

In Search of a Pearl

Matthew 13:44-46

Rev. Dan Schumacher

The late, great Baptist pastor, Carlyle Marney used to say that there is no agony in life more acute than that experienced when we realize we have paid too much.

That's the truth, isn't it?

Christen and I were newly married, underemployed, and paying for college out of our own pockets when we came down with a bad case of "new car" fever.

We only had one car at the time — a 1995 Saturn SL. It was a very reasonable little four-door sedan that was dependable, got good gas mileage, had a low car-payment, and whose cruise control worked about half the time.

So, one Saturday morning we ended up at a dealership. We told ourselves we were there "just to browse..." and we left with a new-used car.

It was a Mazda 626 — and it was an upgrade in every way possible from our reasonable, reliable Saturn. It had powered leather seats, a sun roof, a bigger engine, and it's cruise control worked 100% of the time! It even had oscillating fans. You pressed a button and the central fans on the dash would move back and forth.

We cruised home in style, got out of our new car, stepped back to take it all in — and, in the reflection of that expensive new car, we immediately asked ourselves what we'd just done...

A week into owning that car, the radiator developed a pin-hole leak and drained all the antifreeze out of the car. We noticed when the A/C would only blow hot air. Of course, Mazda required special tools to work on their cars, so we had no choice but to take it to the dealership to get it repaired — to the tune of \$600.

A month later, the windshield wiper fluid reservoir cracked. That one only cost us \$200.

At that time in our lives, we commuted 20 miles between our home and where we went to college. One evening, we were cruising back into town on the highway when all of a sudden, all of the lights on the dash started flickering. There was a ka-CLUNK! And the car, its lights, everything just went dead. We coasted into the edge of town, and I got out and pushed it the rest of the way to our house — cursing under my breath the whole time.

When we were finally able to get it looked at, do you know what had gone out? The harmonic balancer. Have you ever heard of a harmonic balancer? I sure hadn't.

I looked at that mechanic like he'd just told me we'd run out of blinker fluid. He might as well have said, "Well, it looks like the issue is you're all out of fairy dust." I thought for sure he was trying to take us for a ride. That repair cost us well over a thousand dollars.

Let me tell you: by this point, the "new car" fever had broken, and we dreaming of the glory days when we owned a reliable, economic Saturn SL. Instead, we'd traded it in for a lemon.

And that's how life went for that car. Repair after repair after ridiculous repair, we nursed it along as best we could for a year and a half... until one fateful Thanksgiving Holiday.

On that Thanksgiving weekend, we left our lemon in its parking spot behind our house and caught a ride with Christen's mom to spend the holiday with her family out in Sterling. And I will never forget that on the evening of Thanksgiving, we got a call from our landlord. He said, "Dan, I... I don't know how to tell you this, but your car just went up in flames."

"What?!" I said.

"Yeah. Just burst into flames. The fire department just left. It almost caught the house on fire, but it didn't. Everything is ok. But, yeah, it's gone, Dan. There is nothing left but metal."

I honestly started laughing as I hung up and Christen looked at me. "What?" she asked.

I said, "I think our car had finally had enough. It decided to call it quits. It threw in the towel."

When we got home, I started wrangling with insurance. I called them to file the claim and the person on the other end asked for my policy number, asked the make and model of the vehicle, asked what had happened. I explained that the car had just spontaneously gone up in flames.

"A Mazda 626?" he asked. "That's strange. I mean, Ford Tauruses do that all the time, but I've never heard of a Mazda doing that..." It wasn't as reassuring or funny as he meant it to be.

And as one final parting gift from that car, in the aftermath of the fire Christen and I were investigated for suspected insurance fraud by both the local police and fire departments...

There is no agony in life more acute than when we realize that we've paid too much.

But that is the opposite of the lesson that Jesus is interested in teaching us.

“There is at least *one thing*,” he said, “that’s worth selling everything you have to try and get it.”

What could it be? What could be worth giving up your home, your big screen TV, even your Mazda 626?

Jesus says it’s the kingdom of heaven.

He says it’s like a hapless person who tripped on the corner of a treasure chest buried in a field. He was so thrilled at his luck in discovering it that he covered up the treasure, ran home and, grinning ear-to-ear, sold everything he had just so he could buy the field.

He gave it all up for the chance at recovering that treasure. Jesus says *that’s* what the kingdom of heaven is like.

He says it’s like a merchant who spent his life looking for fine pearls. The Greek word for pearls is *margaritas*, but I might caution you against making too much of that. I’ve checked multiple translations, and not one says the merchant went looking for a fine margarita.

This jeweler had been at it for years. He know’s what he’s doing. He’s talked to hundreds of pearl divers.

“From time to time he hears rumors of pearls beyond comparison, the one pearl worth more than any other. He goes and sees and on closer examination always finds they aren’t what was advertised. He’s seen some pearls you might throw before swine. A lifetime’s experience, as he travels from place to place pursuing his business, has given him a trained eye and a quick judgment” (Brett Younger, “Worth It All ,” a sermon preached at Broadway Baptist Church, August 14, 2005).

Then once again, he hears talk of a pearl of superlative quality. He smiles. He’s heard it before. He doesn’t get “new pearl” fever like he did when he was young and dumb.

But it doesn’t pay to disregard even such unlikely reports. He goes to investigate. He looks carefully. He looks again. He’s amazed. It’s unlike anything he’s ever seen. It’s exactly what he’s spent a lifetime looking for.

The price is steep; Rolex steep; Hope diamond steep — but it’s not too high for *this* pearl.

The jeweler sells everything — *every thing* that he’d spent a lifetime building and accruing. He sells his penthouse apartment overlooking the city skyline. He sells his vacation home on the coast of the Mediterranean, his wardrobe of tailored cloaks, his miniature Arabian horse named Sebastian. He even sells his business — the very thing that provided him all of these comforts, all of these luxuries.

And he buys a pearl — *one* pearl that's so incredible, so breathtaking that you could wear it to the pearly gates and not be underdressed.

"This is what the kingdom of heaven is like," says Jesus.

What could so possess a person to go to such lengths, to sacrifice so much, and *not* suffer buyer's remorse?

Jesus hopes that the kingdom could do it — and not just for that jeweler, but also for you and me.

Did you know that Jesus mentions the kingdom 35 times in Matthew alone?

The kingdom is the direction that Jesus says we should go — and everything he teaches points in that direction. To live *in* Christ's kingdom is to live with confession, repentance, courage, love, and acceptance. To live *for* the kingdom is to live not with clenched fists, holding tight to a life that's always slipping away the more tightly we hold, but to live with hands open — both to give and receive in gladness.

To know his kingdom, says Jesus, is to know joy so great that everything you have, everything you've accumulated for yourself, and everything you could have obtained if you'd played your cards right, don't hold a candle to it.

"To know the kingdom is to know *joy*," says Frederick Beuchner. "Not happiness that comes and goes with happy moments, but joy that is always there like a candle that burns no matter how dark and terrible the night."

St. Augustine said it like this: "Thou hast made us for thyself, O God; and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."

It is the opposite of buyer's remorse. It is the one thing that costs everything you have — and is worth it.

Or course, if you're like me, then you know that this sounds a whole lot easier than it actually is.

When I was teen, there was a popular praise song that said, "Every move I make, I make in you. You make me move, Jesus. Every breath I take I breathe in you. Every step I take, I take in you. You are my way Jesus. Every breath I take I breathe in you." My youth group and I sang it almost every week with great gusto... but it wasn't true. In fact, as a teen, I really wasn't that interested in many parts of my life falling in step with Jesus. And I'd venture that there aren't that many teens who are.

But teens aren't the only ones who struggle with this. Most of us have sung, "I Surrender All," more times than we can count and known it wasn't true, either.

When we ask what God's treasure has cost us, the answer for many of us is "not much." And the thing is, God knows that we settle for less than the kingdom. We settle for money, a good job, the contentment of living quietly – but all of these are *only* pearls and never quite *the* pearl that our hearts long for.

But then again, maybe this parable isn't about us... or at least not in the way we might assume.

Maybe, just maybe, we're not the ones who give all we have for the kingdom. However blindly we are seeking the kingdom, it's also seeking us. This parable isn't just about how we seek Christ, but about how God seeks us.

God is the one looking hardest. God is searching for children who will live for the kingdom.

Think about how a pearl is formed. A pebble, a grain of sand, some irritating little substance gets inside the shell of the oyster and it's like a small rock in your shoe – constantly annoying. The oyster's response is to cover the irritant with soft, delicate layers of beauty until it forms a shining, priceless jewel.

What better symbol could there be of God's love for us?

What has God withheld in order to get that pearl?

Christ gave all he had. Jesus came into the place of heartache, of loneliness, of darkness, and became what we are – so that we might become more like him.

The prophet Isaiah said, "He poured out his soul." Paul wrote, "He emptied himself."

Maybe we aren't the merchant in this parable. Maybe we are the pearl of great price; the pearl that God would withhold no sacrifice to obtain.

When American astronaut Edgar Mitchell first saw Earth from the vantage point of space, he described it as "a small pearl in a thick sea of black mystery."

Maybe *we* are the pearl.

Maybe the search is a kingdom in which first, foremost, and finally, we offer up our lives looking for God only to discover that God is looking for us.

Amen.