

THE PARABLES OF JESUS

A Catholic Bible Study

· SESSION THREE ·

The Kingdom's Surpassing Worth

The Hidden Treasure · The Pearl of Great Price · The Two Sons

“Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my

Lord.”

Philippians 3:8 (RSV2CE)

LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE · WITH PARTICIPANT DISCUSSION

SESSION OVERVIEW

This session asks the question that runs underneath every other question in the Christian life: is Christ worth everything? The Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price are two of the shortest parables in Matthew 13, and they may be the most personally demanding. Both end the same way: the person who finds the prize sells everything to obtain it. Not reluctantly, not partially. Everything. The Two Sons then grounds the question of worth in the concrete reality of obedience, because it is not what we say about the Kingdom that counts but whether we actually go into the vineyard.

The three parables belong together by a single logic. The first two test whether we have actually seen the worth; the third tests whether what we have said with our mouths is matched by what we are doing with our feet. If the Kingdom is worth everything, the proof is not a stronger sentence but a body that moves. The session's pastoral aim is honest self-examination, not performance.

Audience note: high-school and young-adult participants often carry a large religious vocabulary and a more uncertain interior commitment. They have said yes many times. The Two Sons puts a careful, kind question to that pattern: is the yes producing actual movement?

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The Hidden Treasure and the Pearl: two pictures of one discovery

Matthew 13:44 and 13:45-46 are deliberately paired. In the Hidden Treasure the discovery appears unplanned: the text never says the man was searching; he simply finds. In the Pearl the discovery crowns a deliberate search: the merchant is explicitly “in search of fine pearls.” Together they teach that the Kingdom comes both to those who were not looking and to those who have long searched. The Sower offered four soils, four kinds of hearers; the Treasure and the Pearl offer two kinds of finders. The response in both cases is identical: sell everything; buy.

St. Augustine’s reading is consistent across his preaching: the prize is Christ himself, and the selling is not loss but joyful release, because what is left behind was always worth less than what is gained (his comment on the pearl is preserved in St. Thomas Aquinas’ *Catena Aurea* on Matthew 13). For St. Augustine this was not a metaphor but his own conversion (*Confessions* VIII.12): the finding of the treasure meant renouncing attachments he himself named as disordered and sinful, and discovering that everything he feared to lose was worth less than what he gained.

St. Gregory the Great, in his *Forty Gospel Homilies* (Homily 9, on Mt 13:44-52), reads the merchant as the soul that has lived in genuine moral and spiritual seeking. The merchant already has many pearls, natural virtues and sincere religious effort, yet recognizes that all of them together are worth less than the one Pearl of great value. St. Gregory’s insight is that grace does not destroy or shame the natural goods; it surpasses them. The merchant is not foolish to have gathered many pearls; he is wise to recognize when one is worth all the others.

The *Catena Aurea* on Matthew 13, in which St. Thomas gathers the Fathers, connects the parables to Colossians 2:3: Christ is the one in whom “are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” The Treasure and the Pearl are not, in their deepest sense, a *what*; they are a *Who*. To gain the Kingdom is to gain Christ himself.

The Two Sons: the gap between yes and going

The Two Sons (Mt 21:28-32) is told in the Temple courts, addressed directly to the chief priests and elders who have just challenged Jesus’ authority (Mt 21:23). The first son says no but repents and goes; the second says yes but does not go. Jesus’ application is sharp: “the tax collectors and the harlots go into the kingdom of God before you” (Mt 21:31). The reversal is not that bad behavior is rewarded, but that honest repentance produces actual obedience while polite religious agreement may produce nothing at all.

The background is the prophetic tradition Ezekiel formalizes in Ezekiel 18:21-24: the wicked who repents will live; the righteous who turns away will die. Worth before God is measured not by religious vocabulary or institutional position but by the trajectory of a life. St. Thomas Aquinas takes this up in his treatment of faith formed by charity (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 4, a. 3): a faith that produces no action is dead in the strict sense James means (Jas 2:17). The Two Sons is that teaching in narrative form.

Pastoral note: the parable is not chiefly addressed to obvious dropouts. It is addressed to people who say yes, regularly, and do not move. Many in your group will have spent years saying yes to retreats, programs, sacraments, and youth groups. The parable’s gentle but uncompromising question is whether all of that yes is producing the obedience it claims.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

These passages are the deep roots of Session 3's parables. The Ezekiel text below is read with the group in the discussion; the rest are developed here for your preparation.

PROVERBS 2:1-5 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

"My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you ... if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures; then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God."

Proverbs 2 is the closest Old Testament parallel to the Hidden Treasure. The seeker who treats wisdom as hidden treasure to be searched for finds, in the end, the knowledge of God. Jesus' parable claims that this seeking culminates in him.

PROVERBS 3:13-15 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

"Happy is the man who finds wisdom ... for the gain from it is better than gain from silver and its profit better than gold. She is more precious than jewels, and nothing you desire can compare with her."

The Wisdom literature's consistent claim is that wisdom surpasses wealth. Jesus takes the same logic and personalizes it: the Wisdom that surpasses every comparison is now made flesh in him (cf. 1 Cor 1:24, Christ as the wisdom of God).

EZEKIEL 18:21-23 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

"But if a wicked man turns away from all his sins which he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is lawful and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die ... Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?"

Ezekiel 18 is the prophetic background of the Two Sons. God measures a life by its trajectory, not its starting point. The first son began with no and ended with yes; the second began with yes and ended with no. Ezekiel says the trajectory is what matters, and Jesus turns the teaching into a story.

ISAIAH 55:1-3 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

"Ho, every one who thirsts, come to the waters; and he who has no money, come, buy and eat! ... Incline your ear, and come to me; hear, that your soul may live."

Isaiah's invitation to come and buy without money lies behind the Treasure and Pearl. The buying is not a transaction in coins; it is the full self-gift of the seeker. The price of the Kingdom is everything, and what God asks for is not money but the entire person.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

Method: Direct quotations appear in quotation marks with a specific source citation; faithfully represented teaching without a single quotable line is given as paraphrase with citation.

St. Augustine of Hippo (354–430)

St. Augustine reads the Treasure and Pearl consistently: the prize is Christ himself, and the selling is not loss but joyful release. His comment that the one pearl is Christ is preserved in St. Thomas Aquinas' *Catena Aurea* on Matthew 13, and the autobiographical pressure is real. *Confessions* VIII.12 narrates his own finding of the treasure: the radical reordering of every previous attachment, including the renunciation of real sin, because all of it was less than the treasure.

From the opening of the *Confessions* (I.1): "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." The treasure parables are this restlessness moving toward its rest; the man finds the treasure not first because he searched well, but because his heart is finally drawn to its true center.

St. Gregory the Great (540–604)

St. Gregory treats the pearl in his *Forty Gospel Homilies* (Homily 9). The merchant is the soul that has lived in genuine seeking and already possesses many pearls; the grace of the Gospel does not shame that seeking but gives it the one thing that makes sense of all the rest. His teaching protects converts from a false guilt about their pre-Christian seriousness, while still insisting that all natural pearls are surpassed by the one Pearl of great price.

St. Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)

In the *Catena Aurea* on Matthew 13, St. Thomas gathers the patristic teaching that the Treasure and Pearl are Christ, a teaching the Fathers connect to Colossians 2:3. On the Two Sons, his treatment of faith formed by charity (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 4, a. 3) supplies the framework: verbal assent to truth is not yet living faith. Living faith is faith "informed" by the love that produces obedience. The parable is not a technical taxonomy of faith-states, but it dramatizes the doctrine: assent that never issues in obedient love is dead in the strict sense James means (Jas 2:17), while repentance that moves into actual obedience is the shape of living faith formed by charity. The second son's polite yes pictures the first; the first son's repentance pictures the second.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 546

"Jesus' invitation to enter his kingdom comes in the form of parables ... Through his parables he invites people to the feast of the kingdom, but he also asks for a radical choice: to gain the kingdom, one must give everything. Words are not enough; deeds are required."

CCC 1814

"Faith is the theological virtue by which we believe in God and believe all that he has said and revealed to us ... because he is truth itself. By faith man freely commits his entire self to God."

CCC 2014

"Spiritual progress tends toward ever more intimate union with Christ. This union is called 'mystical' because it participates in the mystery of Christ through the sacraments ... and, in him, in the mystery of the Holy Trinity."

SESSION GOALS AND TIME ESTIMATE

Goals for the leader

1. Create the conditions for honest personal reckoning: is Christ worth everything to me?
2. Surface the joy of discovery, not just the cost of commitment.
3. Use the Two Sons to ground the abstract in the concrete: are we actually moving into the vineyard?
4. Leave every participant with a specific “sell” to consider this week. **Time estimate (90 minutes)**



Opening prayer and check-in: 10 min



The Hidden Treasure and the Pearl (read together, discussion): 28 min



The Two Sons (read, Old Testament discovery, discussion): 32 min



Application and concrete commitment: 10 min



Closing prayer, with buffer for silence: 10 min

PARTICIPANT DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer

“Lord Jesus, you are the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great price. We confess that we have often valued lesser pearls and missed the one Pearl of greatest worth. Open our eyes to see what we are being offered. Give us courage to sell what is keeping us from you, and joy to do it. We ask this through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Check-In (5–10 min)

Briefly: from last session, did you pray for the person you had sorted as a “weed”? What happened? Did examining your own “fig tree” produce any clarity?

READ ALOUD

In the last two sessions we heard that the Kingdom is here, that it grows from small beginnings, and that it will one day sort all of history. Today Jesus asks a different question: is the Kingdom worth everything to you? Two short parables and one pointed story push us toward a personal answer. Listen for the word “joy” in the first parable. It is the key word.

PART ONE · THE HIDDEN TREASURE AND THE PEARL (MATTHEW 13:44- 46)

Have someone read Matthew 13:44-46 aloud. Read both parables together; they are intentionally paired.

MATTHEW 13:44-46 (RSV2CE)

“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. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it.”

Q1. [TEXT] Notice the word “joy” in verse 44. The man sells everything, but he does it in joy. What does this single word tell you about the relationship between sacrifice and desire in the Kingdom?

Leader note: The most important word in the parable. For the man who has truly seen the treasure, the selling is the most logical thing in the world; joy carries the sacrifice. That does not mean the surrender is without pain; joy and real cost can coexist, as in Christ himself, “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross” (Heb 12:2). But if the Christian life feels chiefly like loss, the diagnosis may be that the treasure has not yet been seen for what it is.

Q2. [TEXT] The two parables describe two different kinds of discovery: one unexpected, one the result of long searching. Why tell both? What does each say that the other does not?

Leader note: The Treasure speaks to the person who was not even looking, who is found by grace. The Pearl speaks to the person who has searched for years for meaning, beauty, or truth. The required response is the same in both: the Kingdom comes to the unlikely convert and to the long seeker, and both must respond with their entire selves.

Q3. [TRADITION] The patristic tradition gathered in St. Thomas Aquinas’ Catena Aurea points to Colossians 2:3, where Paul says of Christ that “in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” What changes in your reading of these parables once the treasure and the pearl are not a what but a Who?

Leader note: It moves the parable from being about religion or ethics to being about a Person. The Christian sells everything not to obtain a thing called the Kingdom but to obtain Christ himself. That is what makes the joy real: no one weeps at having Christ, and no one is sentimental about losing what is less.

Q4. [TRADITION] St. Gregory the Great reads the Pearl as the soul that has long sought truth and wisdom and now finds the one Pearl that surpasses all the others; grace does not shame the previous seeking, it crowns it. How does this protect a convert from false guilt about a pre-Christian intellectual or moral life?

Leader note: Many who come to faith in young-adult years feel they should renounce their earlier seriousness about philosophy, ethics, art, or other religions as if it were waste. St. Gregory says no: the earlier seeking was real and good, and the Pearl does not erase the other pearls but gives them their right place. The seeker’s history was preparation, not embarrassment.

Q5. [LIFE] If Christ is the treasure and the pearl, what are the specific “other pearls” you are still holding onto right now? Not bad things necessarily, just lesser things. What would it actually require to sell them?

Leader note: The most searching question of the session. Give a full minute of silence and press for specifics. “My comfort” or “my time” is too vague. Common honest answers in young-adult groups: a relationship that is not actually good, an entertainment habit consuming hours, the approval of certain people, a future plan shaping every present decision. The specifics make the question real.

PART TWO · THE TWO SONS (MATTHEW 21:28-32)

Have someone read Matthew 21:28-32 aloud.

MATTHEW 21:28-31 (RSV2CE)

“What do you think? A man had two sons; and he went to the first and said, ‘Son, go and work in the vineyard today.’ And he answered, ‘I will not’; but afterward he repented and went. And he went to the second and said the same; and he answered, ‘I go, sir,’ but did not go. Which of the two did the will of his father? They said, ‘The first.’”

Q6. [TEXT] The first son says no and then goes. The second says yes and does not go. Which one does the father’s will, and why is the answer this obvious?

Leader note: The first, because he actually goes. Jesus is addressing religious leaders who have said yes to God for a lifetime without going into the vineyard. The point is bracingly simple: God is not deceived by polite verbal assent. The will is shown by the going.

READ ALOUD

Before the last question, notice how this connects to the treasure and the pearl. Both of those parables end in a single decisive act: the finder sells everything and buys. The Two Sons puts that same movement to the test. It is one thing to say the treasure is worth everything. It is another to move for it. Now read one more passage, from the prophet Ezekiel, and see how God himself frames the difference.

Have someone read Ezekiel 18:21-23 aloud.

EZEKIEL 18:21-23 (RSV2CE, SELECTED)

“But if a wicked man turns away from all his sins ... he shall surely live; he shall not die. ... Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?”

Q7. [TRADITION] According to Ezekiel, what does God measure when he weighs a life: where it began, or where it is going? Set that beside the two sons. What does it say about the first son’s “no,” and about the second son’s “yes”?

Leader note: God measures the trajectory, not the starting point. Let the group find this in the text before you name it. The first son’s no does not define him; his subsequent yes does. The second son’s yes does not define him; his failure to go does. This is hopeful for the person who is finally beginning, and sobering for the person who has been saying yes for years without movement.

Q8. [LIFE] Honestly, which son are you most like right now with God: the one whose mouth said no but whose feet are slowly turning, or the one whose mouth says yes but who has not actually moved?

Leader note: A quiet, convicting question. Some will recognize the first son and need encouragement; some the second and need clarity. Many young adults have a long history of saying yes (retreats, sacraments, programs) without much movement. The question is not designed to shame but to clarify.

Q9. [LIFE] The selling in the treasure parables and the going in the Two Sons are the same movement: full commitment, not partial. What is one concrete step this week that would be your actually going into the vineyard?

Leader note: Closing application. Press for specificity. “Try harder” is not a step. Concrete steps look like a hard conversation, a deleted app, a decision to go to confession this week, a specific person to forgive, a specific obedience that has been postponed. Land here.

APPLICATION AND CLOSING

CLOSING CHALLENGE

Take the “sell” you named in question five and the “going” you named in question nine and put them together. They are the same act. This week, do one concrete thing that represents both at once. Tell one trusted person what you are doing and ask them to check in with you next week. The Two Sons is not a thought experiment; it is an invitation to move.

Scripture Memory

MATTHEW 13:44 (RSV2CE)

“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.”

Closing Prayer

“Lord Jesus, you are the treasure hidden in the field and the pearl of great price. Forgive us for the times we have said yes to you with our mouths while our feet did not move. Forgive us for valuing lesser pearls and missing your worth. Give us the grace to see you so clearly that the selling becomes joy, and the going becomes natural. We ask this with empty hands and willing hearts. Amen.”

GOING DEEPER (OPTIONAL)

Use any of these as your group has time and interest.

QGD1. [TEXT] The man in the Treasure parable hides the treasure and goes to buy the field. Is there anything ethically uncomfortable in that detail? How might Jesus be using the imagery, and what is he not endorsing?

Leader note: Jesus uses the imagery of common life without endorsing every aspect of the action; this holds throughout the parables (the Unrighteous Steward in Session 7 is the clearest case). The point is the worth and the joyful response, not a model for real-estate ethics. Reading parables well means distinguishing the central image from incidental details, exactly as Jesus does in Matthew 13.

QGD2. [TRADITION] Read CCC 1814 alongside the Two Sons. The Catechism says faith is the virtue by which “man freely commits his entire self to God.” How do the second son’s words and the first son’s actions illuminate what faith actually is?

Leader note: Faith is not assent to a proposition but the commitment of the entire self. The second son committed his words; the first committed his self. Faith in the Catholic sense is closer to what the first son does than to what the second son says.

QGD3. [LIFE] Have you ever feared that following Christ would require you to lose something you really love? What would it mean to take seriously the joy the man in the Treasure parable feels?

Leader note: Many live with a quiet fear that conversion will require giving up something precious and that the giving up will feel like loss. The parable insists that for the one who has actually seen the treasure, the giving up, however costly, is carried by joy rather than defined by loss. If the Christian life feels chiefly like deprivation, the diagnosis is not that we need to try harder but that we have not yet seen what is being offered.

QGD4. [TRADITION] What does the Catholic tradition mean by the difference between justification and sanctification, and how do the Treasure parables and the Two Sons illuminate it?

Leader note: Justification is God’s gratuitous act by which he cleanses us from sin and makes us truly righteous, ordinarily conferred in Baptism and renewed in the sacrament of Reconciliation (CCC 1987-1992). Sanctification is the ongoing growth in holiness that flows from it, the actual going into the vineyard day after day (CCC 1995, 2013-2014). By way of analogy, not a strict exegetical mapping: the Treasure parables evoke the decisive gift and wholehearted response, while the Two Sons evokes the ongoing obedience that must follow. Catholics affirm both, neither without the other.

SCRIPTURE INDEX FOR THIS SESSION

Primary parables: Matthew 13:44-46 | Matthew 21:28-32

Old Testament background: Proverbs 2:1-5 | Proverbs 3:13-15 | Isaiah 55:1-3 | Ezekiel 18:21-23

New Testament support: Colossians 2:2-3 | Philippians 3:7-11 | James 2:14-17 | 1 Corinthians 1:24

Catechism: CCC 546, 1814, 2014

Sources cited: St. Augustine, *Confessions* I.1 and VIII.12 (and his pearl comment in the *Catena Aurea*) | St. Gregory the Great, *Forty Gospel Homilies*, Homily 9 | St. Thomas Aquinas, *Catena Aurea* on Matthew 13, and *Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 4, a. 3.