

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 Quislings 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, 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 2 or 3 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 30 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 2, had graduated from university with a business degree, had a good job, a nice brick home, and a secure future. And 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. Doris and I started attending and enjoyed the fellowship, the every-Sunday volleyball games and group picnics. And I started listening to his spiel 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 3 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. 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.

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 PhDs 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 life, so she knows a bit about suffering and anguish. But she says she counts it all as joy. "If I am not in love, then I want to quit!" God has used the Bakers to start 6,000 churches in Mozambique and the surrounding nations to this point. 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 hardly dare to compare our lives and our 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 will demonstrate that love by laying down our lives for our neighbors.

MOTIVES IN MINISTRY

A friend sent me a teaching by Eric Mumford (son of Bob) that is insightful and that goes along with my teaching on the Pearl of Great Price. Eric and his wife are laying down their lives by starting a mission in East Africa. He delineates the common motives for ministry:

1. Ministry for Self-Interest

This phrase seems self-contradictory, but it is identified in Scripture. “Some...are preaching Christ from envy and strife....and for selfish ambition....and some out of good will, love (agape)....and pure motives.” (Phil. 1:15 ff, and Phil. 2:19 ff.) Eric says that he has seen some ugly manifestations of self erupt as believers with improper motives encountered poverty, crisis and misery in foreign nations. The thought of doing something “good” and “spiritual” causes the eros nature to feel good about itself. While most missionaries have pure motives, some (Eric says) spend most of their time trying to make life more convenient, existing in a parasitic way, and some do not even interact with the natives in a meaningful way and speak critically of them as though they were an annoyance.

Service of any kind in the church, from the pastor to the ushers to the various workers, can likewise be self-referential. Ministry can issue out of guilt, out of a self-imposed religious quota, out of a desperate need to feel needed, or out of a pharisaical, haughty spirit. (Have you ever heard a preacher talk down to “you sinners” as though he were above the mix?) Eric ameliorates this tough assessment by noting that all service and ministry is shot through with a mixture of motives, complex feelings, strongholds of self, and a desire to serve God.....and that God takes us where we are and leads us to a higher level if we are willing to be led.

2. Ministry for Others

This motive sounds noble and worthy, but Eric insists that it is simply humanism and is ultimately also self-referential because it sees the answer as being within ourselves. Have you ever heard of “soulish compassion”? Compassion for others issuing out of your soul soon bankrupts because agape does not and cannot originate from you but only from God whose love tank is infinite. Eric saw a teenage girl with cancer on television standing next to a beautiful actress whom she idolized and had written a letter. The actress, or her press agent, decided to take this girl on a shopping spree for a day. The camera flashes were blazing. The actress never once looked at the girl, and she said, “It makes me feel good to help her.” The dying girl was being grievously used. Many Christians “do the ministry” in this same motivation. The initial, noble idea of helping others quickly degenerates into a self-serving system or institution that seeks its own survival, recognition, power, and support in place of the charity it once attempted to advocate.

Eric says, “I ache for burned-out pastors. Why does it happen? First, I believe our current church structure is seriously flawed and not from the mind of Christ. It sucks pastors and their wives bone dry. Second, pastors can become gradually snared in people-pleasing and end up doing the ministry for others rather than for Father and simply run out of gas. Soon soulish compassion is just fumes in the tank, and they are performing in agony. They can end up on the side of the road. People-pleasing and people-serving as a primary motivation is a wretched curse. Church systems have effective means of punishing or replacing ministers that seek to please Father instead of people.”

3. Father Ministers Through Me

Only genuine agape, the kind that comes forth from Father alone, can meet and overcome the moral condition of eros (the people we minister to are infected with self-interest, and they will use you, hurt you, reject you, crucify you, as they did to Jesus, as we did to Jesus). Jesus knew what was in man, and He did not entrust Himself to man (John 2:25), but drew from the inexhaustible, agape Source working through Him. “Fixing our eyes on Jesus...who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame.....”(Heb. 12:2) The joy set before Jesus was nothing more or less than honoring His Father.

Mother Teresa was frequently praised for her sterling compassion. Her response to this was pure gold. She said it was not compassion that caused her to help the poor. “It is the call of Jesus; without Him we couldn’t do it.” She had a radical personal revelation of Jesus on the cross saying, “I thirst.” and knew that by giving drink to the poorest of the poor she would be putting water to Jesus’ own lips.

Your daily death to self allows God to live His life out through your body, and this is the only sustainable power source of ministry and missions, the secret to longevity, the fruit that remains, and finishing well. Does Father want to greet people through you at church? Be a greeter for Him. Does He want to heal people through you? Will you perform lowly tasks? Let Jesus wash feet through you. Are you feeling Father’s heart for missions? Let Him do it through you. Commit to exchange your life for His just for that short-term mission; just try it once – all your needs, comforts, feelings, and opinions go to the cross, and let it be 100% about Him touching others through you. You will be born-again!

Allowing Father to minister through you is not utopia. There is suffering, loss, persecution, hatred, and other severe tests just as Jesus forewarned us. There may well be disastrous explosions of man’s free will, hurricanes of disappointment, and perplexing tests like tornadoes through your household and earthquakes of betrayal. There may be bottomless pits of loss from which precious things are never recovered: including some marriages, fruitful ministries He had once blessed, plans considered prophetically certain that never materialized, and “promised” healings that never occurred. If you can accept these perplexing events and continue to trust the Father, that is Christian maturity and the secret of bearing fruit that remains.

MINISTRY

Had a fulfilling time in a prison way out east of Pueblo, 335 miles from Grand Junction. Although it had snowed for 4 straight weekends, God blessed us with perfect weather for the drive over Monarch Pass. Beautiful!

Have just started a 6-week seminar in our Vineyard church, and had a full room in spite of the fact that my competition was a fabulous video presentation in the sanctuary by Bono and U2. (That is like putting a Model-T Ford up against a Ferrari.)

Plan a trip to Mexico in April if I can ever get details and confirmation from pastors in Mexico. (Trying to get a response from down there is like putting a note in a bottle and throwing it in the ocean and hoping for a prompt reply.)

And I have been invited to go with my friend, Dale Witt, and his mission agency, Global Advance, to Colombia to minister to a pastor’s conference in July! Yea!

Thanks for your many birthday greetings!

