

Parables of the Heart

A Net Full of Fish

Passages: Revelation 20:11-15
Matthew 13:47-50

Today's parable is called '*the Parable of the Dragnet*'. Not only does it stand as the **seventh** parable in Matthew 13, but it is also the **third** parable given by Jesus to His disciples in a private setting. These seemingly insignificant details will gradually become important to us as we go through the parable.

Let's pray.

Let's read today's passage once more.

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind; when it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into vessels but threw away the bad. So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth."

So, how do we understand this parable?

First, as in all the other parables of Matthew 13, Jesus is, once again, the central character! In other words, **He, along with the angels, form the group of fishermen who operate this huge net and take in a tremendous catch of fish.**

Second, as in all the other parables of this chapter, this central character, Jesus, is out in the world (represented, this time, not by a field or a batch of dough, but by a sea)—and what is he doing? He's doing what He did in all the other parables—He's looking, seeking, influencing and gathering. This time, however, He uses a huge dragnet! (A dragnet was usually around 2 meters in height and up to a hundred meters in length, fitted with floats along the top and weights along the bottom. When pulled through the water, it would literally sweep the sea, catching hundreds of fish in one go!)

The point of the parable is simple: In the hands of Jesus, the dragnet (the Kingdom of Heaven) is so powerful and effective that **no fish** (no human being) **is be able to escape its clutches!** In other words, Jesus *“has got the whole world in His hands”!*

But there’s a third thing that we must also notice (and, in fact, this is the one thing that makes this parable different from all the other parables in Matthew 13).

Up until now, all the parables of Matthew 13 have been set in the *present tense*. (In one, Jesus is a farmer “sowing seeds” in various soils **or** He’s out planting a field of wheat. In another parable, He’s a gardener planting a mustard seed in which the birds of the air can nest, **or** He’s suddenly a woman “mixing yeast into dough”, causing the whole loaf of bread to rise. Then, Jesus becomes a treasure hunter digging up and re-burying a great treasure, **or** He’s a pearl merchant on the hunt for pearls of great value.) It’s clear that, whatever the central character was doing in those earlier parables, they were all meant to reflect **Jesus’ present desire**—namely, to bring the Good News of the Kingdom to a broken world *that it might be changed and transformed by the powerful influence of Heaven*.

But something vastly different is on view in today’s parable! **In this seventh parable**, all the action takes place, not in the present, but **in the future!** With His huge net in His hands, **Jesus** (along with the angels) **is initiating the final judgment of God on all of humankind!**

Indeed, to accentuate this idea, Jesus tells us in verse 48 that the fishermen pulled the net *‘up on the shore’*. The Greek word Jesus uses here is *‘anabibazo’*, used only once in the entire New Testament. It means *‘to cause something to go up’*, or *‘to ascend.’* Clearly, this image of a huge dragnet being lifted up out of the sea with a mixture of good and bad fish in it **is a vision of the final resurrection**...the day when every human being who has ever lived on this earth (both good and bad) will be *“lifted up from their graves”* in order to stand before God, the Judge!

To put it simply, then... **this is the first of Jesus’ parables that deals with the serious question of eternity and with His role in the final judgment of God.**

Of course, this raises an important question: Why, after giving 6 parables focused primarily on the **present**, does Jesus suddenly make this switch to the **future**?

Could it have something to do with the fact that this is **the seventh parable**? I say that because, in Jewish thinking, 7 was the final or complete number; it was the number which completed the perfect sequence. (The seventh *day*, for example, is the day that completes the week. That's why every seventh day was meant to be a Sabbath Day, the day when you rested and thanked God. The seventh *year* was also called a Sabbath Year, the year when crops weren't planted and you had to trust that God would provide. Furthermore, after seven sevens of years (49 years), the Year of Jubilee was declared as a time when slaves were to be released, land was to be restored and debts were to be forgiven.)

It makes sense, then, that this 7th parable was meant to *complete* all the other parables. Whereas, **in the other 6 parables**, Jesus was out "seeking and saving the lost", **in this seventh parable**, Jesus points ahead to what will be *the end result of all His earthly work*.

This is where the **good fish** and the **bad fish** come into the picture...and this is the fourth thing of which we need to take careful notice! You see, when Jewish fishermen sorted their fish, the *good fish* were the ones that were **ritually clean** (those with fins and scales)-- for Jews, these were the only fish that were edible and marketable. The *bad fish*, on the other hand, were those that were considered **unclean** by Jewish kosher laws -- that is, they had no scales or fins...such as catfish, eels and rays, for example!

But listen to the radical teaching of Jesus! He's saying in this parable that, although humankind will eventually be divided between those who are "clean" and those who are "unclean", **it will not be the Jewish law that will determine who falls into these categories**. Rather, the future state of all humankind will be determined by only one thing: *Whether or not a person has allowed Jesus and His Word to influence their lives!*

That's why this 7th parable focuses entirely on the future! In this parable, Jesus brings a conclusion to all the things He taught in the first six parables, showing how **a person's attitude towards Him throughout the present** (as He sows His

seeds, mixes His yeast, or searches for treasure or pearls) **will ultimately affect their final standing before God on the Last Day**. Clearly, the **six** preceding parables all contribute to determining the outcome of the **seventh!**

With that in mind, think again about the context of this chapter. All around Jesus, people were already making up their minds about Him. In chapter 12, the Pharisees and teachers of the Law were calling Jesus, ‘Beelzebub’. They were, then, demanding that He prove Himself by performing miracles for them. Little by little, they were becoming bad fish! (In fact, Jesus calls them a “*brood of vipers*” in verse 34—vipers/snakes are unclean!)

Even Jesus’ own family can’t be sure what to think of Him. In chapter 12, they come to see him because they’re afraid he may have lost his mind.

Skipping to chapter 14, Jesus will be confronted by the fact that King Herod has just cut off John the Baptist’s head and may now have evil intentions for Him. Later in that chapter, Jesus will go to Nazareth, his hometown, where he’ll be rejected again, this time on the grounds that they think he’s just a local boy, the ordinary son of a carpenter.

Indeed, what becomes more and more obvious through Matthew’s Gospel is that **anyone who repeatedly opposes Jesus and rejects His Word becomes hardened in their hearts**. As such, they prove that they are *bad fish*...fish who will be rejected on the Last Day. For the fact is that anyone who repeatedly decides against Jesus is putting themselves on a road that leads *away from God*. That’s what it means to be a *bad fish*.

But there’s another side to this truth! You see, the wonderful fact about Jesus the Judge is that, in this present life, He is still ‘the Sower’, ‘the Gardener’, ‘the Baker’, ‘the Treasure Hunter’, and ‘the Pearl Merchant’. He is still presently available to do His work in us. Thus, **our present fallen nature can still be overturned!** An unclean fish can still be made clean! How? By receiving the seed of God’s Word; by having your heart open to Jesus and His teaching; by letting the Kingdom of Heaven penetrate our life until it changes us from the inside out! That’s what will turn us into good trees that bear much fruit. That’s what will change us from bad to good fish! Indeed, anyone (whether they be Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female)... **anyone who opens themselves**

up to Jesus and allows Him to do His work of transformation will, on the Last Day, be received with open arms into eternity!

To put it another way, *your final state before God...* whether He sees you as a good fish or a bad fish, a good tree or a bad tree, a sheep or a goat, a righteous or unrighteous person... *is determined by no one else but yourself!* Your decisions in this present life will establish your final destination. It's your decision to connect with Jesus that changes you from a goat into a sheep...or from a bad fish into a good fish...from an unrighteous to a righteous person!

With that idea in mind, let me point out one more Greek word in today's text. In verse 47, Jesus uses the verb 'sunago'. The NIV translates it with the English word "caught" (The net "*caught all kinds of fish*"). But a better translation is "gathered". I say that because 'sunago' has the same root as the word 'synagogue', which means "gathering". Indeed, I wonder if Jesus wasn't using a little word-play here. You see, in both chapters 12 and 14, He goes into local synagogues to preach,... but, sadly, He is rejected. Could it be that Jesus deliberately used this word to describe how the net of the Kingdom of Heaven will **catch** a variety of people and, in the end, create a new **synagogue...a new gathering of God's people...** made up of *good fish* from every nation, race, tribe and tongue?

Now, I have one last question for us to ponder: **Why did Jesus give this parable only to His disciples, in private, and not share this parable with the wider world?**

The only thing I can think of is that **Jesus was attempting to take His disciples through** (what we would call) **a major paradigm shift**. If you remember, the first two of these "private parables" dealt with 2 key issues over which the disciples were concerned—(1) Would Israel have a part to play in God's Kingdom?, and (2) How would the Gentiles fit into this? Clearly, by these first two parables, Jesus was privately and gradually opening their eyes to a new way of seeing the world; a world in which both Jew and Gentile have a place in God's Kingdom.

Today's parable deals even more forcefully with this issue. It challenges the conventional Jewish way of seeing the world, where **all Jews** would see themselves as the *good fish* and all Gentiles as the "bad fish". Jesus, of course,

sees things differently! In His new paradigm, all people on earth are of equal value and worth to God; all people on earth can, through the transforming power of Jesus, have a place in God's heavenly Kingdom.

This, of course, would be a necessary shift in the disciples thinking. Considering the fact that Jesus would soon be sending them out to the ends of the earth, they would have to be very clear that *all people* of all races and origins were worthy of hearing this Gospel, regardless of what the traditional Jewish teaching said.

Indeed, **it would put world evangelism at the very heart of their calling as Christ's disciples.** After all, how could anyone become a good fish if they weren't ready to share God's Word with all people? How could anyone be changed by God's Word **if that Word was not even available?** How could the nations ever be included in the great in-gathering of the Righteous **if the Word that creates righteousness was never sown amongst them?** It's exactly what St. Paul was saying to the Romans in chapter 10 of his letter: ***"How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have never heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?"***

With this in mind, we can understand why Jesus ends this seventh parable with such horrible consequences. In verse 49, He tells His disciples, ***"So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth."*** Now, let me say from the outset that I don't like these verses! I hate the idea that there will be a final judgment. I hate the idea that people will be separated, like fish are separated by a fishermen.

But I guess it's essential. I mean, did you know that, when the Jewish fishermen sorted out the unclean fish, they weren't simply thrown back into the water? No...they were placed into a pile and burned. Do you know why? **So that they couldn't go back and procreate, and thus multiply their 'uncleanness' in the Sea.** The final judgment is about destroying uncleanness. It's God's way of making sure the *uncleanness* of human sin doesn't contaminate *"the new heavens and new earth, where righteousness dwells."*

Keep in mind, however, that *at the present time, Jesus is doing everything possible to turn bad fish into good ones so that the final judgment won't have to happen!* The Biblical message is clear: God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek. 18:23). He does not desire that anyone should perish (2 Pet. 3:9). In the same way that the Lord wept over Jerusalem because the people would not come to Him and be saved, He continues to weep over this world that refuses to come to Him and be transformed by His love.

If you understand this, then you'll understand that this seventh parable was never meant to dampen the spirits of Jesus' disciples. To the contrary, it was meant to encourage them to wholeheartedly engage in world evangelism...that the whole world might be transformed by the power of God's Word and that all people might pass through the flames!

Let me finish with a story. Just this past week, I visited with some dear old friends who were missionaries with us in Niger. In fact, they still go back to Niger to do evangelism for 9 months of each year... trekking in the desert, searching for Fulani nomads... even though this couple are in their late 60's!

In our conversation, Phil said to me, *"Bart, these unreached people groups are going to a Christless eternity unless we get out there and share the Gospel with them."* Now, Phil has said this to me before...in fact, he says it all the time...but this time, I started to feel guilty...in a healthy way. I started to ask myself, *"What am I doing to help people really come to know Jesus?"* I mean, do I really sense the urgency?

As far as I'm concerned, I think it's time for a *paradigm shift* on this issue! I need to hear this seventh parable in a fresh new way. I need to see how it stands as the conclusion to all 6 of the earlier parables. Of course, it's not that you or I will have any part in the future casting of the final net or in bringing the fish to the shore... **but, in this present day, we do have a small part to play in doing our own fishing... helping bad fish turn into good fish, by being Sowers of the Word of God!**

I believe it's an urgent call to every disciple in every age!

Let's pray.