

“PARABLE OF THE NET”
MATTHEW 13:47-50

The single most important day of your life is not the day you were born, or the day you got married, or the day you got that dream job or that promotion. The single most important day of your life is still in the future. It is the day you stand before your Maker, the Lord of the Universe, and hear him tell you where you will spend eternity.

The most important day of your life is the Day of Judgment, when the Judge of all the earth, the Lord Jesus Christ, will either say to you, *“Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world”* (Matt. 25:34); or, *“Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels”* (Matt. 25:41).

On that day nothing about your present existence on this earth will be of any concern to you. Your vocation, in which you invest 40, 50, 60 hours a week of your mental and physical energy, will be of no consequence whatsoever. Your home, vehicles, toys, hobbies, bank accounts—those temporal things on which you spend much of your time and place much of your value, will be of no use to you at all. Your appearance, talents, health, IQ, athletic ability—none of these things will matter in the least.

On that day there will be only one thing about your life on this earth that will be of any concern to you. Are you *in* or are you *out*? Will you spend eternity with Jesus in heaven...or with the devil and his demons in hell?

Some of us don't like to think about the Day of Judgment, and even more of us, understandably, don't like to think about hell. From an emotional standpoint, it is a difficult doctrine to ponder, let alone accept. Yet it is so clearly and frequently mentioned in Scripture that we must not avoid or ignore it. Jesus spoke twice as much about hell than he did about heaven; indeed, he spoke more often about hell than about love. More than all the other teachers in the Bible combined, Jesus warned men and women of the inescapable horrors of hell if they refused God's gracious provision for their salvation.

This morning we are going to look at one of those warnings that Jesus gave in the form of a parable. Look at **Matthew 13:47-48**. ⁴⁷ *“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind. ⁴⁸ When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad.*

This parable occurs in Matthew's Gospel near the end of a collection of parables that Jesus told about the kingdom of God. Some of these stories were told to the crowds on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Some, like this one, were told exclusively to Jesus' disciples in Peter's home in Capernaum. This particular story would have especially activated the imaginations of Peter, Andrew, James, and John, since they had been full-time fishermen, and thus were intimately acquainted with the type of fishing Jesus described in this parable. But everyone (not just fishermen) who lived near the Sea of Galilee would have been familiar with what Jesus described, for they witnessed it almost daily.

Jesus is likening something about the kingdom of heaven to a specific kind of fishing that commonly occurred on the Sea of Galilee in that day, especially in the stretch of water near where he was speaking. There were three basic methods of fishing. The first was with a line and hook, in which a fisherman caught one fish at a time. This was the type of fishing Jesus instructed Peter to do when they needed money to pay the two-drachma tax. Peter caught the fish with a line and hook and found the coin inside its mouth.

The other two methods of fishing involved nets. The first was a small, one man casting

net (called an *amphiblestron*). In this method the fisherman would wade into the water off the shore, looking for a school of fish. When the fish were near enough, he would hold the center cord in one hand, and with the other cast the net so that it would open in a large circle that came down over the fish. Weights around the perimeter of the net would cause it to sink and trap the fish. The fisherman would then pull on the cord which was attached to the center of the net, and draw it around the fish like a sack. When the net was pulled closed, he would haul the catch to the shore. Peter and Andrew were taking turns casting this kind of net when Jesus called them to become fishers of men (Matt. 4:18-19).

The other type of net was called a *sagene*, which was a large seine or dragnet that required a team of fishermen to operate, because it covered as much as a half a square mile. The *sagene* hung vertically in the water with cork floats at the top and weights at the bottom edge. It was shaped like a long 750 to 1,000-foot wall, upwards of twenty-five feet high at the center and five feet high at the ends, which were drawn together to encircle the fish. Because it was so large and because it was frequently used in deep water, a variety of fish were caught.

When the net was filled it would take many men several hours just to drag it up onto the beach. The fishermen then sat down and sorted the catch. They gathered the good fish into containers, typically baskets, but threw the bad fish away. Because of their dietary laws, Jews considered bad fish those without fins and scales, which were unclean and thus were not permissible to eat.

That's the story. Simple, relatable. But what is its meaning? How is catching good and bad fish in a net and then sorting them on the shore comparable to the kingdom of heaven?

Jesus explains in **verses 49-50**. ***49 So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous 50 and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.***

If this sounds familiar it's because Jesus told another parable—the parable of the wheat and the tares—that has a similar theme and uses some of the same language. In the parable of the wheat and the tares, although Jesus *does* mention the final destiny of the weeds—a fiery furnace—his emphasis is on the *coexistence* of the righteous and the unrighteous in the kingdom in its present form until the end of the age. The parable of the net, on the other hand, emphasizes the destiny of the righteous and especially the unrighteous when the kingdom changes its form at the end of the age. In this present age, God, in his grace and patience, permits unbelief and unrighteousness, but the time will come when his toleration will end and judgment begins. And Jesus is stressing that judgment in this parable.

The first phase of judgment is the separation of the evil from the righteous. Like fishermen sitting on the shore separating good fish from bad fish, so will the angels of God separate believers and unbelievers, righteous and unrighteous at the end of the age. And it is a decisive, once-for-all separation, directed by the Lord himself and executed by his angels. He is the One who determines who is righteous and who is evil, and he is the One who sends them to their ultimate destination.

Though there is nothing mentioned in Jesus' explanation about the destiny of the righteous, it can be presumed that their fate is the kingdom of heaven. The focus of this parable is the destiny of "the evil." They will be thrown into the fiery furnace where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. As we discussed a couple of weeks ago when we looked at the parable of the wheat and the weeds, this is a description that is intended to convey

unbearable suffering, loneliness, and loss.

Please note, there are only two kinds of fish in the story, which indicates there are only two categories of people in the world: the good (the righteous) and the bad (the evil). Which raises the all-important question—the *ultimate* question of life: In which category are you? Are you one of “the good” (the righteous), or are you one of “the bad” (the evil)?

By the way, we had better know exactly what *good* and *bad* mean, because our eternal destiny depends on it. And it’s vitally important that we understand that the meaning of good and bad, righteous and evil, is not determined by *my* definition or *your* definition, but solely by *Jesus’* definition.

It is important to remember what Jesus has previously said about what it means to be “good” or what is required to be “acceptable” to God or what it takes to be on God’s good side on that Day. And we have discovered, up to this point in Matthew’s Gospel, that what Jesus considered good and acceptable were not the same as what the typical Jew in his day considered good and acceptable. They had been taught that being good meant obeying the Law of Moses, which for them meant adhering to a moral code, performing ceremonial rituals, and engaging in religious activities. It involved such things as praying at prescribed times of the day for a prescribed length of time, fasting on prescribed occasions, tithing, keeping the Sabbath, giving to the poor, reading the Scriptures, going to synagogue, etc. If one does these things, they thought, one was good and acceptable to God. And for the Jews in Jesus’ day, the ones who epitomized this kind of goodness and righteousness were the Scribes and Pharisees.

But Jesus made it clear in the Sermon on the Mount that religiosity and rule-keeping are not what impresses God, and it’s not what saves a person on the Day of Judgment. He said, *“Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Scribes and Pharisees, you will not enter the kingdom...” (5:20).*

That statement had these people scratching their heads and wondering, “If doing God’s will is more than the religious activity and rule-keeping that our leaders are doing, what is it?”

On several occasions in Matthew’s Gospel Jesus equated goodness, righteousness, or a right standing with God with *doing the will of God*. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus said, *“Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven” (ESV)*. And at the end of chapter 12 Jesus said, *“Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (12:50).*

The requirement for entering the kingdom of heaven is to *do* the will of God. Which raises the crucial question. What does it mean to *do* the will of the Father in heaven? Everything rides on the meaning of this phrase. If we can determine precisely what this means, then we can have certainty that we know what it means to be saved.

I’d like you to look at **John 6:38-40**. *“For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I should lose nothing of all that he has given me, but raise it up on the last day. For this is the will of my Father, that everyone who looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.”*

There are two aspects of God’s will in this passage. God sent his Son into this world to secure for himself a people that are his very own. Jesus came to redeem them from their sin, to give them life, and to raise them up on the last day. And “last day” is another reference to the Day of Judgment. On that day, all that the Father has given to Jesus will be raised—

that is, they will be assigned to live with Jesus forever in heaven. That's the will of God.

Here's the second part of the will of God: That everyone who "looks on the Son and believes in him should have eternal life." What does this mean?

Obviously, it means more than just believing he exists, believing he is powerful, believing he is God. The demons believe that, and shudder! Looking on the Son and believing in him means that we look on him to save us from our helpless sinful condition which makes all of us guilty before God and worthy of hell. It means that we look to him to rescue us from our abject spiritual poverty, and it means to look on him to clothe our shameful spiritual nakedness with his righteousness in order to make us presentable to God.

We are not looking to our own good deeds or our own righteousness to get to heaven. We are not looking to our religious upbringing or our spiritual accomplishments to save us. We are not looking to anything we have, anything we have done, or anyone we know. Because it's not what we do for God—it's what he has done for us through Jesus.

It's about looking on Jesus. Putting our complete trust in him—his righteousness, his grace, his mercy, his power, his provision. It's placing our absolute confidence in what he did for us on the cross when he bore our sins in his body and experienced the punishment for sin that we deserved. It's putting our full weight upon him.

Do you want to have eternal life? Do the will of the Father. Do you want to know what God's will is? "Look on the Son and believe in him, and you *shall* have eternal life". That's the entrance requirement into heaven. Those are the terms. There is no other way that leads to life. Salvation is found in Jesus and Jesus alone.

Have *you* looked on Jesus and believed?

It's possible that some of you have been anticipating the Day of Judgment with confidence that you are going to be okay and you are going to heaven because you were baptized as a baby, or you grew up in a Christian family, or you went to church all your life, or you prayed the sinners' prayer, or you've done a lot of good things. I want to declare to you none of these things can save you. You cannot bring anything with you on that Day of Judgment—not your baptism certificate, your church membership papers, your church attendance records, your tax forms that show how much you gave to God's work, your Bible degree from such and such a college, your good works. As the hymn writer so poignantly wrote, "Nothing of my own I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling."

Where do you stand in relation to Jesus' words? Are you prepared for the Day of Judgment? I want to caution you: this is not a matter about which you should procrastinate. Jesus could come at any time. And his coming will signal the end of this age, when judgment will begin. It will begin by the angels separating the righteous from the wicked, believers in Jesus from unbelievers in Jesus, those who have done the will of God from those who have not done the will of God. And once that judgment begins, there will be no possibility of altering your destiny. I plead with you, look to Jesus and his provision for you, and be prepared for his coming and for the Day of Judgment.

"Come Ye Sinners Poor and Needy" #334

“Parable of the Net” Matthew 13:47-50

Main Idea: The kingdom is building to a climactic day of judgment where the righteous and unrighteous will be separated and assigned to their eternal destinies

The kingdom is compared to fishermen using a dragnet (47-48)

The process of catching fish with a net (47)

How fish are caught

The kind of fish that are caught

The process of sorting fish after the catch (48)

What is done with the “good fish”

What is done with the “bad fish”

The meaning of the parable (49-50)

The kingdom presently “catches” all kinds of people

There are good and bad people in the kingdom’s present realm

Not all people in the kingdom’s present realm belong to the kingdom

There will be a climactic event that will change the composition of the kingdom

The end of the age is the Day of Judgment

There will be a separation of good and bad people

The destiny of the “good”

The destiny of the “bad”

The role of angels in the judgment

