

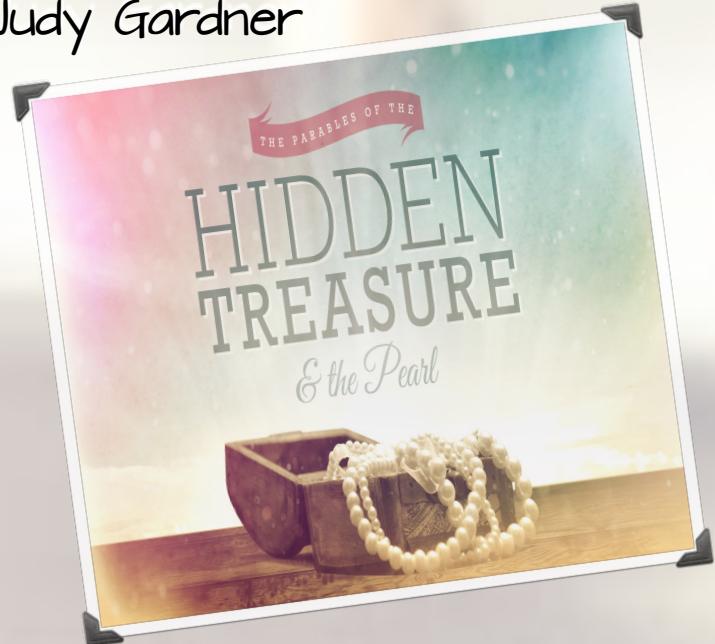
October 9-13, 2023 Edition

The Year_(s) Of ^{Following} Jesus Part 93

A Field, A Pearl & A Mustard Seed

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When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

Monday Reflection: This week we are finishing up our parable segment of the year of Jesus by looking at the stories of the treasure in a field and the pearl of great price. This parable is all about how the Kingdom of Heaven is like something you give **EVERYTHING** for.

But if you've been with us during this entire series, especially the parables, then you know that Jesus also says over and over again that you can't earn or buy the Kingdom of Heaven. In the story of the Good Samaritan we learned that we can't justify ourselves... make ourselves good enough to deserve the Kingdom. Only Jesus could justify us and that was free of charge. In the story of the wheat and the weeds we learned that there are two kingdoms on this earth existing side by side and we can't really tell which kingdom someone else is in just by looking at them. In the parable of the Two Deadbeats we learned that the Kingdom was for everyone and all you had to do to get in was ask. In the parable of the farmer and the 4 soils we learned that we were planted by God not because we did anything or even asked to be planted... it was all His work. We can cooperate with His Kingdom by how we live our lives (what kind of soil we are) but the growth and the harvest are all due to God. In the parable of the Great Banquet we learned that the Kingdom is like a party and the only difference between those who ate at the great feast and those who didn't is, the ones who ate... showed up and the ones who didn't... didn't. Then we had the parable of the talents. We learned that God expects us to do something with what we've been given. In this story the Kingdom was like a master who expected a return on his investment. And then last week we looked at the story of the Prodigal Son and learned that it's never too late to come home... even if you've messed up royally... and that it is just as likely to separate ourselves from God by being too good (while looking down on those who we deem to be not so very good). And now we learn that the Kingdom looks like someone who gives everything they own to buy it.

The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy the field. Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant on the lookout for choice pearls. When he discovered a pearl of great value, he sold everything he owned and bought it! Matthew 13:44-46 (NLT)

Confused? Me too. But that's Jesus for you. It really doesn't bother Him when we're confused. In fact, He did it deliberately. All the time. Why? Because, faith doesn't grow in the house of certainty. Faith grows in the confusion and frustration and fog of uncertainty. We will talk this week about what it looks like to give everything for the Kingdom but for today ask yourself this question: Have I given all for the Kingdom of Heaven? Uncertain about that? Good! See you tomorrow.

Tuesday Reflection: So what does it look like to give everything for the Kingdom of Heaven? What is this story about the treasure in a field and the pearl of great price really all about? Well, I guess the first thing I'd say is that the Kingdom of Heaven costs everything but it doesn't leave you with nothing. Confused? Yeah... I do that a lot. It's one thing I have in common with Jesus (it's also probably about the only thing I have in common with Him but that's another story for another lesson).

Here's what I mean: the Kingdom of Heaven is about giving up everything but that doesn't mean we're left with nothing. Less confused now? No? Ok... here's what I mean by that: When I first started getting serious about my faith I thought that giving everything to Jesus would mean that I would be left with nothing. As I looked around at other followers of Jesus I noticed that nobody had nothing. In other words, everybody had something. And we all had our own ideas about what "giving up everything for the Kingdom" meant. I was confused. So I started reading my Bible and talking to people I trusted and respected about this. Here's how I see it now:

Before we come to Jesus we are holding onto everything we possibly can with a death grip because we believe that more will make us happier. When we come to Jesus one of the toughest things to do is let go of the things we've spent our lives being told (and believing) will make us happy. But that's what I think this story is telling us the Kingdom of Heaven looks like. Being willing to drop all that stuff that we thought would make us happy. When we come to Jesus we turn our hands palms toward the ground and drop all that freight and baggage. But that doesn't mean we're left with nothing.

Look at the story of the guy who found a treasure in a field. He went and sold everything he had (EVERYTHING) and so it did cost him everything. But he wasn't left with nothing. He had the field and the treasure. Then there's the pearl merchant:

When he discovered a pearl of great value, he sold everything he owned and bought it!
Matthew 13:46 (NLT)

The pearl did cost him everything but he wasn't left with nothing. He had the pearl. I have seen the same things at work in my own life over and over. When I trust the King enough to give Him everything and then trust Him enough to give me back what's going to be good for me, what will help me to become what He created me to be... then yes, it does cost me everything but I'm not left with nothing. And we'll all be left with different stuff, different amounts of stuff, but hopefully we'll all be trusting the King enough to believe He knows what He's doing.

The Kingdom is about giving up everything, but it's not about having nothing. You get much more than you ever bargained for. Once you've turned your open hands palm down and dropped all you have, then you turn them back face up so you can hold onto what the King wants you to have. So what are you holding on to that you shouldn't be holding on to?

Wednesday Reflection: Another things that I think giving EVERYTHING to the King for the Kingdom of Heaven looks like is reflecting and reflection. We'll deal with reflecting today and reflection tomorrow but they really go hand in hand with one another (some might say they are inextricably intertwined ;o)

When I was first trying to find my way in following Jesus I started meeting with a man I respected and trusted. He was a preacher at a church not far from where I worked and that man helped Jesus change my life as much as anyone I have ever known. He told me and my friends (there were three of us who would meet with him before Wednesday night church) about Psalm chapter 1:

Happy are those who don't listen to the wicked, who don't go where sinners go, who don't do what evil people do. They love the Lord's teachings, and they think about those teachings day and night. They are strong, like a tree planted by a river. The tree produces fruit in season, and its leaves don't die. Everything they do will succeed. Psalm 1:3 (NCV)

He pointed to that last sentence... everything they do will succeed. The secret to success, as it turns out, is found in Psalm chapter 1. In fact, Psalm chapter 1 promises three things: happy, strong and successful. I mean, come on, what more is there? The preacher we met with focused on the Bible reflection part of this verse but I noticed there was something just as important for me as someone who was trying to recover his life from addiction. Did you notice it? Right there at the beginning:

Happy are those who don't listen to the wicked, who don't go where sinners go, who don't do what evil people do.

I recognized that the one thing that was different from July 6, 1985 (the day I recovered my life once and for all) and every other time I had tried to kick the drug/alcohol abuse addiction was that every other time I had tried to keep living my life exactly the way I had before... just without the drug/alcohol abuse. And it never worked. I couldn't figure out why, until I read Psalm chapter 1. Happy, strong and successful begins with being careful about:

1. Who I listen to.
2. Where I go.
3. What I do.

As long as I kept listening to the people I had always listened to, going the same places I'd always gone and doing the same things I'd always done I had zero success at transforming my life. Once I began with changing those 3 things, something different happened in my life. But I had sensed there was more that I was missing and it turns out I was right and this preacher showed me what it was.

Reflecting. It's right there in Psalm 1.

They love the Lord's teachings, and they think about those teachings day and night. They are strong, like a tree planted by a river. The tree produces fruit in season, and its leaves don't die. Everything they do will succeed. Psalm 1:2-3 (NCV)

Reading the teachings of the Lord and reflecting on them is the second part of this whole, happy, strong and successful formula. The happy/strong/Successful people don't just read the Lord's teachings... they think about those teachings. They reflect on them day and night. Between being careful about what/who I listened to, where I went and what I did and the Bible reflection I had found the key not just to success but also the happiness and strength.

Tomorrow we'll talk about another component that has to be added to this formula for it to reach its full potential but maybe for today you and I should reflect on this passage of the Lord's teachings. Am I being careful about what/who I listen to, where I go and what I do? Or am I continuing to live my life the way I always have and be mystified at why things aren't changing in my life?

Thursday Reflection: Ok, so yesterday we talked about the importance of being careful of what/who we listen to, where we go and what we do. We reflected on Psalm

chapter 1 to learn the key to being happy, strong and successful. But I started out yesterday's reflection (ooooooh... you hadn't given much thought before to why I call these little devotional thoughts "reflections" before, hmmmm. Well maybe neither had I... or maybe I had... confused again? Ok, then we're ready to move forward ;o) by saying that one key to giving everything for the Kingdom of Heaven is reflecting and reflection. You see, giving everything for the Kingdom isn't just about my stuff... it's about my emotions/thoughts/ambitions etc... And so giving everything includes what I focus on. What I think about. Am I reflecting on the Lord's teachings as Psalm 1 instructs me to (at least if I want to be happy/strong/Successful). Today we're going to follow that up by talking about reflection. Yesterday was about reflecting... today is about reflection. Here's what I mean:

God intends for me to see myself in the pages of the Bible. I can read the Bible all I want, but if I don't look for my reflection in those words and then reflect on that reflection throughout the day, then nothing much happens. Jesus' brother, James put it this way:

But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves. For if you listen to the word and don't obey, it is like glancing at your face in a mirror. You see yourself, walk away, and forget what you look like.

James 1:22-24 (NLT)

What's he talking about? Are there people who look in a mirror and then walk away and forget what they look like? Probably not many. But if we look into the teachings of Jesus and then walk away and don't do anything about what we read then we are like that guy who forgets what he looks like. God's intention is for me and you to see ourselves in the pages of the Bible. Maybe not every page, but if you're reading through the New Testament it probably won't take long to find something that steps on your toes and makes you feel a little uncomfortable (or maybe a lot uncomfortable). That's God's doing. He's stirring up your conscience and hoping that as you reflect on the reflection you see of yourself in His teachings that you will make the changes you need to make to become the person He created you to be. The whole happy/strong/Successful promise of Psalm chapter 1 depends not just on reflecting but also on reflection. Seeing myself in the pages of God's Word and making the changes He's asking me to make. James goes on:

But if you look carefully into the perfect law that sets you free, and if you do what it says and don't forget what you heard, then God will bless you for doing it.

James 1:25 (NLT)

Did you see that? THEN God will bless you. The blessings come after you read, reflect and then take action. I know that it can be difficult to read the Bible. It can be confusing and frustrating because we just don't know what it means or what we should do in response to what we've read. Can I make a suggestion? Read the book of James. It is 5 short chapters but it is filled with practical wisdom on how to live the life Jesus created you to live written by a man who grew up with Jesus in the same house. You won't find much that you don't understand... instead you'll find a treasury of wisdom on how to handle your words, thoughts, relationships and much more. You'll find plenty of opportunities to see your reflection in the pages of the Lord's teachings and make the necessary corrections which according to Jesus' brother leads to blessings.

Want to be happy, strong and successful? Reflect on your reflection.

Friday Reflection: The final thing I want to say about these parables (the treasure and the pearl) is that they show a tremendous confidence in the King that I know Jesus wants you and I to experience. These parables tell me that the Kingdom of our great King is worth everything and I can have confidence in that fact.

The Kingdom of Heaven is about confidence. Not so much in me... but in the King. I used to think entrance into the Kingdom was dependent on me. That I had the keys and I could use them or be left out. And while to a certain extent that may be true, if my entrance into the Kingdom is dependent on me "doing it right" then I'm in a world of trouble. Why? Because I stink at doing the right thing. Sometimes I'm better than others but I have some serious weaknesses that trouble me. I simply have very little confidence in myself.

Thank God, He has a plan for me and He isn't finished with me yet:

And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns. Philippians 1:6 (NLT)

Do you see what Paul is saying? He began this work in you and He won't quit until He's finished. When will that be? Not until His Son returns. Wow. So if I fail today, it's not all over? He's still not done with me? Looks to me like that's what He says. Not only that, but my entrance into the Kingdom isn't even dependent upon my ability to accurately interpret the Bible. That sounds like crazy talk but look at what Paul says later on in Philippians:

Let all who are spiritually mature agree on these things. If you disagree on some point, I believe God will make it plain to you. Philippians 3:15 (NLT)

If you disagree on some point GOD WILL MAKE IT PLAIN TO YOU?!?!?!? No way! I used to FREAK out whenever someone disagreed with me. Why? Well if there's a disagreement then one of two things is true: either I'm wrong (and there was NO possibility of that) or you were wrong and I had to wear you down with my fine arguments until you came over to my way of seeing things.

The biggest problem with that is that my interpretations of the Bible have changed over the years. I believe things now I didn't use to believe and I don't believe some of the things today that I did 30 years ago. So at what point was I disqualified from the Kingdom because of my wrong beliefs?

I never was, at least that's what I believe today. You may say, "wow Ed, you have tremendous confidence in your being welcomed into the Kingdom of Heaven!" Yes... yes I do. But that confidence isn't in me or my ability to always do the right thing or my ability to accurately interpret the teachings of Jesus contained in the Bible. My confidence is in the King Himself. He has promised to get me into that Kingdom. I'm already there... it's just another one of those "already but not yet" things that only Jesus can do. You and I can be confident that the King wanted us in His Kingdom so badly that He moved Heaven and earth and died on a cross and spent some time in Hell so that you and I wouldn't have to. What a King! Don't you want to be part of His Kingdom? Doesn't it seem like giving everything for that Kingdom is still an awesome deal? Then what are we waiting for?