

The Parable of the Dragnet

Intro: I've been deep sea fishing one time. Several years ago I was holding a meeting at a congregation near Fort Walton Beach. Somehow in the course of conversation I indicated that I had never been deep sea fishing; but had always wanted to do so. To my surprise later in the week I received a call from Jeanie Sullivan, one of the members, who happily informed me that she had reserved a spot on a local charter fishing boat for the next day and that she and her teenage boys would join me on the excursion. We went out into the Gulf for quite a while and the captain announced that we should wait until he sounded the bell to let our lines down into the water. The two most attractive fish being sought that day were red snapper and trigger fish. Of course there were dozens of people hanging their lines over the side and excitedly reeling in fish of all kinds. I had landed several fish, but not any of the prize fish—the red snappers. Suddenly a tug came on my line and I reeled up the prize—a large red snapper. Now this was what I came for; and I couldn't wait to put that big daddy in my cooler to take back for a fish fry. But I had hardly gotten the fish to the boat when one of the attendants did something I'll never forget. He threw my fish back into the water! How could he do that! That was as big a fish as I'd caught in my whole life; and he threw it back in the water!

He explained that the fish, though large in my eyes, did not meet the standard limit of 16 inches to be kept and had to be returned. I would have been happier if he had gotten out the tape measure to make sure, but he had seen so many of the right size he didn't need to measure. My fish was gone; and the bad thing was that that was probably the biggest fish I caught all morning. But that man had a job to do. His job was to separate the good fish from the bad ones and he was just doing his job.

Jesus in Matthew 13 spoke a parable about separating good fish from bad ones to teach an important lesson about the kingdom of God.

The parable of the dragnet

“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet cast into the sea, and gathering fish of every kind; and when it was filled, they drew it up on the beach; and they sat down, and gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away.

This is one parable the disciples of Jesus would have had no problem grasping. Several of them were professional fishermen and they well understood the distinction between keepers and junk fish. But in this case Jesus clearly indicated the purpose of His parable. It was to reveal the fact that not everybody would enter the eternal kingdom.

“So it will be at the end of the age; the angels shall come forth, and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:47-50)

A Question: Had not Jesus already stressed this truth? Compare the parable of the tares:

“Therefore just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. “The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 13:40-42)

Why the need to say it twice? Students of the parables in this chapter have often noticed that the messages of the parables seem to be given in doublets.

Both the parable of the mustard seed and the parable of the leaven stress the growth and development of the kingdom.

Both the parable of the hidden treasure and the parable of the pearl of great price stress the value of the kingdom.

Yet in spite of the duplication in message there is a subtle difference:

The parable of the mustard seed stresses the kingdom's visible growth; the parable of the leaven stresses the kingdom's invisible growth.

The parable of the hidden treasure shows the value to those not seeking; the parable of the pearl shows the value to those who are seeking.

In a similar way Jesus taught two parables about consummation of the kingdom.

Both the parable of the tares and the parable of the dragnet make clear that consummating act of the kingdom will be the separation of the righteous and the wicked.

But again there is a subtle difference. It is well expressed by Trench in his “Notes on the Parables of Our Lord”.

The parable of the tares shows the present mixture of the good and the evil in this world. The parable of the dragnet shows the future separation of the good and the evil.

The parable of the tares shows that the separation cannot be made by men in this life; but the parable of the dragnet shows that the separation shall be effected by God in the future life.

Important lessons to think about!

It is imperative that we learn to see in “black and white” again!

As a society we are a people swallowed upon in moral relativism.

Post-modern thinking has made absolute truth virtually non-existent.

That may be for some people the only certain thing: “There is nothing that is certain”.

Jesus in this parable reminds us that there are only two kinds of people. That may be too simplistic for the educated intellectual who can see moral graduations and nuanced views of humanity. But the language of Scripture has a decisive duality about it:

He shall separate “the wicked from among the righteous”.

“He who has believed and has been baptized shall be saved; but he who has disbelieved shall be condemned. (Mark 16:15-16)

Likewise we must embrace as truth Jesus' statement that there are only two destinies.

Jesus' statement seems to respond to the common Jewish conception that all Jews would enter the kingdom.

Repeatedly Jesus stressed that the kingdom is not just for those who say, "Lord, Lord" but for those who do the Father's will.

The kingdom is not for those who can only say, "Abraham is my father"; but for those who live in the faith of Abraham.

Thus, Jesus described these destinies not in the expected terms of race, Jew vs. Gentile, but spiritual condition, "righteous" and "wicked".

It is imperative that we carefully define "righteous" and "wicked".

The world's definitions

For most people, the distinction between righteous and wicked is really one of quantitative obedience. That is, if you do more good things than bad things, you are a righteous person. If you do more bad things than good things, then you are wicked person.

For others, the distinction is one of qualitative obedience. You are wicked if you do really bad things like kill, rob banks, abuse others, do hateful things to others. But you are still righteous even though you engage in small transgressions like tell a white lie, steal something of lesser value, not go to church, etc.

These common standards of human judgments are kind of like my views of Red Snapper. It looks long enough to me... so let's keep it. He knew the law was not subject to my personal likes and dislikes. There was an absolute standard he was obligated to enforce the law or pay heavy fines if caught violating it.

The Lord's definitions

In the absolute sense, no one is worthy of the description righteous. There is transgression in all of us. It is what caused the apostle Paul to appeal to the words of a psalmist to establish the sinfulness of all mankind with these words:

What then? Are we better than they? Not at all; for we have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin; as it is written, "There is none righteous, not even one;

(Romans 3:9-10)

How then can any man be called righteous? The gospel answers:

But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified as a

gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. (Romans 3:21-25)

“The righteous” are those who, recognizing their sin, repent, putting their faith in the redemption of Christ’s blood, obeying the Lord in baptism and receiving God’s forgiveness for sins.

But even so there is a moral quality to this person made “righteous” by Jesus’ blood. In fact, he understands that his whole life belongs to God and he has been saved by grace to be “created unto good works” (Eph. 2:10). And thus in another picture of judgment Jesus looks past the righteous of forgiveness to the righteousness practice of faith. How could you distinguish these forgiven people from the unforgiven? In part by a life of love that expresses itself in appreciation for what Christ has done for them. Thus Jesus on another occasion describes the great separation and stresses the works of faith that accompany the redeemed (Mt. 25:21ff).

“And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life.” (Matthew 25:46)

Jesus was not teaching that doing good things was a substitute for obedience to the first principles of the gospel; He was teaching that doing good things was the inevitable and natural result of obedience to the first principles of the gospel.

It is imperative that we see the seriousness of judgment.

Jesus did, if you’ll allow me a little tongue in cheek here, what no real preacher would ever do—He accentuated the negative! Jesus left the audience to think about the implicit blessings of not being cast out; but he explicitly made them think about the sobering reality of hell. We cannot afford to become to “culturally sophisticated” to neglect to preach what Jesus said about judgment and eternal punishment. Jesus indicated that : God’s judgment will be fair and permanent.

Jesus will judge us according to our deeds. We will either be bad fish or good fish.

Jesus’ judgment will be permanent. If we’re bad fish, we won’t have the opportunity to become good fish.

God’s punishment will be painful.

Furnace of fire

Weeping and gnashing

Both are figures of great pain and remorse.

Conclusion: This truth about the kingdom is of great importance. The great dragnet is indeed gathering all mankind to the shores of heaven and there God the righteous judge will make an eternal separation, not according to human

standards but His own righteous standard. All of us will be there and all of us will be separated.

“There’s a great day coming...when the saint and the sinner shall be parted right and left”.

I pray that I may live to fish.....
Until my dying day.
And when it comes to my last cast,
I then most humbly pray:
When in the Lord's great landing net
And peacefully asleep
That in His mercy I be judged
Big enough to keep.