

Looking Out for #1
Matthew 13:44-46

In 1977, a book was published which became popular instantly. It was #1 in the New York bestseller list for a whole year! The book is entitled “Looking Out for #1”. As the title suggests, the book is about looking out for your own self. It sounds innocent enough because it talks about enhancing self-confidence and achieving your goals in life through life-changing ideas, strategies, and insights you’ll find in the book. However, it’s a bit troubling because the author himself says in the book, “In simpler terms, looking out for number one begins with the belief that you have a moral right to take actions aimed at giving you the greatest amount of pleasure and least amount of pain, provided your actions do not violate the rights of others.”

Interestingly, the book came out during the time when the American society was starting to be enmeshed in a philosophy called “Me-ism”. This culture of “Me-ism” as you can expect is about being preoccupied with oneself. Josh McDowell says about “Me-ism”, “It is clear that advancing and pleasing self is the number-one priority in our world today. A recent survey revealed that teens consider ‘enjoyment’ more important than ‘helping people’ or ‘pleasing one’s parents.’ Our kids are growing up with a warped sense of entitlement which prompts them to demand, ‘I want what I want when I want it.’”

He said that in his blog in 2008. Has it changed 12 years later? I don’t think so. Teenagers still display these tendencies. But not only teenagers. We see all sorts of people around us who strive to take actions aimed at giving them the greatest amount of pleasure and least amount of pain.

As I mentioned in my message a couple of weeks ago, people don't make sacrifices and commitments because it is painful. They would rather do activities that provide them pleasure and a sense of self-gratification.

Today, I'd like to talk about "Looking Out for #1". The real #1 is what I mean here. We're continuing our series on the parables of Jesus. Now, The phrase "looking out for" means to take care of or look after the well-being of someone. Another meaning is to be watchful or be aware about something or someone. An example is when I hear all the time Bel saying, "I always look out for deals when I'm shopping...online". She makes a conscious effort to seek, find, and search for something valuable. She's good at that. Yesterday, she emailed me an order she placed at WalMart for our teenager Ally. It's an ergonomic computer chair because the one she was using suddenly broke. I thought it was pricey and I told her about it with a smile, and then Mr. Know-It-All, that's me, opened Amazon on my computer and searched for the same thing. Lo and behold! She was right. The Amazon price was more expensive. She already did her homework. Mother knows best. In this case, she used both meanings of "looking out for". Looking out for Ally and looking out for a good deal. In this message, I'm using the secondary meaning.

So, what are you looking out for? Yourself? Someone else? Your career? A house, car? Or something greater than any of these? Jesus says in Matthew 6:33 and many of us know this by heart. Say it with me, "But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." (Matthew 6:33)

Is that what you are looking out for? The Kingdom of God? Is that your greatest search in this life? Is that your magnificent obsession?

Let us look then at two parables of Jesus that illustrate the value of the Kingdom of God or the Kingdom of Heaven. By the way, these are terms that are used interchangeably in the Bible. They mean the same thing.

Now, these two parables are the two shortest of Jesus' parables. They come one after another and they share the same theme. The first one, called "The Parable of the Hidden Treasure" is just one verse and the second one, called "The Parable of the Pearl of Great Price, some versions say, Pearl of Great Value, is composed of two verses. So, please turn with me to Matthew 13:44-47 in your Bible.

"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."

Ok. Now, obviously, these two parables are talking about the Kingdom of Heaven. Jesus compares it first to a hidden treasure and then to a pearl of great price. Before I go to the comparison, guess let me talk about the Kingdom of Heaven first. What is it? When Jesus was on earth, preaching about the Kingdom of God or Heaven, what did he mean by it? Is he talking about a real kingdom, a kingdom that is coming in the future or a kingdom in the here and now?

Jesus told about 37 parables. Of the 37, ten of them are about the Kingdom of God. It's only about ¼ of the total parables. Doesn't seem much but when you consider his preaching, his preaching is mostly about the Kingdom of God. In fact, the Kingdom was the theme of Jesus' ministry. The Kingdom is mentioned over 100 times in the four Gospels, most often in statements that Jesus made. In the Bible record, Jesus spoke more about the Kingdom of God than he did about any other subject. Matthew 6:33, of course, is an example.

He first preached after his baptism by John the Baptist, who came from Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem which makes him a Southern Baptist. That's why we know Jesus was baptized by immersion. Ok, you know that's a joke. But baptism by immersion is not a joke. I believe the Bible says he was baptized by immersion.

After he was baptized, he went to the desert to fast for 40 days then was tempted by the devil and overcame the temptations. It was then he started to preach. He was 30 years old when he began his ministry. It began when he first preached in Mark 1:15, "The time has come," he said. "The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!"

The word "Kingdom" in Greek is *Basileia*. That Greek word should not be confused with an actual kingdom but rather the right or authority to rule over a kingdom. That's the primary meaning. Actually, Jesus spoke in Aramaic. The Aramaic word used is *Malku* which means "rule" or "reign" or "sovereign authority". And that is what Jesus means here when he says the kingdom has come near. He is saying that the rule or reign of God is now in the midst of the people. That's the same thing he tells his persecutors when they ask him when the kingdom of God is coming. He says, "...The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or, 'There it is!' For behold, the kingdom of God is in your midst." (Luke 17:20-21).

Now, what do people need to do to get into the kingdom? To repent of their sins and believe the good news of salvation. Therefore, anyone who has Jesus in his or her heart now belongs to the Kingdom of God. God is reigning in their lives.

But what about those verses where Jesus talks about the coming kingdom like in the prayer, "Your kingdom come, your will be done"? Or Apostle Paul writing, "The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely

to his heavenly kingdom". (2 Tim. 4:18) There is no contradiction because the secondary meaning of *basileia* is an actual territory ruled by a king.

In this sense, we are also waiting for the actual coming of the Kingdom of God, where his will and purposes are realized over all the earth and the entire universe. As Christians, we are also looking forward to enter the heavenly kingdom when we die.

In other words, the Kingdom of Heaven has a present and future component.

So, in our parables, we see two people eagerly looking, searching for a valuable prize. The first one, the treasure hunter, found it and what did he do when he found it? He hid it again and sold all his possessions in order to buy the land where he found it.

This guy was smart. If he brought it to the owner of the property and said he would buy it, that wouldn't work because the latter would claim that since it was his property, he had the right to take it without compensating the other person. That's how it worked in ancient Israel. So, our hero just outwitted the owner by buying his land. The latter didn't know there was treasure there anyway.

The merchant, meanwhile, was collecting for fine pearls. But then, he found one of immense value. He wouldn't let it go. So, he gave up everything he had to buy it and possess it.

Now, it's obvious that the hidden treasure and the pearl of great price is the Kingdom of Heaven. It is so valuable that you need to make a sacrifice or sacrifices in order to gain it. Both guys gave up everything they had. They made a sacrifice. They counted the cost and then accounted for the loss they incurred.

If you remember, those were the two points of my message two weeks ago. If you want to be a follower, a disciple of Jesus, first you must count the cost. Because you do not build a tower or go into battle without making sure you'll

finish the job or overcome your enemy. Second, you must account for the losses you'll incur like sacrificing your plans, sacrificing your money, and sacrificing your relationships.

This message I'm sharing with you is the flip side. Because if there are losses, there are gains in the Christian life. I deliberately held it last time because this message is coming. You see, the Christian life is not all suffering, pain, and discomfort. God loves you and me. He wants us to give up things so that we can receive better and greater things. Like if I'm hugging something like this and not letting go, how could I receive something else? Something else that is much better than what I have? I have to relax and release and then I can receive what God is giving me.

So, these two guys, by releasing what they had, gained a very valuable thing - the Kingdom of Heaven. Notice the treasure hunter was filled with joy when he found the hidden treasure. I'm sure the merchant was joyful as well although the text doesn't say it. I mean, how else would he feel? A pearl was more valuable in ancient times than a diamond, according to historians. The Romans prized these jewels more than diamonds. Listen to this: At the height of the Roman Empire, when pearl fever reached its peak, the historian Suetonius wrote that the Roman general Vitellius financed an entire military campaign by selling just one of his mother's pearl earrings. That's why Jesus used it in this parable instead of diamonds. Wives, be grateful to your husbands if they give you pearls instead of diamonds. If they are Mikimoto pearls, right?

So, do you now see why Jesus compared the Kingdom of Heaven to a pearl? The Kingdom is so valuable and, in fact, priceless that it surely will bring unequal joy to anyone who is looking out for it and then finding it.

Folks, you've never tasted real living until you've tasted the Kingdom of Heaven. Things on earth are temporary. They can satisfy you for a time. But they

will lose their flavor. They will lose their shine. The only things that last are eternal things. Jesus says, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.” (Matthew 6:19-20) The two guys in our story gave up everything that was temporary in order to gain something long-lasting. Are we ready to do the same thing?

Now, what makes the kingdom so immensely valuable? Why would it bring you great joy? Because of the gains. Because of the blessings you receive when you make Jesus your King and your priority. Remember the second part of Matthew 6:33? “And all these things will be given to you as well.” What are these things that will be given you? There are so many of them and it will take the whole day to talk about all these things. So let me give you three only. And these three are enough to give you joy in your heart. After that long introduction, let me share with you my three points. **What do you gain when you seek the Kingdom of God?**

1. You Gain Forgiveness of Your Sins.

The Bible says we are all sinners condemned to die. “For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) And “...the wages of sin is death”. (Romans 6:23) But God has forgiven us through the death of the Lord Jesus on the cross. If not for his forgiveness, we are still wallowing in our sins. We are still doing things that can destroy us. And we are still filled with guilt and remorse.

I read the story of Charles Colson who told of watching Albert Speer being interviewed on “Good Morning, America” some years back. Speer was the Hitler confidant whose technological genius kept the Nazi factories running throughout World War II. Speer was the only one of the twenty-four war criminals tried at Nuremburg to admit his guilt, and he had served twenty years in a Spandau prison.

He asked Speer: “You have said the guilt can never be forgiven or shouldn’t be. Do you still feel that way?” Colson said he will never forget the look on Speer’s face as he responded,

“I served a sentence of twenty years, and I could say, ‘I’m a free man, my conscience has been cleared by serving the whole time as punishment.’ But I can’t get rid of it. This new book is part of my atoning, of clearing my conscience.” The interviewer pressed the point: “You really don’t think you’ll be able to clear it totally?” Speer shook his head. “I don’t think it will be possible.”

Colson said: “For thirty-five years Speer had accepted complete responsibility for his crime. His writings were filled with contrition and warnings to others to avoid his moral sin. He desperately sought expiation. All to no avail. I wanted to write Speer, to tell him about Jesus and his death on the cross, about God’s forgiveness. But there wasn’t time. The ABC interview was his last public statement; he died shortly after.”

If only Speer knew that there is complete forgiveness of sins through Jesus. Psalm 103:12 says, “As far as the east is from the west, So far has He removed our transgressions from us.”

You gain forgiveness of your sins when you find the Kingdom of God. That is one thing God gives you. Another is

2. You gain an Extended Family.

Jesus says in Luke 26, “If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, and even his own life—he cannot be my disciple.” He said this before telling the parable of the tower builder which I talked about last time. You see, as I mentioned in that message, one of the things that can happen when you become a Christian is that your friends will leave you. Your parents will disown you. But even if your friends and your

family leave you, let me encourage you because you're not alone. You gain new friends and brothers and sisters and mothers and fathers in the Lord.

Jesus says in **Matthew 19:29**, “**And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much...**”

That's the bonus of becoming a Christian. You have an instant extended family. And you can find this extended family anywhere you are on the planet.

In 1992, I was single and when I moved from California to NJ because of work, a Christian couple who I met in a Bible study adopted me. They allowed me to use one of their bedrooms for free and really treated me as family. When my late grandma came to join me a few months later, they accommodated my grandma too. They always checked my grandma and made sure that her needs were met. And when my parents came to join us, well, that's when we moved to an apartment. So you see, that's one of the perks of being a Christian, you readily and immediately find help when you need it.

You gain of forgiveness. You gain an extended family. But the best gain I believe is this. When you seek God's Kingdom and his righteousness,

3. You Gain Being With Jesus for Eternity.

Forget all about the other gains. Being with Jesus in heaven is worth it all. Remember the thief on the cross? All he said before he died was, “Jesus, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!” And Jesus said, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.”

The thief didn't get a chance to experience God's provisions in his life. He didn't get a chance to meet and fellowship with other Christians. But he got the chance to be with Jesus for all eternity. That surpassed all other chances he could ever have on earth.

Jesus promised eternal life to his followers in John 6:47 (MSG), “I’m telling you the most solemn and sober truth now: Whoever believes in me has real life, eternal life.” And that is the last part of the verse I gave you earlier, “And everyone who has left houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or wife or children or fields for my sake will receive a hundred times as much and will inherit eternal life”. (Matthew 19:29)

That is really sobering and reassuring. It is the greatest gain and blessing in life. Paul says in Philippians 3:13-14 “Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

And this is what kept him going. Even though he was hard pressed, perplexed, persecuted, struck down. He knew that one day the life of Jesus will be revealed in his mortal body. In short, he was expecting to be in heaven when he died.

If you’re not a Christian, you too can have eternal life. It’s not complicated. It’s a no-brainer. What do you need to do? Just come as you are to Jesus. With no pretensions. With all your warts and pimples, so to speak. Because he cares for you and he loves you. He will forgive you of your sins. He is ready to embrace you in his arms and say, “My dear child, I want you to spend eternity with me.” Do not think that your religion will earn you a merit badge. Do not think that your philosophy will garner you points. Do not think that your good works will give you an advantage.

Just believe that Jesus died for your sins. Believe that he alone can save you and no one else. Jesus says in John 14:6 (NIV), “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”

Today people are so concerned about their survival. There is the pandemic, the worsening economy, terrorism, natural disasters. People are nervous. They are getting insecure. The world could plunge into great turmoil and who knows what's going to happen next?

The Christian, however, knows that in the midst of all these troubles, he or she can rest assured that God is watching over him or her. The Christian has hope for the future because God's Kingdom is in his or her heart and that one day, Jesus will come and take those with him to his heavenly kingdom.

If you're not a Christian, I hope you consider this message and reflect on it and make a decision for Jesus. If you believe you're not yet a part of the Kingdom of Heaven, all you need to do is to repent and believe in the good news of salvation.