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**Let's stand and read together Matthew 13:44-46**, “The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in the field, which a man found and hid *again*; and from joy over it he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant seeking fine pearls, and upon finding one pearl of great value, he went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

Imagine browsing around in a Goodwill store when you spot a cool looking reproduction of the Declaration of Independence. You decide it would look great in your office so you pony up the \$2.48 and purchase it. Then imagine learning that this is not a reproduction at all but an actual rare copy worth a half million dollars! Michael Sparks didn't imagine it – he bought it. He turned a \$2.48 purchase into \$477,650. Not a bad return. Of course there is another man in the story, Stan Caffy, who may never clean out his garage again. Caffy had the rare document hanging on the wall of his garage for ten years. He was getting married so he decided to impress his new wife with a clean garage so he threw the old document in with some stuff he gave to Goodwill. I'm sure she was impressed when she found out what he had tossed out! Stan's trash turned out to be Michael's treasure. Caffy was quoted as saying, "I'm happy for the Sparks guy. If I still had it, it would still be hanging here in the garage, and I still wouldn't know it was worth all that." (*Associated Press, "Sold! One Declaration of Independence Copy," MSNBC.com (3-23-07); submitted by David Slagle, Atlanta, Georgia*)

When you find out something you had little value for is suddenly worth a lot of money it changes your whole perspective doesn't it? It can also change your behavior and even your destiny. The two parables in Mt. 13:44-46 describe the motivation found in those who “seek first the kingdom of God.” If you don't know about the kingdom or its surpassing value, then you will attach your affections to lesser things. But those who perceive the worth of the kingdom will act decisively to secure it. The characters in these two short parables discover a treasure and a pearl, things of inestimable value and, full of joy, sell everything they have in order to possess this treasure. There are some profound lessons in these simple stories.

**The kingdom of God is a treasure.** A treasure represents something of great worth. What do you treasure in this life? Some people treasure money. Why? Because it makes them feel secure. But nothing compares to the security of heaven. Some people value travel? It doesn't matter where you go on this planet, nothing compares to the beauty of heaven. You can assess the value of a house or car or boat but what price tag can be put on knowing your sins are forgiven, or the value of being set free from sin and disease, poverty and injustice?

As humans, we all suffer from a serious case of misplaced values. Giving away a priceless copy of the Declaration of Independence is sad but not nearly as sad as the people who live their lives trying to make meaning out of meaninglessness or trying to assign value to the valueless. That tattered old copy of the Declaration of Independence guarantees, “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” but just think of how much time energy and effort is spent in the futile pursuit of happiness. Happiness is elusive and fleeting. I know, I've been to Disneyland...the Magic Kingdom, “The happiest place on earth.”

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If you've been there you may have noticed the faces of the people stumbling out into the parking lot at closing time. You may have heard the weary cries of exhausted children who got too much sun and too much fun. All the happy has worn off.

Recently I read the sad story of Abraham Shakespeare who, for a few short months, was one of the happiest men on earth. After all, he had achieved the American dream, he won the lottery.

**PLANT CITY, Fla.** — Winning millions of dollars in the Florida Lottery should have been the best thing that ever happened to Abraham Shakespeare (an assistant truck driver who lived in Florida with his mother). But with his newfound wealth in 2006 — \$17 million in a lump sum payment — came a string of hangers-on who constantly hit him up for money. (Last April) he vanished. Friends and family hoped he was on a beach somewhere in the Caribbean. But (a couple of weeks ago) detectives confirmed that a body buried under a concrete slab in a rural backyard was his.

Shakespeare's brother, Robert Brown, said Friday that Shakespeare often wished he had never bought the winning ticket. "I'd have been better off broke.' He said that to me all the time," Brown said. (One of Shakespeare's friends) said Abraham would tell him, "I thought all these people were my friends, but then I realized all they want is just money."

Friends and family are puzzled over Shakespeare's rapid rise and fall. Jones said his friend lived a humble life, and just before he bought the winning ticket he joined a church and was baptized. "When he won the lottery," Jones said, "he forgot about being saved."

I can't think of a better description of the human condition; those who win the lottery forget about being saved. And we have all won! We live in the wealthiest country on the planet. We have everything we could want. But materialism makes us forgetful, our riches let us down and the happy wears off. This world offers temporary happiness, Jesus promises permanent joy.

**The path to the kingdom is paved with joy.** (v. 44) There is great joy in the discovery of something that satisfies our deepest longings and fulfills our wildest dreams. When we discover that we can have an intimacy with God that surpasses any human relationship we are filled with joy. When we feel misunderstood or underappreciated and discover the Good News that Jesus knows us intimately and still loves, accepts and forgives us. When we are disappointed by our parents or abandoned by our earthly father and we embrace the promise that one day we will be reunited with our true Father we feel joy. Last week someone sent me a picture of the joy of a Father as he welcomed his son home at DFW airport....A picture is worth a thousand words.

Becoming a Christian begins with the realization that the value of knowing Christ exceeds the value of everything else you have ever known, or ever will know. Our relationship with Jesus is greater treasure than anything this world has to offer. The kingdom of God is so valuable that losing everything on earth to secure it would be a happy trade-off.

**The kingdom of God has competition.** There are so many alluring temptations I can pursue in this life. Jesus told another parable about three men who refused the kingdom because they chose things they considered more valuable than His invitation of eternal fellowship.

**Luke 14:16-24**, "A man was giving a big dinner, and he invited many;<sup>17</sup> and at the dinner hour he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.'<sup>18</sup>

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But they all alike began to make excuses. The first one said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land and I need to go out and look at it; please consider me excused.' <sup>19</sup> Another one said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please consider me excused.' <sup>20</sup> Another one said, 'I have married a wife, and for that reason I cannot come.' <sup>21</sup> And the slave came *back* and reported this to his master. Then the head of the household became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the city and bring in here the poor and crippled and blind and lame.' <sup>22</sup> And the slave said, 'Master, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' <sup>23</sup> And the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the highways and along the hedges, and compel *them* to come in, so that my house may be filled.' <sup>24</sup> For I tell you none of those men who were invited shall taste of my dinner.'"

We will inevitably encounter a succession of setbacks in which we have second thoughts and try out what the world offers once again. Does that disqualify us from the prize? No because the Bible presents salvation as a process. **Philippians 2:12-13** <sup>12</sup> So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; <sup>13</sup> for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for *His* good pleasure." When we come to our senses we repent.

Repentance is a turning from those things and from our own treasonous thoughts that somehow we can find something as valuable as Christ.

**The Good News of the kingdom is an invitation to act.** When the men in these parables discovered their treasure they did something about it. They sold everything and went and bought the field and the pearl. Often times this passage is used to emphasize the importance of giving up everything to follow Jesus. That seems consistent with all of Jesus' statements about the cost of discipleship. But there is something in this parable that shouldn't be overlooked. The kingdom of God is a treasure that demands everything from us but it is not a "sacrifice." Even though the people in the parables went and sold all they had to get the treasure and the pearl, this was not so much a sacrifice as it was a wise logical decision based on what was to be gained by their actions. If you give up everything for a cause that may or may not succeed, that's truly a risky sacrifice. But to give up all you have KNOWING that the outcome will be to gain all you have ever wanted is not a sacrifice but a wise decision, a joyful transaction.

That's how Paul viewed it: **Philippians 3:7-8**, "But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ."

This is important because some people think becoming a Christian or going to heaven requires living an ascetic life of sacrifice. They hear Jesus say, "Wipe that smile off your face, deny yourself all joy and all pleasure and then you can follow me. If you are willing to leave behind anything fun, then you can be my disciple. When faced with a decision between two choices,

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determine which choice you would enjoy, and choose the other one!” The choice to follow Christ is the only way to truth and life and joy forever. Choose Christ.

If you’re here today and you find yourself disillusioned, disappointed, dissatisfied in life then redirect your affections to the things of God. Seek first His kingdom. “Therefore if you have been raised up with Christ, keep seeking the things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your mind on the things above, not on the things that are on earth.” **Colossians 3:1-2** I want to invite you to respond to Jesus’ words by declaring your allegiance to the King and His kingdom.

What you value most determines the direction of your life. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is there will your heart be also.” There are commitments we make based on what we value that will decide in advance how we should live. Want to simplify your life? Commit to a set of core values and you will know how to respond to a myriad of options in life. Commitment eliminates options. We learned that on 9/11, 2001.

We all watched the horrifying scenes from the World Trade Center as thousands of gallons of jet fuel poured out of the plane that crashed into the towers causing people to pour out of the lobby on the ground level. During the evacuation of the buildings an amazing thing happened. There were some people running INTO the buildings. Who in their right minds would run into a burning building when everyone else was running out? Fire-fighters and police officers; men and women who had taken an oath “to protect and to serve.” Men and women who decide in advance that human life is so valuable that they are willing to risk their own lives to save people from danger.

I can’t think of a better response to the truth of these parables than taking communion. In many traditions the act of taking communion is called a “sacrament.” The Latin word, “sacramentum” is actually a military oath. When a Roman soldier entered the military he took an oath of allegiance to the Emperor and his empire. When we take the bread and the cup we take an oath of allegiance to our King and to His kingdom. We declare the surpassing worth of knowing Him and of knowing that we will one day enter into a visible kingdom ruled by Jesus Christ who will sit on the throne of David forever. Let’s prepare our hearts, search our hearts for anything that is not pleasing to Him. Confess those areas of our lives where we have misplaced our affections and ask Him to give us one pure and holy passion, one magnificent obsession, one glorious ambition for our lives; to know and follow hard after Jesus...