

## **The Parable of the Dragnet**

### **Matthew 13:47-50**

This parable seems redundant in light of the parable of the wheat and the tares. There is a significant difference, however. The Lord used the wheat and the tares to illustrate how the good and the evil co-exist side by side during the church age. The command given by the Lord was to let both grow together until the time of the harvest. There was a warning here about the danger of rushing to premature judgment.

The emphasis in this parable of the dragnet, however, is not on co-existence but on separation. This parable contains a frightening warning about what happens to the wicked when they are separated from the righteous at the close of the age.

The picture that our Lord paints in this parable would have been extremely meaningful to the disciples, especially those who had been fishermen. On the Sea of Galilee three basic methods of fishing were used, all of which are still employed today. The first was simple: a line and hook was used to catch fish one at a time. The other two types involved the use of nets.

One net was a small one-man casting net. The folded net was carried over the fisherman's shoulder as he waded in shallow water looking for a school of fish. As the fish drew near the net was thrown so that it opened into a circle and came down over the fish. Weights caused the net to sink and trap the fish. The angler then pulled on a chord, which drew the net around the fish like a sack. When the net had been pulled closed, the fisherman would then haul his catch to shore.

The second type of net was a large dragnet requiring a team of men to operate, and either one or two boats. If only one boat was used, then one end of the net would be moored on shore while the other end was attached to the boat, which would make a large circle out into the water and come back to the starting point.

If two boats were employed, then a very large net would be dragged between them. It was shaped like a long wall, 750 or even 1,000 feet in length, upwards of 25 feet high at the centre, and 5 feet high at the ends. The foot rope was weighted with sinkers, while the head rope floated with attached corks. It would be dragged towards shore by both ends, trapping many fish inside.

The net permitted virtually nothing to escape. All sorts of things besides desirable fish were caught. It swept everything in its path – weeds, objects dropped overboard from boats, all manner of sea life, and fish of every kind. If a net was filled, it could take many men several hours to finish dragging it up on the beach and complete the task of sorting the catch. In the fishing industry, both then and now, a “bycatch” is inevitable. Moreover, in the Lord's day, the technology simply could not be altered so that only “good” fish were caught. By the way, about 24 different kinds of fish have been counted in the Sea of Galilee. According to Leviticus 11:10-12, all fish without scales and fins were considered unclean; that is, not kosher.

Of course, we are all astute enough to know that this parable is about human beings. We are the fish! Just as the dragnet caught all kinds of fish, so the Gospel dragnet sweeps through the vast sea of humanity, catching all kinds of people and drawing them ever nearer to the shores of eternity. When Jesus walked the earth, he initiated the process of calling all kinds of people to enter God's kingdom. He called tax collectors and prostitutes, Samaritans and sinners, fishermen and farmers, centurions and lepers, Jews and Romans, Pharisees and Sadducees, men and women, slave and free.

Today the Master continues this work through his Body, the Church. Our mission is to proclaim the Gospel to all persons regardless of race, creed, color, or socio-economic class. We are to proclaim it without discrimination; alcoholics, drug addicts, pregnant teenagers, convicts, people with AIDS – whosoever.

To those who respond in faith and belief, it is a dragnet of Good News. To those who reject its message, it is a web of judgment. It moves silently through the sea of mankind, drawing them to their ultimate destiny – believers to eternal life and unbelievers to eternal damnation. John MacArthur puts it so well:

**“Men move about within that net as if they were forever free. It may touch them from time to time ... startling them. But they quickly swim away, thinking they have escaped, not realizing they are completely and inescapably encompassed in God’s sovereign plan. The invisible web of God’s judgment encroaches on every human being just as the dragnet encroaches on the fish. Most men do not perceive the kingdom, and they do not see God working in the world. They may be briefly moved by the grace of the gospel or frightened by the threat of judgment; but they soon return to their old ways of thinking and living, oblivious to the things of eternity. But when a man’s day is over and Christ returns to set up His glorious kingdom, then judgment will come.”**

It is probably true to say that no doctrine is harder to accept emotionally than the doctrine of Hell. I have listened to learned men of God, ones who are generally sound in doctrine, shrink back from this particular doctrine. I have heard many an unbeliever protest that surely a God of love would not - could not – send anyone to Hell. But, as emotionally charged as this doctrine is, we must listen to Jesus. Over and over again, Jesus warns about the horrors of Hell. Repeatedly, the Master pleads with men and women to avoid it by coming to Him for salvation. Just read [Ezekiel 18:32](#) where God says, **“For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone ... so turn and live.”** Peter adds this: **“The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance”** (2 Pe. 3:9).

The Lord wept over Jerusalem because the people would not come to him and be saved (Luke 19:41). Jesus spoke more about Hell than did any of the prophets or apostles. He had more to say about Hell than about love! More than all other teachers in the Bible combined, Jesus warned about Hell. Nowhere is there any promise of escape for those who refuse His gracious, loving offer of salvation.

In fact, let’s be clear – absolutely clear - about the danger of Hell and its horrors. First, Hell was not created for men but for the devil and his fallen angels ( Matt. 25:41). Second, so real is Hell, and so dreadful was our Father’s contemplation of it, that he sent his One and Only Son to the cross so that men might escape Hell’s torment. If there was no Heaven to be gained and no Hell to be shunned, why did our Lord subject himself to the tortures of the cruel whip, the crown of thorns, and the nails that pierced his hands and feet? Why? If all men receive the same destiny regardless of how they have passed their time on earth, then I put to you that the cross of Calvary is a meaningless hoax, a totally unnecessary charade. But the cross is God shouting to all humanity, “Please! Please! Don’t cut yourself off from Me! I am your Savior! I am the road that leads away from Hell and into the Heavenly city.”

Those in Hell will have committed the ultimate, infinite sin – not simply a string of finite sins. They will have steadfastly rejected a relationship with God. They will have cut themselves off from God. Ultimately, God will respect their tragic choice. Those who want no God get no God! C. S. Lewis puts it this way: “There are two kinds of people: those who say to God, ‘Thy will be done,’ and those to whom God says, ‘*Thy* will be done.’”

A tragic example of this is the case of Charles Templeton. Once a preacher of the Gospel, he renounced his faith! The last book he wrote bore this title: *Saying Goodbye to God!* When he stands before the Lord on Judgment Day, Jesus will no doubt have a tear in His eye when He replies, “Goodbye then Charles! Depart from Me! Go your way!”

In closing, let me say that this parable is the most crucial of them all. It speaks of the eternal consequences of the choices we make in this life. It also brings all the other parables of the kingdom to a kind of climax in the form of an urgent call. In fact, this parable sets before us two urgent calls. The first is to what we might call “church people.” Those of us who have been drawn into the net – the influence - of our Lord’s kingdom must examine ourselves now, while we can. We must be very sure that we truly have an eternal part in that kingdom. Just because someone is in the net – they go to church - doesn’t mean that they are a “good fish.” How dreadful it will be for those “bad fish” who assumed that they were part of God’s kingdom merely because they had been drawn along by its influence in this age of grace. How terrible it will be for those who have been swimming within the net, attending church, but who, like those fish without scales or fins, are not clothed in the righteousness of Christ.

The second urgent call is again to the church. We are called to spread the Gospel message. The Gospel is a net that our Lord has commanded to be cast far and wide. “Preach the Gospel to every creature ...” commanded the Lord. We must proclaim it everywhere in the confident trust that our Sovereign Lord will draw into its influence whomever He chooses.

We all have a vital role to play in this unfolding drama of the ages, this catch for eternity. Sometimes we will be like a fisherman using a line and hook to catch “fish” one at a time. At other times, we may be like the angler wading in shallow water, casting his one-man net. Most of all, however, we are meant to be a team using many boats! There can be no greater profession than to be fishers of men, saving others by “snatching them out of the fire” ( Jude 23). These are weighty matters of eternal consequence. Let us all examine ourselves while the net is still moving, before its final sweep that ushers all people to the shores of eternity.