

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## THE PARABLE OF THE DRAGNET

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### Matthew 13:47-50

The last parable in Matthew 13 is called the parable of the dragnet. It closes a series of seven parables with a comparison of the kingdom of God to a fishing scene. Let us read this passage.

*Matthew 13:47. Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net which 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 vessels but threw away the bad.*

*49 So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous,*

*50 and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth.*

### Catching fish with a net

The Lord Jesus says that the kingdom of God is like a net which was thrown into the sea. And in that net, all kinds of fish are caught.

The net here is a seine-net, or a dragnet. It is different from a casting net, which was used by the fishermen whom Jesus called to be His disciples (Matthew 4:18). A dragnet was about 2 meters in height and might be up to a hundred meters in length. It was fitted with floats along the top while weights were placed on the bottom so that when it goes into the water, it would spread out.

This net was used in various ways. Sometimes fishermen fastened one end of the net on the shore while a boat pulled the other end into the lake. The boat then traveled in half a circle, sweeping the sea and enclosing the fish that were caught by the net against the shore. At other times, two boats went out from shore, forming a semi-circle with the net, drawing it together to catch the fish.

You can see that this fishing method was rather effective but the drawback was that the fishermen could not be selective while catching the fish. Their catch was always a mixed one. So when the boat returned to shore, the net would be pulled out into land and all kinds of fish, big and small, would be enclosed within it. The fish are then sorted out. Obviously only fish that had commercial value were kept and put in containers. All the others, the bad ones, are thrown back into the water.

There are three main parts in the passage. (1) Vv. 47-48a describe the action of the net. (2) V. 48b describes the fate of the good fish. (3) V. 48c describes the fate of the bad fish. The explanation in vv. 49-50 is simply a development of the last part. With three verses out of four on the rejection of the

wicked, we can fairly say that this parable is one of warning and of judgment. So this is the picture that should be in our mind when we read the story. Now let's look at the meaning of the parable.

## **A world of fish**

In the Bible, the picture of men as fish is a common one. Jesus said to Simon and Andrew that He will make them 'fishers of men' (Matthew 4:19). The fish that they were to catch were the souls of men. The world in which we live is compared then to a world of fish. And there are several varieties of fish, 'fish of every kind' as it says in the parable. These different kinds of fish represent different nations or different types of people in the world.

In Habakkuk 1:14-15, people are compared to fish and the world to the sea. We read in v. 15 that 'the Chaldeans will gather the nations together in their dragnet.' As you can see, it echoes the fishing picture of our parable. The action of 'gathering the nations into their nets' is a picture of a nation conquering other nations, bringing them under its power and its influence. So in the parable, the kingdom of God is pictured as something that goes forth into the world and that has the power to bring people into the kingdom. In this spiritual conquest, the servants of God are like fishermen who use their nets to catch fish, gathering souls to Christ.

This word 'gather', 'gathered fish of every kind,' is exactly the same word used in another parable, the parable of the sheep and goats, where the idea of separating the good from the bad is repeated. *And all the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another* (Matthew 25:32). The judgment begins with a separation. The sheep will be separated from the goats, the good from the bad.

It is interesting to notice that in Greek, 'to gather (*sunago*)' also means 'to welcome.' It is used in that sense in Matthew 25:35, 38, 43 where instead of the word 'gather' we have 'welcome'. 'I was a stranger and you welcomed (*sunago*) Me ... When was it that we welcomed (*sunago*) you?' This means that the kingdom of God stretches out a welcoming hand to everybody. It is not exclusive in its invitation. Everybody without exception is invited to enter the kingdom of God. We know that a fishing net naturally gathers fish indiscriminately. 'It gathers fish of every kind,' we read in the parable. There is clearly an inclusiveness in that phrase which reflects the universality of the invitation to accept the good news of the kingdom.

## **When the net is full**

Then we are told that when the net was filled, it was drawn to shore. The fullness of the net here reminds us of another parable, the parable of the wedding feast. We read there that at some point, the wedding hall was filled with all kinds of people. *So those servants went out into the highways and gathered together all whom they found, both bad and good. And the wedding hall was filled with guests* (Matthew 22:10). The similarity to the net story is quite noticeable. The servants went out into the streets and gathered all whom they could find, both bad and good. We have the idea of going forth and inviting everybody, the good as well as the bad, into the wedding feast. So instead of the picture of a net bringing in different kinds of fish, the story is about people going forth and inviting anyone they met to a wedding feast.

This fullness also echoes the language of Paul in Romans 11:25, where he speaks about 'the fullness of the Gentiles.' *When the fullness of the Gentiles has come in*, then the end of the age will take place. Or to use the wording of our parable, we can say that the net is brought to the shore when it is full. You see the analogy? When God's purpose is complete, when the net is full, then the end will come.

We notice that there are two distinct periods in the parable of the dragnet: (1) there is the period of fishing and then (2) the period of separating. The clause ‘when it was full (v. 48)’ corresponds to ‘at the end of the age (v. 49).’ We now live in the time of fishing, when the proclamation of salvation draws people into the kingdom of God. But we are approaching the end of the world, a sure time of separating. The focus of the story is definitively more on this future separation than on catching people for salvation.

### **Drawing the net ashore**

The net is cast into the sea. We saw that human beings are compared to fish in the sea. What does the sea mean? The sea is a picture of the world in all the depth of its darkness and its unknown. It is the world system as we have it now.

There is something unpredictable about the sea. It is treacherous. It is unstable. Paul speaks of the ‘perils in the sea’ (2Corinthians 11:26). Many ships indeed have disappeared into the sea, being swallowed up by its waters. In fact, in Job 38:8-11, the sea is pictured as a sort of monster that God has to keep under control. *And I (God) placed boundaries on it (on the sea), and I set a bolt and doors, and I said, 'Thus far you shall come, but no farther; and here shall your proud waves stop.'* As you know, the sea can threaten you even when you are on the land. You don’t necessarily have to be on the ocean. Entire villages and towns have been submerged by sudden great tidal waves from the sea. That is the dangerous side of the sea. And here it says that a limit has to be set upon it. It has to be held back by ‘bars and doors.’

The meaning of the shore then becomes obvious. The shore is where a limit – a door, a bar – is set upon the sea. ‘I fixed a limit for it,’ God says. ‘I set bars and doors. Here is where the waves stop.’ The picture of the shore in the parable is designed to tell us about the end of this age. The sea comes to an end here at the shore where the sorting will take place. ‘This is how it is going to be,’ Jesus says in v. 49, ‘at the end of the age when the world will be judged.’

Of course, before we can sort the fish, the net has to be hauled out of the water. Jesus says that the fishermen ‘drew it ashore’ (v. 48). This word, ‘to draw up (*anabibazo*),’ is an interesting one. It occurs only once in the NT, and in Greek it means ‘to cause to go up, to ascend.’ It is an action in which something is being lifted up. The significance of this observation strikes you when you compare it with Acts 24:15. There it says that our bodies will be raised, lifted up, at the resurrection. *I have hope in God, which they themselves also accept, that there will be a **resurrection** of the dead, both of the just and the unjust.* Notice this, the just and the unjust, the good and the bad. Do you get the picture? The net is drawn out of the sea. It is lifted up with all the fish in it. This can be seen as a picture of the resurrection. It is reasonable to think that the Lord Jesus used this rare word to bring out the idea of being lifted up at the resurrection. All those who have died before will be brought back at the resurrection to face the judgment of God. The good will rise to everlasting life, the bad to everlasting damnation.

### **Rotten fish**

Now, what is meant by the good fish and the bad fish? It is quite easy to understand that the good fish stand for the people that God declares righteous, those who received the gospel in truth and in love of it. What about the bad fish? What do they represent? The answer requires some explanation.

When we studied the parable of the tares, we saw that there are two kinds of people in the kingdom of God. There were the wheat, which represented the genuine Christian, and there were the tares, the darnel, which represented the false Christian. Here we also have a mixture of good and bad, but the situation is not exactly the same as in the parable of the tares. Where does the difference lie?

The difference is on the fact that the tares are by nature weeds. They are not the result of some transformation. They have never been regenerated.

Jesus said that the tares were sown by Satan into the kingdom of God. They are false Christians who have never changed in their nature. They come to church every week, they talk and behave like Christians, they may have been baptized, they take the communion, they do everything that Christians do. But inside their hearts, there has never been any change. They are simply non-Christians dressed up as Christians. Only the outward appearance may have changed. The dirt on the outside has been washed off but the dirt on the inside is still all there. That is the picture of the tares.

The picture of the bad fish is not the same. We need to turn to the Greek to discern the difference. This word 'bad (*sapros*)' is used in the Lord's teaching with reference to something that is rotten or corrupt. For example, Jesus says in Luke 6:43 that 'a good tree brings forth good fruit, but a bad tree brings forth bad (rotten) fruit.' The basic meaning of this word relates to a process of decay. It implies that what is rotting was not originally bad. In fact, the object was good before, but it became rotten later on. A rotten fruit was initially healthy. But in due time, some insect got into it. Some disease hit it. And it became bad. This word is used in Greek to speak about a person who becomes sick. He was healthy before, and then he became ill. His health was corrupted by a disease. It is also used of old age in the sense that a person was once young, and when he gets old, he loses his strength and beauty. He became corrupted by age. He turned 'bad'.

So the main idea of this word is that something which was once good becomes bad. You can see immediately how this is different from the meaning of the tares. The tares were never good in the first place. They were planted by Satan and were always bad. They were never anything else but tares. But that is not the case with the bad fish, which were once good and then became bad.

In other words, the parable of the dragnet is not just a mere repetition of the parable of the tares. There is an important difference. The new element is that these fish were bad by corruption, not by nature. This means that the fish which are thrown out are fish that were once healthy but became sick or even died.

This type of people are those who came into the kingdom of God. They were drawn into the church. They responded to the word of God. But having responded, they do not persevere in their initial commitment. They do not live up to the standards of the kingdom and gradually they turn away from their first love. Their love for God grows cold to the point that they eventually wander from the way of truth. They become 'bad'.

The parable thus speaks of the church as a mixed community. The NT is clear that of those attracted to Christ and His teaching, some will not persevere in confessing the name of Jesus to the end. We naturally tend to regard everyone in the church as true sons of the kingdom by virtue of their profession. Who indeed has the authority to identify with certainty the true professors? This task is reserved for the angels who, in due time, will separate the false disciples 'from among,' or 'out of the middle of' the righteous. This expression indicates without any doubt that there is a mixture of good and evil in the kingdom. In this present era, the bad fish are allowed to live together with the good fish. Good and evil can be found together within the net of the kingdom. But one day, an unavoidable separation will take place. At the end of this age, only the righteous, those who have received the kingdom with appropriate response in the form of discipleship, will survive. The others will go to their punishment.

### **A warning**

The parable of the dragnet voices a fearful warning which can be put in this way. Even though a person is now in the church, it does not necessarily imply that in the end that person will still be in

the kingdom. There are people in the churches today who claim to be Christians and who seem to be Christians, but on the final day of judgment, God will throw them out of the kingdom. This is an idea we are not quite used to, isn't it? We tend to think that anybody in the kingdom of God somehow is automatically saved.

If we are bad (*sapros*), we will be separated out. If we are good, we will be kept in. What then defines a good fish? The good fish represents the person who is righteous. It is the person whose faith in Christ endures to the end. This Christ-by-faith notion is the first form of righteousness. Then from there, we must also be moved to ask God in prayer for that kind of moral righteousness in ourselves that will make us reject what is detestable in God's sight. Genuine faith in Christ always leads the believer to seek to be righteous, not in order to earn salvation, but in order to be faithful to Jesus.

By faith we are in the kingdom now, but one day there will be a separation, from within the kingdom, of the faithful from the unfaithful, in a judgment according to works. One aspect of discipleship means to go down on our knees and confess our poverty in spirit and righteousness. The other aspect, sometimes neglected from a fear of works-righteousness, is to rise to our feet and seek to obey Jesus' commands. For it is not enough merely to say that we are nothing. We must also seek to be doers of God's will.