

March 22, 2009
What Matters Most ...
Matthew 13:44-46

"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again, and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it." Jesus' point is straightforward: the kingdom of heaven is so valuable that we should be willing to make it the greatest priority in our lives.

In this series of parables Jesus has been emphasizing that the kingdom of heaven is here. God is among us. The Holy Spirit is at work. Through Jesus a new power has come into the world - that has the potential to fundamentally transform human character and human communities. He is on a mission to change lives: *"anyone who belongs to Christ has become a new person. The old life is gone; a new life has begun!"* (2 Corinthians 5:17). The power of God liberates us from anxiety, fear, meaninglessness, evil, ignorance, guilt and shame.

Evil is still real (there are wheat and weeds growing together in the field), but it's on the way out. Something new has begun - the kingdom of God is among us. God is among us. The power of God changes everything it touches (like yeast in flour); from the tiniest of beginnings it can grow exponentially (like a mustard seed). The power of God is here. It's real. We see its evidence among us. But do I care? Am I going to do anything about it? Are there other things that are more important right now so I'm going to let it pass by? What do I really value most?

What's important?

Craig Harper, an Australian, has this to say about his country: *"Here in Australia we are fast becoming the Accumulation Nation. We love collecting stuff and the more stuff we have, the better. Owning lots of stuff - good. Even more stuff - very good. The most stuff - winner! Of course we would never say this out loud because that would make us seem somewhat shallow, but our actions give us away. We're building houses with ten plasma screens and seven toilets because goodness knows, we wouldn't wanna miss anything on the tube and we certainly wouldn't wanna walk more than ten feet to ... Some of us have hundreds of pairs of shoes for a body that can only accommodate one pair at a time. And of course we tell ourselves we need them, but we don't need them at all; we want them. We confuse 'want' with 'need' regularly and somewhere along the way, we seem to have made the terms 'success' and 'excess' interchangeable. And if anyone should be brave enough to point our penchant for accumulating stuff that we don't actually need we become defensive and reactive, and then we criticise the observer of our behaviours. Of course we do. Clearly they are jealous of our success."*¹

¹ Craig Harper quotes are from <http://www.craigharper.com.au/2009/02/he-who-dies-with-most-toys-wins-part.html> and http://www.craigharper.com.au/2009/02/he-who-dies-with-most-toys-wins-part_07.html

Is that true of our society? How many cars, houses, plasma screens or even pairs of shoes does a person need before the amount of stuff we have brings us true happiness and contentment? If one car can make us happy, imagine how happy we will be with a whole bunch of cars? This is actually how some people seem to think. But have you ever met a person who is anxious to get all the right things who also happens to be happy, balanced and content?

Harper, who is not a Christian, writes, *"Of course this game is ultimately an unwinnable one. Despite its obvious popularity and endorsement of the masses, the 'Happiness Through Accumulation' model for life, is not a particularly effective one. At all. Just take a look at our emotionally, mentally, spiritually and socially bankrupt society and that should give you an insight into how we're travelling as a group. The notion of achieving some level of inner peace, fulfilment and long-term happiness via the ownership of 'stuff we don't need' is a sad reflection of popular thinking and an indicator of how disconnected we have become from what really matters."* Intriguingly, he ends his diatribe with a quote from Jesus: *"For what does it profit a man if he shall gain the world, yet lose his own soul"* (Mark 8:36). Not bad for a non-Christian!

Going deeper ...

Craig Harper goes on, *"When I got up this morning I turned on the television and sat on the edge of my bed watching the news in disbelief. I was transfixed as I observed the devastation, destruction, tragedy and loss of life that's taking place in my home state (the recent wild fires in Victoria, Australia). I sat there feeling sad for those affected and also somewhat helpless as the estimated number of deaths continued to rise with each subsequent news update.*

"If there's ever a time when it's easy to differentiate between what we humans want and what we actually need, just watch people in the middle of a natural disaster; humanity at it's rawest and perhaps most authentic. All the superficial stuff disappears. If you want to know what really matters, listen to what comes out of the mouth of a person facing tragedy, devastation and the possibility of imminent death - either their own or someone they love. I'll tell you what they're not worried about; their shoe collection, their laptop, their hair, their make-up, their wallet, their car, how fat their legs are, or what other people might be saying or thinking about them. In an instant they have a completely different mindset and perspective and all of a sudden what is important - truly important - becomes glaringly obvious. Being confronted with one's mortality will do that to you.

"Today I have watched and listened to many interviews (radio and TV) with numerous people who have lost all of their material possessions. People who seemed relatively happy and relieved because the things that really matter to them - the people they love - didn't perish. I saw a lady laughing, crying and dancing with joy as she was re-united with the husband that she feared had died fighting the fire. She held his dirty, exhausted face in her hands and said 'this is all I care about, everything else is replaceable.'"

This is a non-Christian perspective. But it's a good one! A really good one! It sure is a whole lot better than how many people live! Sometimes we make the mistake of acting as if the things

that matter most can be bought and sold, yet of course we know that treasures like relationships, beauty, laughter and life itself cannot be bought, but are free gifts.

We need to spend some time seriously reflecting on our relationships and giving them the time, energy, and priority they deserve. (No one probably notices your shoes anyway ...)

"Friendships," writes David Bentall (former CEO of the Bentall Group), *"have a transforming power ... where (we) create enduring, meaningful relationships of mutual support."*

Spend some quality time with someone you love today. Go for a walk together and TALK. Make a phone call to a friend or relative you haven't talked with for a while. Go for more coffees with people. Invest time, energy, and money on things that really matter ... You will probably find that all areas of your life go better as a consequence anyway ...

But there's so much more!

Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God is even more precious than close family and friends. Is that possible? How can that be? What is this kingdom of God that we should care?

What is a kingdom? A kingdom is the "domain of the king" - it's the world over which a king has influence or control. So the kingdom of God is the world over which God has control. Ultimately, of course, that includes everything. Potentially, if He chose to exercise His power, God can have His way everywhere, every time, in everything, but that would reduce us to the level of robots.

God doesn't want automatons. God invites us to be part of His kingdom. He invites us to allow Him to have dominion or control over our personal lives. He uses a variety of metaphors to describe this new reality. Among many other images, we are invited to be:

- New creations (2 Corinthians 5:17, Galatians 6:15)
- Born again (John 3:1-16)
- Dead to sin and alive to God (Romans 6:1-14)
- a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God (1 Peter 2:9)
- people who are called out of darkness into his wonderful light (1 Peter 2:9)
- citizens of heaven (Philippians 3:20)
- children of God/members of God's household/Jesus' brothers and sisters (John 1:12-13; Ephesians 2:19; Matthew 12:46-49)
- God's stewards of his creation (Genesis 2:15)

There is a notion of a radical difference that comes when we understand ourselves as people of God. We are not just like everyone else. There will be - there ought to be - something different about us. Fundamentally different. A different notion of:

- Who we are (in terms of the things listed above)
- Who other people are (using the same terms of reference)
- What creation is (God's precious work of art)
- What reality is (the physical, but also the intellectual, emotion, and spiritual)
- Who God is (the One we know as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

Jesus' parables help us, then, understand what all this means ...

As people of the King, we live as wheat among the weeds. We are distinct - not in an odd way, but in the best way! We have the bread of life in a world rife with weeds of greed, materialism, and selfishness. The world desperately needs us to be distinct and different - or else the whole field/world might become overgrown with noxious weeds. Your school desperately needs you to be distinct and different. Your workplace desperately needs you to be distinct and different. Your family desperately needs you to be distinct and different. Our culture needs people who will stand up for truth, honour, integrity, compassion, unconditional love, charity, grace, righteousness - otherwise our whole culture will sink to the lowest common denominator. We need to be agents of positive peer pressure, inviting people to the highest standards. Is that easy? Absolutely not! It may, in fact, be very difficult and lonely. But it's the right thing to do.

As people of the King we can anticipate growth. We may feel like a mustard seed right now. I'm the only Christian I know at school. No one else seems to care about being distinct. Things aren't going that well with (whatever). I can't do it any longer. I'm struggling to keep the faith. It's hard to live as Jesus wants me to. Don't give up. It may sound clichéd, but "give it to God" or "Let go and let God." It's when we let God take control the kingdom begins to take shape.

As people of the King we can change our lives, our family, our community, our world. Is anything changing? It doesn't seem like it. That's what the baker says when she sets the bread. It seems like it'll never rise (a watched loaf never rises?). But let it go for a bit and it does. We may be the ones who say a word of encouragement, have a conversation, share some story of God's work in our lives, do something courageous and good - which inspires someone else who inspires two other people, who each inspire two others ... and so on and so on.

As people of the King we have purpose. The man and the merchant in today's parables have a purpose - an all-consuming purpose - to be the kingdom of God. To make Jesus the central part of their existence. Nothing is going to get in their way. Does that seem excessive to you? Are they a bit over the top? Why would we think that? We admire the Olympic athlete who gives her all to her sport. We admire the musician who gives his all to his performance. We admire the parents who give their all for their children. Those are all good things. Do we admire those who give their all for God? Who willingly choose to live at a different standard of living so they can be a blessing to others? Who willingly volunteer? Who live lives of spiritual integrity and authenticity? I do! So why wouldn't I do the same ...?

"For what does it profit a man if he shall gain the world, yet lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36)

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