

12 *Parable of the Purchase of the Field (The Hidden Treasure)*

Parable of the Purchase of the Field in Matthew 13:44

Jesus teaches in a one-line parable commonly called the Parable of the Hidden Treasure that you must be willing to sacrifice all that you have in this world to acquire the kingdom. A better name for the parable is the *Parable of the Purchase of the Field*. This name will help keep in our mind the *price* to be paid for the kingdom, as Jesus intends us to see as the *main* point.

Jesus gives this parable in succinct but powerful terms:

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. (Matt 13:44, ASV.)

What underscores this verse's meaning is the next verse. In the immediately following verse, Jesus repeats the same idea in another single-sentence parable. This is known as the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price:

(45) Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a man that is a merchant seeking goodly pearls:

(46) and having found one pearl of great price, he went and sold all that he had, and bought it. (Mat 13:45-46.)

Both parables are identical to the message Jesus gives the rich young man.¹ *Jesus told the young rich man that he should have exchanged all that he had in this life as worldly riches to obtain eternal life.*

As we shall see below, many famous Christian thinkers concur on this interpretation of the Parable of the Purchase of the Field: Calvin, Bonhoeffer, and MacArthur. It is surprising to think Calvin agrees. So many times his doctrines sowed the seed for the gospel of cheap grace. But when it came to this parable, Calvin saw it the same way as did Bonhoeffer, and as does MacArthur.

Commentators Who Agree The Purchase of the Field Means A Costly Grace

John MacArthur in his famous *Gospel According to Jesus* (1995)

John MacArthur in *The Gospel According to Jesus* says that the obvious meaning of this parable is that grace is costly. Jesus is telling us what to do when confronted with the offer to acquire the kingdom. MacArthur says the *Purchase of the Field* parable is no different than numerous other messages by Jesus on the same issue.

Forsaking oneself for Christ's sake is **not an optional step** of discipleship subsequent to conversion: it is the *sine qua non* of **saving faith**. The Savior consistently set forth his gospel on those terms. Faith as he categorized it is nothing less than a complete exchange of all that we are for all that he is. Two brief parables in Matthew 13:44-46 [including the parable of

1. Matthew 19:16-26; Mark 10:17-31; Luke 18:18-26. For discussion, see page 123 *et seq.*

the purchase of the field] illustrate precisely this truth. (*Id.*, at 142.)²

MacArthur says the purchase of the field symbolizes that a sinner who wants the kingdom “will gladly yield everything else he cherishes to obtain it.” The corresponding truth is that those who hold onto their earthly treasures “forfeit” the treasure of obtaining the kingdom.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (Lutheran Pastor): The Cost of Discipleship (1937)

The Lutheran pastor, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, is a modern Protestant Christian pastor. He claimed that he was teaching the authentic Gospel of Jesus Christ which somehow had been lost in the post-reformation period. Bonhoeffer insisted the modern gospel of free grace, with its emphasis on faith alone, gave us a crippled gospel. It was a Cheap Grace. He claimed it actually *denies* the Words of Jesus.

One of the many key proofs for Bonhoeffer’s claim was, in fact, the Parable of the Purchase of the Field. In his chapter entitled *Costly Grace*, Bonhoeffer first defines what he means by Cheap Grace — a term he first coined.

-
2. MacArthur teaches this requirement of giving up all that you have is essential to “saving faith.” But MacArthur does not see this as an additional component, but part of the meaning of *saving faith*. MacArthur sees repentance-from-sin as part of saving faith. MacArthur sees repentance-from-sin as indistinguishable from faith alone. Thus, MacArthur has tried to defend his views are compatible with ‘faith alone.’ However, is it really correct to say Jesus taught faith alone for salvation? To say so would appear disingenuous to anyone who later learns you mean by *faith* that it includes *repentance from sin, sacrificing all that you hold dear in this world, obedience to the commandments, etc.* Isn’t Jesus’ gospel of costly grace compromised by using a misleading label of ‘faith alone’? Using such a label matches our prevailing notions, but mismatches Jesus’ teachings. One must use labels with precision, or otherwise old wrong-headed notions are never cleared away.

Yet it is imperative for the Christian to **achieve renunciation**, to **practice self-effacement**, to distinguish his life from the life of the world. He must let grace be grace indeed, otherwise he will destroy the **world's faith** in the **free gift of grace**. [If free grace is all there is, then let] him rest assured in his possession of this grace-for **grace alone** does everything. Instead of following Christ, let the Christian enjoy the consolation of his grace! **This is what we mean by cheap grace**, the grace which amounts to justification of sin without justification of the repentant sinner who **departs from sin and from whom sin departs**....Cheap grace is the grace we bestow on ourselves. (*Cost of Discipleship, supra*, at 44.)(Emphasis added.)

Thus, Bonhoeffer starts out saying there is a high cost to grace. It requires achieving renunciation. It requires a departure from sin. Any other kind of grace is a **false consolation** that we simply are bestowing on ourself. Jesus did not promise salvation without cost.

Bonhoeffer later will say the doctrine of cheap grace has been “disastrous to our spiritual lives.” For “instead of opening up the way to Christ **it has closed it**.” (*Id.*, at 54.) Because this cheap grace doctrine so abandons the actual words of Jesus, Bonhoeffer calls this “**Christianity without Christ**.” (*Id.*, at 59.) He claims those who oppose what Jesus teaches are infected with an “excess of Protestant zeal.” (*Id.*, at 68.) What are his Biblical proofs?

The first proof he cites is the **Parable of the Purchase of the Field**.

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field;
for the sake of it a man will gladly go and sell
all that he has. (*Id.*, at 45.)

The second proof is the Parable of the Pearl of Great Price.

It is the pearl of great price which the merchant will sell all his goods. (*Id.*)

The third proof is the Heaven-Maimed or Hell-Whole statement of Jesus in Matthew 5:29-30 and Mark 9:42 *et seq.*:

[Costly grace] is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble. (*Id.*)

The fourth is the Parable of the Nets. The disciples will leave their nets and follow the call of their master.

Another proof Bonhoeffer cites is Jesus' message that he who gains his life in this world shall lose it in the next, but he who loses it for Jesus' sake in this life will gain his life in the next world. (Mark 8:31-38.) Bonhoeffer says those who teach to the contrary that Jesus "makes no costly demands" are merely giving you an emotional lift. They are not giving you the Gospel as Jesus proclaimed it. (*Id.*, at 88.)

The next proof was the story of Jesus' answering the young rich man's question on how to have eternal life. (Matt. 19:16-22.) We discuss this elsewhere.³

John Calvin 1509-1564: The Cost To Qualify To Receive Grace.

Calvin interestingly agrees with John MacArthur and Bonhoeffer. Calvin first says Jesus makes clear this parable's meaning by means of the immediately following Parable of the *Pearl of Great Price*. They are the same message. Calvin explains that "in the same manner as a treasure, though it be hidden, [acquiring the kingdom] is preferred to a vain appearance of wealth."⁴ Then Calvin directly concurs with MacArthur and Bonhoeffer:

3. See "Jesus' Answer To The Direct Question On How To Obtain Eternal Life" on page 123.

We now perceive the leading object of both parables. It is to inform us, that none are **qualified for receiving the grace** of the Gospel but those **who disregard all other desires**, and devote all their exertions, and all their faculties, **to obtain it.** (*Id.*)

Clearly, Calvin just said that those who wish to “obtain” the object of the kingdom of God must be “qualified for receiving the grace” of God by complying with the costs to do so laid down by Jesus in this parable.

Then Calvin directly deals with the hard question whether this means we really and truly must turn away from ourselves, including our material possessions **to obtain salvation**. Calvin does not run to the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace for his answer. Instead, Calvin says it is unmistakable that Jesus taught elsewhere that the answer is *yes*, that is what we must do — we must turn away from our greed and sinfulness. This means there is no avoiding this parable’s meaning about the costliness of grace. Calvin explains this as an unavoidable meaning if we use the “natural meaning” of words:

But it is asked, is it necessary that we abandon every other possession, in order that **we may enjoy eternal life**? I answer briefly. The natural meaning of the words is, that the Gospel does not receive from us the respect which it deserves, unless we prefer it to all the riches, pleasures, honors, and advantages of the world, and to such an extent, that we are satisfied with the spiritual blessings which it promises, and **throw aside every thing that would keep us from enjoying them**; for those who **aspire to heaven must be disengaged from every thing that would retard their progress**. Christ

4. http://www.ccel.org/c/calvin/comment3/comm_vol32/htm/xxiii.htm
(last accessed 7/2/06).

exhorts those *who believe in him to deny those things only which are injurious to godliness*; and, at the same time, permits them to use and enjoy God's temporal favors, as if they did not use them. (*Id.*)

Calvin, a primary leader of the Protestant Reformation, here refused to change Jesus' obvious meaning into a teaching that salvation can come without "throwing aside everything that would keep us from enjoying" it, including all things "injurious to godliness."

However, then in the next note on the text, Calvin tries to reconcile this with the doctrine of free-grace. In essence, Calvin argues that Jesus means the gift of salvation belongs *freely* to everyone who *buys it* by relinquishing their sinful life. This may appear self-contradictory. Yet, this is how Calvin held onto Jesus' gospel while not relinquishing the key verbiage of 'free-grace' that is used today to support the cheap grace doctrine. Calvin writes:

[Matt. 13:]46. And *bought* it. By the word buy Christ *does not mean, that men bring any price, with which they may purchase for themselves the heavenly life*; for we know on what condition the Lord invites believers in the book of Isaiah, (55:1,) Come and buy wine and milk without money and without price.⁵ But though the heavenly life, and every thing that belongs to it, *is the free gift of God*, yet we are said to buy it, when *we cheerfully relinquish the desires of the flesh*, that nothing may prevent us from obtaining it; as Paul says, that he 'reckoned all things to be loss and dung, that he might gain Christ' (Philippians 3:8.)

What Calvin appears to imply, which is correct, is that the atonement of Christ pays for sin. None of us can pay anything to redeem ourselves from sin. None of us is a sinless

lamb. However, if we claim Calvin was agreeing with the Modern Gospel of Cheap Grace, this would be wrong. The next sentence in the above quote makes this clear.

Calvin cites Paul as someone who actually repeats Jesus' principle that to gain Christ, Paul "reckoned all things [he had] to be loss and dung...." (Phil. 3:8.) Calvin then returns to agreeing that in some sense we do 'buy' salvation— "we are said to buy it, when ***we cheerfully relinquish the desires of the flesh***, that nothing may prevent us from obtaining it...."

-
5. This is often read out of context to make it appear salvation is cost-free, without repentance. However, it reads to the contrary in the fuller context: "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. (2) Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? and your labor for that which satisfieth not? hearken ***diligently unto me***, and ***eat ye that which is good***, and let your soul delight itself in fatness. (3) Incline your ear, and come unto me; hear, and ***your soul shall live***: and I will make an ***everlasting covenant*** with you, even the sure mercies of David. (4) Behold, I have given him [Messiah] for a witness to the peoples, a leader and commander to the peoples. (5) Behold, thou shalt call a nation that thou knowest not; and a nation that knew not thee shall run unto thee, because of Jehovah thy God, and for the Holy One of Israel; for he hath glorified thee. (6) Seek ye Jehovah while he may be found; call ye upon him while he is near: (7) ***let the wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts; and let him return unto Jehovah, and he will have mercy upon him; and to our God, for he will abundantly pardon***. (8) For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith Jehovah." Isa 55:1-8 ASV.

Read out of context, the "without price" is typically interpreted to mean one is saved by faith without repentance from sin. Grace is free. However, verse seven ***erases*** that notion. Instead, "without price" means the items for sale have no price on them you can buy with the world's money. These are spiritual possessions. How are spiritual blessings purchased? Without money and without price. The exchange, instead, is in verse seven. If the "wicked forsake his way, and the unrighteous man his thoughts and return to....Jehovah," then God "will have mercy upon him...and abundantly pardon." There is a spiritual price, not a worldly price. Thus, grace is costly *spiritually*. Yet, it is without a price in worldly terms.

John MacArthur says the same thing — Jesus speaks of our 'buying' the kingdom, but tries to insist he is not contradicting the Modern Gospel's doctrine of grace:

In a sense, the parables [of the Purchased Field and Pearl of Great Price] say the men **did buy their salvation**, but you have to understand what is meant by that.⁶

Then what is meant by this 'buying' of which Jesus speaks? MacArthur says we know a rich man cannot *buy* his way into heaven, citing Matthew 19:24. But that is not what that verse said. In fact, Jesus said, in effect, the opposite in Matthew 19:24. When the rich man was sorrowful and unwilling to give up all his wealth to the poor as **one part** of the price to enter heaven, Jesus in 19:24 said "it is hard for a rich man to enter heaven." The man **also** had to follow Jesus and take up his cross, but **one unmistakable element** was the cost of giving away all his possessions to the poor.

There is no escaping Jesus' point: grace is costly.

Compare Jesus' Doctrine on Light-Hearted or Half-Hearted Acceptance

Corroborating proof of what the Parable of the Purchase of the Field means comes from comparing it to other messages of Jesus about the *cost* to follow Him. If we find a persistent doctrine of Jesus about taking the call from Him as involving serious cost and deprivation, then we know more certainly Jesus' meaning in this parable.

For example, in Luke 9:57, a man came to Jesus and called him Lord and wanted to follow Jesus. Yet Jesus responds that the cost is very high. Jesus is seeking to dissuade the man from a light-hearted decision. For the man

6. <http://www.biblebb.com/files/MAC/sg2303.htm> (last accessed 7/2/06)

said: “Lord, I will follow Thee wherever Thou goest.” But Jesus responded: “Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man hath not where to lay His head.” (v. 58).

In other words, Jesus says “Here’s the price for following Me: You give up your comfort of a nice place to sleep and I’ll give you My Kingdom.” The man did not like the costs. He did not make the transaction. Jesus told him the costs were *higher than the man assumed*, and the man backed off from a serious costly step of following Jesus.

In verse 59, Jesus asked another man to follow Him. The man said, “Lord, permit me first to go and bury my father.” (v. 59.) However, the man’s father was not even dead yet. The man’s words meant he wanted to wait for his inheritance. Jesus said, “Let the dead bury their dead; but go thou and preach the kingdom of God.” (v. 60.) That man did not want to give up his inheritance. Thus, he did not make the transaction. The man’s intentions were good, but his interest was not serious enough to sacrifice now his opportunities for wealth and comfort.

Finally, a third man, mentioned in verse 61, said, “Lord, I will follow Thee; but let me first go bid them farewell, who are at home at my house.” This even appeared to be a reasonable request to act sociable to those at his home. However, Jesus said, “No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is *fit for the kingdom of God*.” (v. 62.) In other words, “You *can’t* plow a straight furrow while looking in the opposite direction and expect to enter the kingdom of God.” That man was not willing to walk away from his family life to serve the kingdom, which Jesus repeatedly said was a cost, which if paid, means you will “inherit eternal life.” (Matt. 19: 29.)

Thus, we learn from these true-life examples that Jesus rejected light-hearted acceptance of Himself. Jesus wanted to make sure that each person knew the high cost in human terms of what it *really* means to accept Him. For if you looked back longingly at what you gave up, you were not

fit (worthy) of the kingdom of God. You would fail. You would lose the kingdom. You will not have escaped the kingdom that leads to spiritual death. Thus, every time someone tried to come on board the Jesus-ship, Jesus tried to dissuade them unless they *understood* and *accepted* the high human cost of doing so.

What is the message of the Gospel of Cheap Grace? ***The exact opposite message of what Jesus taught.*** There is supposedly no cost in human terms of accepting Jesus. It is merely acceptance (belief alone). The cheap grace gospel is emphatic that there is no cost involved. Because nothing is supposedly sacrificed, you never are looking back feeling sorry for anything you gave up! As a result, in the Gospel of Cheap Grace, you can never become unfit for the kingdom by missing the things that you did before following Christ. Why? ***Because you never had to give them up in the first place!*** You are supposedly always safe and secure, and loved and accepted “just as I am.”

Hopefully, one can now see how stark the difference is between Jesus' words and the gospel that most of us evangelicals have been assuming was true.

Compare Jesus' Doctrine on Denying Yourself And Confessing Christ

Another series of verses repeat the meaning of the Parable of the Purchase of the Field. These passages emphasize the duty to deny yourself and commit your way to obeying Jesus as ruler of your life to receive *life* — a synonym for salvation.

In Matthew 10:37-39, the issue is whether a person is willing to give up everything he has to receive Jesus. The Lord says in Matthew 10:37:

He that loveth father or mother more than Me, is not worthy of Me; and he that loveth son or daughter more than Me, is not worthy of Me.

Jesus goes on to explain what *worthy* means. If you are not willing to give up something that needs to be given up, such as your family, then you are not going to have life. Instead, you will lose it. *Life* is a synonym here for the Kingdom. Jesus next said: “And he that taketh not his cross and followeth after Me, is not worthy of Me. ***He that findeth his life shall lose it; and he that loseth his life for My sake shall find it.***” (vv. 38-39).

That is the simple transaction: you give up all that you hold dear in this life and receive all that He offers: *life in the world to come*. If you cling to your life here instead, you will lose life in the world to come.

In Matthew 16:24, Jesus likewise said to His disciples, “If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me.” The basic principle in salvation is that a person gives himself up to follow Christ.

Finally, in Matthew 19, as we discuss elsewhere,⁷ a rich young ruler came to Jesus and said, “...what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?” (v. 16). Jesus said, “If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell what thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come and follow Me” (v. 21). Jesus was saying, in effect, ‘If you want My treasure of life in the kingdom, then give away all you hold dear.’

Are these repetitive messages meant to instill obeying only one command of Jesus to *believe* in Him? Hardly. Yet, that is what some insist is the case. ***However, in none of these examples was Jesus talking to a person who did not already want to believe in Jesus.*** Rather, each was a person

7. See “Jesus’ Answer To The Direct Question On How To Obtain Eternal Life” on page 123 *et seq.*

Compare Jesus' Doctrine on Denying Yourself And Confessing Christ

who was hesitating treating Jesus as his immediate ruler — they were reluctant to obey Jesus if it involved too much *personal cost*.

Jesus was saying that salvation depended on *more than a desire to believe*. You had to pay the personal cost that Jesus required. You had to relinquish all the sin-life which you held dear that could hold you back from obeying Jesus.

Thus, it is no wonder that Bonhoeffer started his book *Cost of Discipleship* by emphasizing the Parable of the Purchase of the Field (the Hidden Treasure). It spells out clearly the costliness of grace.

TABLE 1. Costliness of Salvation Theme

	Parable of the Purchase of the Field	Parable of the Pearl of Great Price	Luke 9:62 Unfit for kingdom if put hand to plough and look back	Matthew chs. 10, 16, 19 Find life by losing it. Lose life by keeping it.
Salvation	“kingdom of God”	“kingdom of God”	“fit for the kingdom”	“enter life”
Cost	worth all that you have.	worth all worldly wealth that you have.	Give up inheritance, home life, etc. vs. looking back activity.	Give up all that you have, if necessary all worldly wealth, to enter life.
If Not Pay The Cost	Pass up kingdom	Pass up kingdom	Unfit for Kingdom	Will not enter life

Parable of the Purchase of the Field (The Hidden Treasure)
