

"The Long Game"

Text: Matthew 13:44-52

May the God of all grace, through his Holy Spirit – who is living and active within you – grant to your hearts an appreciation of the *reality* of your rescue, and an unending joy in the treasure you have been given in Jesus Christ, knowing him as your Savior and Redeemer. Amen.

Dear Fellow Christians:

I've often heard that the Chinese "play the long game." By "the long game" I assume they mean directing short-term actions according to a greater, long-range plan or goal. Christians are encouraged to use the same approach to life, but for obviously different reasons. In fact Christians ought to recognize how appropriate foresight is for pretty much every decision, big and little. Paul, in his beautiful discussion of the importance of the resurrection in 1 Corinthians 15, identified the entire Christian life as a long game. ^{ESV}(1 Corinthians 15:17-19) ***And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. ¹⁸ Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. ¹⁹ If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.***

Everything in the life of a Christian is rightly evaluated and directed ultimately not to this life but to the life to come. That's our long game, and that's why Paul said that if there is no such thing as a resurrection, Christians are the most pitiful people on earth. In other words, if we live for the life to come, and there *is* no life to come, what pitiful creatures we would be. But listen to how Paul continued: ***But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. ²¹ For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. ²² For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.*** ^{ESV}(1 Corinthians 15:20-22)

It is, in fact, the long view of eternity that is to give meaning and direction to our time of grace here on earth. That means, among other things, that the value of every single thing here in time is really only accurately determined in light of God's Day of Judgment, and in light of the eternity that follows this life. This is just one of the lessons taught by our Savior in our text for this morning, found in the Thirteenth Chapter of the Gospel of Matthew:

^{ESV} **Matthew 13:44-52** ***"The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy***

he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field. ⁴⁵ ¶ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, ⁴⁶ who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it. ⁴⁷ ¶ "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. ⁴⁸ When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. ⁴⁹ So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰ and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁵¹ ¶ "Have you understood all these things?" They said to him, "Yes." ⁵² And he said to them, "Therefore every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

So far the inspired words of our God – *his very words*. Give due reverence to these, the very words of our God, now and always, for they are most certainly worthy. So also we pray, ***"Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth!"*** Amen.

One of the first and most important questions we want to ask ourselves before we study this or any other part of God's Word is "Why?" Why did Jesus speak these words, and why did the Holy Spirit choose to include them in our Bibles? Of all the lessons that Jesus taught during his time on earth, why did the Holy Spirit choose to record one over another? In other words, what is the purpose of this section of God's Word? What does it mean to me in my life today?

It might be helpful first to clarify what the purpose of including these words was *not*. Jesus did not speak these words either to entertain us or to whip up the emotions of those who hear them, although our emotions will certainly come into play when we rightly understand these words and their intended purpose.

What could be so bad about being entertained by these words of Jesus, or getting emotionally charged by them? The danger with presenting the Word of God as something intended by God only to entertain or stimulate our emotions is that it inoculates us against the real thing. We've been hearing a lot about vaccines and inoculations recently, haven't we? When doctors inoculate or vaccinate us against certain diseases, they are actually administering a weakened form of a disease in an attempt to prevent the more serious illness.

Whenever we gather together in a church building only to be entertained or emotionally moved by a moralizing or emotive message, but given no other depth of content or meaning, we are being inoculated against ever going any deeper into the truths of God's Word. The "real thing" is always Jesus Christ and salvation by grace through faith in him alone. He is to be the center, the focus, of all that we do and say. He is the only reason we are here this morning. If not for the suffering and death of our Savior on the cross, nothing else we do here has any lasting meaning or eternal significance. All else would be fluff intended only to help us get through another day. That is the danger when we regard God's Word as simply a source for entertainment or emotional stimulation. Jesus quickly becomes a minor actor, lost in the rolling credits.

The purpose of this and every other text in the Bible is first of all to teach us about Jesus Christ and his kingdom. The second is to teach us something about ourselves and our relationship to that Savior.

So what then does our text teach us about our Savior and his kingdom? "Kingdom," remember, is defined as "Christ's rulership in our hearts." This is Jesus' own definition, since he once told us, **"Indeed, the kingdom of God is within you."** (Luke 17:21) Yet if **"the kingdom of heaven"** is *Jesus' work, Jesus' rulership in the heart*, why does he need to teach *us* about it? Because we need to know if we have the real thing. He wants to make sure that we are not mistaking a shallow, worthless counterfeit for the real thing. In our text Jesus uses several picture lessons (parables) to teach us what we need to know about his kingdom – the *real* kingdom. The first is of a man who found a buried treasure, the second of a pearl merchant who found that one priceless pearl he had been searching for his entire life, and with the third he taught us why it matters.

Jesus first used the very tantalizing picture of buried treasure to gain the attention of the people. Who isn't interested in hearing about buried treasure? Yet, again, Jesus' purpose went far deeper than entertainment or moralizing. In fact his message might have been lost had he not continued with the second and third parables. After all, who here wouldn't do what the man in the first parable did? Even the Godless would sell all *to acquire more*. Who wouldn't give up all earthly possessions if it meant getting enough to buy more and better? So Jesus fine-tuned the lesson with the second parable. A man sold all to acquire that one great pearl, but notice that that man is not looking for anything beyond that one pearl itself. The pearl isn't a means to another goal, it *is* the goal.

Both the buried treasure and the priceless pearl represent the gospel and faith in Jesus Christ. The gospel isn't a means to gain more in this life; it is one great treasure this life has to offer. That treasure is discovered by some when they aren't even looking for it, as in our first parable. This is the case with most of us as it was "found" for us in our baptism. Others find that one priceless treasure after a lifelong search. Paul was one of those. He spent the first part of his life clouded in the delusion that he had already found the pearl. In fact he was so sure of himself and his convictions that he occupied himself with the eradication of every other religious conviction – including the genuine Christian faith. When he finally found the true pearl on the road to Damascus, he saw all of his previous ideas for what they were – trash. You remember his words: **"But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. ⁸ Indeed, 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 ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith."**^{ESV}(Philippians 3:7-9)

From this one example we begin to understand why Jesus said what he did, and why the Holy Spirit regarded the message of these parables as essential. Human beings can possess counterfeit religious convictions. And yet when we actually find that one true treasure, when we come to know Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior, immediately nothing else could possibly matter more. Stop to really think about it and it's impossible not to thrill to the idea of unloading all of our old ideas, beliefs, and ideologies (as so much rummage sale junk) because we have found the truth. We have truly, and in every meaningful way, come into possession of unimaginable wealth – a kind of affluence that lasts an eternity.

It is usually at this point that a rather disturbing trend begins to form. Here is where we generally begin to externalize and generalize the Word to make it more comfortable, palatable, acceptable to our sinful flesh. In other words, we regard these words as true in a general sense, but never really in a specific, personal sense. Personal application takes time, effort, and – most difficult of all – self denial. Personal application is advanced Christianity. The Bible never tells us that it is wrong to enjoy the blessings of life. It does, however, tell us never to let them detract from our love and devotion to the "one

thing needful." Such things are never easy. That means, for example, asking not just "Can I afford it?" but "Will it draw me away?" It means forcing every big and little decision through the wringer of "Will this pull me away from my one true treasure?" – and then exercising self-denial if the answer is yes. As Christians we tend to muddle through, and most often we do a rather poor job of it.

That, in fact, is the purpose and value of the third parable in our text – the parable of the net and the fish. It is the third parable that teaches us not only of the importance of all of this, but the need to adopt the long game. These words in particular absolutely mandate Christian sobriety: ***So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous⁵⁰ and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.***

Our great treasure is knowing that Jesus lived and died to pay our sin debt, and thereby to reconcile us to God. Because of that, we need have no fear of the coming judgment. Through faith in Jesus Christ we will not be discarded. The treasure of Jesus Christ and him crucified never runs out, is never used up. It lasts us through all eternity.

But just how do we continue to recognize the value of the treasure we have found? How do we go about, on a personal level, clearing away the trash of life so that our great treasure is and remains the gospel of Jesus Christ? Here's something that can help. Remind yourself, moment by moment, of the *reality* of your faith and the certainty of God's Word. Take time regularly to contemplate the literal, certain fulfillment of all of God's promises. Jesus promised to return in judgment. That event could happen at any moment. Remind yourself that it *will* happen – the reality of the thing. Imagine what that will be like. Jesus did exactly that in that third parable. He there reminds us of the need for the long game - the reality of both heaven and hell. Consider those truths and their personal implications for *you*. Imagine first the eternal horror if you were to throw away your faith. Follow that with the confidence that, connected regularly to his Word, God the Holy Spirit will preserve your faith until that faith is replaced by the sight of God himself.

Satan would love to convince you that these things are myths, fairy tales, make-believe. Contemplate instead the stark, personal reality of exactly what God's Word tells you here. All unbelievers will face an eternity of punishment. You, however, will enjoy an untold paradise that does not end – yours because God declared the debt of your sins to be paid in full by Jesus Christ. Jesus taught us here how to make that truth

all the more real. Follow his lead by really imagining finding a treasure long hidden in a field. Imagine your excitement. Think of what steps you would take to secure that treasure so that it would always be your own. Now recognize that the far greater treasure is already yours in Jesus Christ. That is exactly what our Lord taught us to do in our text. What steps will you take to safeguard *that* priceless gift?

May God the Holy Spirit give each of us eyes to see the relative value of all things, and an ever stronger love for, and appreciation of, that "one thing needful" – Jesus Christ our Savior. His rulership in our hearts and lives is clearly, and by far, our greatest treasure. Amen.

Scripture Readings

^{ESV} **Deuteronomy 7:6-10** "For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. ⁷ It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸ but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt. ⁹ Know therefore that the LORD your God is God, the faithful God who keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments, to a thousand generations, ¹⁰ and repays to their face those who hate him, by destroying them. He will not be slack with one who hates him. He will repay him to his face.

^{ESV} **Romans 8:28-32** And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified. ³¹ ¶ What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?

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The 8th Sunday after Pentecost – July 26, 2020

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn – 19 (Red Hymnal)

"All Praise to God, Who Reigns Above"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Old Testament Lesson: (Deuteronomy 7:6-10) All love for God toward mankind has its basis in Christ Jesus. So also we hear that God loved Israel, but that love was based on the promise to send Jesus from the Jewish race. Once that promise was fulfilled and the Jews turned away and rejected their promised Savior, God also turned away from them. Christians are now the "new Israel" – dearly loved for Jesus' sake.

The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 146 (Page 41) (Brown Hymnal)

The New Testament Lesson: (Romans 8:28-32) Cling stubbornly to this section of Holy Scripture - even in the face of persecution, sorrow, and hardship. Take comfort in the fact that not only does everything work out for the good of God's Children, but God also knew and chose you from eternity to be His very own. Thanks be to God for the gift of our salvation.

The Confession of Faith -

The Nicene Creed – page 5. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 266 (Red Hymnal)

"O God, Our Lord, Thy Holy Word"

The Sermon – Text: Matthew 13:44-52 (Printed on the back page)

"The Long Game"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Prayers

The Pre-Communion Hymn – 755 (Stanzas 1-2, 5) (Brown Hymnal)

"What Is This Bread?"

The Preparation for Holy Communion (Brown Hymnal page 17)

The Distribution

The Nunc Dimittis and Thanksgiving (Brown Hymnal page 20)

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn – 48 (Red Hymnal)

"How Blest Are They Who Hear God's Word"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors worshipping with us this morning and invite you to join us each Sunday at this time. We are glad you are here!
To our Visitors seeking Holy Communion – In obedience to God's Word, we practice "Close Communion." This practice stresses both our concern for others, not wanting anyone to receive the sacrament to their harm (1 Cor. 11:27-30) and the importance of unity in confession and faith (1 Cor. 10:16-17). For this reason we ask that anyone who has not established this unity through membership in a CLC congregation please meet with the pastor to discuss this Scriptural doctrine before communing. This is a practice that we follow out of love and concern for you, and out of obedience to God's Word, not in judgment of anyone's Christian faith.

Attendance – Sunday (30) Average (35)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service w/communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour
Next Sunday	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship Hour

CLC News – Pastor Stefan Sonnenfeld is considering the calls to Redeemer of Bowdle and Zion of Ipswich. Pastor Rich Kanzenbach has accepted the call to St Luke's of Lemmon. Prof. Steven Sippert has returned the call to Bethel of Morris.

2021 Trip to Israel – Despite the current COVID-19 related challenges, the CLC trip to Israel is still on schedule for January 13-22, 2021 with a possible three day extension to Jordan for those who are interested. 17 CLC members are registered for the trip, and a dozen more have expressed interest. While the tour company is expecting that the trip will be possible, they do have options available if it has to be cancelled. More information is available online at <https://tinyurl.com/IsraelTrip2021> or from the tour sponsor, Pastor Nathanael Mayhew (404-729-4602 or nnmayhew@sleepyeyelutheran.com).

Maintenance Position at ILC – Immanuel Lutheran College is soliciting applications for an on-campus maintenance position. See Pastor Roehl for more information, or contact ILC incoming President Daniel Schierenbeck dan.schierenbeck@ilc.edu for a list of duties and compensation. Applications must be received by August 15, 2020.