

THE NET CAST INTO THE SEA

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SCRIPTURE: Matthew 13:47-50

And again, the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind; which, when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away. So shall it be at the end of the world: the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.

Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven, but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven.

Again in the parable of the net cast into the sea, Jesus drew upon incidents which were familiar to all his listeners. Many of his disciples had been fishermen before they left their nets to follow him; and no citizen of Palestine could have been completely ignorant of the procedure of using various kinds of nets in fishing.

It should be noted, however, that the Greek word translated "net" in this parable appears only this one time in the New Testament. It is not a dip net; it is not a hoop net into which fish swim and are trapped. It is a seine, or a very large drag net. The seine is very long, and weighted on the bottom. One end is fastened on shore, and then the other end is taken aboard a boat and a wide circle of water is swept clean of fish. Or sometimes two boats will manipulate the net. In this kind of fishing, there is no chance to pick and choose your fish, as would be the case if you were using a smaller net on a small school composed of one kind of fish or if you were fishing with flies, or a hook and line. The seine or dragnet sweeps everything before it. It gathers of every kind.

The first lesson of the parable, perhaps, is that those who are sent forth to be fishers of men cannot be and should not be too much concerned about the kind of fish they are getting. The grace and pardon and forgiving mercy of God are extended to all subject only to their willingness to come, and to obey. The minister who in his fishing for men is very careful not to swing the net around any of the so-called "lower classes," or to enfold in its meshes any who are morally disreputable, has missed the point of his calling. It is true, no doubt, that the church has to exercise some care in choosing its members, lest the church be filled with unregenerate, sinful, wicked men who will soon make the church only an echo of the sinfulness of the world. But on the other hand, the church exists that sinful men might be saved. No one knows sometimes whether a man who appears to be bad is really good or bad, until he has come in contact with the Spirit of Christ, and has felt its quickening, forgiving, regenerating power. It is the duty of the church to proclaim the gospel of salvation to all; to spread the net of the kingdom until it encompasses all men; to invite all to come to Christ; to lend every assistance that love and fellowship can contrive to those seeking to overcome sin. It is not the prerogative of the church to judge men before the net is drawn in. Judgment is the prerogative of deity. It will come in God's due time. In the meantime, the church is not supposed to be a mutual admiration society composed exclusively of perfect, sinless people, but rather a society of imperfect people who have felt God's pardoning grace, and who are striving together and with God to attain perfection by overcoming temptation.

The redemption of Jesus Christ is efficacious for all men. In God's due time all men will be resurrected -- redeemed from the grave -- spirit restored to body -- and

all men in their resurrected and immortal bodies will be brought to stand before the judgment bar of God, or in other words, restored to God's presence. The net of Christ's redemption is all-inclusive. Within its sweep it includes all mankind. It catches of all kinds. In the field of the world, according to another parable, the wheat and the tares grow together until the time of harvest, but each will come under the scrutiny of a final judgment. In the parable of the wedding feast, the guests came from the highways and byways -- they were anything but the socially elite but each was required to have on a wedding garment. Though the redemption of Christ includes all men, let us not lose sight of the final judgment which will be rendered by God himself. Each man who is restored to God's presence will have determined by his own life, his own choices, whether he is worthy to remain there -- worthy to be saved and used in God's kingdom, or cast out to be destroyed. Though the net gathered of all kinds, not all were saved.

Next in our interpretation of the parable of the net, let us note the leisurely way in which judgment is rendered upon the fish who were caught in the sweep of the dragnet or seine. When the net was full, the fishermen drew it to shore, and sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away. There was no snap judgment. There was no sweeping verdict passed on the catch as a whole; but rather each fish was examined critically and individually to see whether it was good for food. The judgment was quiet, deliberate, unhurried; but infallible and inexorable. There was no possibility of one good fish being accidentally discarded because it was mixed in with a batch of bad fish. There was no possibility of one bad fish getting by because he was in company with a lot of good ones. Judgment was careful, unhurried, final, infallible and inexorable.

We usually interpret this parable to mean that the "good fish" or good men who are caught in the net of the kingdom are the morally good; and that the bad fish are the morally bad who in the day of judgment will be cast out and destroyed. That meaning is certainly there. But there is another meaning there too. Fish are not morally good, or morally bad. They are either good to eat, or unfit for human food. In that sense, they are good and bad. The Mosaic law provided that fish were good for food only if they had both scales and fins. And fish which did not have those two qualifications was therefore a "bad" fish, in the sense that it was considered unfit to eat. He might be a perfectly fine specimen of a fish, but because he was not good for the purpose of the fisherman or those he served, he was cast out.

Jesus' most severe criticism was always reserved for those who omitted to do the thing which was good, while priding themselves on not doing a lot of things they considered bad. The Pharisees in particular, prided themselves on NOT doing thousands of little inconsequential things which they considered as contrary to the law, but Jesus told them that the publicans -- those hated tax gatherers who were considered traitors to their nation and their race -- and the harlots, should go into the kingdom before the Pharisees. Jesus had very little to say about people who in the face of temptation had made mistakes, who had done things they should not have done, and then repeated of them. He was always very lenient with sins of commission, always eager to extend his forgiveness and pardoning grace. But Jesus had no patience with the sins of omission -- with the people who prided themselves on their piety, but never go around to DOING the things that would have made them good for something. Negative righteousness is not enough. It is not enough that a man be good by refusing to do that which is bad. If the highest good is to do nothing bad, then a rock which does nothing, is the most moral thing in the universe. The citizen of Christ's kingdom must be good for something. There must be something in his life which will nourish and help and strengthen his fellow men. There must be positive virtue, not simply a lack of evil. The fish which were saved out of the net were the useful fish. The fish which were cast out were just as morally good as the others, but because they were good for nothing, they were cast out.

The parable of the net teaches the universality of Christ's mission, his forgiveness, his grace and pardon, and of his kingdom. Many are called, but few are chosen. The day of judgment is coming, but today is also a day of judgment. If you were to be judged today on the basis of your worth to the kingdom and to your fellow man, would you be saved, or cast aside as a bad fish?