

“Kingdom Secrets: Treasure Hidden”

January 24, 2021

Matthew 13:44-46

SI: Jesus’ disciples asked him why he taught the crowds in parables but only explained the meaning of the parables to them.

Jesus replied, The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.

So the primary purpose of the parables is to tell followers of Jesus Christ about God’s kingdom in this world.

What is it like to live under the gracious rule of Jesus Christ?

What does the Lord Jesus want us to understand and expect about life in the kingdom of heaven? What does he want us to believe about it?

INTRO: My sermon this morning will be different from my usual form.

So if you are a note-taker, put your pencil down for now.

I'm going to begin by telling you about a woman who you probably haven't heard of. I'm going to tell you about her life in some detail.

And then, with that picture of her life in our mind's eye, I'm going to turn to these parables and make some comments and application.

Her name was Lilius Trotter.

She was born in 1853 to a large and wealthy English family.

She grew up in London's affluent West End during the golden age of Queen Victoria.

Her parents educated her through the best private tutors.

Every summer the family would travel the Continent, exploring all the great cities and art and architecture of Europe.

It was a very privileged upbringing.

Her parents were Christians and she was raised in the faith, but after Lilius' father died when she was 12, her grief over his death made her seek the comfort of her Heavenly Father in a personal way..

So from a young age, her own spiritual sensitivity and commitment to Christ began to develop.

In her 20s she got involved in something called the Higher Life Movement, later known as the Keswick Movement.

This was an evangelical movement that organized Christian conferences focusing on Bible teaching, walking with Jesus, and sharing the Gospel through service.

Her heart reached out to poor and working-class women in the city.

Even though her family expressed concern for her safety, she began to work in a Christian mission in a rougher part of town.

She helped open London's first affordable restaurant for working women.

Before it opened, women in service jobs were forced to eat on the sidewalk.

She had a particular compassion for prostitutes.

She helped open a training institute where they could learn employable skills and be introduced to the Jesus the Good Shepherd.

These different mission projects eventually became the basis for YWCA in London.

In addition to her zeal for Christian service, Lilius had a passion for painting.

She had an innate sensitivity to beauty and a God-given artistic talent.

And it was her talent that caught the eye of a man by the name of John Ruskin.

Who was John Ruskin? He was the foremost art critic in Victorian England.

He was a man of monumental influence in the cultural world of his day. And he is still known as one of the great British men of letters.

Here's what happened.

Lilias and her mother were on one of their summer trips to Europe and they were staying in the Grand Hotel in Venice. They heard that Ruskin was also a guest. So Mrs. Trotter sent some of her daughter's water colors to Ruskin's room.

Her note said: My daughter has been painting from childhood. She's never had formal training. You won't hurt my feelings if you don't like them, but I would appreciate your opinion.

Ruskin himself later described his reaction.

He was irritated by the request. He thought women were incapable of creating true art so this was a waste of his time.

But when he looked at her paintings, he was rocked back on his heels.

Because he saw immediately a profound original talent.

He took Lilias under his wing. He was 57 and she was 23, and they formed a unique friendship that lasted the rest of his life.

He invited her to Brantwood, his home in the Lake District, where he selectively invited other young promising artists. But Lilias was his favorite student.

He said that she was capable of learning everything the instant she was shown it, and her skill and mastery began to develop.

During her time at Brantwood she would go back and forth to London to continue working in the Christian mission.

Three years after they had met in Venice, after being under Ruskin's mentorship for three years, he had a frank conversation with her.

He told her she had the ability to become England's greatest living painter and to produce works of art that would be immortal.

He was ready to throw all his influence behind her to launch her career.

But, he said, there's only one way this is possible.

You have to give yourself up to art.

Which meant that she would have to quit her London ministry.

This life decision threw her into turmoil.

After days of agonizing deliberation she realized that Ruskin was correct, that she could not devote herself to both art and ministry.

Which would it be? Here's what she wrote in her journal.

I see clear as daylight now, I cannot give myself to painting in the way he means

and continue to seek first the Kingdom of God and his Righteousness.

She declined Ruskin's offer, left Brantwood and devoted her energy to the London ministry. Many of her friends and family members were deeply disappointed. They could not understand why she would make such a choice.

She continued her friendship with Ruskin and continued to paint, but she gave those things up as a career, because she was certain the Lord had called her to follow him on a different path.

Eight years after that life-shaping decision, when Lilius was 34, she felt the call of God to bring the Gospel to North Africa.

The missionary agency she applied to turned her down for health reasons.

So she recruited two other 30 something women and with her own financial resources they went to Algeria. None of them knew Arabic, but they rented an apartment in the heart of the old city of Algiers and began to serve neighbors.

Because Lilius was a woman, she was allowed into the secluded world of Arab women. And as she learned the language, she began to befriend them and tell them about the love of God in Christ.

The same love and compassion she had for the women of London was evident in her interaction with Arab women and they were astounded.

They would often say about Lilius: No one ever loved us like this.

She lived in Algeria 40 years, traveled deep into the Sahara Desert where no European woman had ever gone to witness to people there, established 13 mission stations and recruited over 30 missionaries.

She longed for the establishment of a visible church, but that dream was never realized because of opposition from the Islamic society.

She passed away at age 75 surrounded by friends and fellow missionaries.

What about her painting?

She continued to paint, but not for public viewing.

She kept extensive journals over those 40 years and filled them with watercolors of people, landscapes, and flowers.

She loved the sights of North Africa and found beauty everywhere she looked.

Let me read you something from her journals.

She asks two questions

Are our hands off the very blossom of our life?

The blossom is the crowning glory of a plant.

Are your hands off the glory of your life? Her artistic talent was her glory.

Then she asks:

Are all things—even the treasures that He has sanctified—held loosely, ready to be parted with, without a struggle when He asks for them?

When she gave up her future career as an artist, she told her friends that her decision was not because being an artist is wrong and being a missionary is better. It was because in her own personal walk of faith she believed the Lord had asked her to part with something good to follow the path he had marked out for her.

So her question is not: Can you give up sinful things when God tells you to?

Of course you should do that.

But can you hold good things loosely and give them up if God asks you to do so?

Her answer to that question was the turning point of her life.

By the way,

if you are curious about Liliias Totter, there was a short documentary about her life made a few years ago. It's called *Many Beautiful Things*, and it's on YouTube. But watch it on a large screen if you can, instead of on your little computer screen.

The reason I've taken so much time describing her life is to help us understand these two short parables.

When you first read them, the impression you might get is that your sacrifices somehow buy or merit the kingdom of heaven.

But that can't be right.

The only sacrifice required to enter the kingdom of heaven is Christ's death. We receive salvation by faith as a gift.

I think the Lord is instead impressing upon us three important truths we have to understand and live by as we follow him in this life.

The kingdom of heaven is not just living with God in future glory, it's living under the reign of King Jesus in this present life as well.

Now you note-takers can pick up your pencils again.

MP#1 First, the value of following Christ is hidden from the world

Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field.

The same point is implied in the second parable. The pearl is hiding in plain sight.

Only the merchant looking for it sees its value, others have not.

This theme of hiddenness has already appeared in Matthew 13.

Jesus told the parable of the woman who hid the leaven in the dough. He quoted Psalm 78 saying the Messiah would utter hidden things.

Jesus hides the meaning of these parables from the crowds, but he reveals them to his disciples.

He tells them in this chapter that they are able to see and understand the kingdom, not because they are smarter or better than other people, but because God has given them eyes to see and ears to hear.

But people with calloused hearts are ever seeing but never perceiving.

Here's the practical point the Lord is making for his disciples.

Don't be surprised when other people do not understand or do not see the value of the decisions you make as a follower of Jesus Christ.

So don't second guess yourself when you get negative reactions.

But don't be prideful either, because the only reason you can see is that God has given you spiritual sight.

John Ruskin thought Lilius Trotter had made a terrible decision.

He was not a believer, so for him all he could see was that this was a choice between working in a soup kitchen or developing artistic talents.

But because he did not have spiritual sight, he could not see the hidden treasure of following God's calling.

There's a remarkable statement by Lilius that I didn't read to you where she expresses the sense of freedom that came over her when she made that important decision.

But she wasn't dismissive of John Ruskin because of his negative reaction.

She continued her friendship with him and was appreciative of all he had done.

Jesus may call you to make financial decisions or vocational decisions or parental decisions or ethical decisions that important people in your life don't understand.

You understand the treasure of following Christ, but they don't.

Don't be surprised if it happens, don't second guess yourself, don't be prideful.

The value of following Christ is hidden from the world.

MP#2 Second, the cost of following Christ is always worth it

The first man sold all he had and bought the field but it was worth it, because in that field was a far greater treasure.

The merchant sold all he had and bought the pearl but it was worth it, because that one pearl was of greater value than all others.

Was Liliias Trotter's decision to give up her art career worth it?
Her 40 years in Algeria were difficult and at times extremely difficult.
She told a friend that whenever she picked up her paintbrush she felt an ache in her heart knowing there were some skills she had never learned.
Was it worth it?

Let me present a hypothetical situation.

Imagine an unmarried Christian man or woman living in America right now.

This is a sex-obsessed culture.

It's not just that sexual immorality is everywhere, it goes deeper than that.

Our culture believes that indulging your sexual desires and proclivities is essential to being a complete and authentic person.

Denying your sexual desires is foolish and wrong and leads to neuroses.

But following Jesus means a totally counter-cultural path.

It means chastity if you are unmarried.

It means marrying another Christian or not marrying at all.

That might mean for some Christians that they never have sex. Is it worth it?

What about the claims God makes on your money and his commands about giving and generosity and tithing?

I would love to have a little cabin up in North Carolina and I would have one if I hadn't tithed my income over the years. Was it worth it?

What about the cost of forgiving that person who has wronged you?

Forgiveness means you commit to blessing that person and not cursing him.

Praying for those who spitefully use you and leaving vengeance to the Lord.
Is it worth it? Cursing and vengeance can feel pretty cathartic.

When we say the cost of following Christ is always worth it, we can't be flippant.

We cannot toss that phrase around as if it's all lavender and roses.

It's the cost of following him.

Selling all you have means there will be good things lost that you will miss.

But back to the crucial question: Is it worth it?

Yes it's worth it. It's always worth it.

Because the treasure in the field and the pearl of great price is knowing Jesus Christ himself. By following him and obeying his leading you get to know him.

He shows himself to you in ways that you would not know if you choose not to obey him or refused to make the sacrifices he asks of you.

In the easy times and in the hard times, when you are enjoying beauty or experiencing pain, you will know that God is with you.

The Apostle Paul said:

I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.

St. Augustine said: You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until we rest in you.

The Catechism says: Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

Yes, it's worth it. Not just heaven and future glory. Of course that.

But even now, even in this fallen world, he infuses your life with meaning and that makes all the difference.

So is it just a matter of gritting your teeth, bearing down obeying God?

MP#3 The joy of following Christ is the empowering motivation

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.

Don't miss the order of the parable.

It wasn't that he sold everything and that made him joyful.

It was that he got joy and then he sold everything.

He was motivated by joy. He sacrificed joyfully.

The joy of what he had discovered and what he knew it would mean for his future empowered him to do something incredibly risky, selling everything in order to buy the field.

Paul says in Romans 14 that

the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.

There is that same order again, you don't get joy by doing things, joy comes to you in the kingdom of God through the Holy Spirit and then you present your body as a living sacrifice.

David says in Psalm 30:11

You removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy.

There it is again. You don't get joy by doing things, God gives you joy.

Joy is the deep current that runs under the Christian life.

It is the deep happiness in God's goodness to you in Christ.

It is the deep security in God's love and forgiveness in Christ.
It is the deep confidence in God's promises to you in Christ.

Joy is so deep that it can even co-exist with grief because it is deeper than grief.

A person can be weeping and still have joy.

The greatest example is Christ himself. He had joy in the Holy Spirit beyond measure, but he was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame.

So how can you get joy?

If it comes from God, then you have to ask him for it.

Ask him to give you joy through his Holy Spirit.

Trust that he has done so and then start to cultivate it.

If you experience joy as an assurance of God's love, forgiveness, favor, promises.

Then do all you can to grow in your assurance of those things.

That means you have to fix your attention upon and meditate upon the truths that are going to make you joyful and strong.

You have to stop fixing your attention on and meditating on the half-truths that will make you hopeless and weak.

I've sinned and failed and messed things up. True, but it's a half truth.

Full truth is and you are forgiven and eternally loved by God.

If you meditate and mull over yourself all the time,

your sad circumstances, the wrongs done to you, your failures, your faults, even if those things are true, you are going to be weak and hopeless.

But, if you meditate on Jesus Christ and his great love for you.

And how, through him, you are fully accepted by God the Father,

even though your sin and rebellion was so heinous, Jesus Christ had to die.

And if you ponder the great adventure following that Jesus, and going where he leads and sometimes making costly sacrifices to know him better, that will color your spiritual life.

One more Liliias Trotter comment from her journals.

She often drew spiritual lessons from the things she painted.

In her journal is a watercolor of a dandelion puffball with the seeds blowing away and floating in the wind. Can you picture that?

She writes:

This dandelion has long ago surrendered its golden petals and has reached its crowning stage of

dying. The delicate seed globe must break up now with gifts and gifts till it has nothing left. It holds itself no longer for its own keeping, only as something to be given. That is how she had come to understand her own life. Not holding herself for her own keeping, but joyfully giving herself to God.