

### BURIED TREASURE

Moviegoers came and stood in lines that wrapped around the block. Some of them were dressed in bandanas and gold hoop earrings. Others engaged in mock sword fights on the sidewalks under the marquees. Last weekend they came in record-breaking numbers and helped shatter the old Hollywood record for a movie's opening weekend, generating some \$132 million dollars in ticket sales. They came in such huge numbers to see Johnny Depp reprise his role as Captain Jack Sparrow in the new *Pirates of the Caribbean* film called *Dead Man's Chest*. (Source: *New York Times*, 7-10-06, E-2)

There can be little question. Pirates have made a comeback! Not since the days of Errol Flynn have they so captured the public's imagination! The renewed popularity of buccaneers and swashbucklers is led by Depp and the two Caribbean movies, but it's not just about a couple of popular films. The *Times* Book Review section had a whole article recently about new children's books with pirate themes. And pirate costumes flew out of stores last Halloween. There are even whole websites devoted to pirate jokes and riddles.

Do you know, for instance, what method pirates use to learn how to read?

Hooked on phonics!

Do you know why the pirate showed up with a paper towel over his hair?

He had a bounty on his head!

Or, how did the pirate stop smoking?

He used the patch!

A soldier and a pirate are both sitting at a bar and they start swapping stories about their escapades.

"So," says the soldier to the pirate, "How'd you get the wooden leg?"

"Ay," says the pirate, "I fell overboard one day, and afore they could fish me out, a shark bit off me leg."

"Wow!" says the soldier, "And the hook."

"Ay matey, that's from a sword fight that didn't go me way."

**“Amazing,” says the soldier. “And the eye patch?”**

**“Arrgh I got squirted in me eye by a grapefruit.”**

**“You lost your eye because of grapefruit juice?”**

**“Ay,” says the pirate, “It was me first day with the hook!”**

**Corny jokes and riddles aside, the popularity of pirates may be due to their colorful personalities, their seafaring adventures, or their rebellious natures. But there can be little question that a big factor in their attraction is all wrapped up in our fascination with buried treasure. The very idea of following a map to where X marks the spot and then unearthing a sea chest filled with jewels and Spanish doubloons tickles our sense of adventure. What if we found such a treasure—imagine what we could do with all that loot!**

**Pirates, of course, buried their sea chests filled with gold, because they couldn’t risk being seen in banks! But buried treasures have been around long before pirates. In fact, in Jesus’ day, burying one’s treasures was rather commonplace. William Barclay writes: “In the ancient world there were banks, but not banks . . . ordinary people could use. Ordinary people used the ground as the safest place to keep their most cherished possessions . . . . There was a Rabbinic saying that there was only one safe repository for money—the earth.” (*Daily Study Bible: Matthew, I: 98*)**

**In 1992 archaeologists discovered an example of this in Caesarea on the Israeli coast. They were excavating an ancient residential site when they found ninety-nine gold coins in a covered hole beneath the floor of a private home. Such buried treasure was far from unusual.**

**The commonplace was often at the center of Jesus’ parables—this one about buried treasure was no exception. It is part of a whole string of parables, all intended to address the question what is the kingdom of heaven? What is the kingdom of God?**

**An important note: as used here the word kingdom is not about geography. When you think of kingdom you probably envision castles and knights and damsels-in-distress. But the kingdom of heaven is not about a specific place. The original Greek phrase is probably best understood as a state of being. The kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of God, is the rule or reign of God. Whenever we do God’s will, whenever we do the right thing, we enter the kingdom. As one scholar writes: “To be in the Kingdom is to obey the will of God.” (*Daily Study Bible: Matthew I: 212*)**

**And what is the will of God? Jesus makes that very clear throughout the gospels: we are to love God with all our heart, body, mind and soul, and we are to love our neighbors as we love ourselves. And he also makes it clear that our neighbors include everybody—even our enemies.**

**I recently read about a survey of college students asking what they thought was the most distinctive Christian teaching. They responded, “Love your enemies.”**

**Love of neighbor, love of friend or enemy, is not about emotion—it doesn’t mean we are to have a warm fuzzy feeling about everybody. It means treating others in the way you want to be treated. Loving your neighbor as you love yourself is obeying the will of God. That’s the kingdom of heaven.**

**What then happens when we obey the will of God? What happens when we love God and neighbor? That’s the question addressed by Jesus in these parables.**

**To obey the will of God, he’s saying, is like finding a treasure buried in a field while you’re plowing and then using all the money you can scrape together to buy the same field and gain the treasure.**

**Like plowing a field, obeying the will of God happens in the everyday experiences of life.**

**Like finding an unexpected treasure, obeying the will of God requires being open to something new.**

**Like using everything you have at your disposal to buy a bit of land, obeying the will of God must be the most important thing in your life, consuming your very all.**

**Like acquiring a buried treasure, obeying the will of God means recognizing it can change everything.**

**When you enter the kingdom of heaven, when you obey the will of God, when you love your neighbor as you love yourself it will turn life upside down!**

**Pirates were at the peak of their influence and power in the eighteenth century. But they were not the only ones plying the waters of the Atlantic and the Caribbean with ill-gotten gain. The waters were also full of slave ships.**

**It is hard for us to imagine the horror of the slave trade. Slave traders would dock off the coast of West Africa and then buy human beings with various trinkets and liquor in order to sell them in England or America. Then men, women and children would be stacked like logs in the hull of each boat, chained together to prevent suicide attempts. Not out of any sense of mercy, but to protect their market value. A dead slave was worth nothing. If any one got sick with small pox or dysentery, they were simply thrown overboard. Over the course of the eighteenth century some six million Africans were bought and sold as if they were livestock.**

**One slave ship Captain named John made many such trips and started sailing at the tender age of eleven. His father was a commander in the merchant service of the King of England. Young John's mother had died when he was only six.**

**John worked his way up through the ranks, and in time became a pilot on the *Greyhound*, a slave ship out of England. He went about his everyday work, sailing through waters far from home, buying and selling African slaves.**

**In 1748, heading home with a hull full of human cargo, his ship was overtaken by a massive storm. They pumped and bailed, but the boat kept taking on water. Death seemed certain, and the young pilot was very frightened and overcome with a sense of guilt as he stared death in the face and considered his evil ways. He cried out to God for salvation and deliverance. In time the storm slackened off enough for him to sleep. In the morning the skies were clear, but the storm had stripped the ship of all food stuffs. Still there were casks of fresh water. And they made it home safely. Slowly it dawned on him that it was by God's grace he had been saved—from the storm and from his sin. He vowed to live his life going forward for God.**

**He had discovered the buried treasure of grace. But it took some time before he bought the field. He slid back into his old habits. And he continued to engage in the buying and selling of human beings. But each trip became harder and harder. And finally, he left the slave trade behind. Convinced he could not continue to conduct such business and call himself a Christian. He realized obeying God also meant loving his neighbors. All his neighbors. Even the black ones from Africa.**

**For a while he worked in the maritime business on shore, but he felt a growing call to something totally new, and so he studied for the ministry. He was ordained and appointed a curate in the small town of Olney. Eventually he joined up with Wilbur Wilberforce and worked for the abolition of slavery. He bravely told his own story, despite the guilt he felt when he remembered his past. "Silence," he wrote, "at such a time and on such an occasion would, in me [have been] criminal . . . I felt bound in conscience to take shame to myself by a public confession." He bravely told his own story and confessed to his complicity in the horrors of the slave trade. And he wrote hymns. Wonderful hymns. "Glorious Things of Thee Are Spoken," and of course, "Amazing Grace." His full name was John Newton. When he wrote about being a wretch, about being blind, he knew whereof he spoke! And he knew first hand all about the kingdom of heaven.**

**He knew that obeying the will of God happens in the everyday experiences of life, like steering a ship on rough seas.**

**He knew that obeying the will of God requires being open to something new, like loving people he once considered property to be bought and sold.**

**He knew that obeying the will of God must be the most important thing in your life, consuming your all, like becoming a parish priest.**

**He knew that obeying the will of God means everything can change, like moving into the public eye and honestly telling your life's story, even if it means being subjected to scorn.**

**The kingdom of heaven is like this, Jesus might have said, it is like a slave ship captain who gives up his trade and works for the freedom of those he has previously oppressed.**

**And that's well and good. But what about you? Are you a citizen of the kingdom of heaven? Are you seeking to obey God's will in your everyday life—at home, at work, at school, at play? Is obeying God the most important thing in your life? Are you ready for change? Are you showing your love for God and neighbor in all you do?**

**How do you deal with that boss you can't stand at the office?**

**What do you say to your rival when she gets elected president of the PTA—despite the fact that you really deserved the office?**

**What is your attitude towards Conservative Republicans—or liberal Democrats?**

**How are you treating those who wait on your table or do your dry cleaning?**

**When a company downsizes do you say, "Great, my stock will go up!"—or do you think about those who've lost their jobs?**

**When your buddies pick on a kid at school because she's overweight, do you join in with the others and call her "Fatso"—or do you sit with her at lunch?**

**It's all well and good that the kingdom of heaven is like a man finding a buried treasure, or even like a reformed slaver working for the cause of abolition. But what about you? Could Jesus point to your life and say, "the kingdom of heaven is like this"?**

**You see, Jesus tells this parable and all parables to challenge us to think, and to force us to ask a simple question, what about me? What about me?**

**Are you a citizen of the kingdom of heaven?**

**Amen  
John H. Danner**

