

THE PARABLE OF THE PEARL-MERCHANT.

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a merchant seeking goodly pearls; and having found one pearl of great price, he went and sold that he had, and bought it.”—*Matthew* xiii. 45, 46.

TWENTY-THREE years ago there appeared in the *EXPOSITOR*, under the title of “The Twin Parables,”¹ a striking paper, written by the Rev. W. M. Metcalfe, contesting the ordinary view of the parable of “the Pearl of Great Price.” The author insisted that this story should be read in its strict grammatical construction and ought not to be forced into the grooves of the companion story of “the Hid Treasure,”—that, in fact, the second of the two is the counterpart and complement, not the duplicate of the first, and assigns to the kingdom of heaven an active, not a passive part in the search in question.

Notwithstanding the reply which appeared subsequently in the *EXPOSITOR*, and the general assent to the established interpretation, I have from that time been convinced that Mr. Metcalfe was right in the starting-point and main ground of his contention. What our Lord (as reported) actually said is, in the first instance, “The kingdom of heaven is like unto a treasure hidden in the field” (verse 44); in the second, “The kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a merchant seeking goodly pearls” (verse 45). If we are to take the words as they stand, the kingdom is in the former case *the thing sought*, in the latter it is itself *the seeker*. No reason is given by the expositors why the Speaker, if He intended an identical lesson, should have reversed the position of the two figures introduced in passing from the one picture to

¹ *EXPOSITOR*, II. viii., p. 54 (July, 1884). The reply is found in the December number of the same volume (pp. 468–472), from the pen of the Rev. J. H. Burn, M.A., endorsed by the then Editor, Dr. Samuel Cox. This was the last article that appeared under Dr. Cox’s auspices.

the other ; nor why the reporter, if he understood his Master to mean that "the kingdom" is the costly pearl, should have made Him say that it "is like unto a *seeker* of goodly pearls." Unquestionably, if verses 45, 46 had stood alone and been allowed to speak for themselves, the image of "the kingdom" must have been seen in "the man that is a merchant," and "the pearl of great price" would have been recognized as the treasure of the kingdom's quest. The form of the opening sentence is precisely that of verse 24, "The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man that sowed good seed in his field," and of chapter xx. 1, ". . . is like unto a man that is a householder"; it closely resembles that of chapters xviii. 23, xxii. 2, xxv. 14; in all which examples the action of the Divine kingdom is compared to that which men of authority and enterprise adopt in the common undertakings of life. The same line of comparison is manifest in the parables of Luke xv. and John x. 11, and in the similes of Luke xi. 13, xviii. 2-8, etc.

Reading the twin parables in this light, one sees how well they match each other, and how the second of the pair completes, and in a sense corrects, the first. Between them they describe, upon both sides, the mutual courtship ever going on between the kingdom of God and the heart of man, which fills the history of revelation and forms the romance of the ages. The soul seeks the kingdom (verse 44); but still more, the kingdom seeks the soul (verses 45, 46). The antithesis is conceived in the same manner as that of Matthew xi. 12 (according to the proper rendering): "The kingdom of heaven useth violence, and men of violence seize it,"—it wrestles and must be wrestled with! But in this passage, exceptionally, the *human* side of the search and capture happens to come first. Jesus could not speak of man as a seeker for the heavenly treasure without reminding Himself that the seeking is rather on the *other* side; the initiative and prime intention, the overtures

and proffers of friendship, are upon God's part ; and man's search after God is but his slow response to God's search after him. " Not that we loved God," cries St. John, " but that He loved us " ; " Ye did not choose Me," says Jesus to His disciples, " it was I that chose you." Never could our Lord forget that it was *His* business " to seek and save the lost "—the lost wealth of His Father's kingdom and sons of His Father's house ; and the thought of the kingdom being sought for and found by men, of necessity called up the counter-thought of its long and painful pursuit of men. His representation, in the picture of the Treasure-finder, of the eagerness aroused in men by the discovery of spiritual treasure required, surely, to be balanced by the representation of the Divine solicitude for man's recovery afforded in the image of the pearl-merchant. Jesus Christ is Himself the actor of this story ; He speaks out of His inmost consciousness, and betrays His ulterior purpose. The shadow of Calvary falls across His visions of the kingdom.

Our parable follows the main tenor of Christ's teaching about salvation, and falls in with a multitude of gracious sayings and images used by Him to set forth the redeeming grace of God at work in His mission. He is the Sower, flinging wide over God's field the life-conveying seed ; the Baker, thrusting the leaven into the heavy and sullen mass ; the Fisher, plying his net amid the teeming waters ; the Shepherd, going after his one lost sheep—this little stray world of ours, that is missed amongst the flocks of God's bright and happy worlds peopling the skies ; the Cottager, sweeping and raking amid the dust to recover her single lost coin ; and now He is the Merchant, ransacking the markets to find the world's most precious pearl, and laying out all that he has to win it.

The extreme words with which the parable closes were, doubtless, an enigma to the first hearers ; the historical

sequel has explained them. The doctrines of *the kingdom* and *the sacrifice* lay close together in our Lord's mind. He and the kingdom are one ; and the cross stood always in His way to the throne. To suppose that at any time after His baptism and temptation Christ expected an easy success, the fruit of mere teaching and miracles, and thought to win the Messiah's crown by a bloodless victory, is to presume against the evidence and to miss the secret of Jesus. He certainly did not invite others to "sell all that they had" (as in the parable of the Hid Treasure) for the sake of entering the kingdom He was setting up, without contemplating a corresponding sacrifice for their sake upon His own part. When Jesus anticipates "selling¹ all that He has" to "buy" the pearl of price, this unbounded self-devotion on the kingdom's account is no more than that to which He summoned others in saying, "He that doth not take his cross and follow after Me, is not worthy of Me," than that to which He explicitly pledged Himself when He declared that "the Son of man hath come . . . to give His life a ransom."² The principle expressed in the words of John xii. 24-26 was no late conclusion forced upon Jesus by disappointment, it was the rooted conviction of His ministry : the "grain of wheat" which multiplies itself in dying, and the "man that is a merchant" who devotes his whole store to the purchase of one precious pearl, bespeak the same resolution fixed in the Redeemer's thoughts. The entire course of Jesus was

¹ Possibly, the difficult perfect tense (*πέπρακεν*) between the two aorists of the narrative (*ἀπῆλθεν . . . ἠγόρασεν*) is due to the Evangelist's reflexion on the sacrifice of Jesus as a *fait accompli* : "He went away and sold all that He had (yes, and He *has done it!*), and bought it" (ver. 46).

² "That Jesus spoke all the seven parables grouped together in this chapter at one time is not certain or even likely" (A. B. Bruce, in *E.G.T.*) St. Matthew, according to his wont, has strung them together. The sixth parable may, not improbably, have been spoken at a later point in Christ's ministry, when the cross was immediately in view, and in illustration of such a saying as that of chapter xx. 28 ; and St. Matthew (*ex hyp.*) may have placed it here on purpose to complement the fifth.

governed by the maxim—valid for Himself to begin with, since “every one that is perfect shall be as his master”—that “whosoever shall seek to gain his life shall lose it, but whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.”

What seemed to Mr. Metcalfe an objection to the interpretation he proposed (see the last paragraph of his Paper), becomes therefore its verification, when it is understood that “the kingdom of heaven” denotes, for Jesus, no celestial abstraction, no ideal of a glorious ultimate and eternal rule; it is the working and warfaring kingdom embodied in Himself and in those who think and act with Him; His teachings and spirit reveal what the kingdom of God means and is, and by what forces it operates. The parables of the 13th chapter of Matthew would in truth have been deficient, and our Lord in delivering them (or the Evangelist in reporting them) would have seemed to forget the “baptism that He is to be baptized withal” and “the sufferings of Christ” that lead to “His glory,” but for this indication given by the sixth of the series of the immense sacrifice through which the kingdom secures its victory. If we are justified in reading verse 45 in its *prima facie* construction, and in seeing Christ and His kingdom pictured by the Pearl-merchant, and its policy of redemption by his bold purchase, then the story teaches, not like its companion the supreme value of the kingdom to man, but *the supreme value of man to the kingdom, and the cost to which the kingdom is prepared to put itself on man’s account*. The Captain of salvation knows the price of conquest; He promises that it shall be paid.

Another point in the parable needs elucidation, viz. the distinction between the “goodly pearls” sought by the merchant and the “one pearl of great price” on which his heart is set. This can hardly signify a discrimination between soul and soul—as though “great and capable souls” elicited “mightier efforts” for their conversion, while “the

kingdom seeks all manner of souls" as the pearl-dealer "all manner of pearls":¹ such a differentiation belittles the parable, and ill accords with the mind of Christ and His respect unto the lowly. "The pearl of great price," in our Lord's valuation, is the soul of any man, of every man—of humanity in the whole world or in the single person. This, wherever He meets it, is to Him an object of incomparable worth, and to "gain the whole world in exchange for the soul" He counts an utter loss. But to the value of other objects Jesus Christ was not insensible. In His temper there was no tincture of a sour or narrow puritanism; "the kingdoms of the world and the glory of them" held out to His all-appreciative nature a veritable and a powerful temptation. Whatever was great and goodly, lovely and pleasant, on the face of nature or in the life of man, the Son of man knew how to appraise; He once promised His friends "a hundredfold now in this time—houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands"—in return for what they forfeited on His account. His appreciation of the "many things" desirable and useful throws into the stronger relief His vindication of the "one thing needful." Christ claimed for God the body with the soul; He discerned a fatherly Providence that "counts the very hairs" of its children's heads, and marks the fall of every sparrow. All that is rich and fair and precious—"the glory of Lebanon, the excellency of Carmel and Sharon," "the glory and honour of the nations"—belongs to the kingdom of our God and His Christ; and everywhere it "seeks" its own. St. Paul followed Christ's teaching when he prophesied that "the creation itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the liberty of the glory of the children of God." There was no lack surely, to the eye of Jesus, of

¹ Thus Mr. Metcalfe, on pp. 66, 67 of the aforesaid article, compromising (as I take it) his position by this subtlety.

“goodly pearls” inviting His purchase, of treasure for mind and heart scattered through the earth to be redeemed for Divine uses. But amidst the riches of the Lord that fill creation and the “goodly pearls” whereon He looked with delight, there shone “one pearl of great price” cast in the mire, weighed against whose worth the whole world was as nothing to Him; for its purchase He had “come to give His life a ransom.”

Such, then, we are compelled to think, is the mystery of the kingdom of heaven couched in the image of the pearl merchant and his traffic; Jesus is Himself *the trader* of the sixth parable, as He is the fisherman of the seventh and the sower of the first and second. But He does not speak for Himself alone. The “drag-net” of the seventh story requires many hands to help in the boat; the King does not by Himself make up the kingdom, nor unaided secure its victories. He has servants and companions who share His plans, who carry forward and complete His undertaking. They are “the sons of the kingdom,” the heirs of its wealth and of its duties; and what the Lord says concerning Himself in the guise of the merchant—concerning His estimate of men and things, and the sacrifice He is resolved to make—applies to these also, so far as they are embarked with Him and are members of His body. Two qualities, it appears therefore, must be found in those who deal in Christ’s merchandise and who are fit to have their part and lot with Him in the enterprises of God’s kingdom.

1. *A just appreciation.* They must understand the staple that they have to handle; they must carry their Master’s standard of value, and His system of weights and measures, into their transactions.

The hero of our story is a *pearl-merchant*: and his business is his passion. He has his ideal—“one pearl of great price,” beside which all other property goes cheap. He posts

from market to market, he explores every secret hoard, he sounds the perilous seas to find this pearl of pearls—the jewel of the universe for him. Other wares tempt other men—dainty stuffs, lustrous gems, cunning artistry—he casts over them all a careless glance; but let some new and rare pearl gleam out of that piled up merchandise, then his face kindles and his hand reaches out to clutch the treasure. And with the single-minded pursuit there comes the sure eye and delicate touch, the fine judgment, the appreciative power.

There can be no question of that which holds the place of the merchant's pearl of price in the Divine estimate and the reckonings of God's kingdom. The first page of Scripture, in its poem of Creation, tells us this. Day after day, with measured labour, the Maker wrought His world-work, sundering the elements, fixing the orbs of heaven, clothing the earth with life and beauty. As the fabric grew into shape, at stage after stage, He pronounced the sentence "Good" upon His accomplished labour. At last when the sixth day's task was finished and man appeared upon earth—a rational, affectionate, and willing creature, the Maker's image—"God saw everything that He had made, and, behold, it was *very good!*" for then the setting had its jewel, and the world a *soul*. And so "God rested from all His work which He had created and made," keeping sabbath with His creature man. When, again, the time of the new creation came, one object governed its proceedings, as it had determined "the plan of the ages" now at last unfolded: "Thou shalt call His name Jesus," it was said to the mother of the Lord, "for He shall save His people from their sins." The salvation of the soul, the restoring of the lost fellowship of God with man, was the errand upon which God sent forth His Son,—“to bless you in turning every one of you from your iniquities,” as St. Peter said to the Jewish people. To seize the reins

of secular dominion and to save the splendid civilization of Greece and Rome, to break the fetters of the slave and remedy out of hand the monstrous social wrongs of the age, to unlock the secrets of science, to endow the world with consummate productions of genius, to open the ways of commerce and fill the lap of universal man with plenty—such aims as these might have seemed worthy motives for a Divine mission; the Almighty Father is not indifferent to any of the efforts of His children to better their natural lot and to make the earth a fitter and happier dwelling-place. The beneficent miracles of Jesus gave signs of the direction of His social sympathies. But all other objects the Saviour of men passed by or set aside: “He gave Himself up for us, that He might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto Himself a people for His own possession,”—that He might bring back the alienated race to its Maker’s love. The world’s worth lies in hearts that can beat with love to God, minds that can think and adore, wills that freely and faithfully obey; these form the enduring substance of life and time. All else that the earth holds of goodness—the wealth of empires, the treasures of art—is mere dross in comparison with this; is but as scaffolding for the house of heaven, or as fuel for the fires of judgment. “The world passeth away, and the desire thereof; but he that doeth the will of God abideth for ever.”

Such at least was Christ’s judgment of values, such the measure that He applied to human dealings. Men of Christian sense and Christian taste carry this standard with them into their affairs, and base their reasonings on this axiom. Their life’s accounts are kept, not in terms of pounds, shillings and pence, but of faith, hope and love. Their wealth lies in the worth, actual or possible, of the human beings around them; it is summed up in items of character—of truth, purity, courage, intelligence, of uncomplaining patience and unselfish

affection and lowly piety, in the souls of their fellows. *Men* and not money, *people* not property, *persons* always and never mere things, constitute their absorbing interests, supply their ruling motives, and draw out their appreciative powers. Of these contrasted objects those who think with Christ will always sacrifice the latter to the former, at no point the former to the latter.

The social question can only be settled, in the personal or national sphere, by a Christian appreciation of life, by a sound sense of the value of the human personality,—“the brother for whom Christ died.” On the ground of this estimate all personal relations are to be adjusted in the kingdom of God and under the light shining from the person and the cross of Jesus—whether they be the relations of pastor and people, of parent and child, of master and pupil, or of the employer and his workmen, the mistress and her domestics, the tradesman and his customers, the imperial nation and the savage or heathen races politically or commercially dependent upon it. There is but one law of Christ, that holds wherever man comes into contact with man. When this “law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus,” this habit of judgment and appreciation, prevails amongst Christians and leavens society, as it is bound to do, when Christ’s people universally find the gold and pearls of life where Christ Himself did, the kingdom of God will quickly come.

2. It belongs further to the kingdom of God, when one has learnt to judge aright of life’s values, then to act promptly and bravely upon this estimate. Appreciation must be seconded by *resolute decision*.

Had Christ’s “merchant” been like many of ourselves, when he had found his quest and heard its price, he would have said: “Ah, I wanted that pearl above everything; it was the dream of my life! But the sum you name would beggar me; I should have to sell all that

I have to buy it." So it proved with the rich young ruler who inquired of Jesus the way to life eternal. The Lord looked on him with love ; he had spiritual impulses and a fine appreciation, he saw that it was the right and beautiful thing to follow such a Master. But when the Lord laid His unerring finger on the weak spot in the young man's nature, and bade him part with all earthly goods, looking only for "treasure in heaven," "his countenance fell at the saying"—he loved property more than people. It is our English idolatry !

Not so with the great Pearl-seeker and Master-merchant. When Christ had "found" His "pearl of great price"—had set His love upon our sin-bound race and counted the cost of its redemption—He laid aside His eternal glory for the state of an earthly babe, for a suffering human lot and the life of a despised and homeless teacher, for the contradiction of sinners, for buffeting and spitting and scourging, for the final horror and desolation of Calvary: "He emptied Himself,—He humbled Himself, becoming obedient even unto death, yea the death of the cross." Jesus grudged nothing, He hesitated at nothing ; the whole wealth and capital of His being—His sinless manhood, the glory of His Godhead—He staked upon the enterprise ; He invested and sunk *Himself* in the work of man's salvation ; "He loved us, and gave *Himself* for us,"—He "went and sold all that He had" for His one pearl, "and *bought it*." That clinched the bargain, and fetched home the purchase : "Thou hast redeemed us to God with Thy blood !"

Such language is, to be sure, the language of parable. The atonement of Christ was no mercantile transaction, no more than is the soul's purchase of the heavenly treasure by its surrender of earthly good (in the fifth story) a mercantile transaction or the payment of an arithmetical equivalent. But the actualities of an "eternal redemption"—of the

offering rendered in the sinner's stead by perfect love and obedience, and weighed in the scales of an absolute righteousness—lie behind these figures of the market-place, which bring home so truly to our imagination the motive and effect of the Lord's vicarious sacrifice.

"If any man serve Me, let him follow Me," is the watchword of Jesus. He depicts Himself as the First-born of many merchant-brethren engaged in His traffic, as He was the Captain of a boat-full of "fishers of men." The task of the kingdom of God is, all through, a task of redemption, to be carried on by sacrifice. Until mankind is saved and the kingdom of heaven comes in its glory, there must always be that to "fill up on our part which is lacking of the afflictions of the Christ." "Hereby know we love," writes St. John, "in that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren." In such a world as this, love cannot be known otherwise. The Apostle John, surviving his Master for some seventy years, continually laid down his life in laying it *out* for others; St. Paul, in like fashion, protested "I die daily." But there are so many of Christ's servants who never quite "sell all" on His account; they give much, they do much—short of putting their whole selves into His work. They have never fairly given themselves away for His love's sake. Hence their personal failure, and the collective failure of much of our Church expenditure and missionary activity. For it takes a heart to win a heart; and one must give *all for all* to "know love." Every pettiest contribution that has a man's soul and will behind it, tells; nothing else tells or counts at all in Christ's redeeming kingdom. When a man or a community is once embarked on the enterprise of saving souls, every other interest, affection, ambition has to be subordinated, every faculty and every possession utilized for this consuming purpose. So Christ

judged and acted, and so those who are Christ's will judge and act after Him.

The soul of the world is a pearl of great price ; when the full price is forthcoming, it will be won for God.

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LEXICAL NOTES FROM THE PAPYRI.¹

ἀθανασία.—*Syll.* 365^A (i/A.D.) τὸ μεγαλεῖον τῆς ἀθανασίας, of Caligula.

ἀθέτησις.—TbP 397 (ii/A.D.) ἡ[ν] καὶ ἀναδέδωκεν αὐτοῖς ἐς ἀθέτησιν καὶ ἀκύρωσιν, "which agreement she has surren-

¹ New abbreviations are the following :—

Str P = Strassburg Papyri, ed. Fr. Preisigke. Band i., Heft 1, 1906.

Lp P = Leipzig Papyri, ed. L. Mitteis. Band i., 1906.

Rein P = Papyri edited by Th. Reinach (Paris, 1905).

Ostr. = A. Wilcken's *Griechische Ostraka*.

BM III. = British Museum Papyri, ed. F. G. Kenyon and H. I. Bell, 1907.

(The Museum papyri are cited by pages, the rest by numbers.)

Witk. = *Epistulae Privatae Graecae*, ed. S. Witkowski. Teubner, 1907.

(Cited by pages. The reference to Witkowski's edition is regularly given as well as the original designation, since there is often a revised text : the commentary likewise is valuable.)

Syll. = *Sylloge Inscriptionum Graecarum*, by W. Dittenberger. Second edition (Leipzig, 1898–1901). Cited by numbers. The following are all cited by pages :—

Mayser = *Grammatik der griechischen Papyri aus der Ptolemäerzeit*, by E. Mayser (Leipzig, 1906).

Nägeli = *Der Wortschatz des Apostels Paulus*, by Th. Nägeli (Göttingen, 1905).

Proleg. = *Grammar of N. T. Greek*, by J. H. Moulton. Vol. i., *Prolegomena*. Second edition (Edinburgh, 1906).

Thess. = *St. Paul's Epistles to the Thessalonians*, by G. Milligan (Macmillan, 1908). References will sometimes be made by chapter and verse).

Notes i., ii., iii. denote previous papers in this series : see EXPOSITOR, vi. iii. 271, vii. 104, viii. 423 respectively.

The dates of papyri are regularly given, except sometimes for the Petrie and Hibeh collections, which are entirely Ptolemaic.

Square brackets denote supplements made by the editors where the document has a gap. We have not reproduced these where the missing letters are few and admit of no possible doubt.

Roman capitals are used in abbreviations for papyri collections, italics for those of inscriptions and ostraca.

For other abbreviations see *Proleg.*² pp. xvii.–xx., 258–262.