

Christ traveled the land of Israel looking for those who were truly searching for God¹. He illustrated this principle in a parable:

“... the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant looking for fine pearls. When he found one of great value, he went away and sold everything he had and bought it. [Matthew 13:45-46]”

The Kingdom has to do with those who are looking for what is the most valuable thing in life, and are willing to give up everything else they have to obtain it.

A friend of mine² once told me a story that, though it was meant to be funny, resonated within me in a manner that eventually made me see it as a parable about the search for great value. The story goes something like this:

A man who was looking for a way to determine the character of young boys in order to see who would be best to train for problem solving and data analysis, decided to perform a psychological experiment. At a nearby farm, with permission from the owner, he filled two stalls in his stables with horse manure³. He put a boy in each one, gave them a shovel, and shut them in without actually giving them any information or instructions.

After about a half an hour, he returned to view their respective responses to their situation. When he opened the first door, he found that boy huddling in the corner, as far away from the pile as he could get. When asked, the boy claimed that the manure was too nasty to even get close to.

When the man opened the second door, he was confronted with a flurry of activity and flying debris. The boy was shoveling his heart out, and the man was barely able to get him to stop. In describing what he was doing, the boy exclaimed, “There was so much horse manure, I just knew that there had to be a horse in here somewhere!”

In commenting on it later, the man expressed his excitement in seeing someone that was so committed to finding the value that might lay underneath the mess. The boy did not actually see a horse there, but was totally engaged in a search for it. He loved being involved in the pursuit! As a reward, the experimenter let the boy meet the horse in question.

But there is another story that I think is appropriate to consider by the side of the first one. In my effort to tie the two stories together, I have changed this one a little bit from my favorite mis-management parable.

It turns out that the owners of the stable turned its administration over to a man who felt great pride in their own management ability, but who had little real-world experience. He implemented a plan to make the place run more efficiently, and one of his targets was the owner’s horses who had been assigned work duties. He worked diligently to carry out a feeding regimen that would steadily decrease the amount of food given the horses in conjunction with increasing the work load. The manager was proud of data showing improved efficiency – decreasing cost and the “mess”. He was just about to reach his goal, he thought, but then the horse the boy had met and had been so interested in, died!

In order to connect the two stories, I present the following addendum:

The boy, who was now older and had been away at school for a while, maintained the searching character exhibited in the initial parable. He was still filled with excitement when he thought of “his” horse. But when he came by the stables, he learned that the horse was no longer there! The manager’s assistant, who had not been in favor of the efficiency strategy, tried to explain to the boy how the horse had died as a result of the constraints placed on its feeding regimen in view of this different efficiency and cost savings agenda. The boy was saddened, for sure, but more than that he was completely de-motivated as he realized the futility of his pursuit⁴ when there were those who put such stringent controls on life.

The Lord told us “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness⁵”. He also said that we must seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness⁶. This, to me, is the spirit that the boy exhibited in digging in something that is so objectionable to all of us. The contrast to this is the trimming down to a set of “doable” rules that lose the spirit of the Word – reducing grace to a minimal structure that does not allow for creativity – and indeed it crushes it.

Like the act of cutting back on feed for the horse, some people try to control our belief in such a way that actually squeezes the true value out of it. Such a legalistic philosophy caused many Jewish leaders to miss the most important part of God’s Law (the Greatest Commands⁷). Our faith can be shrunk down by feeding on external things rather than the Bread of Life⁸, until it is nothing but a dead husk. Our Lord did not say: “Blessed are those who tithe mint, dill, and cumin...” if they neglected the important matters⁹.

We should learn a lesson from the boy and apply it to our search for God. The boy knew that there is something very valuable to be searched for (and found) in spite of the evil in the world. A quote that seems to fit in here is that “We must concern ourselves not so much with the pursuit of happiness, but with the happiness of pursuit¹⁰.” And in light of the horse theme note: “If we let fear push us around, it won’t be long before we’re all fences and no horses¹¹.”

1. There were many “people of the land” such as Simeon, Anna, and others; see Luke 2:25ff
2. Thanks to Ray Marcrom, my mentor in teaching
3. Don’t be offended – Jesus and Paul both used this basic word (Luke 14:15 and Philippians 3:8 (KJV))
4. I imagine his feelings are somewhat like the preacher discusses in Ecclesiastes 2:17-26
5. Matthew 5:6
6. Matthew 6:33
7. Matthew 22:24ff
8. John 6:25ff
9. Matthew 23:23
10. Happiness of pursuit quote from the movie: Hector’s Search for Happiness; Character played by Christopher Plummer.
11. Dream Big: Know What You Want, Why You Want It, and What You’re Going to Do About It, Goff, Bob, p.136