

The Parable of the Dragnet

by A.W. Pink

The parable of the dragnet illustrates the work of God's servants in gathering in the elect, while also separating the good from the bad, and emphasizes the importance of instrumentality and the separation of true believers from the world.

Scripture: Matthew 13:47

Topics: "Evangelism", "Discernment in Ministry"

Description

A.W. Pink expounds on 'The Parable of the Dragnet,' illustrating how the kingdom of heaven is likened to a net that gathers fish of every kind, emphasizing the role of evangelists in casting the net of the Gospel into the sea of nations. He highlights the inconspicuous nature of the fishermen, reminding us that the success of the Gospel does not depend on human instruments but on God's grace. Pink also discusses the importance of distinguishing between good and bad fish, representing the true believers and false professing Christians, and the ultimate separation that will occur at the end of the age. The sermon calls for a focus on gathering the elect while recognizing the mixed nature of the Christian profession in the world.

Transcript

The Prophetic Parables of Matthew 13

Chapter 7:

THE PARABLE OF THE DRAGNET.

"Again the kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind" (Matthew 13:47-50) We have previously pointed out that it is of first importance to carefully note the manner and method in which these seven parables are arranged, for their order supplies a key to their interpretation. The first one stands by itself, being distinguished from the other six which follow by the omission of the opening clause "the kingdom of heaven is like unto."

The first parable is not a similitude of the kingdom of heaven; the last six are. The first parable treats of a preparatory work, done prior to the introduction of the kingdom of heaven in its present form; that introductory work being the broadcast sowing of the seed. first by the Lord Himself, afterwards by the apostles. The six parables which follow are plainly divided into two threes. The first three were spoken by

the Lord from the ship in the hearing of the multitude by the seaside, and therefore they give us the more public aspect of the kingdom of heaven in its present form--the kingdom of heaven in this world as it is seen by men.

The last three parables were not spoken to the multitude nor were they uttered by the seashore, but were spoken by the Lord to the disciples only, and that within the house; intimating that they treat of the internal and hidden aspects of the kingdom of heaven, that which is not manifested before men in this world. So that the last three parables speak from the standpoint of God's counsels. The first of the last three is the parable of the treasure hid in the field, a man for joy thereof buying the field--principally for the sake of the treasure that was hidden therein.

The next parable, that of the pearl, also sought, desired, and purchased by the same man, the merchantman. Those two objects, the treasure and the pearl, intimate that there are two elect companies, dear unto God and precious unto His Son, purchased by Him: one an earthly people, the other a heavenly; through whom the wondrous riches of Divine grace and glory will yet be made manifest in the two great divisions of God's dominions--heaven and earth. The earthly people, spoken of under the figure of the treasure, being Israel, the literal Israel; the heavenly people, spoken of under the figure of the pearl, looking forward to the time when the body of Christ will be completed and He shall present to Himself a glorious Church.

The order of these two parables, then, is, "to the Jew first and also to the Greek"--the treasure coming before the pearl. But if these seven parables give us a prophetic outline of the course of Christendom, that is the history of the Christian profession throughout this dispensation, during the time of Christ's absence from the earth, one more parable is needed to complete the picture. The last parable is in one sense an amplification of the sixth. In the sixth parable there is only one man at work, one agent acting--the Merchant-man.

He is the one who does all in connection with the pearl. But while it is true the Merchant-man, the Lord Jesus Christ, is the principal worker in connection with the gathering out of the saints during this dispensation, in His condescending grace He does not work alone. He has been pleased to call His own saints to have a part with Him in the prosecution of this work, in the accomplishing of God's counsels, in the gathering out of His elect people. Consequently, when we come to this seventh parable, for the first time, the number of the pronoun is changed.

Notice this in verse 47: "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"--not "he" but "they." That is the first time we have "they" in the parables. Illustrations of what is thereby denoted are found in the Gospels in connection with Christ's miracles. Take the first one that He performed--the turning of water into wine. This is a sermon in action. His mother came to Him and said, "They have no wine."

Their own wine had given out. Now "wine" in Scripture is the symbol of joy--not exclusively, but that is one of its essential significations. "They have no wine." Christ alone can impart real joy to the heart; but in the working of the miracle He used servants. He said to the servants, "Fill the waterpots." He said to the servants, "Draw it forth." He said to the servants, "Convey it to the master of the feast." He deigned to use them, and in their obedience they became workers together with Him in the performing of that miracle.

Take again the feeding of the multitude. There was the famishing crowd: they had no food. Here was the Lord Jesus Christ. A few loaves and fishes were placed in His hands, and under His miraculous

working-power those loaves and fishes were made to feed the hungry multitude. But what was the method that He followed? He did not hand the food directly to the crowd; He first gave to the disciples, and they distributed to the multitude. So that (we say it reverently) between the Lord Jesus Christ and the multitudes, and the wine and food, there is need of consecrated servants, to first receive from Him and then to hand out to others.

Therefore we may see that if these seven parables furnish an outline of the history of this present dispensation, it is necessary to complete the picture by showing us that the Lord Jesus, in His condescending grace, uses others to the accomplishing of God's purpose and the executing of His counsels. Now the details of this parable are so few in number and so simple that it seems they hardly call for explanation. First of all, there is the "net." Second, there is the "sea" into which the net is cast.

Third, there are the "fishermen" themselves--they gather in. And fourth, there are the "fish" that are enclosed in the net. It should be plain to all that the "net" itself is a symbol of the Gospel, the proclaiming and presenting Christ to the responsibility of men. Second, the "sea" into which the net is cast has the same meaning that it has in the first verse of the chapter: it stands for the nations as such, the Gentiles, and that is why the "sea" is here once more mentioned--because that which is specially characteristic of the present dispensation, in contradistinction from the dispensation that preceded it and the one which shall yet follow, is God's mercy turning unto the Gentiles: therefore we have the figure of the "sea" once more.

The "fishermen," those who cast the net into the sea, are the Lord's gospellers, the evangelists, the preachers of the Word. That is clear by comparing Scripture with Scripture: in Matthew 4:19 and in Luke 5 the Lord Jesus said to His first disciples, "Follow Me and I will make you fishers of men," it is His own figure for His evangelists. Now very briefly let us call attention to seven things connected with the parable. The first thing that has impressed us in studying it is this: the inconspicuousness of the fishermen.

Observe that in the 47th verse they are not even mentioned: "The kingdom of heaven is like unto a net, that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind," while in the 48th verse Christ just refers to them as "they": "Which when it was full, they drew to shore." That is all that is said about them. How inconspicuous they are! In other words, those who have been so highly honored by God, and (it is an infinitely higher honor to be a servant of Christ than to be King of the British Empire) to have a part in the casting of this net into the sea, are here hidden from view, nothing is said about them, except they are just referred to once as "they."

O how that rebukes and condemns the preacher-worship of the day! Turn for a moment to 1 Corinthians 3: beginning at verse 4:--"For while one says, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos, are you not carnal? Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers by whom you believed, even as the Lord gave to every man? I have planted, Apollos watered; but God gave the increase. So then neither is he that plants anything neither he that waters." Do we realize that, my brethren?

Do you realize that the one whom God has called to minister to you, is himself nothing--nothing at all, merely an empty vessel, that, unless the Lord comes, will soon crumble away to dust! But He, the One who deigns to bless, who places His treasure in earthen vessels, He is everything. O my brethren and sisters, it has impressed me deeply in studying this parable that the fishermen are hidden from sight. They are inconspicuous, they are mere nothings that God can dispense with as easily as He can use them.

Do not imagine that the prosperity of any church depends upon the presence of some particular man in the pulpit. The Lord is not only able to continue and prosper His work, but to do so a hundredfold more without the most gifted preacher if He so pleases. The instrument is nothing. How that rebukes the preacher-worship of the day! May Almighty God deliver His people from it. May God in His grace (for He is a jealous God, who will not share His glory with another), preserve His people from giving any of the honor and glory to the mere instrument, the whole of which is due and belongs alone to Him.

Just as surely as you begin to honor and glorify the instrument, the blessing of God will depart. Heed well this first point in our parable: the fishermen were hidden from sight. May they be hidden from sight in all the churches of God. Secondly, the object before the fishermen in casting the net into the sea and drawing it forth again. This was simply to gather good fish. That was their one aim and design, the 48th verse shows that--"which when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good fish into vessels."

It is true there were also some bad fish in the net, but these they cast away. It is the good fish they were out for. Now, while it is true the servant of God is under marching orders to "preach the gospel to every creature," nevertheless, that which he must ever keep steadily before him, those whom he must perseveringly seek out, and those he is called to minister unto, are God's elect. Though the servant of God is sent forth to preach the Gospel to all who come under the sound of his voice, yet he is not sent to draw a bow at a venture.

God has not sent him forth so that the success of his labors is made dependent upon the caprice of man or the response of his will. No, the primary purpose of God in raising up His servants and sending them forth is, the good of His own elect. And that end is to be kept in view by those whom God calls upon to engage in His service, whether that work be in the mission-field or in the Sunday School class or in district visitation. God has called you to seek out those whom He has marked out from all eternity--the "good fish".

There are two Scriptures I want to refer to from the Epistles of Paul which bring both of these aspects before us. First, 1 Corinthians 9:22, "I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some." In a general way that means this: Paul was carrying out his Divinely given commission and preaching the Gospel to every creature--the net was cast into the sea at large. Paul was made all things to all men. He welcomed an opportunity to preach the Gospel to the poor; but he did not miss an opportunity to preach God's Word to the prominent and eminent as well.

He was primarily, "the apostle to the Gentiles" (Rom. 11:13), yet how often he preached to the Jews! He was made all things to all men. That is one side: that is the casting of the net "into-the-sea" aspect. Now turn to 2 Timothy 2:10, which is a verse many Arminians do not seem to know is in the Bible at all; those who have been brought up under "Freewill" teaching need to look at it closely. These were the words of the apostle Paul in connection with his own ministry: "Therefore I endure all things for the elect's sake, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus."

That was the object before the apostle's heart, that was the goal that he had in view. That was the aim of his ministry, that was what enabled him to endure such a great fight of afflictions. He endured all things "for the elect's sake." How that gives the aspect of the Gospel work portrayed in our parable! There is first the broadcasting of the net into the sea at large, and there is secondly the particular design in so doing. The purpose of it is to gather out the "good fish."

So while you and I are called upon to preach the Gospel to every creature, let us not lose sight of the fact that God's purpose and our submission to it is the seeking out of the good fish, praying that God will use us to find His hidden ones. For, observe that, at first, God's elect are hidden from His servants, like the "good fish" in the sea; but as we labor in the Gospel they become manifest--they are seen in the "net!" In the third place, we are told that the net gathered in of every kind.

Coming back to Matthew 13:47, the last part of the verse: "that was cast into the sea, and gathered of every kind." Others besides "good fish" were enclosed. This reminds us once more that the main thing which is in view in our chapter is the Christian profession. Here we are shown the effects of Gospel preaching. Here we behold the results of the net being cast into the sea at large--the world-wide proclamation of the Gospel and the universal presentation of Christ unto men.

The result is that there is a mixed profession. The net gathers in "of every kind." Just as at the beginning of the age there were the wheat and tares, so at the end of the age (to which this parable conducts us) there are bad fish as well as good. Now in the fourth place, the fact that this net gathered in bad fishes as well as good ones was no reflection upon the skill of the fishermen. But on the other hand, they were responsible to distinguish between the good and the bad fish after they had entered the net, and they were responsible to separate the one from the other.

That is an essential and important part of the work and duty of God's servants--to discriminate, to distinguish between the good and the bad fish. Mark it carefully: "which when it was full, (that is, the net) they drew to shore, and (what?) sat down" (v. 8). They sat down before they did anything with the fish. Before they attempted to do any sorting out and separating, they sat down: which indicates that this aspect of their work requires time, care, deliberation! Now notice also in verse 48: "They gathered the good fish into vessels, but cast the bad away."

That is all that the fishermen did with the bad; just cast them away. They had got into the net, but they were rejected. They would have nothing further to do with them. Nothing else is required of the fishermen, but just to cast them away. Such was Christ's word in Matthew 15:13, where the disciples came to Him and were speaking about the Pharisees, He said, "Every plant which My heavenly Father has not planted, shall be rooted up. Let them alone." It is not our business to do the rooting up; just leave them alone, that is all; have no fellowship with them.

Turn to Romans 16:17, "Now I beseech you brethren, mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you have learned"--imprison them, torture them, burn them? No, God has never told His people, or His professing people, to do any such thing. Even if Rome were right in her doctrines, Scripture absolutely condemns her practices. How has she acted towards those who have differed from her doctrine? Here is what Scripture says, "Brethren mark them which cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine which you have learned; and avoid them."

That is all! Give them a wide berth; separate yourselves from them; have nothing to do with them, avoid them. Do you avoid them? If some man comes to the City with a great reputation, and the newspapers announce that he is teaching this, that, and the other and huge crowds are being drawn, and a lot of people tell you he is such a nice man, yet you know he is teaching contrary to the doctrine that you have received; what do you do? Do you "avoid" him? I am afraid some of you don't.

Many need this word. "Avoid them!" See also 2 John 10! In the fifth place. These fishermen were to distinguish and discriminate between the good and the bad fish. Though they are not to be blamed for the

entrance of the "bad" fish into the "net"--being under the waters they could not see what sort of fish entered; yet they have a responsibility concerning them once the net is drawn to land: then they are exposed to sight. It is not long before a professing Christian makes it manifest whether or not he has been really born again.

It is concerning this God holds His servants responsible. Perhaps some will ask, How are they able to do it? In what way are God's servants to distinguish the good fish from the bad? Has God left them to their own discretion in the matter? No, my friends. We need not lean unto our own understanding in anything. The Scriptures have been given that the man of God may be thoroughly furnished unto all good works, and in them God Himself has described the very marks by which we can distinguish good fish from bad!

Turn for a moment to Leviticus 11:9, "These shall you eat of all that are in the waters, whatsoever has fins, and scales, in the waters, in the seas, and in the rivers, them shall you eat. And all that have not fins and scales in the seas and in the rivers, of all that move in the waters, and of any living thing which is in the waters, they shall be an abomination unto you." Do you suppose that these verses contain nothing more than instructions to the Hebrews about their diet 3,000 years ago?

Do you imagine that God has recorded in His eternal Word something with no other significance and importance than the mere regulating of the table of the Israelites in the past? I trust that by this time most of you have learned that there is a spiritual significance and value to everything in Scripture. There is not time now to expound this, but concerning the good fish there were two things, fins and scales--fins to propel them through the waters and aid their motion; scales to protect, to shield them from the pressure and action of the waters as they passed swiftly through them.

Can you interpret it? God has given His people two things: armor to protect them, and also an inward power to propel them through the waters of this world. Those who give evidence of having on them the armor of light (Rom. 13:12; Ephesians 6:13-17), corresponding to the "scales;" and those who make it manifest they are swimming against (instead of floating down with) the tide of this world, furnish proof that they are "good fish." In the sixth place, it should be carefully noted that the work of the fishermen did not cease when they drew the net to land.

Something else yet remained for them to do. Look again at the parable: "Which when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good fish into"--a vessel? It does not say so; but "they gathered the good fish into vessels." Why? The work of the fishermen was not completed when they gathered the fish into the net, nor was it finished when they had separated the good from the bad: the good ones must be gathered into "vessels." Surely that does not need interpreting.

The "good" fish represent believers; their being "gathered" speaks of association together--fellowship; while the "vessels" tell of separation from the world. I have only time now to mention the last point without elaborating--If this parable is studied closely it will be found that verses 49 and 59 present two difficulties--those who have not studied it, will not have felt their force: "So shall it be at the end of the world (or of the age): the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just."

In the parable itself the work is done by the fishermen: but in the interpretation of the parable the work is done by "angels." Again, in the parable itself the good fish are separated from the bad, but when you come to the interpretation, the order is reversed: "they shall sever the wicked from among the just." So that in the interpretation the bad are separated from the good--the very opposite of the order in verse 48. For the present we leave these two points with you.

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