

Show of hands: How many of you have ever done a devotion? As I expected, most of you have. It's a pretty standard part of the Christian life. Something that many of us were taught to do from an early age.

Doing a daily devotion is usually something that involves Bible Study, prayer, maybe reading a text from a Christian theologian. But it's an interesting word, isn't it? Devotion. The word doesn't actually mean any of those things.

No, devotion is commitment. When you are devoted to something, you pursue it at all costs. The root of the word actually comes from Latin, meaning to “fulfill a vow or promise.” You are devoted to your husband or wife in your wedding vows. You are devoted to your family. You are devoted to your God.

And so we call this act of Bible study and prayer a “devotion” because doing it demonstrates our commitment to the Lord. We make a promise to ourselves and to God that we will do this reading and prayer every single night. And then we fulfill that promise as best that we are able. It becomes an example of our devotion to God.

I bring all this up because we have some examples of devotion in our Gospel Lesson today too. A series of parables, with the common theme that they are all about the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom of God.

The first is about a man who is devoted to buying a field. He's discovered buried treasure in that field. He knows that if he wants to claim the treasure as his own, and not be accused of stealing it, he needs to buy the field it's in. So he sells all that he has in order to buy the field and the treasure it contains.

The second is about a merchant who is devoted to buying fine pearls. A merchant like this would have wealthy clients who would pay exorbitantly for his wares. So he comes across the finest pearl he has ever seen. It's expensive, but he knows there's a rich aristocrat out there who will pay double or triple what it's worth. So he sells all that he has, all of his other inventory, in order to buy that one pearl.

Finally, the third is about a group of fishermen who are devoted to catching fish. Like good fishermen, they cast their nets into the sea and gather a huge quantity. Enough to fill their boats. But not all the fish are good. Some don't taste any good. Some are too small. So they sit on the shore, sorting the good from the bad, until all that is left are the fish that are fit to bring to the market.

Three groups of people filled with devotion for their tasks. Willing to pay anything for what they seek. Willing to work whatever hours are necessary to complete their work. Until finally they reach their goal.

And so Jesus finishes telling these parables and then looks at the disciples. And He asks them, *“Have you understood all these things?” And they said to him, ‘Yes.’”*

Yes, of course we understand! We're the men in the parables. The kingdom of heaven is a great treasure to be sought after. A pearl of great value to be purchased, no matter the cost. A huge haul of fish to be gathered and sorted. We are your fisher's of men. We will do whatever you ask. Because we are devoted to you.

That's at least how I imagine they responded. I don't know for sure. The Bible just says, “Yes.” But I'm guessing that's what they were thinking. Why?

Because that's exactly how most of us have read these parables. And I'm not just talking about you in the pews. I'm talking about me as a pastor. And a whole bunch of the guys who wrote the books in my office. It's a very common interpretation.

But after years of reading this passage that way, I'm pretty sure it's wrong. And I'm not alone. There's a growing number of Lutheran theologians who read these parables in a completely different way. And perhaps you've already seen the reason why.

If we are the men in these parables, selling all we have for the kingdom of heaven. Working day and night to take possession of the kingdom of heaven. Then that means that obtaining the kingdom of heaven is just a matter of devotion.

It's just a matter of reading your Bible enough. Praying enough. Knowing enough theology. Obeying God. In theory, as long as you have enough devotion, you will always find the kingdom of heaven.

But there's just two really big problems here. Number 1 is, "Where is Jesus in all of this?" And number 2 is, "Am I that devoted?"

Let's start with number 2 first. Are you that devoted? The men in the parables sold all that they had for the kingdom of heaven. They gathered fish until they couldn't fit any more in their nets. Have you done that? Have you sold all that you have for the kingdom of heaven? Have you been a fisher of men until you couldn't find another person to share the Gospel with?

I don't think so. You do 15 minutes of Bible Study and prayer in the evening and you call that devotion. But that's nothing compared to what the men in the parables did.

Which brings us to where Jesus is in all of this. Because he's the one with devotion. He's the one who sold everything to buy that field. He's the one who gave up all that he had to buy that pearl. He's the one who worked tirelessly to gather every fish he could find.

And what was the treasure in that field? You. What was the pearl of great value? You. What are the good fish kept safe until the close of the age? You. Jesus was devoted to gathering you. As he always has been.

You'll notice at the end of these three parables, Jesus tells a fourth one. But this one is different. Instead of beginning, "*The kingdom of heaven is like,*" it begins, "*Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven is like...*" We're not talking about Jesus and the kingdom of heaven that surrounds him anymore.

No, we're talking about scribes trained for the kingdom of heaven. A scribe is simply someone who knows scripture really, really well. So after talking about his own work through three parables, Jesus is very pointedly saying that he is now talking about his disciples. He's talking about us.

And he says that we are like a master of a house, who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old. He's someone who has great wealth all around him, but he values the old stuff just as much as the new stuff.

So what do we have of value – of heavenly, eternal value, of course – that is both old and new? We have God's Word. Old and New Testaments. The ancient writings of Moses and the prophets. Along with the much newer writings of the Gospels and the Epistles. Both of infinite value to a scribe trained for the kingdom of heaven.

And so what is it that Moses tell us that connects to these parables? "*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.*"

Why? Not because they were so numerous. Not because they were so great. Not because they were so obedient or committed or devoted. No, "*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.*"

It is not because of our devotion that we are God's treasure. It is because he loves us. *“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?”*

He loves us with a love that cannot be separated by death or life, angels or rulers, things present or things to come. Not powers or height or depth or anything else in all creation. Not even our own pathetic lack of devotion can separate us from his love.

And yet, that doesn't mean daily devotions are a bad thing. No, in fact, they're a very good thing. For just as we are God's treasure, he has given to us the treasure of his Word, old and new. The treasure of his prophets and apostles. The treasure of his promises. And the treasure of coming to him in prayer. Treasures that are meant to be brought out every single day.

Because of his great, all surpassing love and devotion to us, that gave up everything to have us as his own, we are given the gift of our meager devotion to him. Our wonderful comforting, encouraging, insightful times of Bible Study and prayer. And our complete confidence that nothing can separate us from him. Amen.