

## Prayer

We ask for mercy, Heavenly Father, on all who struggle this day with work, with family, with life itself, and also with faith. Have compassion on all who are depressed, and save them from its cruel destructive web. Give us such love and understanding that we can walk alongside those who suffer in this way; and by Your grace draw them back to the security of Your love. In the name of Jesus, AMEN

## Other Prayer Suggestions

### Weekly Theme: Preaching

*Pray today for preachers who have preached yesterday; perhaps those you heard or for others you know. Preaching affects people quite powerfully, and they need our support.*

### On-going prayers

- *Pray for countries of the world where people are not free*
- *Pray for those who entertain us in great sporting events*
- *Give thanks for scientists who work to find medical cures*

## Meditation

Is there really any justice in this world,  
When a man who kicks a football earns 500 times more  
than a man who tends plants?

Is there any compassion in this world,  
Where a newspaper editor decides who benefits from news coverage  
Based on his assessment of what will 'sell'?

Is there any love in this world,  
Where the death of its Saviour on the Cross is regarded by many  
As so much religion, legend and myth?

Stand up, God's people, and fight Satan's lies!  
Dispel the false trivia of the enemy and battle for truth where it counts;  
On your own doorstep and wherever you go!

## Bible Study - Matthew 13:44-50

<sup>44</sup> *'The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and kept secret; then he sold all he had with great delight and bought the field.*

<sup>45</sup> *'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant searching for fine pearls; <sup>46</sup> when he had found one of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.*

<sup>47</sup> *'Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet thrown into the sea which caught every kind of fish; <sup>48</sup> when it was full, they pulled it ashore, sat down, and put the good ones into baskets and threw out the bad. <sup>49</sup> So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come and separate the evil ones from the righteous <sup>50</sup> and throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be distress and anguish.*

## Review

The three last parables in Matthew 13 are a fascinating collection. Each of them tells us far more than their short length would imply. The first two are clearly related, and both speak of great value of discovering the Kingdom (13:44; v45,6). The last, that of 'the dragnet' (13:47-48), returns to Jesus' theme of the separation of good from evil, as is clear from Jesus' own explanation (13:49,50). These three parables only occur in Matthew's Gospel.

**The parable of the hidden treasure** In ancient times, there was no secure way to protect wealth in time of war or crisis. The best one could do was to invest in valuables or gold, and bury these in a secret location to be retrieved later, if and when life returned to normal. It is easy to imagine, given the turbulent history of the region that a significant number of people never returned to dig up the treasures they had buried. Imagine then the delight of a labourer, many years later, on finding a stash of wealth whilst digging in a field! Jesus then describes the labourer buying the land, presumably in the hope of finding more (13:44)!

It is a simple and delightful way of describing the value of the Kingdom of Heaven. It is high enough to make a workman part with everything he has. One interesting feature of the parable is that (in contrast to the parable coming next) the treasure is found completely by accident, and causes great joy. In the light of everything that Jesus has taught about the Kingdom so far, this is fascinating and new. The idea that the Kingdom is present in our midst and awaiting discovery is fresh and exciting; moreover, discovering the Kingdom by accident in the course of everyday life is intriguing, but it is true to life, as many will testify. Further, although the field costs the man everything he has, the result of the discovery is sheer elation. Jesus called the disciples to 'leave all' (4:19 etc.) and follow him to discover the Kingdom, and he then warned them about persecution (for example 5:11ff). It is welcome news to hear Jesus talk about joy in the Kingdom of God!

**The parable of the fine pearl** The discovery of the fine pearl by a merchant is also the source of great satisfaction, if not joy. Here, the same theme of the great value of the Kingdom continues. Pearls were highly prized in Jesus' day, and some changed hands with a value close to gold. The pearl symbolised both value and aesthetic beauty, an object capable of captivating people and drawing them to act just as the merchant did in this parable. However, the pearl, too, is a symbol of the Kingdom preached by Jesus, and found through Him. It is more valuable than anything we possess. In contrast to the previous parable, the person who finds the valuable item is a wealthy merchant rather than a poor farmhand. This makes no difference to the price paid, for both have to part with everything they have to gain the prize. It is even more important, therefore, to emphasise to those with wealth that the kingdom will cost them everything; wealth tempts people to believe that possessions will cover all needs. This is not so in the Kingdom.

The last point of contrast between 'the hidden treasure' and 'the fine pearl' is that whereas the treasure was found by accident, the pearl was clearly found by searching (13:45, see also Matt 7:7 'seek and you shall find'). The point of this pair of parables is therefore clear; the way we discover the Kingdom may be anything from accidental to the result of prolonged searching, but there is no difference in the prize of the Kingdom. There may be a hint of criticism in this parable that Israel has not found the Kingdom because she has not sought it or valued what she has been given.

**The parable of the dragnet** Lastly comes the parable of the dragnet. A dragnet was used, and is used to this day, to haul in every type of fish from as wide an area as possible. Jewish fishermen would have separated out the 'clean' and the 'unclean' fish (13:48 - according to Leviticus 11:9-12), but this ritual command was probably just one aspect of the separation. As in any gathering of food, the bad or unpalatable would have been thrown aside rather than kept for food. In those days it was left to one side to rot in order to make

fertiliser for the land. Some people query why Jesus interpreted the parable as He did, with angels separating the good from the bad and that the bad being burned (13:50) rather than thrown aside; he appears to depart from the imagery of his parable! To say this is, however, is to mistake Jesus' intent. In every parable the interpretation is by means of allegory, and Jesus chose to use this means of making a His point about the defeat of evil in the final harvest, and it is similar to what He said in the parable of the 'wheat and the tares' (see notes on Matthew 13:24-30).

I do believe, however, that this parable invites us to look further at Jesus teaching. The clue to the meaning of the parable is not just the separation of good and evil, which we already know about; the clue is the dragnet itself, which is said to catch 'every kind of fish'. This tells us that the harvest of the Kingdom will encompass all things; all people, all times and all places. It is inescapable, and everyone will be caught in God's 'dragnet'! There is no other possible outcome for the Kingdom of the God who made the whole world in the first place!

## Questions (for use in groups)

1. Have you discovered 'the secrets of the Kingdom' by searching, or by accident of birth, or any other means?
2. How does your own wealth affect your commitment to the Kingdom (the answer 'it doesn't' is not allowed!)
3. Is it possible for us to know for certain what is evil and what is good, in this life? Is this partially true, and if so, concerning what?

## Discipleship

### Personal comment:

*It is welcome news indeed that the Kingdom should be received with joy! This is of course the work of the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer, but when we read so much about persecution and trouble in the early chapters of Matthew, the idea of discipleship can seem somewhat dour for many. The Gospel, after all, is one of liberation and freedom, and the god news for those who found the great wealth and the pearl was that their future was secured. It is good news indeed to know that our own future is secured in Christ.*

### Ideas for discipleship programme

- *Can you remember an occasion when you have come across something suddenly and unexpectedly which has helped you to appreciate the goodness of God and His blessings? It is good to recall such times so that we may be helped in tougher times. Make sure that you do recall all the good things God has done for you.*
- *What are some of the equivalent discoveries people might make today, which might illustrate the Kingdom to people who do not believe? Spend some time thinking creatively about this so that the Lord can use your witness more effectively.*

## Final Prayer

As this day unfolds, Lord God, Your love unfolds like an opening flower; revealing ever more depths of colour, hue and saturation. May we benefit not just from a mere snapshot of Your faithful loving-kindness, but from a high-definition video of Your magnificent grace! Through Jesus Christ we pray, AMEN