

Beating the Holiday Blues

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Bible Text: Matthew 13:44-46; Deuteronomy 28:47-48

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Our Scripture text today is taken from Matthew chapter 13, beginning at verse 44, probably an odd text, you think, for Christmas, and I am wearing my robe because I like to dress up for Christmas. Matthew chapter 13, page 1,519, beginning at verse 44.

44 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. 45 Again, the
kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls.
46 When he found one of great value, he went away and sold
everything he had and bought it.

The word of the Lord. [“Thanks be to God.”]

*Lord, help me clearly and concisely and compellingly to tell again the story,
the old, old story. For Jesus' sake, amen.*

And when you think about Christmas and you think about gifts, sometimes you think you've got it all bought—everything: “This is it, this is it, this is it,” and then suddenly you see something, and you think, “That's the perfect gift,” and what do you do?

You go and you take everything back. You stand in those lines even before Christmas to return the gifts you bought because you found the perfect gift, and you use the money from the returned gifts to buy the perfect Christmas gift for the person you love.

Well, this story echoes, a bit, something like that. One day a man's walking through a field —my wife and I like to walk, and sometimes we cut through fields —and as he's walking, suddenly he discovers something. Maybe his

foot hit it —we don't know what happened, but suddenly he looks down, and he realizes he has bumped into a treasure.

You didn't hurt your foot that way, did you, Becky? ["No."]

Okay, and so he's found a treasure, and what he does is he uses his foot to cover it back over, he goes away, he sells everything he's got, and he buys that field.

Is this an endorsement of that kind of thing necessarily? Not necessarily at all. It's just illustrating a truth that sometimes you find something that's incredibly valuable, and you're willing to sell everything in order to acquire it.

So he sells everything he's got. He buys the field, and the treasure is now his.

And then the second parable there in verse 45 is similar. He says:

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. (Matthew 13:45)

Wow! Again, he found this pearl of great price, as the King James says it, "Pearl of great price," and it was so valuable; it was so exquisite that he emptied out all of his other merchandise and acquired that pearl of great price.

Let's think about the meaning of that for a moment because it's a double meaning.

The first thing, and this really drives home the truth of what we're celebrating today as we celebrate the incarnation:

God without ceasing to be God became a real human being just like you and me in every single way except he didn't have a sinful nature and he never sinned (Hebrews 2:18; 4:14).

I can't say that. I've sinned many times in my life. I've failed many times. And so have you, and so has every human being who's not in a mental institution, we have to acknowledge that (1 John 1:8, 10).

The only people who can't acknowledge that they failed in life are people who need to be locked away.

So, the Lord Jesus Christ came into this world, he was by the miraculous work of the Holy Spirit united with a single egg, an ovum, from the Virgin Mary, and from her substance, miraculously the Lord Jesus was formed in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and nine months later was born, by tradition, born on December 25th, though the Bible doesn't make that absolutely plain.

So what do these two parables have to do with this? Here it is.

Who is the treasure hidden in the field? You are. Who is the pearl of great price? You are. The Lord Jesus Christ loved you so much that he left the glory of heaven (Philippians 2:5-8; John 17, especially verses 5-6, 9, 20-24).

Though he was rich, yet for your sake he made himself poor that you through his poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9).

You're the treasure hidden in the field. Can you think of that thing, amazingly, that God Almighty loved you so much that he came in the person of his Son to buy you, to buy you, the treasure hidden in the field, to buy you the pearl of great price?

Now that amazing sacrifice on the part of God also evokes a response in you and me. The true Christian response to the free gift of God in Jesus Christ — never forget salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone — that amazing free gift evokes within people who really experience God's grace a similar response to Jesus.

Jesus is, for you and me, that treasure hidden in the field. Jesus is, for you and me, that pearl of great price. And so what God demands of us is that we let go of everything and come to him as he's offered in the gospel. The Lord Jesus Christ freely offers himself to you and me.

Again, salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone—but a faith that’s never alone. That faith—though we’re not saved by this element—that faith is always accompanied by a surrendered life, and that’s the picture of the treasure in the field. That’s the pearl of great price. We surrender.

When we come to Christ in true faith, we surrender everything. We lay it all down at his feet. We say, “Lord, not my will, but thine be done” (Matthew 26:39). Whatever we’ve got, whatever we cherish, whatever we love, it leads us to a saying that was popular in Puritan New England, “To love the world with weaned affections” (Perry Miller (1956), *The American Puritans* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books), pp. 171, 172).

You know, when I first met Sandy, I fell in love with her that Sunday night. Love at first sight. And she went out with me one time and wouldn’t go out with me again. But you know, I felt in my heart she was the one, and so I never gave up. I got up every morning at 5:30, and I begged God on my knees to manipulate her will.

And I know that sounds funny, but you know that advertising agents manipulate our will on TV all the time. This tie is a modern tie, but if you saw it without the robe, you’d see, well, it’s the perfect size, but I’ve got ties in my closet like that and like that, and that’s Madison Avenue manipulating your will.

You know that God manipulates your will in order to bring you to Christ? He effectually calls you by the work of the Holy Spirit, drawing you to Christ so that you come freely (John 6:44). That’s an amazing truth.

And so, God draws us to Christ, and the response of the gospel is to lay it all down at his feet. And that means this: because I had studied New England and English Puritanism just before I married Sandy on July 6, 1968, and had that phrase so much in my mind, “Love the world with weaned affections”—and it meant not only your house and your treasure, but it meant father and mother, children, your spouse, your own self—I never have allowed myself to love Sandy completely. Why?

Because I have to love her willing to let go of her. I have to love her willing to let go of her, so that if God should take Sandy before he takes me, I will not be bitter. I will not allow my heart so to mourn that I can’t praise God.

And that's a fundamental truth. I can never be so attached to a thing or a person that in the grief of loss—which is always there in loss—I allow my mourning to cut me off from God.

And you know, dear ones, over the years as a pastor, I have known so many people who lose something they value so much, maybe it's a job, maybe it's a reputation, maybe it's their freedom, maybe it's going to jail, maybe it's a divorce, maybe it's the betrayal of a spouse, maybe it's the death of a child—I've known so many people that when they're hit by grief, they can't ever let go of it, and it kills them. They begin to rot inside their souls, and nothing is more depressing than holidays for people who are deeply wounded and cannot give it to God.

When I served as a police chaplain in Wichita, Kansas, for two years, they trained us, and I remember going on my first call, and I had six death notices to deal with on that day.

They didn't pay me, but they did give me a car to drive and a radio in the car and a radio to put by my bed, and every 24 hours a chaplain would turn it over to the next chaplain. So we did that.

I remember holidays, and I remember coming on scenes and suicides, and I said to the officer, I said, "What is this? What is this?" I said, "This is the second suicide I've come to today. What is this?"

He said, "Holidays. Holidays are so sad for people who've lost things. They just can't seem to get over it." And they are sad.

We should remember people who are sad today, people who've lost, people who've lost loved ones, people who are troubled, people who just stare off into space, grieving, locked in grief, lost in grief, never able to let go of it.

What's the solution? The solution really is found in this passage of Scripture. It is to take that pearl of great price, which you value it as a person, or the treasure hidden in the field that you value as a person that's lost and remember:

No human being on earth can ever take that position. Only the Lord Jesus Christ can do that. Only Jesus can satisfy the deepest longings of your heart and my heart and that is the beginning of what we need to think about.

I want you to turn with me, if you would for a moment, to the book of Deuteronomy, chapter 28, where we discover something that's rather strange, and it's found there on page 317. At top of the page, Deuteronomy 28, and verse 47: Happiness is a choice. Joy is a choice. A cheerful heart is a choice. How do we know that? Look at what God says to the Israelites as they are about to enter into the Promised Land in the second giving of the law; that's what Deuteronomy means, the second giving of the law. And he lays out before them in chapter 28. In the first part, these wonderful blessings (Deuteronomy 28:1-14). And then he said, "If you don't obey, here are these curses that will happen to you, including exile" (Deuteronomy 28:15-68).

And now notice what he says in verse 47, top of the page:

Because you did not serve the LORD your God joyfully and gladly in the time of prosperity (Deuteronomy 28:47)

Are you in a time of prosperity? As I look at the history of the world, currently reading a book by Mary Beard about the Roman emperor (Mary Beard (2023), *Emperor of Rome: Ruling the Ancient Roman World* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation)). And it traces all of these Roman emperors, and all of the weird things in their lives that you never get in regular history books.

And I'm struck with this: in the history of humankind, never has a civilization enjoyed more material abundance and prosperity than the United States of America since World War II.

We are living on the cusp of incredible wealth, incredible riches. It may be fueled by debt, but it's incredible. It's unbelievable. And ever since World War II, we guaranteed free trade with our magnificent military. We replaced the British Empire as that institution that would guarantee free trade, and that free trade has brought unprecedented prosperity to our world and to us in particular (Cf. Peter Zeihan (2022), *The End of the World Is Just the Beginning: Mapping the Collapse of Globalization* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers)).

Think of it. If you think back to the days of your great grandparents—my great grandparents, some of them were born in the 1840s, I’ve never talked to them, even my grandparents—my father’s father died when I was three, and my mother’s mother died when I was four, so I don’t know about their life.

But if you think back, think back to my father and mother, they lived through the Great Depression and then World War II and the prosperity.

Listen, America’s a prosperous nation, but it’s a sad nation. And it’s sad today. It’s sad in the Christmas season because material things can’t satisfy.

Material things can’t fulfill that God-shaped void inside of our hearts, and God says if you can’t serve him with joy, you’re not serving him at all.

Isn’t that a strange thing? If we analyze the Hebrew text, we discover that in the Hebrew text, the second phrase is “a good heart” (וּרְטֹיב לֵבָב, from רְטֹיב/טֹיב, and לֵבָב/לֵב), and it’s best translated as “cheerfulness” (Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner (1958) *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill), pp. 372).

I remember when I was a Scoutmaster and later got into the Order of the Arrow, there was a promise we made that “I will always endeavor faithfully,” and so on and so forth, I can’t remember it all, but it said, and “maintain a cheerful spirit.”

Listen, if the Boy Scouts of America instill a promise to serve with a cheerful spirit, why shouldn’t we as Christians emphasize the reality to have a cheerful spirit?

God doesn’t mean that you’ve got to be jumping up and down with happiness and glee all the time. You don’t need to be like University of Arkansas when they win, or when my grandson Wilder broke down in the home of the Texas Aggies two days ago with a flat tire, but he finally got home last night. And you know that in the home of the Texas Aggies, they didn’t have a tire to fit his car with those engineers. I know that people like at LSU think that’s appropriate.

But anyhow, God doesn't expect you to always be jumping up and down in ecstasy and happiness, but what he demands of you and of me is to maintain a cheerful spirit. A cheerful spirit.

Brothers and sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord Jesus Christ left heaven and glory for you. Be of a cheerful spirit. "Be of good cheer." Christ has come into the world and Christ "has overcome the world" (John 16:33). And he loves you and he loves me (John 13:1).

And because the Lord Jesus was born in Bethlehem around 5 BC in December, because of that, and because he died on the cross in AD 30, you know what?

Every single thing in your life, every single thing in my life, the bad stuff, the good stuff, diagnoses that are bad and trouble that comes, because of that we can say absolutely all things, even my wife's spasms in her back right now that she's experiencing, all things will turn out for a blessing in the long run (Romans 8:28-29). Because Christ has come, we can "maintain a cheerful spirit even in the midst of irksome tasks and weighty responsibilities."

Be of good cheer. Christ the Lord has come. Amen.

Lord, bless this word that I have spoken and grant, O Lord, for those who are watching and those who are here, the cheerfulness of Christmas that is the only thing that beats the holiday blues, the cheerfulness that Christ has come into the world, that he's coming again, that he died and rose again for our behalf.

In Jesus' name, amen.