

**PARABLE OF THE DRAGNET**  
**MATTHEW 13:47-50**  
**5/10/20 ABC**

In 1986, two Israeli brothers who were fishermen on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee, noticed something sticking out of the mud on the beach during a prolonged drought. It turned out to be a small fishing boat that dated back to the time of Jesus. Up until this point, historians had relied on the Bible for most of their information about the fishing boats & practices of the region, but this was confirmation. The boat was found in the area of Bethsaida, which Peter called home. *Bethsaida* actually means *House of Fishing*. Although there's no known connection between this boat & Jesus & His disciples, it was this kind of boat Jesus alludes to here in **Mt 13:47-50**.

So far in the parables in Mt 13 we've seen we're to be planting God's truth everywhere & that Satan is doing the same. But even though Satan is doing this, God's kingdom will grow & have influence. People will be finding the infinite worth of His kingdom, some while searching for it & others by simply stumbling over it. In today's parable Jesus illustrates the separation of believers & unbelievers & the unbelievers' judgment. Jesus has already illustrated the nature of His kingdom, the power & influence of it & the personal appropriation each person must make of that kingdom. Now He again focuses, as He did in the parable of the Tares (42), on judgment. This parable forms a miniature version of the wheat & the weeds without the emphasis on them growing together. This is a frightening warning about what happens to the wicked when they're separated from the righteous in the last days.

This parable begins with the phrase **the kingdom of heaven is like**, the same wording we see throughout (31, 33, 44, & 45). In this parable there's no explanation of how the fish got into the water. Nothing's said about their growth or lack of it. There are no human workers, not even a devil. The only thing we have is the separation of the good fish from the bad, the wicked from the righteous, & the suffering of those who are cast into hell. The only really new element is the warning to the wicked. It's as though Jesus is saying with all possible emphasis: *There's a coming judgment & the fate of the ungodly will be terrible.*

**1. THE PARABLE** Jesus uses a common occurrence to illustrate God's judgment on unbelievers. Fishing was something many of the disciples were very familiar with. In vs 47-48 we have the parable. Vs

49 begins with a transitional statement & the rest of 49 & 50 we have the interpretation of the parable. It speaks of 2 major actions: the catching & the sorting of the fish. The 1<sup>st</sup> scene mentions the net without reference to a fisherman & the same is true of the 2<sup>nd</sup> scene which mentions the fish. This shows us the person or persons doing the fishing aren't the main focus of the parable. What is? The separation & judgment of the bad fish.

On the Sea of Galilee 3 basic methods of fishing were used. The 1<sup>st</sup> was with a line & hook. That was how Jesus told Peter to fish when they needed money to pay their taxes (Mt 17:24-27). The other types of fishing involved nets. One net was a small, 1-man casting net. Peter & his brother Andrew were taking turns casting this kind of net when Jesus called them to become **fishers of men** (Mt 4:18-19). This net was carried over the shoulder as the fisherman waded into shallow water looking for a school of fish. When spotted, he'd hold the center cord in one hand & with the other throw the net so it opened into a circle & came down over the fish. Weights around the edge of the net made it sink & trap the fish. He'd then pull the cord, which drew the net around the fish like a sack. When it was closed, he'd haul his catch to shore. This isn't the net Jesus is talking about here. The one He's referring to now was a large **dragnet**, that required a team of fishermen to use. The **dragnet** is either dragged between 2 boats or is set by a single boat & drawn to shore with long ropes.<sup>1</sup> As has been explained,

*A common way of working the drag-net is to have one end of it attached to the shore, while the other is taken seawards by a boat in a wide circuit, & at length brought to land again. The upper side of the net is sustained by corks, while the lower, being weighted, sweeps along the sea bottom. The ends are gradually drawn in till the whole net is brought up on the beach, carrying with it all the fish in the area through which it has passed.<sup>2</sup>*

Because this didn't let anything slip through, all kinds of stuff besides good fish were caught. It gathered everything in its path, weeds, trash, & **fish of every kind**. Since the net was indiscriminate in what it collected, the catch had to be separated into the edible fish & the inedible. **When** the net **was filled**, it would take several men just to drag **it up on the beach**. Then **they sat down, & gathered the good fish into containers, but the bad they threw away**. The bad fish would include any that were unclean, lacking scales or fins, or any other inedible sea creature (Lev 11:9-12). The **fish** to be carried

<sup>1</sup> Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, p 225

<sup>2</sup> A. E. Ross, "Nets," in *Dictionary of Christ & the Gospels*, 2:242

to a market some distance away would be put in **containers** with water to keep the fish alive, & those that were to be sold nearby were placed in dry **containers**, usually baskets. That's the story, now what's it mean?

**2. THE PRINCIPLE** Like the parables of the Sower & the Tares, Jesus also explains this one. He begins clarifying the separation of the good & bad fish represents God's judgment **at the end of the age**. Jesus' interpretation of the tares parable includes the destiny of the righteous & the wicked (41-43), but this one focuses only on the judgment of the wicked. This parable doesn't address the question of how the church age will end but of how all humanity will be judged.<sup>3</sup>

Before we go any further, notice that fish **of every kind** were gathered in the net. That means the net is to be cast so as to embrace all & leave the determination of what is bad & what is good to God & His angels. Or to mix parables, the net must be cast wide & some seed will fall on good soil. When you're fishing, you can't expect to select your fish, otherwise they'd all be trophy catches. Our job involves an indiscriminating sharing of the gospel to people of every class & type. The saved are separated from the unsaved by their response to the gospel.

While the parable of the wheat & tares illustrates the coexistence of believers & unbelievers in the present age & this parable illustrates their separation **at the end of the age**. In His explanation of the wheat & tares Jesus said at the end of the age His angels will come & take out the wicked from among the righteous (39-41). During this present era God allows unbelief & unrighteousness to coexist. But the time is coming when His tolerance ends & His judgment begins. He will one day separate **the wicked from among the righteous**, the tares from the wheat, the good fish from the bad. *Just as the wheat & the weeds must come to ripeness, so the net must be filled before a separating judgment can be made.*<sup>4</sup> Most people don't acknowledge God's kingdom & don't see Him working in this world. They may be briefly moved by the grace of the gospel or frightened by the threat of judgment, but they soon go back to their old ways of thinking & living, oblivious to the things of eternity. But when man's day is over & Christ returns to set up His kingdom, judgment will come. Jesus isn't giving a full description of the last days, but is focusing on the judgment of

---

<sup>3</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, p 203

<sup>4</sup> Daniel Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew*, p 207

unbelievers. He's speaking of judgment in general, with special focus probably on the final judgment at the Great White Throne (Rev 20:11-15). As we saw in the explanation of the wheat & tares & in many other passages, angels are often God's instruments of separation & execution of judgment (Mt 24:31; 25:31-32; Rv 14:19; 15:5-16:21). The separation will include all who are then living & all who have died **those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment** (Jn 5:29). Some wonder why Jesus repeated this teaching here, when it's almost word-for-word what He'd just said at the end of His explanation of the wheat & tares (Mt 13:41). The emphasis here is on the separation of believers from unbelievers, whereas earlier the emphasis is on their coexistence. Besides that, it's such an important truth it needs to be understood & remembered, thus the repetition. Jesus warns over & over about the horrors of hell & pleads with men to avoid it by coming to Him for salvation. God doesn't take pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek 18:23) & doesn't want anyone to perish (2 Pt 3:9). Jesus wept over Jerusalem because the people wouldn't come to Him & be saved (Lk 19:41). He warned about hell not to put people in agony but to save them from it. Hell wasn't even created for men but for the devil & his fallen angels (Mt 25:41).

As with all parables, we mustn't press every detail to make the parable contradict the explicit teaching of Scripture elsewhere. This is not a depiction of salvation by works. Fish don't become **good** by working hard at being morally upright people. If we were to flesh out the story, we'd have to explain that fish, spiritually speaking, become good only because they have faith in Christ & that the bad fish represent people who reject Him. But the imagery of the passage probably does remind us, as the NT consistently teaches, that people of faith in Christ are transformed, not yet perfectly, but are being transformed in visible ways into obedient followers of Jesus. These people, those who're labeled **good** will be separated from the **bad**. At the end of the passage, Jesus abandons everything that applies to fish & speaks directly of hell. The unrighteous will be thrown into the blazing furnace, where there will be **weeping & gnashing of teeth**. This is never a popular subject. Polls suggest around 80% of Americans believe in heaven, 67% believe in some form of hell, & 84%

believe good people will go to heaven.<sup>5</sup> Of course, almost no one believes they are going to hell personally.<sup>6</sup> & many people's ideas of hell are certainly not biblical ones. Jesus' picture of the final judgment as a separation of good from bad fish (or a separation of wheat from tares) hits on the essential nature of judgment, because the word **judgment** means *to separate*. In Hebrew, **judgment** refers to the work of a judge or lawgiver. But one meaning of the Hebrew word is *to discriminate* or *make distinctions*, & in Greek, it means *to divide*. Jesus described the judgment as a thorough & eternal separation.

**A. God's Judgment** Here are four important facts about God's judgment:

**1) It is thorough** The time for coexistence will be over. Here we have good & evil together. However, when the Lord sends His angels to execute judgment, those days will be over, & all people will find themselves in one camp or the other. Either they'll be with the blessed in heaven, having been cleansed from all sin by the redeeming work of Christ, or they'll be in hell without Christ & without hope. No one will be partially in one camp & partly in the other.

**2) It is determined** The 2<sup>nd</sup> fact about God's judgment is it's been determined in this life on earth. It depends on if we've received the good seed of the gospel, whether we've believed in Jesus' sinless life, atoning death, & victorious resurrection for us, whether we have laid everything else aside to gain the hidden treasure or purchase the expensive pearl. You know whether you have done that. So I ask, in which camp are you? If you aren't with Christ now, you'll be without Him then. If you're with Him now, you'll be with Him on that day of judgment.

**3) It is permanent** Nothing could be more permanent than the collecting of the good fish & the discarding of the bad, or throwing the tares into the fire to be burned. On that day the opportunity for repentance will be over. The day for trusting in Jesus Christ will be past. There is no 2<sup>nd</sup> chance once this life is over. We may wish we could say differently, but we can't because Jesus Himself doesn't. Satan has been spreading the lie that the day of reckoning is always far off & that there'll always be time for repentance or religion at a later date. In that way he's lulled millions to sleep, & they now drift on, oblivious to their danger. Don't listen to the devil's lies. He cares nothing for you.

<sup>5</sup> <https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/paradise-poll-ed-americans-and-afterlife>

<sup>6</sup> Craig Blomberg, *Preaching the Parables*, p 135

He's a condemned & evil being who, knowing that he must perish, takes his delight in drawing others after him to a common doom. Instead, listen to the Lord Jesus Christ, who speaks truth. He speaks it in this parable so you may know that judgment is real, separation is coming, & the time for repentance is now. Hear Him! Believe Him! Turn from anything that would keep you from Jesus & throw yourself upon Him & His work only.

**4) The end of the wicked will be dreadful** The fate of those who haven't trusted & followed Jesus in this life is terrible. He says the end will be so bad that it can only be adequately compared to an eternal burning & **weeping & gnashing of teeth.**<sup>7</sup> & we'll talk more about this in a minute.

Our work as Christians isn't social nor therapeutic. Our task isn't to be the moral policemen of the community nor the social workers for our cities. Our work is clear & specific: We're to get the gospel net into the water to catch as many people for the kingdom as we can. We're to say to everyone, *There is a Savior for you. You're a sinner deserving the wrath of God. But there's a Savior in Jesus Christ. He has borne the wrath & curse of God on the cross at Calvary in your place. Trust Him. Run to Him. He, & He alone, can save you.* We all have a net to cast called the gospel of Christ & we're to go & proclaim it to all people. Of course, it's smart to be like good anglers who know the best places & times of day & the habits & customs of what their fishing for, in that it's wise to think strategically about evangelism & understand the people we're trying to serve. But granting all of that, we must never hesitate to share the gospel out of consideration for a person's difference from ourselves. We mustn't restrict our attempt to fill our nets just because we're not sure of someone's moral, educational, social, cultural, or political background. We must look them in the eye & lovingly & winsomely & warmly offer them Jesus. I confess, I have work to do in my own heart in this area & I would guess you do too. This is our calling, this is our mission, to go spread the gospel net wide that we may catch all kinds of fish. We don't discriminate in proclaiming the gospel. It's to be cast globally. But God will distinguish in the last judgment. He'll separate the sheep from the goats, the wheat from the tares, the good fish from the bad fish. There is a great division coming. **50**

**B. God's Punishment** Perhaps no doctrine is harder to accept than the doctrine of hell. Yet it's too

---

<sup>7</sup> James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of Matthew*, pp 250–251

clear & mentioned too often in Scripture to deny or ignore. Jesus spoke more of hell than any of the prophets or apostles, perhaps because its horrible truth would be all but impossible to accept if the Son of God Himself hadn't clearly taught it. Jesus emphasized it throughout His earthly ministry. He said more about hell than about love & more than all other teachers in the Bible combined. He warned men of hell, promising no escape for those who refused His gracious, loving offer of salvation. In His *Sermon On The Mount* alone, Jesus gives several specific & direct warnings about hell: **Whoever says, 'You fool,' shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell** (Mt 5:22), **It is better for you to lose one of the parts of your body, than for your whole body to be thrown into hell** (Mt 5:29-30; 18:8-9; Mk 9:43). Jesus declares that the wicked **sons of the kingdom will be cast out into the outer darkness; in that place there will be weeping & gnashing of teeth** (Mt 8:12) & that unbelieving Capernaum would **descend to Hades** (Mt 11:23; Lk 10:15). He asked the evil & hypocritical scribes & Pharisees, **How will you escape the sentence of hell?** (Mt 23:33). On many other occasions Jesus alludes to hell & warns about damnation.<sup>8</sup> What is it that makes hell so terrible, according to Jesus? Hell isn't just forever reliving bad memories or disappearing into nothingness, as many people believe. Nor is it a place where sinners will continue their sinning, unrestrained & unrebuked. There's no pleasure in hell, none! An interviewer once asked a young punk rock singer what she was looking forward to at the end of her career, she replied, *Death. I'm looking forward to death.* When asked why, she said, *I want to go to hell, because hell will be fun.*<sup>9</sup> It's hard to believe, but there are many who think this way. That kind of deception is tragic. Nothing could less describe hell than the word *fun*. We can't begin to grasp the eternal horror that's hell. Our finite minds can't comprehend infinite pain & torment any more than they can comprehend infinite joy & bliss. The judgment that awaits the wicked is **the furnace of fire** (50; cf 42; 25:41). The words **weeping & gnashing of teeth** signify the suffering that's expressive of the anguish & anger the condemned will experience when they recognize they've been eternally rejected & separated from God. The absence of any reference to the Son of Man, the devil, & the destiny of the righteous focuses the point of this parable squarely on the grim reminder of the ultimate fate of the wicked. From God's Word we learn 4 basic truths

<sup>8</sup> Mt 5:20; 7:13, 19, 23, 27; 10:28; 12:36; 16:18; 18:8-9; 21:43-44; 23:14-15; 24:40-41, 51; 25:30, 46; Mk 3:29; Lk 12:9-10, 46; 16:23; Jn 5:29; 15:6

<sup>9</sup> Quoted by John MacArthur, *Matthew*, Vol 2, p 397

about **the furnace of fire** that will help us to begin to grasp its terror.

**1) HELL IS A PLACE OF TORMENT, MISERY, & SUFFERING** The torment of hell is sometimes described as **darkness** in Scripture (Mt 22:13). Darkness is the absence of light where nothing can be seen. Throughout eternity the damned will never see light or anything light illumines. Hell's torment is also described as fire that will never go out & can't be extinguished (Mk 9:43) & from which the damned will never find relief. Hell couldn't be other than a place where **there shall be weeping & gnashing of teeth** (Mt 8:12; 25:30).

**2) HELL WILL INVOLVE THE TORMENT OF BODY & SOUL.** Neither the soul nor the body is done away with at death for the saved or unsaved. When an unsaved person dies, his soul goes out from the presence of God into everlasting torment. At the resurrection of the dead, the bodies of the unsaved will be raised & those resurrected bodies will join the soul in hell's torment (Mt 10:28; Jn 5:29; Acts 24:15; Rev 20:11-15). Just as believers will be fitted with resurrected bodies so we can enjoy the glories of heaven forever, unbelievers will be fitted with resurrected bodies so they can endure the torments of hell without being destroyed. Jesus spoke of hell as a place **where their worm does not die** (Mk 9:44). When physical bodies are buried & begin to decay, worms attack only as long as the flesh lasts. But the resurrected bodies of unbelievers will never be consumed, & the hellish **worms** that feed on them will themselves never die.

**3) HELL'S TORMENTS WILL BE IN VARYING DEGREES.** For everyone in hell the suffering will be intense & permanent, but some will experience greater torment than others. The writer of Hebrews says,

**Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on *the testimony of two or three witnesses*. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, & has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, & has insulted the Spirit of grace? (Heb 10:28-29).**

Those who willfully reject Jesus, ignoring the sacrifice He made for them with His own death, will receive greater punishment than those who had only the light of the Old Covenant. On the day of judgment, it will be more tolerable for the pagan cities of Tyre, Sidon, & Sodom than for the Jewish cities of Chorazin, Bethsaida, & Capernaum, who not only had the light of the Old Covenant but the opportunity to see & hear the Son of God in person & to witness His miraculous works (Mt 11:22-23). In the parable of the slaves waiting their master's return from the wedding feast, Jesus explains,



that slave who knew his master's will & did not get ready or act in accord with his will, will receive many lashes, but the one who did not know it, & committed deeds worthy of a flogging, will receive but few (Lk 12:47-48). *Hell will have such severe degrees, that a sinner, were he able, would give the whole world if his sins could be one less.*<sup>10</sup>

**4) HELL'S TORMENT WILL BE ETERNAL.** Nothing will be as horrible about hell as its endlessness. Jesus uses the same word to describe the duration of hell as the duration of heaven: **These will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life** (Mt 25:46). Eternal is eternal. People in hell will experience the total absence of hope forever. Although God originally designed hell for the devil & his demons, men who choose to follow Satan's way instead of God's way will also suffer Satan's fate. The Puritan writer & preacher John Bunyan describes hell with this vivid imagery:

*In hell you shall have none but a company of damned souls with an innumerable company of devils to keep company with you. While you are in this world, the very thought of the devil's appearing to you makes your flesh tremble & your hair ready to stand upright. But oh, what will you do when not only the supposition of the devil's appearing but the real society of all the devils of hell will be with you--howling, roaring & screeching in such a hideous manner that you will be even at thy wit's end & ready to run stark mad again for anguish & torment. If after 10,000 years, an end should come, there would be comfort. But here is your misery: here you must be forever. When you see what an innumerable company of howling devils you're among, you shall think this again--this is my portion forever. When you've been in hell so many thousand years as there are stars in the firmament or drops in the sea or sands on the seashore, yet you have to lie there forever. This one word, **ever**, how will it torment your soul.*<sup>11</sup>

Judgment & separation are coming. Hell is a real place & people around us are heading there. That, if nothing else, should spur us on in planting the gospel & casting the net of the gospel at all times & in every place. CS Lewis sums up his book, *The Great Divorce*, by saying, *There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," & those to whom God says... "Thy will be done."*<sup>12</sup> Everyone will be in one of two groups, those Jesus accepts or those He rejects, all based on their response to Him.

To sum up, Jesus taught two truths in this parable. The fishing for fish of every kind reveals that the mission of Jesus' followers is to evangelize the world without discriminating on the basis of nationality or race. Jesus had already challenged the disciples to be **fishers of men** (4:19). The sorting at the end of the age isn't based on nationality, race, goodness, wealth, or morality. They'll be

<sup>10</sup> John Gerstner, *Repent or Perish*

<sup>11</sup> Elon Foster, *New Cyclopaedia of Prose Illustrations*, p 450

<sup>12</sup> pp 66-67

separated depending on their response to the good news of Jesus & what He's done for us. Fishing is our responsibility as followers of Jesus. The future separation is the privilege of Jesus & His angels. Thus both present & future aspects of the kingdom are in focus. The drawing in of the net is like the harvest in the parable of the tares. In both parables the good & the bad won't be fully known until the judgment at the end of this age. For unbelievers this parable presents a warning to take steps to avoid being condemned in the judgment to take place. This judgment is certain even if the time is unknown. Each one of us must examine ourselves to be sure we're not one who will be separated away from the righteous at the judgment. The fear motive is often condemned, but Matthew's gospel shows Jesus wasn't opposed to using it properly. Like children must be warned by their parents of the consequences of their behavior, so we all have been warned by God of the consequences of rejecting His Son. Hell is real. Jesus & His death & resurrection are real. If we don't personally appropriate what Jesus did for us, we'll spend eternity in hell. It's as simple as that. Have you received the salvation He so freely offers? God has given us all a place of safety. His name is Jesus. He's quenched the flames for all who will turn to & trust in Him. No one need die & face the wrath of God, no one, not even you. There's a Savior for you in Jesus! The alarm has sounded. Don't let another day pass without having fled to Him & Him alone for safety. If you have trusted in Christ alone, are you warning others of the judgment to come? It's real & hell's anguish is eternal. Are you proclaiming Jesus Christ & His love to those you come in contact with?