

THE QUEST OF THE BEST

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a merchant man, seeking goodly pearls: Who, when he had found one pearl of great price, went and sold all that he had, and bought it."

-- Matthew 13:45, 46

Life is a search. In both the Old and New Testaments much is said about seeking. Old Testament worthies were commended because, like Ezra, they prepared their hearts to seek the Law. The author of Ecclesiastes said that he gave his heart to the search for wisdom. The Psalms repeatedly express that noble desire, "Oh, God, Thou art my God; Early will I seek Thee." We cannot ignore the definite injunction of the Lord Jesus to seek first the Kingdom of God. In one of His pictorial passages our Lord declared that the Kingdom of Heaven could be thought of in the terms of a search. It was, he said, "Like a merchant seeking goodly pearls."

This text gives us one outstanding characteristic of the kingly and queenly life, namely, the quest for the best, or a search for the superlative in life. With matchless skill the master artist paints the portrait of the pearl seeker. The quest for the best has nought of the visionary, credulous, or the idler. It demands the seeker. Such a seeker was the merchant who was mentioned in the text.

Jesus regarded this merchant with whole-hearted approval. He admired his purposefulness, his energies, and his good sense. He was fascinated by his decision of character, and by the sanity and courage which laid behind it. This merchant knew how to use life and that is a knowledge that is worth possessing. It is also a knowledge that is all too rare.

There is a story of a man who owned a fine old violin. But instead of learning to make vocal the angel choir that homed within it, He used it merely as a prop to keep open the door of his cabin. Thus often, we, too, fumble the big business of living. There are those who spend their strength and days in the quest of money. They are zealous for artificial gems and they miss the goodly pearls. Judas had the privilege of living with the Master day by day. He used his privilege in the quest of money, and all that he got out of his supreme advantage was thirty pieces of silver. He missed the pearls. In order that we might avoid the tragedy of foolishly fumbling the big business of life, let us give earnest attention to this wise merchant. There are some facts about him that are well worth our consideration and imitation.

I. He had a definite purpose in life.

He knew exactly at what mark he was going to aim and what goal he was going to seek, and his mind and heart were in his work. The advantages of this are many.

1. It is essential to happiness.

No purposeless soul is ever happy. Life never becomes truly happy until it is touched by the skilled fingers of a worthy purpose. Much of the prevailing restlessness and wretchedness of our day are due to sheer aimlessness. Too many are possessed by the joy-rider's attitude toward life. They are indifferent both as to direction and as to destination. They have as much business at one place as at another. Thus they not only burn up their energies without getting anywhere, but they even miss the joy of the ride. This merchant had a real reason for carrying on. His energies were turned into his business. Pearl hunting was the one object of his life. He was in search of goodly pearls and he sought them with all diligence; therefore, he was headed for success.

2. It is a prerequisite to power.

It is said that there is heat enough in one acre of sunshine to blast the very rocks like bits of gunpowder if the rays were only focalized. There are also energies enough in the weakest of us for the accomplishment of worth-while tasks if these energies were only focalized. That which is needed to focalize them is a dominate purpose.

When we read that Daniel purposed in his heart, we know at once that Babylon must reckon with him. It could no more ignore Daniel than it could ignore the law of gravitation. He became a power, and he remains a power. The intervening centuries have dealt harshly with the big city that once stood on the Euphrates. They have torn down its high walls, desecrated its palaces and temples and kicked its swinging gardens into heaps of rubbish. Notwithstanding the fact that nothing is left of the Babylon of that distant day, the influence of the character and life of Daniel remains. His purpose made him stronger than the passing years. We, therefore, congratulate this purposeful merchant for traveling on the pathway to joyous and strong living.

II. He Was A Seeker After the Best

He was not simply a seeker after the good; he was a seeker after the best. He was not upon a quest for pearls. Now the pearl was the most priceless jewel in that day. In seeking for pearls, therefore, he was seeking for those values that were supreme. On just such a high quest should you and I be found. The very best in life is within our reach if we are but willing to pay the price. And because we can achieve or obtain the best, it becomes our solemn duty to do so. No one of us has a right to be satisfied with any lesser values than those that are supreme.

But how far beneath our privileges do many of us fall! There are some that make choice of that which is worthless. There are even those that choose what is worse than worthless, the positively vicious. But it is not the quest of the vicious that I fear for most of you, it is rather the quest of the trifling, or the quest of the second best. The question of right and wrong is not so compelling today as it should be. There has been a breaking down of old sanctions, a flinging away of old standards and restraints. The difference between right and wrong is to many as vague and hazy as the horizon on a misty morning. Suppose then we bring this test. Are the ends we are seeking worth while? Are they important or are they trivial? Are they of supreme value or are they merely secondary?

What are you after? If you win the prize for which you are now spending your life, what will you have? If you reach the goal toward which you are now driving, where will you park when sundown comes? You have only one life to invest. What are you buying with it? Some years ago a group of boys were standing near the bank of the Tennessee River when it was at flood stage. About a hundred yards from the bank of the river there was a lumber pile whose top was just above the water. Suddenly these boys saw a rabbit, that had been driven out of its burrow by the high water, take refuge on that pile of lumber. One of the boys said, "I am going out and catch that rabbit." So he got into a frail canoe, made his way to the lumber pile, caught the rabbit, killed it, and put it down in his pocket. Hethen started back to the shore. His boat struck a treacherous current, he lost control of it, allowed it to capsize, and was drowned. Three days later they found his body. They brought it to land and laid it on the fresh green grass. Then, one of his companions came forward and drew the dead rabbit from his pocket and, holding it up, said, "This is the thing for which he gave his life." How cheaply he sold out! Yet many a man who has passed for a success in the eyes of the world has sold out for less than a dead rabbit.

III. He Was a Good Judge of Values.

In mental vision we can follow the pearl merchant as he passes from one city to another, ransacking the famous bazaars in his "quest for the best" among the gems of the earth. One day there flashed before his gaze a pearl of wondrous beauty. With tingling nerves and throbbing heart he looked upon it. It was perfect in its symmetry, peerless in lustre, and fabulous in price. This man recognized the best when he saw it. He was a good judge of values. How important that is! There are gradations of value even among good things. There are pearls and better pearls, and the kingly and queenly life is known by its pursuit of the best. The mastery of the secrets of the visible world, or knowledge is a good thing. Moral and spiritual discernment, or wisdom is a better thing. Acquaintance is a good thing; friendship is a better thing; love is the best thing. The respect of others is a good thing; self-respect is a better thing; a fine, untroubled conscience is the best thing. Love for those who love us is a good thing; love for our neighbors is a better thing; love for our enemies is the best thing.

The man who would succeed in any business must be a good judge of the values with which he has to deal. If he is not, disaster is practically certain. The merchant described in our text knew his business. He had breadth of outlook; ability to fix attention on details; method and order in his work; and decision of mind. He could tell the worthwhile from the worthless. He could tell the pearls from paste. He could tell the best from the second best. Therefore, when he found the best, he knew it.

But many of us are not so wise. Again and again we see men turn from values that are real to pursue mere gaudy things. No wonder Isaiah shouts after such with frantic earnestness, "Wherefore do you spend money for that which is not bread?" No wonder Paul, in praying for his friends, asks that they may have the wisdom to approve the things that are excellent. What blunders we make! Often we are deceived by outward appearances. We allow mere glamor to bewitch us. Often we are confused by the crowd. We see the multitude madly scrambling after certain things, and we decide that because so many are seeking to win these prizes that they must of necessity be of great value. As a boy, I used to feed the hogs. I would pour out a basket of corn that was ample for all. But often one foolish hog would greedily grab an ear and run off with it as if he had cornered the corn crop of the world. But instead of ignoring this foolish fellow, two or three other hogs would start off after him, leaving a number of ears just as good lying on the ground. What was the matter? It seemed to them that this fellow had something bigger and better than anything to be had elsewhere. And we, too, are constantly being taken in by this hog-philosophy. How many of us are pursuing prizes of whose worthfulness we have no better proof than that they are being sought by the crowd. But what the multitude is seeking is a rather poor test of what is of real worth. There are tests, however, upon which we may rely. The great tests of value are:--

1. Rarity.

A thing is valuable according to its scarceness. This test may also be applied to religion. Real religion means holiness and happiness, which are rare things in this world. The most precious thing under heaven is the religion which will make you holy and happy. As John Bunyan said, "It is only to be had at one storehouse, and if you apply there you can get it without either money or price."

2. The verdict of a competent authority.

3. Adaptability.

Does it meet our deepest needs? Values that are real satisfy. This at once rules out mere things. No man, however successful, can ever hope to satisfy the hungers of his heart by his worldly winnings. Sin-stained as we are, God knows we need a Saviour most of all. Thank God, that Saviour is found in Jesus Christ, and He is adapted to our highest and deepest needs.

4. Durability.

Real values abide after all tests are applied. They are not subject to fluctuations. There are values, thank God, that are still at par. "Now abideth faith, hope, love," and these are as priceless as they ever were. Faith is worth just as much in these trying times as it was in the long ago. Hope is still at par. Of course, love is at par. It is just as priceless now as when it sent Jesus to take little children into His arms or to go out as the Good Shepherd in quest of the sheep that was lost. So precious is it that the richest is a bankrupt without it, while the poor who possess it are infinitely rich. May God grant us an eye for the values that are real.

IV. He Determined to Get the Best.

When he saw the pearl, his eyes sparkled. "What's the price?" he asked in a voice that he found hard to control. The answer did not frighten him in the least. Without hesitation he answered firmly, "I will take it." Immediately and joyfully he sold all he had and bought it, and it was a purchase which he never regretted. This purchase marked the very peak of his wisdom. All his seeking, all his finding, and all his keen appreciation of values would have gone for nothing but for this.

As I remind you, my unsaved friends, that it is utterly impossible for you to save yourselves, I am happy to tell you that my Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, can save you. In Christ there is all you need -- pardon and forgiveness of your sins, grace to maintain your character and to qualify you for heaven. There is all in Christ that you need. Accept Him and surrender your all to Him now and thus receive His wonderful salvation. Following your confession of Him as your Saviour, ever after be set of purpose, broad in outlook, intelligent in method, decisive in action, expert of values, and tireless of energy as you live and work for Him.