

The Parable of the Net

by G. Campbell Morgan

The parable of the net reveals the method of the completion of the age, specifically the separation of the wicked from the righteous, and the role of the angel ministry in cleansing the Kingdom and giving nations the opportunity of goodness.

Scripture: Matthew 13:47

Topics: "Divine Judgment", "The Kingdom of Heaven"

Description

G. Campbell Morgan expounds on 'The Parable of the Net,' emphasizing the final separation of the wicked from the righteous at the end of the age. He illustrates how the net represents the Kingdom's influence, gathering various people, but ultimately, it is the angels who will execute God's judgment by separating the good from the bad. Morgan warns against fanciful interpretations of the parable, focusing instead on the certainty of divine judgment and the hope it brings for a future where righteousness prevails. He reassures that God's plan continues beyond the Church, with a new order initiated by this divine separation. The sermon concludes with a call to recognize the importance of judgment as a means of establishing God's Kingdom on earth.

Transcript

With this parable the series revealing the process and condition of the Kingdom principle in the present age comes to conclusion.

In this study we are greatly aided by our Lord's partial interpretation. The picture is that of a great net cast out into the sea. This is not Ezekiel's picture of fishermen standing along the waters from En-gedi to En-eglaim, drawing out fish individually. This is not a picture of the work that the apostles were to do which Jesus described when He said, "I will make you fishers of men." This is quite a different method of fishing, one with which all are familiar who have been to fishing places around our own coasts. A great net is taken out, let down into the sea, and left until after a while those who placed it come back and haul it in, including within its meshes all kinds of fish. When filled it is drawn up upon the beach, and a process of selection and separation goes forward. The good are gathered into vessels. The bad are cast away.

Now our Lord does not explain all the parts of this parable. "So" indicates the beginning of His interpretation. "So shall it be in the end of the age." The Lord's interpretation has to do with the final fact depicted in the parable. The first is the casting out of the net. The second gives a glimpse of the intervening hours when the sea plays backwards and forwards through the net, and fishes of all kinds are

enclosed. The last draws attention to the drawing in of the net at the moment of its fulness by skilful hands. All these suggestive facts are in the parable. But Jesus does not attempt any explanation concerning the net or the sea or the fishes. His explanation has to do with the final movement, the separation, the selection. "So shall it be in the end of the age," the consummation of the age: "the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the righteous, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth."

We grasp at once, therefore, the true emphasis of this parable. It is intended above all to reveal the method of the completion of the age. My own conviction is that we are in danger of fanciful interpretation if we attempt in any detail to explain the other parts of the parable. Let us take that which our Lord explains, and only explain the former as His explanation of the final movement may make possible. The main value of the parable, broadly stated, lies in the fact of the separation which is to follow upon the drawing in of the net. This separation is to take place at the end of the age, and understanding that, we are saved from wrong conceptions, both as to the net and the fishermen, and such fish as are enclosed within the net.

Very popularly this parable is taken to illustrate the work of evangelism, but though that work is spoken of by our Lord under the symbol of fishing, it has no place in the teaching here.

Let us say at once that in some senses this parable is of no vital moment to us. In some senses it does not help us in our work; it is just a glimpse, a flash, of events transpiring at the end of the age. In another sense it is of great and immediate value, as I shall hope to show in conclusion. Here we are not looking first at the processes of the moment, but at the final process with its great meaning. The Church is not here at all. The human race is only partially included. The parable has to do with a section only, that is, with such represented by the number enclosed within the net. Not all the fish in the sea are enclosed within the net. Not all the sea can be traversed, or is traversed by one net in this operation of gathering. It is a sectional picture. A net is cast into the sea, and if we with certain expositors say that the sea is for ever more the symbol of the great Gentile multitudes--I am not sure that is so, but if we say so--remember this is not the picture of the enclosing of all of them, either for reception or rejection.

Let us begin by looking at the point where our Lord placed His emphasis. The process that is to bring to an end the age in which we live and work is a single process. It is that of severing the bad from among the good, of severing "the wicked from among the righteous." The picture our Lord used was altogether familiar, but He chose out of the picture a single fact, and let all the rest go. He pointed His disciples, who for the most part were fishermen, to what they had done many a night, flung the nets out, and left them; and then hauled them in, and sitting down on the beach rejected the bad and conserved the good. But only on one incident in the familiar picture does He lay any emphasis. Ignoring the conservation of the good, and all other processes, our Lord selects this one fact, the severance of the bad. "So shall it be in the end of the age." This is not the picture of our Lord's coming, and taking out His Church, that elect, select company, chosen, fore-ordained, elected by God. There are a great many people who will not be in that elect company who will yet be in Heaven, and included in the economy of God; for election in Scripture is to the Church, and never to salvation. But the subject is not touched upon here. This is a picture of angels coming into the midst of human affairs and drawing out the bad. Let us put the whole emphasis upon that for a moment, because an understanding of it will, I think, flash back for us light upon all the rest.

What is this severance of the wicked for? That they may be destroyed, that they may be cast to the fire; and our Lord's words here are full of significance. He says, There, on that occasion, when angels gather

out evil men and cast them to destruction, "there shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth." And when Christ uses such startling words, we may well ponder solemnly, and read into them nothing that is not there; and read out of them nothing that is evidently in them. "Weeping," lamentation; "gnashing of teeth," the grinding of the teeth, either in pain or rage, or in all probability, both.

What, then, can be the meaning of this net, and this gathering of it up, and this action of the angels regarding it? "Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a net," and as I have said before, the whole picture is needed to show the process of the Kingdom in this age. Notice where the emphasis begins, "So shall it be." This net enclosing within itself a certain number is undoubtedly that of the Kingdom influence of which we have spoken, which is being exercised in the world through the presence in the world of Christ and His Church; and the net is let down into the sea of human life, and wherever it spreads, wherever the influence of the Church is exerted, this final work of the gathering out the bad will proceed. And I have failed utterly if I have not impressed upon the hearts of those who follow me the double value of the age in the economy of God. There is first the gathering out of the Church; and secondly, the creation of influence that prepares for final and future dispensations. That great mystery of the Kingdom as a consciousness, a sub-consciousness, a semi-consciousness in human thinking has come wherever the Church has come, wherever the missionary has come, wherever the Gospel has come. Not perfectly I know, but who shall make the discrimination? I believe there are people in this city of London who have never come under the influence of the Kingdom, and there are certain vast multitudes of people in Africa, India, China, who have never come under the influence of that Kingdom. But wherever it has come, wherever the Gospel has been preached as a witness, there men have been brought consciously face to face with the fact of the Divine government, and it is of such that the number enclosed by the net is made up. At the close of the dispensation or age, when the net is gathered in, and, as I personally think, subsequently to the taking out of the Church at the Lord's second advent, will begin the new process, which will be initiated by the gathering together for judgment of all those nations that have been brought within the reach of Kingdom influence. Later on in His ministry Christ dealt more specifically with the judgment of nations. One glance ahead will suffice to show what I mean. The picture of the sheep and the goats has nothing whatever to do with individual life. It is a picture of national judgment, based upon national relationship to the Christ.

When the fulness of time has come and the elect Church of God is completed and removed, God will not abandon the world, but will begin a new movement in the world's history. That new movement will be initiated by this gathering in of the net, and through the agency of angels, by the sifting of those whole peoples and regions in which the influence of the Kingdom has been felt.

I can well understand that some one may ask, Do you think that is literal, actual, and positive? My answer is, Certainly. There will come a moment when there will be, according to the teaching of Scripture, and this specific word of Jesus, the return to direct intervention in human affairs of angels. To-day their ministrations are unseen. They are still all ministering spirits; but they minister as spirits, because they are ministering specifically to the men of faith in the mystery of this little while.

But as they have been visible in olden days--and if you deny the truth of it, you have to deny your Bible--so will they be visible again. And I believe that the new era in the world's history will be ushered in first of all by this strange and marvellous and overwhelming angel visitation, angel discrimination, and angel separation. Angel discrimination means Heaven's standards set up among the affairs of men. Angel separation means Heaven's might enforcing Heaven's standards.

One of the most interesting subjects in art is the history of angel painting. I am not proposing to discuss it at length. I am inclined to say that I think the great artists, the great masters as we still call them, who in my own opinion so sadly and absolutely failed to represent Christianity, were far more successful in depicting the truth concerning angels. Take one of the latest, that great picture "Despised and Rejected of Men," by Sigismund Goetz. Everybody has seen it.

Everybody has gazed upon the awful figure of the Christ and the crowding figures of the men and women about Him, but how many have noticed that majestic angel form in the background? To me that is the finest thing in all the picture. If this be true, that representation of towering majesty, that conception of angelic being such as is according to Scripture--and here you must not charge me with imagination--"a flame of fire," flashing in beauty and in glory--if that be true, then think of what it will mean for the world when angels come to sever the wicked from among the good.

Do not be afraid of materializing spiritual things. In our great fear of spiritualizing material things, do not let us run to the other extreme. Think what it would mean if angels could come upon our city to-day to lay an arrest upon all evil-doers, and extract them from the midst of the people. That is what will happen, but it is only a preliminary process, the first skirmish of the hosts of God, when He comes to set up His Kingdom. This is the day of long-suffering patience.

This is the day when the net lies out in the sea, and the waves lap it and rock it, and men wonder what is happening. This is the day when the great Merchant is gathering out the pearl, and preparing it for the mystery of unborn ages. When presently the day is ended, and its purpose in the economy of God accomplished, then this new age begins for the world itself, and angels, according to Jesus, are to initiate it by gathering out the wicked from among the good.

There the parable leaves us. In some senses we can go no further. And yet while our parable does not declare to us what the final issue will be, we may for purposes of understanding it, in all fairness refer to the King's previous and fuller statement which at the time we did not dwell upon at any great length. So that returning to the parable of the darnel and the wheat, we shall find something that helps us in interpretation of the present one. "The Son of Man shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His Kingdom all things that cause stumbling, and them that do iniquity, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be the weeping and gnashing of teeth." The parable we are looking at goes no step beyond that. But this parable of the darnel does. "Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the Kingdom of their Father," and here again I believe there is no reference merely to the Church, the process of whose selection has already been completed, but to that multitude beyond the Church whom we have been considering.

What, then, is the meaning of the angel ministry which will follow the age in which He gathers the Church to Himself? First the cleansing of the Kingdom from things that cause stumbling, and from them that do iniquity. But what beyond it? "The righteous shall shine forth as the sun in the Kingdom of their Father." That is to say, this angelcleansing of the Kingdom will mean the opportunity of goodness, and the opportunity of the nations which have never been enclosed within the net.

May I in conclusion depart from all these figures of speech, and attempt to state with great brevity what I think they indicate? This age will close in the first place with the gathering out from it of the Church of Jesus Christ to Himself. If we have made one mistake more terrible than another in our interpretation of Scripture teaching concerning the future it has been that of imagining that when the Church is taken away

God abandons the world. He does nothing of the kind. Beyond the gathering out of the Church, all the great processes foreseen by Hebrew prophets will be fulfilled. Half the reason why scholars to-day are indulging in criticism of the Hebrew prophets is that they have overlooked this underlying fact, that the vast bulk of Hebrew prophecy is yet unfulfilled, but is awaiting its appointed time of fulfilment. Or if they do see these things are unfulfilled they say, These things never came to pass, therefore these things are not to be depended upon. As a matter of fact the Hebrew prophecies are not yet fulfilled, but they are going to be fulfilled; and the vast and splendid visions of a coming King, and a coming glory, which the Hebrew prophets saw, the world has not yet seen; but the world will see it, and the Kingdom is yet to be set up here on earth.

Another of our greatest perils is that of confusing for ever more between the Church and God's Kingdom. The Church is one entity in the great and universal ages and universe, having specific work which we have considered on a previous occasion. But further, beyond the Church will be the multitude which no man can number, and far beyond the Church will stretch the vast domain of Divine beneficence and rule, and the world itself is not to be abandoned, according to Scripture teaching, when the Church is taken out from it. But when the Church is removed a new order will obtain, to be initiated by a process of judgment, in which angels will gather out those nations that have had their Gospel opportunity, and will gather out all evil things and banish them, and righteousness shall have a new opportunity.

I do not know when that hour will be. I have no idea when the King is coming. It may be immediately. It may not be for a thousand years. I do not know, and I do not attempt to discover. But should He come soon, I do not think any of His angels would go into the interior of China. I do not think they would go into the heart of Africa. I think these angels would be in the great centres, all about the parts where white men congregate. They would gather into the embrace of their work of separation all the places and the peoples that have been brought into the net of the Kingdom influence, and the rest would wait. I am perfectly sure that the angels will be busy in London. Think of it, my masters, and in God's name I tell you it does not fill my heart with terror, but with delight. I sigh for the coming of the angels. I feel increasingly that the government of men is a disastrous failure, and will be to the end. Presently when the Church is complete, and lifted out, angels will take this business in hand, and there will be no seducer clever enough to dodge ah angel, and there will be no scamp master enough of traffic to escape the grip of an angel hand. Blessed be God for judgment, stern judgment. I am not sure that the world does not need judgment more than mercy. He "shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His Kingdom all things that cause stumbling, and them that do iniquity." Buildings will crash at their touch, and unholy places will be demolished at their bidding; and yet the angels are only the King's messengers. Think of the King Himself behind it all, coming to establish His Kingdom. This is an unbelieving age, a very clever, busy one, but a very small age in its thinking. I love to get back from magazine articles and philosophies to my Bible, and I love to hear Him say, "The Son of Man shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His Kingdom all things that cause stumbling," everything that offends. That is my hope to-day. Oh, my hope is not in any Missionary Society in existence, nor in any Evangelistic Society in existence. I pray that they may do their duty, preach the evangel, and hasten the coming day; but my hope is in these flaming seraphs. My heart cries out for their coming. You may say it is imaginative. Remember it is Jesus' imagination, and I am quite willing to spend the time imagining with Jesus. "He shall send forth His angels."

And then what? The things that remain shall be the basis of the new Kingdom, and the rule of the iron rod shall be established; and then Africa will get its great chance, and China too. When the angel guards

China against any man's daring to suggest opium, then is the chance for China. That is only one passing illustration, but you catch the thought of it.

This parable is of the nature of a look ahead. In some senses we to-day have little to do with it, but in other senses it is a gracious source of strength, as it assures us of a sure process of judgment, and so gives us hope where otherwise there would be none. Take this parable, and study it in the light of all the rest. It will give you, oppressed with all the failure of the hour, to see that if man fails God is not failing. Beyond this dispensation, God has others; and judgment, the most beautiful thing in God's universe, will yet have its opportunity, and the world, the scarred, seamed, sorrow-stricken earth, will be healed by a mercy that operates in judgment, by justice that operates in mercy.

The Parable of the Householder

"Have ye understood all these things? They say unto Him, Yea. And He said unto them, Therefore every scribe who hath been made a disciple to the Kingdom of Heaven is like unto a man that is a householder, which bringeth forth out of his treasure things new and old." - Matthew 13:51, 52.

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