

Treasured Possession

In the name of him through whom in all things we are more than conquerors, dear friends in Christ: What's an item worth? How do you determine something's value? These are interesting questions.

For a lot of things, commodities in particular, market forces drive the answer: the old law of supply and demand. You farmers understand this. The price of corn, soy beans, beef, and pork is determined by how much is produced. The bigger the supply, the lower the price; if production is low, the price increases (or at least, it's supposed to). This is why too something like water, which is normally plentiful and relatively inexpensive, becomes worth a lot more if there's some kind of disaster that knocks out the local treatment plant rendering the water undrinkable. Now everyone has to buy bottled water. And because that supply is relatively small, the stores have to crank up the price. Sure, they'll be accused of gouging their customers in a time of crisis, but the truth is that if they don't raise the price, the first few customers will buy the whole supply at the normal cost and then turn around and sell it to their neighbors for a much higher price. The simple fact is that because the supply is low, the price must increase. The only question is who will benefit from it.

But market forces don't determine the value of all things. Often other more subjective considerations factor in. Take a young child's favorite stuffed animal or comfort blanket. The item may have no intrinsic value at all. It might be worn, stained, tattered; but don't waste your time trying to explain that to the child. To the child, it's worth all the world. And to parents who'd like to avoid endless weeping and gnashing of teeth, it's worth a lot too.

The history connected to an item can factor in. There are thousands of old flint lock pistols lying around the world, but only one of them was used by Aaron Burr to shoot Alexander Hamilton. It's worth a lot. So too with family heirlooms: a watch or other item that belonged to your great, great, grandfather and that has been handed down through the generations may be worth a whole lot more to you than it is to me.

The quality of an item is yet another consideration. A lump of coal and a diamond are made of the same stuff chemically. But the time and pressure that caused the carbon atoms to organize themselves into a crystalline structure makes the diamond worth a great deal more. And even among diamonds quality matters. Value is determined by size, clarity, lack of defect, and traces of other elements that can impart a blue, yellow, or other hue to the stone. Even clever marketing can factor in. In the past undesirable brown diamonds were used almost entirely for industrial purposes. Then some bright fellow got the idea to label them "chocolate" diamonds and sell them as jewelry. What's in a name? If it's the right name, it can mean a fortune.

But let's return to the original questions: what's an item worth, and how do you determine something's value? With so many factors weighing in, I've found that the simplest way to answer is this: an item is worth whatever someone is willing to pay for it.

And that brings us to today's reading from Deuteronomy. In it the Lord tells the Children of Israel that of all the peoples and nations of the earth, he has chosen them to be his treasured possession. They are the one nation upon which he places the most value. He tells them that

they are a people holy to the Lord. And when hear the word “holy” we usually think in terms of perfection or being without sin, but that’s not the idea. Biblically speaking, “holy” means having been set apart by the Lord for his use and purposes. They were holy unto him because they were the nation through whom he chose to reveal himself, to display his character, to entrust with his Word, and eventually to bring the Savior into the world.

He goes on to explain *why* he chose them to be his treasured possession – but first by ruling out reasons he didn’t take into consideration. He tells them it wasn’t because of their great numbers. And that might have been a good guess. Think: if you’re the great God of all creation, wouldn’t you choose a relatively large and powerful nation through whom to operate? A people worthy of such an honor? No, says the Lord, I chose you when you were the fewest in number. And that’s true: God chose Abraham to be the father of their nation when it was just him and his wife, Sarah. And as a couple, they were well past the age of child bearing. If the size of the nation was what mattered, he surely wouldn’t have chosen them.

A little farther along in Deuteronomy, the Lord explains that it wasn’t because of their relative righteousness that he chose them to be his treasured possession. It wasn’t that they were more godly or virtuous than other peoples. It wasn’t that they had a more noble character or higher moral principles. And certainly, the history of Israel bears this out. If anything, in view of all that the Lord did for them, they proved themselves time and again to be less worthy than other peoples when it came to being faithful to the Lord and walking in his ways. No indeed, they were forever rebelling against him, chasing after other gods, and engaging in all kinds of immorality.

So, what was it about them that caused the Lord to choose them to be his most treasured possession? It was absolutely nothing *about them*. The Lord explains that it was all about *him*. He tells them it is not their worthiness or relative value, but rather *his* love and gracious favor *for* them. And here an insight from Luther is extremely helpful. He says that the love of man comes into being through that which is pleasing to it. That is to say, we love the people and things that gratify us somehow. Or say it another way, we love the people and things we value the most. But God’s love is different. Luther explains the love of God does not *find* but *creates* that which is pleasing to it. It must be so: for in this fallen world there is nothing that pleases or gratifies him. The whole thing is in rebellion and under his curse. If he were looking for a people upon whom to place his love according to the way we do it, he wouldn’t find any. But thank the Lord he doesn’t do it that way. He places his love on the unworthy and then through his divine power makes them pleasing to him. It’s like he chooses to value a dirty, black chunk of coal and then transforms it into a diamond.

He gives another reason for choosing the people of Israel to be his treasured possession, and it follows from the first. He says it is because he is keeping the oath that he swore to their fathers. He’s referring to the promise he made to the Patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to make of them a great nation, and to bring the Savior into the world through their line of descendants. Like I said, this promise is necessarily follows God’s love for them. That’s because love, divine love anyway, always involves a commitment. And this commitment must be communicated. That’s why at a marriage we have the couple speak their vows to each other. They have to say to their partner, “I will love, honor, and cherish you; and forsaking all others, cleave only to you until death parts us.” That’s what the Lord does with his people. He loves them and then commits himself to them with an oath like a loving husband. And unlike us, the Lord always keeps his Word. It’s impossible for him not to. Thus, he can always be trusted.

And then, to hammer home the point he's making about Israel being his most treasured possession, the Lord goes on to name the price he paid to have them as his own people. I said before that an item is worth whatever someone is willing to pay for it. And the Lord wants Israel to know how much he values them. So, he says, "I brought you out of Egypt with a mighty hand and *redeemed* you from the house of slavery." To redeem something means to buy it back. They were slaves in Egypt. As a people they were owned by someone else. They had no strength, no virtue, no worth at all except for what work the Egyptians could force (or beat) out of them. And at the time, Egypt was the most powerful and advanced nation on the planet.

The Lord is telling them, you want to know what you're worth to me? I took that most powerful nation and for your sake I humbled and destroyed it. I visited nine terrible plagues upon them, bringing them to ruin, and then in one night I killed their firstborn just to have you as my own. And in the process, I had them hand over to you their wealth. You left Egypt with laden with gold, jewels, and other valuables. They forced them upon you, so eager were they to see you go in the end. I did that for you, so you would know what you are worth to me.

And that, of course, is just a picture and prophetic foreshadow of the staggering price the Lord would ultimately spend to buy his people back from bondage; not to Egypt, but to sin, death, and the power of the devil. Today, we, the Church, are Israel: the spiritual sons and daughters of Abraham by holding the same faith as Abraham. What the Lord told Israel back then, he says to us today. You are my treasured possession. It's not because of your intrinsic worth, because you haven't got any. It's because of my love for you and my promise to you. And if you want to know what you are worth to me, consider what I paid to redeem you. I took my Son, my firstborn and only-begotten Son whom I love, and I humbled and destroyed him for your sake. I put your sins upon him and had him tortured to death to save you from hell and to give you eternal life in my kingdom. Even now, as a pledge and token my love for you, I give you his body and blood to eat and drink. It's so that you may know – and know for certain – how much you are my treasured possession.

Think about that. That's how much the Lord values you, each and every one of us. And if that thought doesn't overwhelm you, then you don't understand it. It's utterly dumbfounding. But it's true. You *are* the Lord's treasured possession. He proved it by paying the ultimate price.

The question for you is how much do you value that? We just sang, "Your kingdom, O Lord, is my glorious treasure, my pearl of incomparable worth. Its value exceeds every standard of measure, surpassing the wealth of the earth." Is that true? Make no mistake, it should be. But is it? What value do you place upon it?

The answer lies in what you'd be willing to pay for it. I'm not talking about an amount of money per se, but we could start there. I hear all the time about people who get a fantastic job opportunity somewhere there's no church in which they can receive the rightly preached Word and the properly administered sacraments. They have a decision to make. And by it they show how much they value God's kingdom and his gifts of grace. And what about you? Suppose you were being deprived of God's Word and sacraments. What price or sacrifice would you be willing to pay to get them? We have them available regularly right here. And yet so many don't value them enough even to show up to receive them.

But let's cut to the chase. Your eternal life depends on these things. Do you value them enough to pay the price of surrendering your earthly life? This was a question that came up at the youth conference some of us attended last week. What would you be willing to die for? The

speaker asked this as he was talking about the Reformation. He spoke of Luther who put his life on the line for the sake of the rightly understood Gospel. He spoke also of the Lutheran dukes and princes who stood before the Emperor Charles V at the reading of the Augsburg Confession. The Emperor wanted to force them back into the Roman Church. They knelt before him and said (in effect) "You can take our heads off our bodies if you want, but we will not give up this Gospel of salvation."

Would you be willing to do that for the truth of the Gospel? You know, if you're a confirmed member of this Church, you promised to – to suffer all, even death rather than depart from this faith. We know how good the Lord's Word is. How good is yours?

I'll answer that: it's not good enough. None of us values the truth of God's kingdom and the gifts of his grace as we ought. And none of us can keep our promises to be faithful to him – not on our own, anyway. We remain entirely dependent upon God's grace, love, and forgiveness each and every moment. Our value lies only in what he gives us. We pray that he gives us the grace to recognize that – to recognize that and to repent and trust in his mercy in Christ Jesus.

And something else we should recognize is that the Lord places this immense value on all of us. There is no one in God's kingdom who is less of his treasured possession. If the Lord places such a high value on your brothers and sisters in Christ, it's a safe bet that you should too.

We are the Lord's treasured possession: bought and paid for with the blood of his Son. May we treasure now and always his treasuring of us, his gifts of grace, his Word and sacraments, and the fellowship we share as his children all redeemed by his grace through faith in our Savior Jesus Christ. In his holy name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!