

The Pearl of Great Price

by J.S. Lamar

The sermon emphasizes the importance of seeking the pearl of great price, which represents Jesus Christ, and the need for Christians to sell and part with their past acquisitions and possessions to fully possess it.

Scripture: Isaiah 55:1, Matthew 13:45, John 4:23, Romans 14:1, 1 Corinthians 3:11, Ephesians 4:3, Colossians 2:8, Hebrews 4:9, Revelation 21:2

Topics: "Faith In Christ", "Church Unity"

Description

J.S. Lamar preaches on the parable of the merchantman seeking goodly pearls from Matthew 13, highlighting the dual sense of the Scriptures and the different periods or ages represented by the seven parables in the chapter. He discusses the historical progression of the Church from the seed-sowing age to the Reformation and the current age of investigation and seeking truth. Lamar emphasizes the importance of unity in faith in Jesus Christ amidst denominational differences and the need to focus on the 'pearl of great price.' He encourages the Church to hold fast to the fundamental principle of faith in Christ and obedience to His commandments, anticipating the ultimate rest and home in Heaven.

Transcript

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchantman seeking goodly pearls, who, when he has found one of great price, went and sold all that he had and bought it."--Matt. xiii:45, 46.

COME now to speak of the text which I have read in your hearing--the parable of the merchantman seeking goodly pearls. In the treatment of this Scripture, two courses are open to me: Either, first, to consider it in what I may call its personal sense, in which it is applicable to individual men in every age of the Church and in every condition of religious society; or, second, to view it in its historical sense, which I regard as descriptive of the age in which we live, and indicative of the special work desiderated by this age. I shall pursue, as being more appropriate to the occasion which has brought us together, the latter of these courses.

The thirteenth chapter of Matthew contains a series of seven parables, in each of which, save, perhaps, the last, I recognize this double sense. I am aware that the second--that is, the prophetic or historical sense of these Scriptures--though [166] advocated by eminent theologians, has never been popularized; and it may be, therefore, that you have not been accustomed to entertain it. Still, if you will remember that not only the principles and characteristics, but also the various phases and fortunes of His kingdom, were distinctly before the mind of the Saviour, you will have no difficulty in believing that these latter were also

embraced by him in his beautiful descriptions. The difficulty would lie in not believing it; that is, in believing that he beheld all these, and yet said nothing about them. And I am persuaded that your admiration of his wisdom will be sensibly increased, when you perceive that these simple pictures, which exhibit with so much beauty and propriety the nature, the genius, the soul, the spirit, the life, of His Church, portray at the same time and with wonderful accuracy, the successive stages through which that Church was to pass. In this view, each of these seven parables will have a period peculiarly its own--a period in which the state of things indicated by it will predominate--a period specially described and characterized by it. Features and conditions described by the other parables may not be absent from this period, but they will subordinate it.

If you will allow me, I will briefly indicate, as I understand them, the periods or ages respectively covered by these different parables; ages which, of course, are not separated by distinct lines, but shade into each other like the colors of the spectrum. The [167] parable of the sower, which stands first in order, makes known for all times, in its personal sense, the reason why in so many cases the gospel is inefficacious; and yet it is manifest that the first age of the church was peculiarly and characteristically the seed-sowing age. This was the work specially demanded, and necessarily it took precedence of every other. The seed was the Word, and the apostles and their co-laborers went into all the world, scattering it broadcast--preaching the gospel to every creature, and preaching it only.

Subsequently, after churches had been planted; after the seed sown had sprung up and brought forth fruit, it is perceived that a state of things had supervened of which the first parable takes no notice. Error, corruption, heresy manifest themselves; or, in the language of the second parable, "there appeared the tares also." Now, the culture and conservation of the church is the work demanded. Error must be pointed out and opposed, truth must be elaborated and confirmed; and so, when the primitive age had passed there stand the wheat and the tares growing together, but discriminated by apostolic insight; and further, as they are destined to "grow together until the harvest," they are discriminated in writing for all future ages.

In process of time--it was a long time--but the very next thing which distinguished the Church was its attainment of great eminence and power. Paganism was suppressed; the Emperor and the court [168] were converted; the religion of Jesus became the recognized religion of the civilized world--so that the Church, no longer feeble and struggling, and seeming to need support, had itself become the shelter and refuge of mankind. How like the mustard-seed in the third parable, "which indeed is the least of all seeds, but when it is grown it is the greatest among herbs, and becometh a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof."

What is the next period? Without searching for it; without any theory to guide you to it; just follow the stream of history, and you will find that before long the sun of the church's glory begins to decline. Faithfulness and purity are supplanted by pride, and pomp and lust of power, with their train of false-hood and corruption. You see reflected more and more of this world and less and less of Heaven, until at last, amid forebodings of an awful future, the sun goes down. Twilight comes on, the shadow deepen, the last lingering rays disappear from the horizon, and night, with sable mantle, covers the whole earth. We are in the gloom, the awful gloom of "the dark ages," and are bewildered by the glare and the glamour of superstition's lurid lights. But during this long night, where was the truth? It was not lost; it was simply buried out of sight. I was like the leaven which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal. And there in the dark removed from the gaze of men, unseen and unknown it was working--slowly working, but ever working [169] until at last "the whole was leavened." Not the whole world, nor even the whole nominal church, but the whole of the definite quantity, the "three-measures of meal," which had come into contact

with the leaven. Hence the fact, which, but for the light of this parable, would be so surprising and unaccountable--the spontaneous outburst of the Reformation. Where it succeeded at all, it succeeded promptly, as in a day, because men were "leavened"--prepared for it; and where it failed at first, it has continued to fail till now. It is a remarkable fact that, with all the missionary zeal, intelligence, enterprise, wealth, and power of Protestantism, nothing, or next to nothing, has been accomplished by aggressive work against Roman Catholicism since the very first age of the Reformation--certainly not until quite recent times.

Let it be noticed now that, while the origin and remarkable success of early Protestantism are accounted for by the parable of the leaven, the distinguishing work of this period is not described and characterized by it. That is covered by the next parable; and the very nature and construction of this point to a brief historical period. There is no process of gradual work; no seed growing to maturity; no leaven working long and slowly to results; but the simple and, as it were, accidental, finding of a hidden treasure. In a very short time steps are taken to appropriate it--and the parable is fulfilled. Now we may call it chance, or we may call it [170] Providence, but certainly it is remarkable that the characteristic man of this period should, in his own personal history, have so wonderfully and almost literally illustrated this parable. You remember the account of Luther casually and carelessly glancing over the library of Erfurt stumbling upon a Bible. He was not looking for it; he was not thinking about it--but he found it. Permit me to quote the exact language of history. It says: "About this time he discovered, in the library of the university, a Latin Bible, and found, to his no small delight, that it contained more than the excerpts in common use."

In other words, he recognized it as a priceless treasure. The more he examined it the richer and more valuable it seemed. But it was not his. The ecclesiasticism claimed the proprietorship of the Bible. And what was he to do? I will tell you what he did. He gave up the ecclesiasticism; he went and sold honor and place and reputation and the hope of Ecclesiastical preferment--all that he had--and bought this treasure for his own and asserted and maintained his right to possess it.

As with Luther, so with his contemporary reformers; the Bible, in its integrity and completeness, so long lost to the Church and the world, was found by them, and, at whatever cost or sacrifice, was bought and retained. They translated it into vernacular tongues; they printed it, circulated it, and so enabled thousands and hundreds of thousands to come into possession, not only of the Book, but of the [171] hitherto hidden treasure contained in the Book. This it was that distinguished the Lutheran period of the Reformation; and nothing could describe it more accurately or happily than the parable of the hidden treasure.

This first period of Protestantism gradually shades into that which follows it; the latter becoming more and more distinct until, at length, but at what precise period we cannot say, the age becomes marked and characterized as that of the merchantman seeking the goodly pearls. And this brings us to the consideration of the text.

The "spirit of the age," of which we hear so much--what is it? What single word would most aptly describe and characterize it? The word is upon every tongue. It springs unbidden from every heart. And it is the identical word used in the parable--seeking. Distinctly and pre-eminently, this is the age of investigation. I claim this as no discovery of mine; everybody sees it, everybody recognizes it, everybody speaks of it. The fact is so prominent that it has impressed itself upon the universal mind. The truth is that men seem to be everywhere looking for something. Turn where we will, examine whatever department of knowledge we may, and we find minds busily engaged in seeking, searching, investigating, exploring. Men are going down into the bowels of the earth to seek out and decipher the imperishable records of unnumbered ages

past--searching in the rocks of hoary antiquity for goodly [172] pearls of truth; aye, and finding them, too--"Sermons in stones and good in everything." They are sending dumb messengers down into the voiceless deep of the ocean, and are bringing up from that eternal silence eloquent messages of truth--revelations of mysteries which have been hid from the generations and the ages. With eyes of supernatural power they are peering into the depths of infinite space, where stars have their birth, and are bringing down from those heavenly mansions pearls, "goodly pearls."

So it is everywhere. In chemistry and botany, in physics and metaphysics, in geography and history, in law and medicine, in government and sociology, in every realm of matter and every department of mind, investigation is going on; and men are seeking, searching, toiling, to find truth. And from my heart I bid them Godspeed, every one. There is not a feeling in my soul, as there is not a principle in the Christian religion, which does not prompt me to welcome, embrace and appropriate as from God, every truth under Heaven.

"On Christian or on heathen ground,

The pearl's divine where'er 'tis found."

As might be supposed, the Protestantism which gave birth to the spirit of the age has itself been characterized by it. Religious men have been searching the Scriptures, seeking for goodly pearls. The Bible was never so profoundly studied, nor its [173] meaning so patiently and carefully sought after as in these last days. It is the book of the age, and is read and studied more than all other books together. Men, women, and children own it and read it; own it all and read it all, not only without danger to their souls, but with unspeakable profit and blessing.

It is to be regretted that just as scientific men go astray by too hasty generalization, and have been forced time and again to abandon theories and positions once regarded as impregnable, so theologians have been too ready to postulate as certain truths, their hasty inferences and imperfect deductions.

The scientific theory which happens to prevail at any given time is regarded as the standard of scientific orthodoxy, and opposition to this on the part of the Church is paraded as opposition to science itself. In like manner theologians have misused their human creeds and articles of religion. A simple publication of these, to show what men at any given time do believe to be truth, would be right and innocent; but when erected as standards, and made authoritatively to declare what men must believe in order to Christian fellowship, we regard them as pernicious in influence and non-Protestant in principle. I am happy to say that, little by little, the age is becoming a unit with us on this point. Speculative questions have lost their hold on the popular heart. The world is not interested in them; and churches themselves have outgrown their old creeds, and are attaching [174] less and less importance to their denominational differences. As the poet laureate says:

"Our little systems have their day;

They have their day and cease to be;

They are but broken lights of Thee,

And Thou, O Lord, art more than they."

As an evidence of the change that is taking place, I noticed that a few months ago there was published in one of the daily papers of Louisville an old-fashioned Calvinistic sermon. It was by a theological professor, and was very able and logical. I read it with pleasure--and forgot it. The public, no doubt, did the same, and that was the end of it. No enthusiasm was excited; no opposition was aroused. But forty years ago! I tremble to think of the confusion and disaster which the publication of such a sermon would have produced. A hundred knights, armed cap-a-pie, would have sprung into the arena to attack it. Half the pulpits in Louisville--and mine among the number--would have answered upon the spot. Countless pamphlets, full of sarcasm and theology, would have been circulated in opposition to it; challenges would have passed; debates would have been held; reputations have suffered; and the whole community, perhaps the whole State, if not the United States, have been agitated by that one little sermon. But, as it was, the Calvinists cared nothing about it; the Arminians cared nothing about it; nobody cared anything about it--and the same would [175] have been true of any other sermon upon any speculative point.

Now, what is the reason of this striking change? I think our text will answer. It is because, in the earnest seeking after goodly pearls which is going on, men of all parties are beginning to find that there is just "one pearl of great price," and that it is worth all the rest.

What is it that touches the popular heart in any religious public assembly of the day? Is it philosophical theology? Is it the quodlibets and quidlibets of schoolmen? You know it is not. Do you not remember last winter, when Dr. Deems, in the Presbyterian church in this city, rasped and belittled and bemeaned the miserable denominational distinctions that are keeping us all apart; and when he brought out before our hearts the divine Saviour as the center of union, and the only object of faith and obedience--don't you remember how good we all felt?

And look at Moody and Sankey, and their work. A very important work it is, certainly--a building without a frame, that can only stand while it is propped and upheld from without. Serious, thoughtful Christians in all ages have known that Christianity lives in its ordinances and institutions. These are not its life, but they are the body that contains its life. Without these, religion is a mere sentimentalism; very delicious, it may be, but destined to evaporate and pass away. True philanthropy, therefore, and true fidelity to God, require that the [176] CHURCH, with its divine ordinances, shall maintain, uphold and exhibit the religion of JESUS. Moody and Sankey are not the church; they operate outside and independently of the Church as an institution, and their work is without ordinances. We know that while keeping back and ignoring a part of the commission, they can not teach men how to possess the pearl of great price; and yet, because they see and exhibit that pearl, and only that, to the exclusion of all sectarian differences, the popular heart is kindled wherever they go.

The Young Men's Christian Association, too--what an index to the future is that! I do earnestly hope that it may not commit itself unreservedly to the blunder which Moody and Sankey are making, that of assuming to do Church work without Church ordinances; for I regard its existence as one of the most promising signs of the times. It means dissatisfaction with denominationalism; it means the recognition of something better; and it means an earnest effort to attain unto something better.

I might speak of the Evangelical Alliance and its work; of the tone of its published addresses; and of the cordial reception given to its utterances. But I forbear. All these signs point in the same direction, and mean the same thing; and, if I read them aright, they signify that Jesus of Nazareth has come in sight, and that not much longer will the men of this age dwell among the tombs of the dead past. They have found the pearl of great price, and they [177] mean to possess it. But the mistake which they make, the mistake

which the Evangelical Alliance makes, which the Young Men's Christian Association makes, which Moody and Sankey and their imitators and co-operants make, is, in supposing that they can possess this pearl without selling and parting with "all that they have." Hence, after finding it, they are still holding on to their past acquisitions and possessions. As individuals, multitudes, I grant, are making the sale and completing the purchase. But our Lord has something in store for us better than that. The time will come, and may God speed the day, when every true Christian--Greek, Roman and Protestant--shall do this; when the whole "kingdom of Heaven shall be like the merchantman;" when all the Church of God shall sell out its party names and creeds, and buy and be satisfied with the one pearl of great price.

It is for the attainment of this object that the Christian Church lives, and labors and prays. This is our divine mission. In the very beginning of our service the Great Captain sent us forward as sappers and miners of the grand army which is destined to come after us. With such faithfulness as we possessed we have been preparing the way, cutting down the hills and smoothing the valleys. In spite of many difficulties and much opposition, we have been able, by the grace of God, to reach, occupy and maintain the position to which he is now calling and [178] leading all His people. "Step by step," says Tennyson's Cranmer,

"Step by step,

With many voices crying right and left,

Have I climbed back into the primal church,

And stand within the porch, and Christ is with me."

So have we felt. We have demonstrated the practicability in the nineteenth, as in the first century, of church organization and efficiency without a human creed or a sectarian name, and of Christian union and co-operation without a human standard or a human bond. The war, with its unholy bitterness, has come and gone; and while the ties that bound most other communities were severed like wax in the fierce heat, God, for some wise purpose, kept us together. A thousand questions of opinion, of policy, of expediency, are rife among us as among others, but they have not divided us. The Great Power that directs us unites us in the maintenance of this fundamental principle: That, without respect to differences of opinion, the only test of fellowship is faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, and obedience to his holy commandments. He is the "pearl of great price." He is all and in all; the fountain of order and government, of love and life, of truth and salvation. The ordinances, or sacraments, as they came from his mind and heart, are sacred and precious, and to be jealously preserved and guarded, just as he delivered them. In the abstract they would be nothing; and those who can bring themselves to think [179] of them in the abstract regard them as nothing; but in the concrete, as coming from Christ and connected with Christ, they are holy and efficacious, because he, the All, is in them all--filling them with his own divine grace and virtue. This is why we contend for apostolic ordinances. It is not that this is better in itself than that; for in themselves both are nothing; but it is that the false is disconnected with the Fountain--a dry channel--emptiness, vanity and delusion--while the true is full of the very Christ. This, then, I conceive to be our special, our divine mission as a people; and oh! brethren, let it be yours--unmoved by temporary excitements, unreduced by the hope of temporary success--to stand firmly on the rock, and hold up the light for those who are seeking to find it.

And now to conclude. When the favored period in which we live shall close, there is but one to succeed it. The net cast into the sea shall be drawn to the shore; for there is a shore beyond the billows of this troubled sea, where we shall surely rest. The Church of Christ, like a good old ship, is carrying us safely onward. She has passed, as we have seen today, through many a storm and tempest. Fierce waves have

lashed her sides and strained her timbers. She has battered against the opposing currents and contrary winds; and sometimes the breezes which seemed most favorable have carried her into danger and disaster. She has seen awful, gloomy nights, and rough and roaring seas; but, blessed be God, she [180] has seen many a sunburst of joy, and many a star night of glory. But in them all, and through them all, her course has been onward, ever onward. And now her eager passengers begin to look and long for the land. "The morning cometh, and also the night;" but there is no land yet. A little longer to wait and watch and pray. A little longer to buffet the billows and contend with the storms. And after a while--it may be at some midnight hour--the watchman aloft shall see a light in the distance--a glorious heavenly light; and then, when the morning cometh, there, in all its rapturous loveliness, there at last is the land! Oh, beautiful land, bathed in the glory of divine light! Oh, beautiful city of God, radiant with beamings of the divine presence! Moor thee, good ship, moor thee forever; for this Heaven, and this is Home!

And there shall be everlasting rest! [181]

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