

Series Kingdom Parables

This Message The Parable of the Net

Scripture Matthew 13:47-52

The Parable of the Net is closely associated with the Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds which we previously thought about. In Jesus' interpretation of that parable, we learned that the good grain and the weeds would grow together until both were mature. Then at the time of harvest the angels would separate the bad growth from the good. We learned that the weeds represented people who were not members of the kingdom of God, and they would be cast into the fires of Hell. The wheat represented individuals who are "righteous" — individuals who would "shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (*Matthew 13:40-43*).

The parable of the Net is a "companion" to that of the Wheat and the Weeds. As we noted last week, several of the parables taught by Jesus were in pairs. This was an excellent and common teaching technique. One parable would reinforce the meaning of another. It was a way to highlight and emphasize specific information.

Read Matthew 13:47-50

There are several commonalities in the parables of the Wheat and Weeds and the Net. In both parables Jesus explained that the harvest would be "at the end of the age." That's when there would be the separation of kingdom people and wicked people. In both parables, it would be the duty of angels to separate good people from bad. The consequences for those who are evil is the same in both parables — they will be thrown into and burned in the fiery furnace, "where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth."

Although there are these similarities, there is an important difference in the emphasis of the two parables. The explanation of the Wheat and the Weeds implied that there would be a very long time between the sowing of the seed and the time of harvest. In this present age, the wheat, which represents the people of the kingdom of heaven, coexists with weeds, which represent the people who are influenced by the devil. Even casual observers are aware of the spiritual conflicts caused by the interactions between these two groups. It is not easy to be a believer in many parts of the world. The parable of the Wheat and Weeds describes the field conditions of this present age.

The parable of the Net has a different emphasis. It does not mention anything about the present interval of time. It only describes what will happen on the future day of judgment.

All of the parables of Jesus were based on situations which were ultra familiar to His listeners. Among the previous parables we have thought about, Jesus described the work of farmers sowing seed, gardens, and making bread. Fishing would be another illustration with which the disciples were familiar.

In fact, several of Jesus' disciples had, before their response to Jesus' call, made their living by fishing. At first, they had been attracted to Jesus by His teaching and miracles. Then Scripture explains that one day, "As Jesus was walking beside the Sea of Galilee, He saw two brothers, Simon called Peter and his brother Andrew. They were casting a net into the lake, for they were fishermen. 'Come, follow me,' Jesus said, 'and I will make you fishers of men.' At once they left their nets and followed him.

"Going on from there, he saw two other brothers, James son of Zebedee and his brother John. They were in a boat with their father Zebedee, preparing their nets. Jesus called them, and immediately they left the boat and their father and followed him" (*Matthew 4:18-22*).

Fishing was a popular occupation on the Sea of Galilee. The work was difficult, but there was a good chance of success because the water was teeming with a large and varied fish population. In the first century there were several common methods used in fishing depending on the kind of equipment available to the fisherman. One of the most effective methods was the use of the dragnet. This net was usually about eight feet in height and could be several hundred feet long. The net could be set to work at different depths in the water through the use of cork-like floats attached to the top of the net. The bottom of the net was weighted so that the net was always spread open to trap fish.

Sometimes the fishermen would fasten one end of the net near the shore while a boat would pull the other end in a half circle back to the shore. The net with the fish trapped in it would be pulled onto the shore. In another method, the net would be strung between two boats which would move in a circle towards each other in order to draw the ends together. In this method the nets would have to be pulled into the boats where they would be emptied of the fish.

Regardless of the method used, the fishermen would end up with several kinds of fish in their nets, some edible and some not; some good and some bad. According to Jewish dietary laws, fish without scales and fins were “unclean” and could not be eaten. *(See Leviticus 11:9-12) (Perch, bass, and walleye would be OK, but not catfish.)* In Galilee, good fish which were small were returned to the water, but the inedible fish were destroyed. Fish which were marketable were sprinkled with salt to keep them from putrifying, packed in baskets, and sent by donkey transport to markets in the villages and communities around Israel.

Such had been the occupation of at least four of the Apostles, and undoubtedly, all of Jesus’ disciples were well acquainted with what fishermen did on a daily basis. The story part of the parable is only two verses, and the interpretation is also short, only two more verses, beginning with the words, “This is how it will be at the end of the age.” In the same way that fishermen sorted out their catch of fish, keeping the good ones and discarding the inedible ones, Jesus said that angels will “separate the wicked from the righteous, and throw the wicked into the fiery furnace.”

The parable points quite specifically to the last judgment. Just as we learned previously from the parable of the Wheat and Weeds, the population of the world is a mixture of righteous and wicked people. As Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, kingdom people are expected to adhere to a radically different lifestyle than earthly people, even though they are mingled together. They are to be humble before God and dependent on Him, rather than to compete for power and influence. They are to hunger and thirst after God's righteousness, rather than have an appetite for earthly material advantages and resources. They are to be merciful and forgiving, and be peacemakers, loving their enemies. These are among the characteristics which are pleasing to God. They are definitely counter-cultural characteristics compared to the attitudes and behaviors of people who are under the influence of the devil.

Jesus said that kingdom people would be persecuted because of their identification with Himself, and because of their non-conformity to the non-believers around them. Jesus wanted His disciples to know that they would have to put up with such spiritual conditions during their lifetimes on earth.

This was an extremely important truth that the disciples had to grasp if they were to serve as His future representatives. Jesus knew that this truth differed from the teachings of the Jewish scholars, who believed that the Messiah would reveal himself with overwhelming power and defeat all of the enemies of Israel. Jesus wanted His followers to understand that He had indeed come to gain a victory, but it was first to defeat the spiritual powers which were at work in the world. The visible manifestation of His power and authority would not be revealed until the end of the age. The disciples would need perseverance and determination if they were to represent Him in the first phase of kingdom work.

This is why Jesus asked the question at the beginning of our second reading.

Read Matthew 13:51-52

Jesus was giving His disciples the opportunity to clear up any lingering questions and to ask for more explanation. In response to His question, they replied that they did indeed understand. They certainly understood more than the multitude of listeners who had heard the parables but were not interested in an explanation of the meanings. To the disciples' credit, they had asked Jesus for, and received, His specific interpretations, but we might well question whether they understood these things as much as they thought they did.

The word translated “understood” means “to fit things together.” By means of parables, Jesus had been describing various aspects of kingdom development, and, beginning with the Sermon on the Mount, He had been hitting them with one new, radical, and momentous thought after another. Jesus wanted to know if the disciples comprehended “all these things” He had been talking about. In spite of their “yes” answer, they probably had only a partial grasp of the implications of what Jesus had been talking about. And given the difficulties that the disciples had in grasping the deeper meanings of Jesus’ teaching in other passages of Scripture (*for example, see Mark 8:17-21*), we can assume that the disciples did not have the comprehension that they thought they had.

However, Jesus did not probe their minds with more questions. He quickly moved on to a “therefore” statement, that is, a statement of application. By using the word “therefore” and speaking the words in verse 52, Jesus was announcing that those who had been “instructed,” and who presumably “understood,” had a special responsibility. Jesus wanted His disciples to know that they now bore the same responsibilities as the “teachers of the law.”

Jesus’ reference to “the teachers of the law” is quite surprising. These men were commonly known as the “Scribes,” and it was the Scribes, along with the Pharisees, who were the most bitterly opposed to Him. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus had been very critical of both of these groups of religious leaders for disregarding the authentic intentions and purposes of the Old Testament law. So why was Jesus associating His disciples with His enemies? I think we will understand after we reflect on the historical role of the Scribes.

The Scribes had been the chroniclers of Israel’s history for several centuries. In the Old Testament era Ezra was the most conspicuous example of the true scribe. At a critical time in Israel’s history, he stood in the midst of the people, read the words of the law, and explained the meaning (*See Ezra 7:10*). After that time, the Scribes were recognized by the Israelites as the experts of the law. It was their responsibility to read and interpret the law. They were Israel’s religious teachers. However, as has been pointed out in previous messages, the teaching of the Scribes in the first century had drifted far from the original intentions and purposes of the law.

In verse 52 Jesus was very clear about the responsibilities of His disciples. He said, “Every teacher of the law (scribe) who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven ...” Thus Jesus was signifying that His disciples had become, on the basis of His teaching them about the kingdom, the new interpreters of the law, at least as far as the kingdom of God was concerned. They were to be the new class of Scribes. They would have the future responsibility to teach about the kingdom.

Verse 52 is complicated because there is a second comparison. Jesus said, “Every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house.” Now we have to think about why Jesus introduced this reference to the “owner of a house.” This phrase can also be translated “head of a household.”

Jesus used the imagery of the “owner of a house” several times in His teaching (*for examples, see Matthew 20:1-16; 21:33-43*). Often, in the context of His descriptions, the owner had the responsibility to provide for everyone and everything under his authority. This could include the owner’s family, his servants and workers, his livestock, his property. It is in this connection that Jesus’ statement makes sense. The owner of the house is the one who “brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.” In fulfilling his responsibility to provide for others, the owner dips into his resources.

By fitting all the parts of verse 52 together, we learn that the person who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven has not only gained a personal understanding of the ways of God but he has acquired important resources which can be shared with others. Verse 52 does not imply that the disciples were to share one set of new things and another set of things that were old. They were to share things which were a blending of both new and old. The new information that they had been learning was based on old truths. They were discovering that what was being fulfilled could be linked to what had previously been prophesied. They realized that their present spiritual realities were linked to long-standing hopes.

That is what Jesus had done in His proclamation of the Sermon on the Mount. He emphasized over and over that kingdom truths were not new, but were, rather, based on God's original intentions and purposes which went back to creation. Jesus emphatically declared that there was no conflict between His preaching about the kingdom of heaven and what had been established by the Old Testament law. The truths that Jesus taught seemed to be radical to His listeners, but He had come to fulfill the law, not to destroy it.

Jesus was obligating His disciples to a ministry of sharing the good news about God's kingdom. He had not taught them for only their personal benefit. Jesus was preparing them to be teachers of kingdom truths. "Yes, we understand," they said, to which Jesus responded, "Therefore, you must bring out of your storeroom of knowledge the treasures of truth I have given to you so that you can teach others."

After Jesus' death, resurrection, and return to the Father, after the infilling of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, the disciples recognized that they had the incredible strategic responsibility to evangelize and missionize the world. Before His ascension, Jesus was training them to later "go into all the world and make disciples of all people groups" (*Matthew 28:19-20*). They were to "teach all people groups to obey everything He had commanded."

The "disciples" in Matthew 13 included the twelve apostles and probably a few other followers. After Pentecost these disciples were able to "fit all the parts together." They became the leaders of the early Church. The disciples of each succeeding generation are expected to also "fit all the parts together" and to be the teachers and leaders among their peers.

Friends, the kingdom is not yet complete, and we, like the disciples 2000 years ago, are expected to help it to advance. Through the regular study of Scripture, we must keep adding to our storeroom of understanding so that we can share the new and old truths of the kingdom of heaven. That is the perpetual responsibility of those who understand the ways of God's kingdom.