

Parable of the Dragnet
Matthew 13:47-52
Pastor John E. Dubler

The Parable of the Dragnet, unique to the Gospel of Matthew, reveals that a day of judgment is coming when God will separate the good from the evil. The evil will be judged, found guilty and after separation from the good, thrown into the fiery furnace.

For the sake of complete clarity, allow me to declare that the basis for the judgment will not be works for righteousness. Although this particular point is not referred to in the Parable of the Dragnet, the importance of this critical doctrine of salvation through the Blood of the Lamb cannot be omitted.



The only basis for separating the good from the bad will be the blood covering of our Lord Jesus Christ. “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).¹ Another passage phrases the same idea in these words: “He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that

being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:5-8). [Painting: *Ecce Homo* by Antonio Ciseri.]

Thus, when the judgment books are opened, only one factor will determine our eternal destiny: If one’s name is recorded in the Lamb’s Book of Life (Jesus Christ being the Lamb of God), that person will not be judged. If he were to be judged for his sins he would be condemned along with the rest of the world who have not accepted the lordship of Jesus. But he whose name is recorded in that book will not be judged, but declared clean without judgment because of the Blood of Jesus. (See Revelation 20:15 and Revelation 21:27).

Here then is the Parable of the Dragnet from Matthew 13:²

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. So it will be at the end of the age; the angels will come forth and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

¹ Scriptural references are to the New American Standard Updated Version, unless otherwise noted.

² I have included in the discussion of this parable the subsequent comparison of a scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven, not treating it as a separate parable as some do.

“Have you understood all these things?” They said to Him, “Yes.” And Jesus said to them, “Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings out of his treasure things new and old” Matthew 13: 47-52.

Meaning: The Parable of the Dragnet is about the end-time judgment of all souls. This includes all people living at the time of the Lord’s return, and all the dead who have ever lived upon the earth from the beginning of time. The sea gives up the dead in it and death and Hades give up the dead in them. Those who are alive and remain at the coming of our Lord Jesus will appear at this judgment (Revelation 20: 12-15). In other words: Everyone who has ever lived or will live appears before this judgment which is commonly referred to as the “Great White Throne Judgment” (Revelation 20:11).³

Good and bad fish: Not all who walk the earth have faith, obviously. This comes as no great surprise to anyone to think that there may be no small number of “bad fish” in the net who do not know the Lord. [Photo: Contemporary net fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. Courtesy Holy Land Photos.]



But a more disturbing issue is that not all who are in the visible church are truly Children of God—good fish. Becoming a member of a church or a Christian organization, no matter how noble or fine it may be, is not the same as belonging to Jesus. Thus, it is very possible that many people who think that they are Christians are not really believers at all. To become a believer one must confess that his own efforts to save himself have failed—his self-righteousness, his good deeds, even his ancestry or his

memberships in fine organizations. He acknowledges that he is in fact a sinner. He has broken God’s holy law and deserves to die. But, by God’s grace, through faith, he calls out to the Lord Jesus Christ to save him. He asks Jesus to forgive his sins and cleanse him of all unrighteousness, expressing at the same time a total willingness to make Jesus LORD of his life. I have added the emphasis in all capital letters as the issue of lordship weighs very heavily upon those of us who preach the gospel. Just acknowledging that Jesus is the Son of God is no more than demons do. The demons know who Jesus is and tremble. But when one makes Jesus Lord of his life, then the transformation can begin. And, when such a cry comes from the heart, no force or power can separate that man from the love of God and His merciful redemption. Jesus will save and preserve that person forever.

Therefore, we see through this parable that there will be a separation of the sheep from the goats at the end of the age. Whether this judgment is referred to as separating the sheep from the goats

³ Those who died before they could conscientiously know right from wrong (the so-called age of accountability) will not, in my view, be condemned. See 2 Samuel 12: 19-23.

or the wicked from the righteous or the wolves from the sheep, or the good fish from the bad; the message is one and the same.

In order that all may know from the Word of God that there are wolves among the sheep, I submit three passages from Matthew's gospel:

Matthew 7:15-20 "Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. So then, you will know them by their fruits."

Matthew 24:11-12 Many false prophets will arise and will mislead many. Because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold.

Matthew 24:24-26 For false Christs and false prophets will arise and will show great signs and wonders, so as to mislead, if possible, even the elect. Behold, I have told you in advance. So if they say to you, "Behold, He is in the wilderness," do not go out, or, "Behold, He is in the inner rooms," do not believe them.

In this last passage we find "false prophets" and "false Christs." There is no more clear evidence of the infiltration of the sheep by wolves than this statement. The Scriptures give us seven "false" categories of people. The word ψεύδι "pseudi" is used in the Greek. We have adopted the word in English, using it to describe something that looks like or resembles the true copy, such as a "pseudonym" or "pseudoscience." The word is not negative in all cases in the English. However in the Greek it literally means "lying." A "pseudo prophet" therefore is not one who is trying to be a prophet and not making the grade, but a false, lying prophet, attempting to devastate the flock (whether he knows it or not.)

Seven "pseudo" of scripture (with thanks to Rick Renner):⁴

1. Pseudoapostolos: false apostles (2 Corinthians 11:13)
2. Pseudoprophetes: false prophets (Matthew 7:15)
3. Pseudodidaskolos: false teachers (2 Peter 2:1)
4. Pseudochristos: false Christs (Matthew 24:24)
5. Pseudoadelphos: false brothers (2 Corinthians 11:26)
6. Pseudomartureo: false witness (Matthew 19:18)
7. Pseudologos: false word or one who speaks falsehood (1 Tim 4:2)

We are not at all subject to the devices of those false apostles, teachers, prophets and even false Christs. We can know the pseudo from the true by examining the fruit. This refers to a person's deeds, actions, moral character, behavior, and even his work. What comes forth from the man indicates what's inside the man. Therefore we are wise not to be too impressed with the tree itself. Look for the fruit.

⁴ R. RENNER, Sparkling Gems from the Greek, (Tulsa, 2003), p. 649.

Some differences: The message of separation and judgment in the Parable of the Dragnet is similar to that found in the Parable of the Wheat and Tares but with this important difference: The Wheat and Tares shows us that the righteous and the wicked will grow together, coexisting until the end of the age and then separation of the wicked from the righteous occurs. The Dragnet, by contrast, does not focus on the entire process from now until judgment but on the day of separation and judgment itself—the end of the age. So, while the kingdom contains both good and bad fish, only the final sweep of the dragnet and subsequent dragging of the net up on the beach reveals which fish are good and which are not. The Dragnet therefore is more tightly focused, revealing to us the principle of separation and judgment in a more stark light.

Separation of the wicked from the righteous. The process of separation is very similar to the Parable of the Wheat and Tares where we saw the tares gathered up at harvest time, bound into bundles and burned. Similarly, in the Parable of the Dragnet, the bad fish are thrown away. (The bad fish are said to be “thrown away” in the parable because inedible fish are not normally burned in a furnace.) In the explanation of the parable we are told that the wicked are separated from the righteous and not “thrown away,” but burned up in the fiery furnace.

Elements of the parable:

The first element of interest is the dragnet itself. The Greek word used here is σαγήνη [sagene, its only occurrence in the New Testament being here in Matthew]. Sagene is a seine net, that is to say, a large net with weights on the bottom and floats on top, hanging vertically in the water, enclosing all fish larger than its grid. After a pre-determined time its ends are drawn together and the net pulled up on the beach. Two boats would be used to set out the large net. The net represents the preaching of the word. It is the Gospel message going out in all parts of the world. Some are swept up in the excitement of a revival or preaching meeting but do not truly desire to become disciples. Others are simply “along for the ride,” whether convinced to come by family or friends or for some other reason find themselves exposed to the gospel message. Not all “fish” who are thus responding to the gospel message will indeed become true disciples.



I am reminded of a skiing trip we were on two years ago. We were accompanied by a friend who was just learning to ski. She decided to take a lesson from the ski resort’s professional ski instructor staff. The first question he asked to his assembled class was, “Why are you here? Did you come to learn to ski? How many are here skiing for love?” By “love” he meant, “how many of you are here simply because you love someone who skis, and they want you to be a proficient skier so you can be together and share the experience.” That’s “skiing for love.” But a stark fact will always pursue and eventually overtake a person who is so motivated: If at some point that person does not fall in love with skiing itself, they will sooner or later abandon the cause.

Just so with Christianity and the kingdom. A person may hear the preaching of the gospel because of the love of a friend, or his love for a friend. But sooner or later, if he does not want to hear the preaching of God’s Word because he has fallen in love with the Savior, Jesus; he will not be back.

Finally, there is a set time when the preaching of the word will be finished and come to an end. “And this gospel of the kingdom shall be preached in the whole world for a witness to all the nations, and then the end shall come” (Matthew 24: 14). Whenever that time comes to pass, the net is dragged up—meaning the end times come.

The sea: The world or anywhere the Gospel is preached. Before the end, no place will have a chance to say, “We never, ever, heard the message.”

The fish in the net: Everyone in the world, including all those who find themselves in the visible kingdom, the church, whether sincere or insincere. The good fish are those who are true disciples. The bad fish are the wicked, those who never knew, never wanted to know, thought they knew but didn’t, or pretended to know. Included here are the insincere and false disciples, including false teachers, and false apostles.



The sorting of the fish: This is the final judgment at the end of the age. This judgment, which really does sweep all fish into the net, is referred to as “The White Throne Judgment” based on Revelation 20: 11-15: “Then I saw a great white throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away . . .” Believers, though standing there before the judgment seat, are not judged and condemned. The judgment that those believers deserved has been paid in full on the cross by the Lord Jesus. Therefore, when their name is called for judgment, the recording angel opens the book of Life and if that person’s name is found written therein, he is exempt from judgment and eternal death and hell fire. This is what is meant by the blood covering of the Lamb. Our sins are covered over by the blood. It is as if we never sinned. Our just penalty is

paid for by another, namely Jesus, who, though innocent, suffered and died on the cross of Calvary, paying for our sins in full. There is nothing we can do to atone for ourselves; we need a savior. Jesus is the only one who qualifies. [Photo: Sorting fish courtesy NOAA fisheries, magazine.noaa.gov.]

Have you understood all these things? The disciples answered, “Yes.” Certainly this was an astounding answer. Would they had replied, “no,” or “not really, we could use some additional teaching.” But I can fully empathize. Many times I have had teachers ask me, “Do you understand?” I have answered in the affirmative, not because I was proud and afraid to admit that I did not know. I said, ‘yes’ because I was so very lost I had no idea where to begin. In Jesus’ question and the disciples’ remarkable “Yes” answer, Matthew is not portraying the disciples as understanding everything, but rather as Carson so aptly puts it, but that they understood nothing.⁵

The disciples certainly understood more than the crowds, but their understanding was still woefully inadequate. Jesus would later rebuke them for their dullness of understanding (Matthew 15:16 regarding clean foods). Nor do we claim, even today, to have a perfect

⁵ D. A. CARSON, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1984), p. 331.

understanding of the parables. Some things will have to wait until we are face to face with Jesus in glory.

New and Old: The parable concludes with these words, “Therefore every scribe who has become a disciple of the kingdom of heaven is like a head of a household, who brings out of his treasure things new and old” (Matthew 13: 52).

Not all the scribes and Pharisees scoffed at him as did the Pharisees in the Parable of the Unrighteous Steward (Luke 16: 14), or grumble as did the Pharisees and scribes in the Parable of the Lost Sheep (Luke 15:2). Some scribes were of a humble and contrite heart and were very ready to hear the Good News preached to them. As scribes, they would be highly educated, very conversant with the scriptures, and acting as teachers of the law. Therefore, if such a person became a believer and a disciple of our Lord, they had a double treasure to draw upon, namely the old covenant prophecies and their firsthand accounting of learning and seeing how Jesus fulfilled them. Thus, the scribe who becomes a disciple can bring out of his storehouse (the treasury of the Word of God) things new and old.