours. So how in the world are Billy and I going to get into heaven?

I erased these squares and drew two more on the board, with "Glenn" above the first, and "Jesus" above the second. In Glenn's box I drew a big, red R, and in Jesus' box I drew a black S. The way Billy and I and you and anyone get into heaven is not by earning it, but as a gift of God. Jesus purchased our salvation by dying on a cross, and we accept His gift by believing it in our hearts and confessing it with our mouths. (Romans, chapter 5) A divine exchange happens at that point: Jesus' righteousness is credited to my account, and my sins are credited to His account. Does this mean that God is soft on sin? If you want to know how God feels about sin, just consider what Jesus endured (the movie, Passion of the Christ, was a good representation): the humiliation, the beating with fists and whips, the torturous death on the cross, and worst of all, the time when the Father withdrew from His Son, who cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" This was all but a foretaste of hell and eternal separation from God. That is what you and I deserve. But God's wrath was poured out on His Son, who became sin for us, and we who believe become "*The righteousness of God.*" Oh, praise His name!

There are many Christians who believe and act (our actions always follow our beliefs) as if that is the end of the story. "I truly believe that Jesus was the Son of God and that He died for my sins, and now I am saved and secure. I was born-again, which means I am definitely going to heaven when I die, so now I can get on with my life and do whatever is important to me." So they proceed to live self-centered lives, not different than their neighbors who are pagans, as all the polls and surveys reveal and as we observe in the lives of Christians all around us.

The final words of the resurrected Christ to the church at the end of the Book of Matthew are called "The Great Commission." So what did Jesus tell the church to do? Did He say, "Go into all the world and make converts"? Let's look at His words: *Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."* He said (1) we are to go into all the world (2) we are to **make disciples**, not converts (3) we are to baptize them in the name of the three-fold God. (4) and what is a disciple? **teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you**. What are the things that Jesus commanded us to do? We have to look at His words in Matthew, Mark, Luke and John to find out. And how in the world can we accomplish such a monumental task? (5) Jesus says, I will be with you to help you. I suggest to you that the reason church folks are no different than everyone else is because they are not disciples.

Jesus came into a world in rebellion against God and doomed to face the wrath of God. He came to offer forgiveness and a way back to God, as described in my analogy about the bad person, the good person, and the perfect person. But Jesus made it clear that this was a radical decision and that He was asking His followers to give up everything to be His disciples. (Some people say, "I just want to be a normal Christian, I don't want to be a 'disciple.'" There is no such distinction in the Bible. Jesus never said He came to start a religion and to invite people to join His new church and become normal Christians, He invited people to follow Him and become His disciples.) He said things like:

- *If anyone desires to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me.*

- *It is better to enter life lame or blind than to be cast into hell where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.*
- *He who loves father or mother or son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.*
- *I did not come to bring peace on earth, but a sword.*
- *He who is not for me is against me.*
- *If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love.*
- *If you become my disciple, the world will hate you and kill you just as it will do to me. But don't let it bother you, you are in God's hands.*
- *Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength, and love your neighbor as you do yourself. Love your enemies. Love those who spitefully use you.*
- *Don't decide to be one of my disciples without counting the cost, because if you don't forsake all that you have you can't be my disciple.*

Some Christians continually say, "God loves you just as you are." Yes, that is true. But He surely does not leave you as you are, because the way you are without His mercy and the change He brings to your life is hopeless, lost, and doomed to destruction. (See 1 Cor. 6:9-11)

Who are the sons of God? Galatians 4 tells us that *"We become sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus."* So is it just a matter of believing one time and the matter is forever settled? Romans 8:14 amplifies the understanding of what it means to be a believer by stating: *"As many as are (continually being) led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God."* Note that it is a process.

Some Christians quote Romans 8:1 - "There is no condemnation to those who are in Christ Jesus," and stop there. But the verse continues: *"who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit."* God is saying to us that being a Christian is not just a one-time decision, but a lifetime walk. It is a process.

Is it reasonable to tell someone that God requires you to sacrifice your body for Him? That is exactly what Paul tells us in Romans 12:1 - *"Present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service."* Paul says this is a reasonable thing for disciples to do.

Is it reasonable to tell someone that God wants you to be His slave? Romans 6 tells us that we are either slaves of sin, uncleanness and lawlessness, or slaves of God. Then it says that *"The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life."* Bill Bright founded Campus Crusade for Christ that over a 40 year period led some 150 million souls to Christ. A reporter asked him if he understood why God had used him in such an amazing way. Bill said: "When I was a young man I wrote out a contract with God on a piece of paper. I wrote: 'From this day forward I am a slave for Christ,' and I signed my name at the bottom." Thus it was that God was free to use Bill as a fabulous blessing for millions. And Bill said that his life had been blessed beyond measure.

I have heard it said that: Since we Christians are under grace then it doesn't matter to God that we continue to sin. Consider some of the following scriptural declarations on this subject:

- *Shall we continue to sin? God forbid? (or Certainly not!) How can we continue to sin since we died to sin when we accepted Christ and were baptized into His death.*
- *Reckon yourself dead to sin.*
- *Don't let sin reign (rule) in your mortal body.*
- *Since you are under grace, sin will not have dominion over you.*
- *Walk in the Spirit and you shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh.*
- *You are not your own, you were bought with a price.*

What expectation, what standard, does Christ have for His people, His disciples, His church? There are many statements in the Bible that we totally ignore. We preachers wouldn't touch them with a ten-foot pole. For instance, Paul writes to the church at Corinth and tells them: *"Don't even associate with anyone who calls himself a (Christian) brother but is sexually immoral or greedy, an idolater or a slanderer, a drunkard or a swindler. With such a man don't even eat.....Expel the wicked man from among you!"* (1 Cor. 5:11) In today's church, which is watered down with compromise, we would regard a church that treated its members in that fashion as legalistic and unloving. In much of today's church we don't have any

expectations or standards that we hold up to our members. The Biblical standard is holiness of heart and life and total separation from sin. God softens the apparent harshness of His counsel in First Corinthians by instructing us: "*Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently, considering that you also may be tempted.*" (Galatians 6:1)

The point of the admonition in First Corinthians is not condemnation and punishment but restoration of the one who has fallen into sin. But note that God insists that he repent of his sin before the restoration. The church of Christ is not supposed to be like the world! And please think about this: **The point that Paul is making in chapter 5 of 1 Corinthians is that if someone who calls himself a Christian is living in blatant sin, if he does not repent he is in danger of God's judgment.** We don't think like this in today's church. We think, "Yes, I am doing something I know is wrong, I am living in sin, but it's all under the Blood. Thank goodness we are under the dispensation of grace, not law. I am 'in Christ,' I am born-again, I am safe and secure, so it really doesn't matter how I live, etc." Am I suggesting that we must live perfect, sinless lives? No, we can't do it! God knows us, He is not expecting sinless perfection. Because He loves us, we can turn back to Him every time we fall short. Remember: sin is what destroys us, and the good news is that *Christ became sin for us and has delivered us from the power of sin.* This is not bad news, it is good news!

Does all of this make God sound heartless, legalistic, tyrannical? That is why I started this newsletter with the teaching on the Pearl of Great Price. God is not a tyrant, but He is God, and He is calling us to a particular type of life: a Christ-like life. It is through His grace and kindness that we enter and remain in that life. If we meet His conditions, it is not back-breakingly difficult, it is the highest and best life possible in this world. It is a life ruled by love and peace. It is a life free of the bondage of fear, anger, self-condemnation and addictions. Jesus said, "*Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.*" That life, "the abundant life," is God's will and God's gift for us. But we don't enter into that quality of life by being a nominal church member. We must meet God's conditions to receive His blessings. God's purpose is that we become His disciples so that we can "Go into all the world and make disciples," - the world of family, business, school, arts, entertainment, sports, government, military, media, inner city, overseas missions - wherever you and I live and in whatever world God calls us to.

MINISTRY

- Jim and I had a great time on our prison trip. The attendance was good, two men were physically healed, and many were led through the steps of spiritual and emotional healing.
- Am just concluding a seven-week seminar on Wednesday evenings in my home church. Two weeks ago we ministered to a lady in front of the class. She had been in a terrible ATV accident five years ago, had broken 14 or 15 bones, and had suffered constant pain. By God's grace she was able to stand up straight and all pain left. PTL!
- On June 6 - 13 I will have the great pleasure of preaching two weekends at my former church, Good Shepherd Church, in Loveland. (Pastor Kent Hummel is taking a sabbatical.) And during that week I will lead my Breaking Your Chains seminar. PTL again!

God Bless,
Glenn

WEBSITE: glennbrownministries.com

I would like to thank each of you for your support of this ministry.

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