



# DOWN TO EARTH

HOW JESUS' STORIES  
CAN CHANGE YOUR  
EVERYDAY LIFE

TOM HUGHES

The gospel is God's flesh-and-blood embodiment of life-giving love. Jesus Christ is that life, the living center of that gospel. Tom Hughes is utterly convinced this Jesus alone provides the good news we all need. In *Down to Earth*, Hughes takes us into some of Jesus' most powerful stories that to this very day still invite and provoke us to find our truest and fullest life in Christ. Relish these stories and respond to Jesus' call to life—life abundant.

MARK LABBERTON, president of Fuller Theological Seminary

In *Down to Earth*, Tom highlights Jesus' use of parables throughout his ministry on earth. Tom proffers that Jesus used a parable as both a riddle and a mirror. Certainly, some parables seem straightforward, but others have always felt like a riddle to me. Through reading this book, even the ones I assumed to be straightforward have been unlocked in new ways, like riddles in sheep's clothing. What I learned through the pages of *Down to Earth* is how Jesus used parables to mirror back to us how valuable we are to him. These mirrors are meant to show us not how we see ourselves but how he sees us, as image bearers of God. Jesus not only sees us as precious but invites us to see this ourselves, as a way to step out of hiding and into deeper communion with him. Tom articulates how Jesus came not only to prove the existence of God but also to demonstrate the character and compassion of God—and he did this most powerfully through parables.

BLYTHE HILL, CEO of Dressember Foundation

Tom Hughes's book *Down to Earth* declares with great joy who God is, whose we are, and the invitation to become changed people. Tom writes and teaches with years of ministry and leadership experience, pastoring us into the stories and heart of Jesus. You won't regret reading this book that exclaims the power of the greatest story ever told!

ALBERT TATE, speaker and senior pastor of Fellowship Monrovia

The beauty of this book is that it fully lives up to its title! Tom brings heaven's stories down to earth for the here and now with real-life application, and you find yourself captivated by the Master Storyteller, Jesus, along the way.

TAMMY DUNAHOO, general supervisor of The Foursquare Church

Every one of us loves to hear a good story. We weave our own lives into its fabric as we discover that we can identify with the reality it unfolds. There is such joy in finding that in the grand stories of Jesus, there is a place for us. Let Tom Hughes guide your heart in finding yourself on the pathways of Jesus' stories that bring meaning to your life and godly perspective to living.

KEVIN MANNOIA, chaplain at Azusa Pacific University,  
president of International Council for Higher Education

It's one thing to tell someone that God is love; it's quite another to tell them the story of how Jesus suffered and died for them to prove that love through a beautiful song or captivating story. Jesus did the same thing when he taught two thousand years ago. He told stories. Tom Hughes has done a beautiful job of pulling out the sometimes-hard-to-understand truths of these stories in an instructive and inspiring way.

TOMMY WALKER, worship leader at Christian Assembly Church

Jesus' stories have the power to unlock the deepest realities of our lives: our regrets, disappointments, failures, and fears. Hughes helps us wrestle with these life-changing stories . . . with helpful discussion questions at the end of the book. This book contains hope and good news for all. Dig in!

DOUG SCHAUPP, national director of evangelism at InterVarsity

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**TOM HUGHES**

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# FOREWORD

WE LIVE IN THE MOST COMPLEX and volatile mixture of generations and cultures that I can ever remember. The social and political clashes being ignited by collisions of age, ethnicity, and gender are happening daily. It feels as if the world is splitting at the seams. We are witnessing meltdowns of global proportions—nations railing against each other, politicians hunkering down, families and relationships fracturing. Even our prisons are overflowing, and yet we have not stemmed the tide of pain and brokenness. There seems to be little relief in sight, and no clear leader with a solution or clarion call.

Maybe that's part of our problem: We are looking for one leader to fix it all. Just maybe, the solution lies within all of us. Perhaps the plan and pattern has already been given through the parables of Jesus, and we just need to discern it, embrace it, immerse ourselves in it, live it out, and transfer it to others. Tom Hughes has done a masterful work of compiling several of the parables of Jesus, taking extraordinary care to unpack their incredibly helpful counsel. As we come to understand and discern them, we have the chance to first find clarity about our own journey and



then, second, become spokespeople for abundant life, peace, joy, grace, wisdom, kindness, and love. When an individual discovers the treasures of heaven, Tom helps us see, it not only changes their perspectives and priorities but also affects everything they influence. The rescued become the rescuer.

Jesus entered a world of institutional, political, and religious oppression. The delicately balanced systems of people were often the sources of the world's problems, rather than pathways to solutions. Their focus was hinged solely on authority and obedience. Collisions abounded everywhere back then too. But Jesus began to shift that thinking. He highlighted godly values, not organizations or rules, as the pathway to elevate people above their problems. In human-made systems, people are often treated as objects to be used, leveraged, and manipulated. But Jesus saw people as objects of his affection to be restored and helped at every turn. His parables demonstrate the value he places on every person, and they hold keys to help people navigate life.

Tom Hughes is like a tour guide through Jesus' parables, pointing out the things that are often missed because of our poor vantage point or lack of insight or experience. That's the focus Tom takes throughout his life. He is an unconventional leader (in the best sense) whom I've grown to admire and respect. He puts others first. He is less concerned about protocol and more concerned about people and principles. His leadership is breaking hard ground, breaking through difficult situations where it's been hard to imagine hopeful or helpful possibilities. He has one hand on Jesus' teaching, and with the other hand, he is reaching out to connect us to this lifeline. People are being rescued and are becoming rescuers.

You only do that when your values align with Christ's and

## FOREWORD

when you deeply care about the future of others. In this book, Tom has marshaled the forces of heaven to combat the forces of darkness. *Down to Earth* has the possibility of releasing people from their personal places of imprisonment—some there by their own decisions, others by being pulled along into the conforming culture of a fallen world. As Tom points out, Jesus doesn't spend a lot of time on how we got to where we are; instead, Jesus focuses his words and stories on how to get going in the right direction, how to anticipate and avoid the danger spots, and how to help others do the same.

The church is indebted to Tom Hughes for his tenacious focus, energy, and work to unpack the stories of Jesus. The powerfully healing, releasing, and empowering truths in this book will unleash heaven's resources, bring clarity to places of confusion, rescue those derailed by their own decisions or the situations they find themselves in, help stem the tide of the dangerous forces of evil, and initiate a resurrection effect in every arena that desperately needs life breathed over it. And just maybe, our story will become a bridge to the greatest story ever told.

*Glenn Burris Jr.*

**PRESIDENT, THE FOURSQUARE CHURCH**



INTRODUCTION

# THE GREATEST STORIES EVER TOLD

The shortest distance between a human being and the truth is a story.

ANTHONY DE MELLO

THE STORIES JESUS TOLD ARE the greatest stories ever told.

That's a bold claim in a world filled with stories. If it's true, then this book is worth your time to read. Let me see if I can back it up.

Jesus was a master storyteller. It's been estimated that up to a third of his teachings came in the form of stories (often called parables) about the Kingdom of God. If you want to know Jesus or understand God's Kingdom, then you have to wrestle with the parables of Jesus.

I say *wrestle* rather than simply *read* or *hear* because that is the point of the parables. They are not just stories to be heard; they are riddles to be unlocked. In fact, the Hebrew word for parable means just that: a riddle.<sup>1</sup> The Greek word for parable means "to throw alongside."<sup>2</sup> Like a farmer throwing seed on soil, Jesus is not

just telling stories; he is “throwing riddles alongside.” Alongside what? Another story: ours.

In considering these riddles, viewpoint is everything. A theologian once told of a time when he held his infant son up in front of a mirror. The baby moved; the reflection moved. The baby waved; the reflection waved. Suddenly the youngster’s face lit up. He realized, “That’s me!”<sup>3</sup>

That is how these riddles work. The parables begin as black print on a white page. Told long ago in a faraway place, they seem to be irrelevant to our day and time. But as Jesus tells them, the time and space seem to disappear. On the pages of Scripture, you see a reflection of yourself and an invitation to join in and live in the Kingdom of God. They are the greatest stories of all time not only because of who told them but also because they have the power to change us.

If these stories are the greatest ever told, we would expect to see that they have stood the test of time—that they are resilient and relevant across cultures and generations. And, in fact, that is what we see. They have inspired people to create some of the most beautiful art ever created: paintings, sculptures, stained-glass windows, poems, and songs ranging from hymns and symphonies to rap and rock. References to the parables of Jesus are everywhere.

It’s not just art. Countless hospitals are named Good Samaritan. Every time you hear of a talent show, you are hearing the echo of one of the parables of Jesus. And most people, including those who have never read Jesus’ actual parables, know that a prodigal-son story is one of loss and redemption.

The parables of Jesus were always drawn from daily life. They are stories about fathers and sons, farmers and seed, business agreements and fishing trips, baking and banquets. They have been called earthly stories with heavenly meanings, but that can be

misleading, suggesting that they have nothing to do with the here and now. It is more on target to say that they challenge us to join in with God's work in our everyday lives.

Jesus' stories connect us to him. We are told that "Jesus used many similar stories and illustrations to teach the people as much as they could understand" (Mark 4:33, NLT). Apparently, Jesus knew that we are wired *for* stories and can be rewired *by* stories. Recent brain-scan studies show that stories influence our thoughts; moreover, the mere act of storytelling cultivates a relationship between the storyteller and listener.<sup>4</sup> The closer the connection, the greater the listener's understanding of not only the story but also the storyteller.

The more we understand Jesus' stories, the closer we will be to him. Likewise, the closer we desire to be with him, the more we will understand what he is saying through his stories. It's a virtuous cycle. As Jesus observed, "Whoever has will be given more, and they will have an abundance" (Matthew 13:12). However, for those with hearts hardened toward him, the parables might never move beyond being merely interesting stories (see verse 15).

Jesus' parables require us to think, pray, wrestle, and do some soul-searching as these down-to-earth stories give us a view into how the Kingdom of God operates. When we do these things, not only do we see the Kingdom of God, but like the baby in the mirror, the stories help us see ourselves and the condition of our own hearts in light of the stories Jesus tells. Our understanding and our hearts are tied together.

Yet when Jesus' disciples asked him about the parables that they did not understand, he explained everything to them (see Mark 4:34): They could discover the purpose of the parable by simply asking Jesus. Thankfully, we have not only the parables of Jesus but also some of his explanations recorded afterward.

The parables are concise, with intriguing plots usually involving crises of some sort. They always include a surprise from what we may have initially expected. By the end of the stories, we are always left to issue verdicts. However, the point of these verdicts is not to simply say the right answer; it's to live the right answer. The stories do not end when Jesus finishes telling them. They continue in our own lives as we grow, change, and do life differently because of them.

Jesus' parables were almost always told to groups of people. At the end of the book, you will find a section with questions for each chapter. You can use these to guide your own personal reflection. Even better, I invite you to use this book with a small group to grapple with the parables together as Jesus' original listeners did. We will be considering fifteen of Jesus' parables, but you can find a list of twenty-nine of them at the end of the book to further your growth in following Jesus.

So come with me as we take a look at some of these riddles that Jesus throws alongside our lives so we can better understand and live out this thing called the Kingdom of God. These down-to-earth stories not only hold the power to entertain, intrigue, and make us curious but also have the power to help us clearly see and know God, make a fresh start, set priorities, forgive, maximize our talents, cope with evil and suffering, and love others well.

They are not just stories to be heard; they are stories to be continued. The parables of Jesus come to us with surprising twists and different perceptions to teach, challenge, convict, heal, comfort, and motivate us. They are the greatest stories ever told because they hold the power to change the world. In fact, they already have. But they are not done. Now these down-to-earth stories have come to change *your* world too.

CHAPTER 1

# JESUS' MOST MISUNDERSTOOD PARABLES

## The Stories of the Hidden Treasure and the Pearl of Great Price

Nowadays people know the price of everything and the value of nothing.

**OSCAR WILDE**

The Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost.

**JESUS (LUKE 19:10, NLT)**

IT FEELS AS IF WHAT SOMETHING is worth is constantly up for grabs. Not long ago, I was in the process of purchasing airline tickets for an upcoming trip, and the price changed while I was in the process of booking them! And, of course, the price went up, not down. Then a week later, after I'd already purchased tickets, an email alerted me to the fact that the same flight, same day, same airline had now dropped in price (again with no price guarantee).

It's not just airline tickets. The "in" toy from last year isn't so "in" anymore. The brand-new car driven off the lot immediately loses value. A company's valuation on the stock exchange can change from moment to moment.

How can we know what something is actually worth?

It's a question we face every day. On one hand, we can confuse



something that has only temporary value with something that is of lasting value. On the other hand, there are times when we recognize what is of real value—what is very good and truly valuable—and we organize our lives around those things.

Jesus tells two parallel stories back to back as a way of emphasizing that we are constantly faced with the challenge of deciding what something is worth. How you understand these two stories influences how you understand yourself, God, and living your one and only life. I believe that the following two parables are the most misinterpreted of Jesus' parables. See if you agree.

#### **WHAT IS WORTH WHAT: BEGIN AT THE BEGINNING**

[Speaking to his disciples, Jesus said,] “The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure that a man discovered hidden in a field. In his excitement, he hid it again and sold everything he owned to get enough money to buy the field.

“Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant on the lookout for choice pearls. When he discovered a pearl of great value, he sold everything he owned and bought it!”

MATTHEW 13:44-46 (NLT)

The standard interpretation of these two parables is that we are like the man in the first story or the merchant in the second one. We find the treasure that is the Kingdom of Heaven. Seeing that it is of such great value, we give our all to buy it. We are the one doing the seeking, the finding, and the purchasing. We are the hero in the story.

But is that really what Jesus is trying to tell us? Maybe.

But maybe not.

## JESUS' MOST MISUNDERSTOOD PARABLES

“Am I the man or the treasure?” “Am I the merchant or the pearl?” Before we wrestle with the ends of the stories, we have to wrestle with their beginnings. We have to ask ourselves, “Who is what?”

Just prior to the parables, Matthew tells us,

Jesus always used stories and illustrations like these when speaking to the crowds. In fact, he never spoke to them without using such parables. This fulfilled what God had spoken through the prophet:

“I will speak to you in parables.

I will explain *things hidden since the creation of the world.*”

MATTHEW 13:34-35 (NLT), EMPHASIS ADDED

If these parables are about “things hidden since the creation of the world,” determining who is what in these parables requires us to go back to the creation of the world:

God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.”

So God created humankind in his image,  
in the image of God he created them;  
male and female he created them. . . .

God saw everything that he had made, and indeed, it was very good.

GENESIS 1:26-27, 31 (NRSV), EMPHASIS ADDED

The Hebrew word that is translated *good* can also be translated as *precious, valuable, excellent, and pleasing*.<sup>1</sup> Genesis tells us that for the first five days of creation, at the end of each day's work the creation was good. However, here at the end of the sixth day's work of creation, the day that God made people in his image, it was *very good*. In other words, Genesis is underlining the value that God saw when he considered the people he had created. All of creation was good, except those beings made in God's image—they were *very good*.

Living in a global marketplace, we can absorb the illusion that value is determined by “What have you done for me lately?” We often extend that way of thinking to ourselves, measuring our worth based on grades, job reviews, number of social-media followers, or amount of money in our bank accounts. We slip into thinking that our value is determined by how others feel about us or even how we feel about ourselves. That might work well on our good days, but what about on our bad ones?

Genesis offers us a different picture. Humans are created on the sixth day. The people had not even done anything yet. They had not produced or created or even multiplied. And day seven was set apart as a day of rest—the very first full day of human existence was a day of rest.

Our being called very precious and valuable before we had done anything and then given a day of rest to start our experience of life underscores that our value must be intrinsic to who we are, not just what we do.

## **THE SOURCE OF OUR VALUE**

God declares us very valuable, but where does this value come from? It comes from the fact that you and I were created in the

image of God. Authentic image gives and determines value. God does not make any counterfeit human beings.

The value of a US hundred-dollar bill is not based on where it has been or how it has been used. Its value is not determined by its shape, size, or color. A one-dollar bill in American currency has the same shape, size, and color as a hundred-dollar bill. If you want to know what the bill is worth, what matters is whose image is on it. George Washington's image tells us that it is a one-dollar bill we are holding. If we have a bill with the image of Benjamin Franklin, then we know we are holding a hundred-dollar bill. How do you determine what *you* are worth?

*You need to know whose image you bear.*

So here's what is true about you: Regardless of whether things are going well or not, whether you feel great or glum, because you were created in the image of God, you are of the highest value.

This can be a challenge for some of us to accept because the things around us have constantly changing values.

*The thing is, you are not a thing.*

According to Matthew, the prophecy said that the Messiah will "explain things hidden since the creation of the world." Then Jesus tells a parable about a hidden treasure and then another one about a pearl. We've seen that God has given us great value, but where does the hidden part come into play?

In Genesis 3, we learn that Adam and Eve let fear and skepticism take root in their hearts. Up to this point, they had experienced only good. However, the enemy of God tempts them to believe that the Creator is not planning for their best interest. So they eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

It's essential to note that the Hebrew word translated *knowledge* carries with it a sense of experience. It's not just that Adam and Eve

## DOWN TO EARTH

were intellectually aware of evil's existence; it's that by becoming skeptical of God's nature and purposes and intentions for them, they opened themselves to the experience of evil. Here's what we are told:

The man and his wife heard the sound of the LORD God as he was walking in the garden in the cool of the day, and they *hid* from the LORD God among the trees of the garden. But the LORD God called to the man, "Where are you?"

He answered, "I heard you in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; *so I hid.*"

GENESIS 3:8-10, EMPHASIS ADDED

God gave us the highest value by making us in his image, but when he comes looking for us, our totally false perception of him causes us to hide ourselves from him. God's plan of sharing his joy with the creatures of his affection—created in his image and dearly precious to him—is challenged by our propensity to doubt that love. How could God's reputation be renewed and light be shed on the now dark, worrisome, and skeptical place in the human soul? How could that happen, and what would it cost? In other words, what is worth what?

## THE FOUR STAGES OF LOVE

About a thousand years after Jesus told these two parables, a monk named Bernard of Clairvaux wrote something that has helped shine some light on these parables for me. Clairvaux founded seventy monasteries and observed a four-stage development in a person's

relationship with God. See if you can find yourself at any of these stages as a way of moving forward in your relationship with God.<sup>2</sup>

The first stage is the love of oneself for the sake of oneself. We all start here. We are concerned for only ourselves, aware of only our own needs. As babies we have no choice but to begin our lives in an entirely self-centered reality. But we don't have to stay there.

The second stage is the love of God for the sake of oneself. We step into loving God but only on the basis of what he can do for us. Clairvaux noted that this is as far as most people ever travel in their lives. One way to tell if this is where we are is to listen to our prayers. If our prayers mainly consist of asking God to give us something or protect us from something or make something happen for us, we are probably at this second stage. If this is where our love for God stops, we are in danger of hating God if he does not give us what we want when we want it.

The third stage is the love of God for the sake of God. This is where we begin to sense that God has value simply because of who he is. Just as he declared that we have value simply because of who we are, we now can make that same declaration about him. Just as he valued us before we had done anything, we can now value him also for who he is.

This is the beginning of joy and wonder for many people. God did not have to be the way he is. He did not have to create animals as wonderful and weird as the platypus, but he did. He did not have to make sunsets so majestic and beautiful to us, but he did. God's character does not have to be filled with mercy, creativity, generosity, and grace, but it is. That such a God does exist becomes the point of delight and joy.

When I first read these stages, I thought that this third one should be the end of it. If we could each get over ourselves long enough to love

God solely for who he is, that should be the top of the mountain, right? But I was surprised to read about the fourth stage.

According to Clairvaux, the fourth stage is the love of oneself for the sake of God. When I first read this, it rubbed me the wrong way. It seemed selfish, prideful, and arrogant. It seemed to be a great step backward, not forward. And then I thought about how being a pastor serving in the most diverse neighborhood in Los Angeles means that I have had the privilege of sitting with many different people: men and women of seemingly every ethnicity and background imaginable, some exceedingly rich and others exceedingly poor, some very young and some very old. I have learned that it is very rare to find a person who does not suffer from some level of blatant self-dislike or even self-hatred.

Some people focus on physical traits, desiring to be taller or thinner or to look different than they do. Others are introverts wanting to be extroverts (or vice versa). Still others wish they had different natural skills or abilities: “If only I could write music like she does”; “If only I could speak as well as he does”; “If only I could build a business like my friend.” Some people seem to think that God did not really know what he was doing when he created them. If you have ever struggled with negative feelings toward yourself, it is a surprising discovery to find out how God feels about you. This fourth stage is when we have caught a vision of the value he has placed within us.

Which brings us back to these two parables that Jesus told of the hidden treasure and pearl.

### **WHAT IS SOMETHING REALLY WORTH?**

What is a thing worth? It's worth what someone is willing to pay for it.

In Jesus' other parables that have a person searching for something that is hidden, covered, or lost, God is not who is hidden or lost; we are. Just like in Genesis. God is the one doing the searching. This fits exactly with Jesus' understanding of himself: "The Son of Man came to seek and save those who are lost" (Luke 19:10, NLT). God is a seeker.

Christ sees our value in spite of all of the broken, messy, value-distorting fears and sin we have covered ourselves in. He sets aside his divine privileges (sounds like a man who "sells" everything) and takes the form of a baby in a manger. Skepticism had set into the human soul from Genesis 3, but in Luke 1:68, interestingly, we are told that God has *epeskepsato* us.

Many English Bibles translate *epeskepsato* as "visited."<sup>3</sup> It's an unfortunately bland translation, as it obscures the lightning of what is happening in Jesus' coming down to earth.

*Epe* means to move toward someone or something with helpful intent. *Skepsato* is where we get our English word *skeptic*. Putting it together, when Jesus came, he "moved toward the skeptics with helpful intent."<sup>4</sup> Who are the skeptics? As we just saw in Genesis, me and you. And what are we skeptical of? God's good character, intentions, and plans for us.

And so we hid from God, and Jesus came from heaven to seek and save what was lost. He who set aside his divine rights to visit the skeptics with helpful intent did this by eventually dying on the cross (see Philippians 2:7-8).

He did this all for the joy that was set before him (see Hebrews 12:2). What does that joy consist of? A restoration of the unbroken communion that we were created to have with God from the creation of the world—a treasure that was once hidden and lost and is now being found again.



Most people have at least some time in their lives where they struggle with issues of self-worth or wonder how God sees them. Whether that happens a lot in your life or only episodically, God declares that you are worth the coming of his Son, Jesus Christ, who arrived in a manger to be with us. Zephaniah says it this way:

The LORD your God is living among you.

He is a mighty savior.

He will take delight in you with gladness.

With his love, he will calm all your fears.

He will rejoice over you with joyful songs.

ZEPHANIAH 3:17 (NLT)

With Jesus' arrival in the manger, the Father declared, "You are worth it!"

### **THE TREASURE IN THE DIRT IS STILL VALUABLE**

And now we ask, "But what about my sin? My messed-up life? My addiction? My secrets? Don't those remove my value to God? Just because I once was of great value and great worth does not mean that I still am."

Don't believe that lie about yourself and about God.

Think of it this way. How much is a crisp, clean hundred-dollar bill worth? A hundred dollars. How much is a dirty, crumpled, hidden hundred-dollar bill worth? A hundred dollars. Why? The image might be in need of restoration and cleansing, but it is still there. While we were still in the dirt of sin, in the fear of evil, in the anger, in the isolation we covered ourselves with, God not only came looking for us but came to pay the highest price for us: "He was pierced

for our rebellion, crushed for our sins. He was beaten so we could be whole. He was whipped so we could be healed” (Isaiah 53:5, NLT).

On the cross, Jesus was the man and the merchant who sold everything he had in order to pay for the treasure that had been hidden, the pearl of great price to him. In Christ, you were “bought with a price” (see Acts 20:28; 1 Corinthians 6:20; 7:23; 2 Peter 2:1). God’s Word is clear that the mystery of this Good News is now available to all who would hear and respond by faith (see Romans 16:25-26; 1 Corinthians 2:7; Ephesians 3:7; Colossians 1:26). If you respond by placing your faith in Jesus and follow him, that is what it means to be “in Christ.”

In the book of Revelation, the city of God is described. It contains twelve gates. On the gates are written the names of the twelve tribes of Israel, and each of the gates is made of a single pearl (see 21:9-21).

A pearl is unique among all the precious stones in creation because it is the only precious stone that is created through pain. It is the result of a grain of sand creating pain within a clam, which then secretes a fluid that hardens around the grain of sand. When we see a pearl, we see something that has been made lovely through the process of pain. That is the very story of the gospel of Jesus. We are forgiven and are being healed, renewed, and restored, but it happened through the process of his freely entering into the pain of the Cross on our behalf. What God thinks you’re worth is clear and unwavering: You are worth everything to him.

## **RESPONDING TO GOD’S LOVE**

What has been paid for us is of greater value than anything that will ever be asked of us. If indeed, within these parables, we are the

pearl and the treasure as opposed to the merchant and the man, it frees us to embrace and live from God's assessment of our great value and preciousness to him. It calls us out of our tendency to hide and out of our feelings of worthlessness. Even in your hiddenness and sin, Jesus Christ has judged you to be worth his everything. "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). This is Good News. This is the gospel.

No longer are we forced to live lives in which our value rises and falls based on grades, jobs, social-media likes and followers, or any other external circumstances. This gritty story invites us to live in the joy of the stability of a value that comes from the fact that we were created in the image of God. Faith is not just believing in God; it is believing that he is good. Faith rejects the skepticism that says that God is in it only for himself. The Cross is God's ultimate rejection of the enemy's lie from the beginning that God is really only about himself. Faith sees that we do not do things hoping to prove our worth to him or earn his love. Faith sees that we already have it.

Life, then, is not an attempt to earn God's love. Instead, his love is the fuel and the power to live the lives we were created to live. In other words, we are pearls of great price. And thanks be to God that he was willing to pay it so we could be freed from our hiddenness and sin, restored to life with the one who loves us from the very beginning.

So then the question becomes "How do I handle regrets in my life? Can God redeem the things I wish I'd done differently?" Well, Jesus once told a story about that, which we will look at next.