

CHAPTER III
SIMILITUDES OF THE KINGDOM (II)

THE PARABLE OF THE HIDDEN TREASURE

"The kingdom of heaven is like unto a treasure hidden in the field; which a man found, and hid; and in his joy he goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field."
(*Matthew* 13:44)

THE PARABLE OF THE PEARL OF GREAT PRICE

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a merchant-man seeking goodly pearls: and having found one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it."
(*Matthew* 13:45, 46)

THE PARABLE OF THE DRAGNET

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind: which, when it was filled, they drew up on the beach; and they sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but the bad they cast away. So shall it be in the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the righteous, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth."
(*Matthew* 13:47-50)

CHAPTER III

SIMILITUDES OF THE KINGDOM (II)
THE KINGDOM—A TREASURE
AND A TESTING

The Parable of the Hidden Treasure
The Parable of the Pearl of Great Price
The Parable of the Dragnet

The stories of the treasure and the pearl are twin parables with likenesses so evident that they cannot deny the blood bond. Yet, as with twin children, each is markedly individual. The resemblances and the differences can best be shown as they are considered in company. The little known parable of the dragnet forms their rather natural sequel.

The Parables of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price

The kingdom of God is to rule both man and mankind. It is both a personal good and a social order. The parables discussed in the last chapter seem to emphasize the wider reference. These two stress the worth of the kingdom to the individual. If the heaven influences the "whole lump" and the tree gives shade to the world, the treasure is primarily a personal possession. Though latterly the "social Gospel" has been proclaimed as the sorely needed corrective of a rampant individualism in religion, it remains inevitably true that the determinative unit of human life is a person. "*A man shall be as a hiding place from the wind. . .*"¹

The purpose of both stories is to depict the surpassing worth of the kingdom of God. Every detail converges on this focal truth.² The joy of the man finding hidden wealth, his tremu-

¹ *Isaiah* 32: 2.

² G. H. Hubbard, *op. cit.*, p. 86, maintains that the two parables are sharply distinct in their teaching, that of the Treasure depicting the *value* of character, and

lous fear lest his secret cannot be kept, his eagerness to purchase "that field" reckless of the cost—each item quickens our sense of the value of the treasure. The morality of the purchase has been called in question, because the original owner of the field was left in ignorance as to its real value.³ The question is irrelevant. Jesus is not here discussing a business ethic, or He would not have instanced a transaction tinged with unscrupulous dealing, except to condemn it. He is approving, rather, the man's instant appreciation of supreme worth when it is found.

So with the Parable of the Pearl, every circumstance—the persistent search of the pearl-collector, his passion for the "one pearl," his willingness to part with everything for the sake of it—serves to throw the preciousness of the pearl into bold relief. The kingdom of God is the ultimate blessing whose glory makes all other riches "of nothing worth."

There is tingling excitement, as Jesus well knew, in a story of treasure-trove. Who has read of Long John Silver and Treasure Island without a romantic thrill? In Palestine the discovery of concealed riches was not unlikely. For centuries life and property had been insecure in a land which was the battlefield of the ancient world. Under a threatened inroad of some foe, it was natural that a man should bury his wealth in the ground. That was his safest bank. Through death, or some other untoward happening, buried treasure was not always reclaimed. Men were known in the time of Jesus to forsake their learning or trade to become treasure-hunters,⁴ and to this

that of the Pearl the *cost* of character. He bases the contention on the fact that the one parable says, "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a treasure . . ." and the other, "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a man. . . ." But sound exegesis cannot be built merely on arrangement of words or on accidents of grammar. This author does not always adhere to the rule he here observes. Of the parable which begins: "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a net . . ." he says: "It is rather the picture as a whole, the casting, the gathering, the separating, as a continuous action, that is designed to represent something with regard to the kingdom of heaven." (*Op. cit.*, p. 103.) This comment suggests a much sounder canon of interpretation. A friend once wisely remarked to me that it would help to the understanding of the parables, and especially of those in Matthew 13, if there could be a colon printed after the word "unto"—"The kingdom of heaven is like unto:" for then the reader would be led in search of the central impact of the parable. Arnot has convincingly argued (*op. cit.*, p. 169, 170) that this central impact "must be determined otherwise than by the mere juxtaposition of the clauses."

³ The question of the morality of some of the characters in the parables comes to its sharpest point in the Parable of the Unjust Steward, and is there discussed. See p. 116.

⁴ See the lovely phrase in Proverbs 2: 4, and the poignant phrase in Job 3: 21.

day excavators in Palestine report the hostility of villagers who suspect that they have knowledge of hidden wealth. Jesus pictures a man finding concealed treasure. The supposition is that he came upon it by accident. Perhaps he was a ploughman. Faithfully trudging the weary furrows, he one day—a never-to-be-forgotten day—drove his ploughshare into the lid of a sunken chest. With quivering hand he uncovered his "find"—gold and gems beyond his wildest dream! Then he glanced around furtively: what if some one had seen? There was nobody in sight! With nervous fingers he hid his treasure again, and hurried home to buy the field!

The Parable of the Pearl is equally dramatic. A diamond is our stone of greatest value, but in Christ's day it was so rare and costly that it had little place in popular thought. The pearl, however, was well known and everywhere admired.⁵ Possibly Jesus as a boy had seen traders, in the caravans that passed through Galilee, proudly exhibiting their precious stones. The ancients were willing to pay fabulous prices for "goodly pearls." Cleopatra had two valued each at \$400,000. The "merchantman" of the parable was a pearl collector, a connoisseur, rather than a mere tradesman. His interest was not mercenary; the lovely jewel had become his passion. The name also suggests one who travelled far, perhaps around the Persian Gulf and to fabled India. There was always the exhilarating chance that some day a diver or a jeweller might confront him with the pearl of pearls. Nay, the chance befell! What now should he do? Return home; sell every pearl he possessed, and house, and lands! Not that his pearls were poor—he had never dealt in paste; but they seemed poor indeed beside the sheen, the purity, the opalescent glory of this surpassing jewel. So he bought the pearl of great price and was satisfied.

Thus far the stories offer an identical teaching. There is in life a *summum bonum*—a joy awaiting discovery! Jesus calls it the kingdom of God—one man's utter consecration to God, a commonwealth of men animated through and through by the

⁵ See Bruce, *op. cit.*, pp. 72, 73. Those who saw the crowd which constantly thronged the case in the Wembley Exhibition, London, England, to see replicas of famous diamonds found in South Africa, can testify to the lure of celebrated jewels.

Christ-spirit. This is the ultimate and ineffable blessing; it is like sudden treasure, like the pearl of pearls!

Having exalted that *summum bonum*, the stories then diverge to show "the varieties of religious experience." One man stumbled upon his joy; the other discovered the pearl by an unremitting quest.

There are those of whom God says: "I was found of them that sought me not."⁶ There are those whom life has used so harshly that they have surrendered the quest, though hungry in soul. The days have been "a fury slinging flame"; or the struggle for bread has been so hard, that they have had neither hope nor heart for the struggle to reach a heaven on earth. . . . There are other people who have made shipwreck of conscience. Once they were adventurers in the quest for God. Then came the dark, irreparable lapse. They have learned their lesson: the folly is outgrown; but splendid dedication is no longer possible. There must be instead a quiet trudging through the years until the light fades. . . . Others, again, are disillusioned. In their youth the ideal beckoned; but stars (they found) have small chance in the light of common day. A selfish world mocks the stars. Youth's ideals are well enough in youth, but stern facts gainsay them. All that a man can do is to make truce with the soul's discontent, and face the routine of "to-morrow and to-morrow" with conscience and courage.

God finds these faithful ones who cannot find Him. Therefore the ploughman in that humdrum field, of which he knew every clod, stumbled on hidden treasure! Therefore faithful shepherds heard the angels' song, and the very stars that had been the steadfast sentinels of their weary vigil became heralds blowing trumpets of goodwill "from the hid battlements of eternity." Therefore the kingdom surprised Nathanael—a good man and true, in whom there was "no guile," but who was quite sure that nothing divine could come from Nazareth!—with the promise that he should "see angels ascending and descending upon the Son of man."⁷

The "merchantman," on the contrary, never surrendered the

⁶ Romans 10: 20, quoting Isaiah 65: 1.
⁷ John 1: 43-50.

quest. Many "goodly pearls" were his, but he sought persistently the best pearl. On what voyages of sense and thought such seeking souls embark! The adventure is well told in that old story of the Holy Grail. One knight, riding on the quest, came to a singing brook, deep meadows, and laden fruit trees. But even as he ate the fruit it turned to dust . . . for no feeding of the flesh could still his deepest hunger. Riding on, he saw a home, its open door a promised welcome, and in the door a woman standing, her eyes innocent and kind, "and all her bearing gracious." Surely the love of woman and the sweet shelter of home are his heart's desire!

" . . . But when I touched her, lo! she too,
Fell into dust and nothing, and the house
Became no better than a broken shed. . . ." ⁸

His soul's craving all unsatisfied, he rode on again, and found a warrior clad in golden armor. But he also turned to dust . . . for pride of battle never answers to man's profoundest cry. At last, in the long quest, he saw a city on a hill, its spires piercing heaven, and at its gates a great throng shouting acclaim as he climbed the slope. Surely civic honor, the esteem and affection of fellowmen, is his journey's end. But when he reached the crest there was neither city, man, "nor any voice," so that he cried in grief,

"Lo, if I find the Holy Grail itself
And touch it, it will crumble into dust." ⁸

"Goodly pearls" of home, food, friendship, and rightful fame leave the soul still restless and ill-content. Ever and anon comes a stinging realization that life is incomplete. Then the "merchantman" goes seeking, seeking a power, an enrichment, a forgiveness, a pearl of final joy. If, for some, the kingdom is flashed like a treasure on unexpectant eyes, others find it as the rich reward of an unwearied quest.

Now the lines of the two parables again unite. Though there are various ways of finding, there is only one way of entering

⁸ Tennyson's "The Holy Grail" ("The Idylls of the King").

into full possession. The finder of treasure sold everything and bought the field; the merchantman bartered his whole collection of "goodly pearls," together with his house and lands, for the pearl of great price. In both cases the transaction (so we are told or left directly to infer) was made in abandon of joy.

The question, "How can the kingdom of God be at once a gift of heaven's grace and a purchase by man?," which has been raised by many commentators, betrays a failure to appreciate the purpose of the parables. The index finger of both stories points to the exceeding worth of the kingdom. Its value is so far beyond all reckoning that at any cost of purchase it is still a gift. The "buying" is indescribable good fortune, the "sacrifice" is joy, the "duty" is sheer exhilaration; for the kingdom has driven irksomeness from the world. The disciples "left all and followed" eagerly. Paul yielded up without regret his pride of Pharisaic birth and learning: "But what things were gain to me these I counted loss for Christ."⁹ Augustine parted gladly with his darling sins: . . . "what I feared to be parted from was now a joy to surrender. For Thou didst cast them forth from me, Thou true and high sweetness. Thou didst cast them forth, and in their place didst enter in Thyself, sweeter than all pleasure."¹⁰ These men found the kingdom. It rolled away the intolerable load of their sins; it quickened and fulfilled their soul's aspiring; it was a life eternal in the midst of time. For such a treasure who would not impetuously abandon every lower good?—

"Thou hope of every contrite heart,
Thou joy of all the meek,
To those who fall how kind Thou art,
How good to those who seek.

"But what to those who find? Ah, this
Nor tongue nor pen can show!
The love of Jesus, what it is
None but His loved ones know."¹¹

Those who saw the kingdom in His face became reckless of

⁹ Philippians 3: 7.

¹⁰ Augustine, "Confessions," ix: 1.

¹¹ The hymn "Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee," by Bernard of Clairvaux, translated by Edward Caswall.

loss, that they might "know him, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings. . . ." ¹²

But if the literal mind, still pestering, asks: "Then the 'living water' is not the 'gift of God,' but must be bought by human energy?"; if these lovely stories cannot be saved from that musty and singularly fictitious controversy of "faith" and "works," the answer must be made as patiently as possible: "Salvation, however you may like the fact, is both a gift and a purchase—and trying to resolve a paradox is as futile as trying to catch the light." For we live in a paradox. An opportunity is a gift, as the very word implies; but it must be "improved," and Paul wisely counsels us to buy it.¹³ The fertility of a field is a gift, but it must be purchased by man's labor. A noble book is a gift—the distillate of wisdom from experience; but before we can make it ours we must expend far more than time for its reading. We must "sell" other books, for instance; for, as Ruskin said, "If I read this book I cannot read that book." A worthless treasure is a contradiction in terms; and if character is not to be a topsy-turvydom more insane (and far less happy) than any Alice found in Wonderland, the rule must hold that when one ideal is supreme other ideals shall serve it, and find their life in its life.

The surpassing worth of the kingdom of God—have we ourselves not known it? One day we stumbled on our treasure. It surprised us in the splendor of duty, or in the radiance of a child. One day we saw the Face of Jesus, and knew in Him the "Holy Grail" of our long quest. We knew that other wealth is not to be compared with the unsearchable riches of His kingdom. But those who had not seen praised our "goodly pearls" of comfort, pleasure, learning; so we tarried on the very threshold of a passionate devotion. Why will we not trust our soul's conviction? The unspeakable gift is ours; why will we not sell all in scorn of trivial consequence?

"It was my duty to have loved the highest;
It surely was my pleasure had I seen:
It would have been my profit had I known:
We needs must love the highest when we see it."¹⁴

¹² Philippians 3: 10.

¹³ Ephesians 5: 16.

¹⁴ Tennyson, "Guinevere" ("The Idylls of the King").

"Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."¹⁵ The kingdom of God flashes on weary eyes like treasure unsurpassed; or is given, a priceless pearl of reward, to all who truly seek.

The Parable of the Dragnet

The similitudes considered in this and the preceding chapter show the kingdom under aspects of favor—its spontaneous growth from vital resource, its expansion from a small seed to a sheltering tree, its leavening health, and its exceeding worth. The sequence of little parables attains completion (and not by accident, we think, but by the intention of the redactor) in this story which represents the kingdom as a standard and testing. The last parables hinted that the *summum bonum* is, in one aspect, divisive. It lays the sword of an alternative across a man's life, compelling him to choose between lesser riches and the highest wealth. That truth now becomes explicit; the realm of heaven is like a net whereby the good and bad are unerringly brought to judgment, and parted, "the one on the right hand and the other on the left."¹⁶ Thus the spectrum of His teaching has colors dark and bright. He brings both rigor and hope.

The people who lived in the villages around the lake of Galilee had often seen the drama of the dragnet. At a little distance from the shore the fishing-boats would "cast" the net. Its lower edge was weighted so as to trail on the bed of the lake, and its upper edge fastened to floats. As it was dragged, it became an advancing wall more and more circular in shape (the ends being hauled towards the shore and ever closer together), until at length it rested a prison-mesh upon the beach. See the squirming, leaping mass of fishes! See the flash of sunlight on their iridescent scales! Soon the fisher-folk, sitting on the sand, gather the good fishes into vessels and fling away those that are worthless for food. Then the net is once more cast into the sea.

Jesus had observant eyes, a wholesome admiration for honest human toil, and a mind quick to detect the truth of heaven

¹⁵ Luke 12: 34.

¹⁶ Matthew 25: 33.

through the forms of earth. There is no need to seek the special significance of "net," "sea," "beach";¹⁷ or to belabor the parable into precise analogies. Its teaching is this: the kingdom of God gathers men irresistibly to a judgment and sifts them by its own high ethic. The story thus becomes an antidote to the Parable of the Tares which counsels patience in the presence of badness. Here we are assured that the blemish of badness is not allowed to persist, and that goodness is not cheated of its bright perfection.

The figure is startling in its fitness. Unless a net is cast, some criterion launched, character is not brought to judgment: "Sin is not imputed when there is no law."¹⁸ The Pharisees once asked Jesus: "Are we also blind?" The reply was incisive: "If ye were blind, ye would have no sin: but now ye say, We see: your sin remaineth."¹⁹ A tiger may slay a child and do no wrong, but a man committing such a deed is not innocent; for the man has within him a court which never adjourns, whereas a tiger's only "right" is that he must eat. In the absence of a moral standard and power to recognize it, right and wrong have no meaning. The story of the Garden of Eden and the Forbidden Tree is a searchingly true account (as any one can testify who has consulted the memory of his own transition from the un-moral to the knowledge of good and evil) of the way in which the "net," a new norm of right, was cast into the undifferentiated "sea" of Adam's innocence to gather him to a judgment.

Jesus tells us that the realm of heaven is such a net. In His time good character had lost its bold distinction. The lines of right and wrong were blurred. "Right" in respect of the Sabbath was the meticulous observance, as "wrong" was the ignoring, of certain multiplied, petty prescriptions of the rabbinical law. "Right" in regard to filial duty could be achieved and "wrong" avoided (however grossly the ancient law "Honor thy father and mother" might be transgressed) by the parroting of a shibboleth: "It is Korban."²⁰ Religious virtue was concerned with prayers ostentatiously spoken in the streets,

¹⁷ See Trench, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

¹⁸ Romans 5: 13.

¹⁹ John 9: 40, 41.

²⁰ Mark 7: 11.

with the payment of tithes and the keeping of fasts—with the whitening of the outside of the sepulcher, though the inside might be “full of dead men’s bones and all uncleanness.”²¹ Thus men went groping “through the feeble twilight” of the world, “forging a life-long trouble” for themselves by taking false for true and true for false. They lacked the loadstone to determine enduring values. Their need was for some new Mt. Sinai of inescapable authority.

Then Jesus came, the “divinest symbol” of that kingdom which He preached. He was a living conscience. Men awoke to a new knowledge of right and wrong. The ancient Law, forgotten in its enfeebled descendant of scribal interpretations, was revived and transcended. Never spoke Mt. Sinai with more Divine finality: “Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time . . . but I say unto you.”²² His words carried the sanction of a universal law, and the world found itself obliged to adjust itself to His decrees or perish. “Whence hath this man this wisdom?”²³ His authority abides. The only possibility of a man remaining neutral in regard to Jesus is that he shall dismiss Him completely from thought. It is not an easy dismissal, for as of old He enters “the door being shut.” He makes wrong apparent (how the coarse indulgence of a Herod, the shuffling cowardice of a Pilate, the scheming ambition of a Caiaphas are revealed in His light!), and goodness He makes positive and winsome. Life cannot remain unchanged in His presence. Rejection of Him hardens the soul; acceptance bestows new peace. What a squirming within the net of judgment! Existing doctrine did not take kindly to His challenge. Existing institutions recognized in Him a threat to their life. Men and women shrank from His ruthless revealing of their hidden motives. . . .

“There came a man, whence, none could tell,
Bearing a touchstone in his hand;
And tested all things in the land,
By its unerring spell.

²¹ Matthew 23: 27.
²² Matthew 5: 33, 34.
²³ Matthew 13: 54.

“And lo, what sudden changes smote
The fair to foul, the foul to fair!
Purple nor ermine did he spare
Nor scorn the dusty coat.

“Of heirloom jewels prized so much
Many were changed to chips and clods,
And even statues of the gods
Crumbled beneath its touch.

“Then angrily the people cried,
‘The loss outweighs the profit far,
Our goods suffice us as they are,
We will not have them tried.’

“But though they slew him with a sword
And in a fire his touchstone burned,
Its doings could not be o’returned,
Its undoings restored.”²⁴

The net is flung on a wide sea without regard to creed, caste or clime: “God is no respecter of persons: but in every nation he that feareth him, and worketh righteousness, is accepted with him.”²⁵ None can escape those meshes, and the line of separation drawn across the “catch” over-passes all other lines. It is not now a question of a man’s creed, either of smug orthodoxy or dazzling heterodoxy; or of his punctilious obedience to the letter of a law. It is not now a question of a man’s birth, even though he be a child of Abraham; or of his outward act, save as that is the reflection of his motives. “They gathered the *good* into vessels, but cast the *bad* away!” Such is the testing which proceeds deliberately, inexorably: “Does this life reveal a living and compassionate ethic? Is it humane after the high manner of Jesus?” This was the criterion applied by prophets of old,²⁶ but in Jesus it became inescapable. He was its embodiment, “Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me.”²⁷

“And the choice goes on forever twixt that darkness and that light,” says Russell Lowell. The parable assigns the testing

²⁴ Quoted in Hastings, “Great Texts of the Bible,” St. Luke, p. 71.

²⁵ Acts 10: 34, 35.

²⁶ See, for example, Micah 6: 6-8.

²⁷ Matthew 25: 40. The separation above described raises certain questions: Is character either black or white, or is it one of innumerable shades of grey? Can the division be made with such finality? The standard of judgment here posited is also beset with problems: Is philanthropy a substitute for vital faith? And what of the “acknowledgment of God in Christ”? These questions and problems are discussed in connection with the Parable of the Last Judgment. See p. 255 ff.

and the separation to the shores of another world; but there is strong reason to believe that the verses in question (Matthew 13: 49, 50) were not originally part of the story but were transferred to it by the redactor from another setting,²⁸ possibly from the Parable of the Tares. In any event, some persistent fallibility in us ever refers judgment to the future and ignores the cruciality of the present.²⁹ John the Baptist had truer insight when he cried: "*Now* is the axe laid at the root of the trees."³⁰ *Now* we are in the midst of life. Hereafter life may be more intense (and the judgment therefore more searching), but the axioms of character which will hold then hold now. Life in that realm of clearer seeing will not be inconsistent with life in this realm of dimmer sight. *Now* we are in the midst of life. To-day is judgment day. This very hour the scales are set, the books opened and the verdict read. The kingdom of God is about us now, nor can we escape its invisible meshes. So urgent are our swiftly passing moments that our present character is in itself the condemnation or approval of all our past life. Now the net is being drawn. Now selfishness is its own curse and love its own blessing. Now deceit sows its own darkness and honor springs up a harvest of light. Of those whose happy life can stand before the testing of the kingdom, there is none "who shall not receive manifold more in *this present time*, and in the world to come life everlasting."³¹

²⁸ See G. H. Box, "Century Bible," pp. 228, 230 (Matthew), who quotes so sound and careful an exegete as Dr. Denney.

²⁹ Thus Arnot, *op. cit.*, p. 170: "The net . . . drawing them . . . towards the boundary of this life and over it into another" where "ministering spirits, on the lip of eternity that lies nearest time, receive them and separate the good from the evil."

³⁰ Matthew 3: 10.

³¹ Luke 13: 30.