



**BETHEL**  
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# **MINISTRY OF THE WORD**

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## The Dragnet

Imagine if the ten most important people that you can think of were gathered in a room and you were present; perhaps you would imagine your grandfather or grandmother who has since died but in their life led you to Christ and taught you the love of the Lord. Picture a missionary, martyred for his faith, whose life and death proved to be a life changing encouragement to you. Think of a parent or a sibling now gone. Consider someone from the Bible: Paul, David, Timothy. Imagine how you would feel upon entering a room with all ten assembled. The words that come to my mind are excitement and joy.

And yet, the greatest and most profound assembling of peoples this world has ever known would NOT produce the joy that occurs in heaven when someone repents.

Luke 15:10, "In the same way, I tell you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents."

Spurgeon wrote of this text:

...if all the princes of earth had marched in pageant through the streets, with all their robes and jewelry and crowns and all their regalia and their chariots and their horsemen- if the pomp of ancient monarchies had risen from the tomb- if all the might of Babylon and Tyre and Greece had been concentrated into one great parade- yet not an angel would have stopped in his course to smile at those poor tawdy things. But over you, the vilest of the vile, the poorest of the poor, the most obscure and unknown- over you angelic wings were hovering, and concerning you it was said on earth and shouted aloud in heaven, 'Hallelujah, for a child is born to God today.' (Warren Wiersbe, 1998, p. 82)

Truly, the angels rejoice over the repentance of a lost soul! Why is that? Why do the angels rejoice over a person's salvation? There are a variety of reasons we could pose, chief of which would be that salvation testifies to the glory of God. And yet, I believe that the text we are looking at gives another reason for the angel's rejoicing. Notice Matthew 13.

Matthew 13:47-50, "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind, 48 which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away. 49 So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just, 50 and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth."

Based upon Matthew 13:1, we know that Christ told this parable as He sat by the Sea of Galilee. And as with all of Christ's parables, the subject of this lesson would have been all too familiar to those in attendance. Those listening were fishermen or at least acquainted with the fisherman's trade. In fact, fish was a very common dish in the Jewish diet. It was eaten fresh, dried, pickled, and was made into a spread resembling relish. Surprisingly the Mishnah has quite a bit to say about not only the use of fish, but also how to prepare a variety of meals using fish.<sup>1</sup> In fact, fish was such an important part of the Israelite culture that the Jews named one of the gates of the Temple, "Fish gate."

Thus the crowds listening to Christ as He told this parable by the Sea of Galilee would have been familiar not only with the fishing trade itself but also what went into catching a fish, of which there were three common practices. The first was with a line and hook, which was

used to catch one fish at a time. It was this type of fishing that the Lord instructed Peter to do when they needed money to pay the two-drachma tax in Matthew 17.

The second type of fishing employed a small, one-man casting net called an amphiblástron. The folded net was carried over the fisherman's shoulder as he waded in shallow water looking for a school of fish. When the fish came close, he would hold the center cord in one hand and with the other hand throw the net so that it opened into a large circle and came down over the fish. Weights/lead around the perimeter of the net caused it to sink and trap the fish. The fisherman then pulled on the cord, which was anchored on the center of the net and drew it around the fish like a sack. When the net had been pulled closed, the fisherman hauled his catch to shore. It was this kind of fishing that Peter and Andrew were doing when Christ called them to become "fishers of men" (Matthew 4:18-19).

The third kind of fishing used a net known as a Sagána (*sagēnē*). The Sagána was a very large dragnet which required a team of fishermen to operate. Sometimes the net covered as much as a half square mile. The way it worked was that the fishermen would take their boats out to deep water (or they could work with one end of the net tied to the shore). With the use of two boats in the case of open sea, the net then would be pulled into a giant circle around the fish. Floats were attached to the top of the net and weights to the bottom, forming a wall of net from the surface to the bottom of the lake. Because the net permitted nothing to escape, the net caught everything in its path: weeds, objects dropped overboard from other boats, all manner of sea life, and fish of every kind.

It should be obvious that it was this last type of fishing that Christ is referencing here. And notice, of all the methods for fishing, this was the most costly, the most time consuming, and yet the most rewarding. As the fish were pulled onto the boat or the shore, adrenalin would be pumping and a rush would be felt by all involved. And thus, a parable about fishing which employed the Sagána would have aroused the most vivid of all pictures. And with that we are brought to the sifting.

### The Sifting

Matthew 13:47, "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."

In the case of the Sagána being used from shore, it would take a large number of men several hours just to drag the net up on the beach. While the net was being pulled on shore, the fishermen would begin the long process of sorting what they caught; fish by fish. The "good fish" they put in containers filled with water in order to keep them fresh and alive until they could be transported to market. Those fish that would be sold immediately would be placed in a dry container like a basket. But the "bad fish" would be thrown away lest in returning the fish to the sea, the fishermen waste their time catching them again.

Now what Christ has just described would have brought to the minds of those listening vivid

memories of previous catches; catches in which hundreds of fish would have been sold at market and also catches in which hundreds of fish would have been thrown out either to rot under the hot sun of Galilee or to be burned in a large fire. At this point, what Christ has said would NOT have been shocking at all- but the disciples would have been ready. As this is the seventh parable that Christ told sitting by the Sea of Galilee, the disciples would have become accustomed to the fact that every parable that Christ had thus far spoken had a shock value to it. The Parables of:

- The Four Soils, Matthew 13:3-23.
- Wheat and the Tares, Matthew 13:24-30.
- The Mustard Seed, Matthew 13:31-32.
- The Leaven, Matthew 13:33.
- The Hidden Treasure, Matthew 13:44.
- The Pearl of Great Price, Matthew 13:45-46.

All of these parables contained a startling application akin to the “you’re the man” of 2 Samuel 12. And what is the shocking application in this parable? That brings us to the parables’ significance.

Matthew 13:49-50, “So it will be at the end of the age; the angels shall come forth, and take out the wicked from among the righteous, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

Jesus begins His interpretation of the parable by explaining that the separation of the good and bad fish represents God’s judgment “at the end of the age.” And thus we conclude that as the day draws near, it is as if the net of God’s judgment is slowly being drawn around this world! Occasionally we bump into the net as we catch glimpses of God’s judgment, but we know that its fullness is yet to come. John MacArthur wrote this:

The invisible web of God’s judgment encroaches on every human being just as that of the dragnet encroaches on the fish. Most men do not perceive the kingdom, and they do not see God working in the world. They may be briefly moved by the grace of the gospel or frightened by the threat of judgment; but they soon return to their old ways of thinking and living, oblivious to the things of eternity. (MacArthur, 1987, p. 395)

Truly the Day of Judgment is coming. On the Last Day, the “Angels of God”<sup>2</sup> will come forth and gather the wicked- all who have ever lived- out from the children of God. And on that day, just like the fate of the bad fish, the angels will cast the wicked into “the furnace of fire”- which in Scripture is nothing less than hell.

Matthew 5:22, “But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, ‘Raca,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go

into the fiery hell.”

Mark 9:47-48, “And if your eye causes you to stumble, cast it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes, to be cast into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.”

Luke 16:23-24, “And in Hades he [the rich man] lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham far away, and Lazarus in his bosom. And he cried out and said, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus, that he may dip the tip of his finger in water and cool off my tongue; for I am in agony in this flame.’”

John 15:6, “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch, and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.”

See, the “furnace of fire” referenced is nothing less than hell itself with its “weeping and gnashing of teeth” which is NOT so much a picture of suffering as it is rebellion (Acts 7:54)- what a sobering truth! And yet, today many make light of this teaching, and some even laugh; either because it is so horrible or because they don’t believe it. Either way, few respond with the sober-mindedness that this text requires! When an interviewer asked a young punk rock singer what she was looking forward to at the end of her career, she replied, “Death. I’m looking forward to death.” When asked why, she said, “I want to go to hell, because hell will be fun.”

Such a statement is tragic beyond words! Hell is the ultimate expression of God’s judgment. As such, Scripture describes it with horribly graphic words. It is a place of constant torment, misery, and pain- “where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched,” Mark 9:48; see also Matthew 22:13; Mark 9:43. C. H. Spurgeon wrote this:

These eyes would become sightless balls of darkness if they were permitted for an instant to look into that ghastly shrine of torment. Hell is horrible, for we may say of it, eye has not seen, nor ear heard, neither has it entered into the heart of man to conceive the horrors that God has prepared for them that hate Him. (Warren Wiersbe, 1998, p. 78)

John Leadley Dagg put it this way:

Devils, and wicked men, all under the same condemnation, will be their eternal companions: and the companionship, instead of affording relief, will be an aggravation of their woe. The whole throng, hateful, and hating one another, will be tormentors of one another. The malignant passions, which, on earth, caused wars, assassinations, cruelty, oppression, and every species of injury, will be let loose without restraint to banish peace and brotherhood forever from the infernal society; and the passions which burn in the hearts of wicked men on earth, and destroy all internal peace, and sometimes drive to suicide, will then be unrestrained, and do their full work of torture;

and relief by suicide, or self-annihilation, will be forever impossible. O, who can endure such torment. (Dagg, 1857, p. P 368)

It involves the torment of both body and soul, Matthew 10:28; Mark 9:44; John 5:29; Acts 24:15; Rev. 20:11-15.

John Bunyan wrote this:

[In hell] thou shalt have none but a company of damned souls with an innumerable company of devils to keep company with thee. While thou art in this world, the very thought of the devil's appearing to thee makes thy flesh to tremble and thine hair ready to stand upright on thy head. But oh, what wilt thou do when not only the supposition of the devil's appearing but the real society of all the devils of hell will be with thee- howling, roaring and screeching in such a hideous manner that thou wilt be even at thy wit's end and ready to run stark mad again for anguish and torment. If after ten thousand years, an end should come, there would be comfort. But here is thy misery: here thou must be forever. (Foster, 1877, p. 450)

It involves torments that are issued in varying degrees- each more heinous and more miserable than the next, Heb. 10:28-29; Matthew 11:22-23; Luke 12:47-48.

John Gerstner said this:

Hell will have such severe degrees that a sinner, were he able, would give the whole world if his sins could be one less.

Let us be sober-minded. Christ's forewarning of hell here is not intended to frighten us, but to warn us and so burden us unto the ministry of His kingdom!<sup>3</sup> And so we are warned of the SERIOUSNESS of falling short of the Kingdom of God! As "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23), the punishment for such wickedness is eternal separation from our glorious Lord and in its place, destruction and condemnation!

In light of this what ought to be our passion when it comes to the ministry of God's kingdom? What ought to be the source of sadness in our lives? What should be the joy?

Why is it that "there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents" (Luke 15:10)? Aside from rejoicing over the glory of God as manifested in the life of the new believer, the angelic host also rejoices — I believe — because they know

- What weighs in the balance.
- What has just been averted.
- The AWE-full punishment that will never be experienced by the one saved by the blood of Christ.

C. H. Spurgeon, speaking of the Angelic host, wrote this:

They knew what hell was, for they had looked within its jaws and had seen their own brothers fast enclosed with them; therefore, when they see a sinner saved they rejoice because there is one less to be food for the never-dying worm- one more soul escaped out of the mouth of the lion. (Warren Wiersbe, 1998, p. 79)

How ought we to respond to a parable like this? As Christ Himself would have us! Notice that the text goes on:

Matthew 13:51a, "Have you understood all these things?"

This more literally translated reads, "Have you put all of these things together?" And what "things" are these? All the messages of the previous parables! Again notice, Christ has just told seven parables all of which call for the same conclusion:

- Through the parables of the sowers, mustard seed, yeast, hidden treasure and pearls, and the dragnet, Christ essentially has stressed one theme: That of Discrimination.
- In essence, Christ has said in this chapter through these parables, *"What you yourselves have been doing many a time, or have seen your fellow-disciples doing, namely, pick out the bad from the good and discard them, that is what will be done on the last day once for all by the angels at my order."*

Now in light of this message, the exhortation is obvious:

Matthew 13:51b-52, "...They said to Him, 'Yes.' And He 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 forth out of his treasure things new and old.'"

In Christ's day, the head of a household was responsible for its physical care. Thus, they stored their supplies for the time when they were needed. For example, when it came time to clothe the children for the summer, the head of the household would go both to his storehouse and the market with the result that his children could be found dressed in "things new and old." And that was the call of the disciples, to preach the good news of Jesus Christ, a gospel that was revealed in the Old Testament and extended in the New Testament to a world facing the judgment of God. John Calvin described it this way:

And now the Lord... warns [the disciples] at the same time, that His object, in taking so much pains to instruct them, was not merely that they might be well informed, but that they might communicate to others what they had received. (Calvin, 2005, pp. 133-134)

And so, what ought to be our response to this sobering message? We must take seriously God's commission to the church by which we are called to enter the harvest and make disciples.

Matthew 28:18-19a, "And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, 'All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...'"

Just as the angels in heaven rejoice over the salvation of one lost soul, so also we must joyfully enter the work of the kingdom by which we labor for the salvation of the lost! And yet, we have a problem that often times we're ashamed of the Gospel! Now don't misunderstand; we're NOT ashamed to tell people that God "loves them and has a wonderful plan for their life" but we are ashamed to tell people of this "archaic" concept of wrath and judgment that awaits them at the end of their life!

Years ago a Christian Radio station had as their mission, "to be a good neighbor to a variety of listeners." And thus, the policy statement given to prospective broadcasters included the following instructions:

When you are preparing your program for these stations, please avoid using the following: criticism of other religions and references to conversion,... the cross, crucifixion, Calvary, Christ, the blood of Christ, salvation through Christ, redemption through Christ, the Son of God, Jehovah or the Christian life. These people listening are hungering for words of comfort... We ask you to adhere to these restrictions so that God's Word can continue to go forth. Please help us maintain our position of bringing comfort to suffering people. (MacArthur, 1987, pp. 400-401)

Do you see the folly behind this? "Words of comfort" require a context in which comfort is needed: that is, sin, crucifixion, death, hell, wrath, and judgment. If we don't mention the context of salvation, which is hell, all words of comfort will be "no comfort" at all. And yet, that is the norm when it comes to the gospel that is preached in America today. H. Richard Niebuhr, a neo-orthodox, described the gospel preached by so many in the church in America:

God without wrath brought men without sin into a kingdom without judgment through the ministrations of a Christ without a cross. (Niebuhr, 1937, p. 193)

A true reading of the Parable of the Dragnet will always lead to the passion at which Christ arrives in Matthew 13:51-52- the passion to tell others. First of all, of the impending death that awaits them if they continue in their sin. But then secondly, of the good news that:

- They need not perish,
- God has sent an advocate for them- the Lord Jesus Christ, and
- Christ can save them if only they would repent.

Now for those of you who know Jesus Christ, we must also praise God that He has delivered us from the punishments referenced in our text.

Romans 8:1: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ



Jesus.”

Do you understand what this means? As God’s children, we never will experience hell! The horrible and terrifying punishment that awaits all who do not know Christ will never be our end. Oh brothers and sisters, in light of the salvation that has delivered us from hell, let us:

- Praise Christ!
- Gather and worship Christ each week on account of the blood of the Lamb!
- Devote our lives to God as a living and holy sacrifices!

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## End Notes

<sup>1</sup> See Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Vol. 1, p. 473 for more details.

<sup>2</sup> This is symbolic of God. In Scripture it is God through Christ that will do the judging (cf. Matthew 24-25).

<sup>3</sup> Of all teachers in the Bible, Christ spoke the most on hell. If you totaled all the teaching about hell in the Bible, Christ Himself taught more on the subject. Why? Because Christ came preaching the Gospel- the good news of salvation. Without describing that from which we have been saved, salvation becomes meaningless. Or perhaps another reason for Christ’s emphasis on hell in His first advent is as one man put it, “The Biblical descriptions of hell are so horrible that if Christ hadn’t spoken so much about hell, we wouldn’t have believed that it could exist.”

## VISIT US WHEN IN Broomfield, COLORADO

Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10<sup>th</sup> Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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## About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on April 6, 2014. Greg is the minister of Bethel Presbyterian Church.