**REAL TREASURE! MATT. 13:44-46, PS. 50:1-11, PS.139:23, 24, JULY 17/22.**

 God is good. All the time. All the time God is good, because that’s simply God’s nature. Wow!

 I believe in Jesus. I believe He is the Son of God. I believe He died and rose again.

 I believe He paid for us all. And I believe He’s here now, standing in our midst.

 Here with the power to heal now, and the grace to forgive.

 Last week we talked about the prayer of Jabez. Do you remember it? “Lord, bless me indeed. Expand my territory. May Your hand be upon me & keep me from evil.” Repeat it with me. God deemed Jabez to be more honourable than his brothers. That meant Jabez wanted to honour God above all else—to put Him 1st in everything that he thought, said and did.

 Asking God to bless us is agreeing to centre ourselves in what God wants for us & it’s also asking God to honour that intention. And asking God to bless us is not so much for us as it is a request to enable us to share God’s best with others. It’s about glorifying God by sharing His goodness so that others will look at Him. Asking God to bless us “indeed” is a request to bless us a lot, without concern for who you are, but rather who you want to be/become.

 Jabez’ next request was for God to enlarge His territory. Really, that is asking for a miraculous intervention by God to make something happen that ordinarily would not. Bruce Wilkinson says, “God always intervenes when you put His agenda before yours and go for it.”

 The 3rd part of Jabez’ prayer is that God’s hand would be with/upon us. The problem is that when we get these expanded opportunities because we’ve asked God for them, we start to think we deserve them & can handle them in our own strength. Wrong. Bad logic. You need to release your dependence on yourself & give these new territories completely over to God’s leading, even though that goes against your past experience. As you become dependent on the strong hand of God, His greatness is released through you. You can’t do it on your own.

 “The hand of the Lord” is a Biblical term for God’s power & presence in the lives of His people. Joshua 4:24 reveals God drying up the Jordan River so the Israelites could cross it, as He had done with Moses leading them across the Red Sea.

“God did this so all the peoples of the earth might know that the hand of the Lord is powerful & so that you might always fear the Lord your God.”

 In Acts 11:21, the church was scattered by persecution after Stephen was stoned to death. Believers began to speak to Gentiles, rather than exclusively to the Jews & told them the good news about Jesus. “The Lord’s hand was with them & a great number of people believed & turned to the Lord.” When Jesus gave the Great Commission to His disciples: “Go & make disciples of all nations &…lo I am with you always,” there was no way that task could have been accomplished on their own! But the arrival of the Holy Spirit in Acts 1 touched ordinary believers with God’s greatness. The hand of the Lord is powerful & present within us!

 Jabez finally asked God to keep him from evil. The 4 parts of Jabez’ prayer reveal what God desires from us. He wants us right in the middle of His agenda, bringing glory to Him by loving Him & serving others—that’s the blessing. He wants us to grow in our influence for Him so others will come to know & love Him—that’s the expanded territory. He wants us to want His guidance & direction in all life—that’s His hand upon us. And, He wants to protect & keep us from evil & temptation on the road to righteousness. The beauty? God delights in doing all this!

This morning’s Scripture is an extension of the principles of Jabez’ prayer.

“The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field. When a man found it, he hid it again and then in his joy went and sold all he had and bought that field. Again, 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.” (Mt. 13:44-46)

 In a modern take of this parable, a woman finds a valuable pearl in an obscure shop. The merchant will give it to the woman in exchange for everything she has. Wanting badly to own it, she writes a check for several thousand dollars, emptying her savings & checking accounts. The merchant asks, “What about your house?” The woman signs over the deed. “What about your 2 cars?” She signs them both over to him. “What about your boat & vacation home? Stocks & bonds, retirement funds & life insurance?” The woman transfers all of these to the merchant.

 Then the merchant says, “Now the pearl is yours.” The woman is delighted! She turns to leave, but the merchant stops her, saying, “Here is all that you have given me to purchase the pearl; I am giving all these things to. They still belong to me, but I will let you have full use of them for as long as you live. The only thing I ask is, whenever possible, share my houses, my cars & my other wealth with those I send your way.”

 The woman is overcome with joy. “Of course, thank you!”

 “Remember,” says the merchant, “you may use these things as if they are your own, but on occasion, I will ask you to share them or even give them away to others.”

 Many of us are still learning how God can multiply our resources when we understand the relationship between our gifts, the gifts we receive & the ultimate Giver. This week, allow God to show you that He will be found faithful as we increase our faithfulness and generosity. How does God call us to be faithful with these generous blessings He has bestowed on us?

 There is an emphasis here about generosity of heart & how filled you are in your relationship with God & the community of Christ. This parable is about responding gratefully to the sense of the Holy Spirit at work in the world around us.

 It also invites us into regular patterns of living out our faith. Stewardship is about building a healthy relationship with our possessions & it’s about giving something bigger than ourselves. Stewardship is also a form of serving others. Giving our time, talents & financial resources connect us with others whom God so deeply cares about.

 It’s very easy to be drawn away from being good stewards—so many things that tempt us, so many things that are marketed at us; so many messages that try to convince us our happiness can only be found if we acquire the right car, home, phone, TV, game system, clothes...

 Yvonne Martinez Thorne reminds us that giving is a means to grow closer to God, an opportunity to respond to God’s amazing invitation to be co-participants with Him in loving and caring for His people. So what can we do to incorporate generous giving of our time, talents and treasure into every day, to connect more to others and their needs rather than things?

 People are amazed when they hear that church is a community where people volunteer their time, talent and treasure without expecting any material return for them. They wonder if they couldn’t share in that kind of giving.

 Tony Campolo was asked to pray for the missions offering at a church. To the shock of many, he refused. Instead, he said, “We don’t need to pray for an offering tonight because this is what I know about God. God has already given each of us in this room enough resources to meet our $15,000 offering tonight. All we need to do now is to give. So, I’ll start by emptying my wallet with the cash in it & maybe some of you could do the same. They exceeded their target offering.

 That’s what happens when God’s people are in the habit & ready with generosity & stewardship, when lives are filled with the love of God & each person lives from a place of generosity. Miraculous things happen when you open your hearts & minds to live generously.

 David Platt in *Radical* says, “God blesses His people with extravagant grace so they might extend His extravagant glory to all peoples on the earth.” You can’t disconnect the grace of God from the glory of God. Otherwise, we exalt grace that centres on us & bypasses the heart of God. The message of Christianity is, “God loves me so that I might make Him—His ways, His salvation, His glory & His greatness—known among all nations.” God, not us, is the end of the Gospel. We work toward this end when we practice good stewardship.

 God has given us treasure beyond all the gold or pearls in the world. If we really think about that, we’ll want to sell everything we have to secure that treasure. We’ll want to stop worrying about storing up treasures on earth on things—things that rust, break, wear out, get lost or stolen. Things that we eat or drink or clothes that we wear. Things we can’t take with us when the Lord calls us home. Which master do we serve? We can’t serve both God and money.

 God does not need your money. As we read, God owns all the silver, all the gold, every beast of the forest, and all the cattle upon 1,000 hills. Every sq. inch or cm of the earth is His. He doesn’t need your money. That said, He wants your heart devoted to Him, not to the things money can buy. One very clear way of showing that your believe in Jesus, you believe He is the Son of God, you believe He died and rose again, you believe He paid for us all, & you believe He’s here now standing in our midst, here with the power to heal now & the grace to forgive—is to be faithful in your giving. Is Jesus the treasure we say He is? Is He really worth giving up everything else for? If you really mean it, release your financial resources to Him for His use to serve &provide for others—for God’s glory. He wants to accomplish truly unbelievable things in & through you, with your resources & mine—our collective resources.

 As we give everything for the real treasure—Christ Himself—we will know unspeakable joy in our giving! Think of how joy-filled you are when you can give a gift to your child, or any child, or to any loved one. As the giver we always get much more blessing in return. God wants you to give Him all your things so He can give you back much more blessing than you ever imagined. He’s given us the means to help others. The question is, do we have the heart to live as generously as God desires for us to live in order that we may bring glory to Him?

 See what you can sacrifice from among your things—possessions & money—this week for God’s service & the needs of His people; then continue that practice for good.