

“Kingdom Secrets: The Net”

January 31, 2021

Matthew 13:47-52

SI: Jesus’ disciples asked him why he taught the crowds in parables but only explained the meaning of the parables to them.

Jesus replied, The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them.

So the primary purpose of the parables is to tell followers of Jesus Christ about God’s kingdom in this world.

What is it like to live under the gracious rule of Jesus Christ?

What does the Lord Jesus want us to understand and expect about life in the kingdom of heaven? What does he want us to believe about it?

INTRO: The first time I ever ate crawfish

was when I was dating Allison and went to meet her family in Louisiana. There on the table, spread on newspaper was a bright red pile of boiled crawfish. They told me if a crawfish's tail is curled under its body, then it's fine to eat. But if you pull one out of the pile with a straight tail, throw it away, don't eat it. Because it means that it was dead when it went into the pot.

I have no idea what horrible things would have happened if you eat one with a straight tail—but I didn't tempt fate and find out.

Ask anyone in Louisiana and they will tell you the same thing.

When you are eating crawfish and you find one with a straight tail, throw it away!

The image in Jesus' parable was just as familiar to his disciples.

Capernaum was on northern shore of the Sea of Galilee and it was a fishing town. They had seen this and even done it themselves countless times.

A net was dragged to shore full of all kinds of fish. And the fishermen sorted them into two groups, edible fish and inedible fish, the good and bad. The good to keep and sell and eat, the bad to toss.

Then Jesus said, That sorting and keeping or discarding is a picture of judgment. And he goes on to talk about the angels coming at God's command and sorting people into two groups for some to be kept and others thrown away.

It's interesting to compare this last parable in Matthew 13 with the parable we studied a few weeks ago about the wheat and the tares.

It's a different image, farming instead of fishing, but these two parables are very much alike in a number of ways.

Jesus even uses some of the very same words.

There is a gathering and a separating done by angels at the end of the age, and the same words are used to describe the fate of the wicked:

They are thrown into the furnace where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth.

But there is a difference between these two parables, and the difference helps us understand Jesus' point and what he wants us to get from this parable. The difference is that the parable of the wheat and the tares talks about the work of the devil in this age and the spread of evil which goes on simultaneously with the growth of the kingdom of heaven.

It stresses patience and commitment to growth throughout this age.

But in the parable of the net, all of these details are removed.

There is nothing about the work of the devil. Nothing about the spread of evil in this present age. Nothing about the children of God bearing fruit. Jesus removes all those details to intensely focus on one truth: There will be a judgment of all people at the end of the age.

Just as fishermen on the sea of Galilee separate fish into two groups, all men will be separated in a final division.

“This is how it will be at the end of the age.”

When Jesus says this is how it will be, then this is how it will be.

The Bible is unequivocal in its teaching that the final judgment is certain.

This is a secret of the kingdom that the Lord presses home.

As much as things seem to stay the same and follow predictable patterns, there is a great event on the horizon.

There will be a consummation of the kingdom.

This age will end. The age of grace will end. When it does, judgment comes.

Why does Jesus push this home with such force?

Why does he want the reality of judgment on the minds of his disciples, so much so that he says this is one of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven?

Because a proper focus on judgment drives you to Jesus Christ.

There's only one worthwhile reason for knowing and believing any doctrine, to bring you closer to God.

And the doctrine of the final judgment can be used powerfully for that purpose.

Christ's parables not simple stories with simple moral lessons.

They reveal mysteries about God's dealing with the world—secrets of kingdom. They call you to respond in faith or suffer the consequences of unbelief.

This is a bare-bones parable of judgment.

Let's look at it under the bare-bones outline Jesus provides. Three points.

1. The sorting
2. The burning
3. Treasures new and old

We'll see how these lead to him

MP#1 The sorting

“Men drew (the net) ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous.”

There are only two categories of people at the judgment—good fish and bad fish.

The Bible has many other names for these two categories.

Gold and dross, wine and dregs, grain and chaff, sheep and goats, wise virgins and foolish virgins, wheat and tares.

These are all ways of describing two moral categories—the evil and the righteous. That tells us the standard used for sorting on the day of judgment will not be any human categories. It will be God’s moral law.

It will be according to what God says is evil and what God says is righteous.

What about people who don’t have the Bible?

What about people who have never heard of the Ten Commandments?

For people who don’t know the Bible, judgment will be according the law of God written on the heart—the conscience. The key passage is Romans 2.

When Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law . . .

They show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness.

I read about a psychologist who studied prison inmates who are stabbers.

I didn’t know it, but apparently that is a category in the penal system— inmates who frequently stab other prisoners or guards.

What this psychologist discovered was that these men had a peculiar way of talking about stabbings.

They rarely spoke in the first person when describing an incident and they never described themselves as the active participant.

In other words, they would never say: I stabbed him.

Instead, they would say things like. The knife went in.

Which is kind of funny, but it’s obviously a way of shifting blame in order to silence the conscience, which people do all the time. I have.

Another way people attempt to silence their conscience is to admit to doing some bad things, but then to say that’s not the real me.

Deep down I’m a good person.

According to Jesus, however, that’s not one of God’s categories at the judgment.

There are only two, evil or righteous as determined by the law of God.

Sometimes people do so much evil over and over again that their conscience

becomes mute. They no longer feel even a twinge of warning or regret.
The old-fashioned way of describing this is to sear the conscience.
But we know these people still have a conscience because thieves hate to be stolen from. Cheaters hate to be cheated on. Liars hate to be lied to.
And at the judgment, the testimony of their own conscience will condemn them.

In human judgments we never have all the facts.
We have standards of proof like “beyond a reasonable doubt” or
“preponderance of evidence” but we can still get it wrong.
And sometimes evidence comes out later that shows we got it wrong.
Of course, God knows everything, so he can’t get it wrong.
But in describing judgment day, the Bible doesn’t just say God is omniscient,
instead it gives us the very sobering image of books being opened.
You might remember this from our study of Daniel 7 a few months ago.

Thrones were set in place, and the Ancient of Days took his seat.
His clothing was as white as snow; the hair of his head was white like wool.
His throne was flaming with fire, and its wheels were all ablaze.
A river of fire was flowing, coming out from before him.
Thousands upon thousands attended him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.
The court was seated, and the books were opened.

What’s in these books? The record of your life. Every thought, word, and deed.
I’ve heard that somewhere in some data center is everything you have ever done on
the internet, every email sent, every site visited, every click.
I have no idea if that’s true or not, but it certainly is true that there are things we’ve
done or thought that we want to hide.

I recently read Dan Carter’s biography of George Wallace.
Late in life Gov. Wallace said the reason he had black marchers beaten on the
Edmond Pettus Bridge was to protect them, because he was afraid that if they
made it over the bridge, angry white crowds would have killed them.
You shake your head at that, yet haven’t we conveniently forgotten or softened
or reinterpreted bad things we’ve done with the passing of the years.

The books will be opened, the conscience will bear witness,
judgment will be rendered.
Jesus says that in the kingdom of heaven there will be the sorting,
and after that, the burning.

MP#2 The burning

“The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

In the parable of the wheat and the tares Jesus adds the sentence:

“Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.”

But in this parable he does not mention rewards at all, only punishment.

That bare-bones approach makes this parable very sobering.

The church father Chrysostom called it “a terrible parable.”

Gregory the Great said it is a parable “to be feared rather than expounded.”

He’s not saying we shouldn’t expound it, but that as we examine the words and interpret it, we should do so with care.

Because this secret of the kingdom that is a terrible thing that must not be approached in an abstract way. No jokes about hell.

The Lord Jesus is impressing upon us hell’s awfulness, so we seek salvation in him.

Let us look with reverent fear at the images Christ presents of hell.

He calls it a fiery furnace. And a place of weeping and gnashing of teeth.

Fire is often used to describe hell in the New Testament.

Christ himself does so about a dozen times. Also James, Peter, Jude, Revelation.

What does the fiery furnace mean, or the lake of fire in Revelation?

We have to tread carefully here, because Christians have sometimes misunderstood this in ways that contradict the plain teaching of Scripture.

For example, some people have taken this very literally and teach there is a literal lake of fire and that all the wicked people are thrown into it and suffer indiscriminate physical agony.

Medieval church art sometimes depicted this as a bunch of naked people being stirred in the fire by demons with pitchforks.

But that interpretation of the fire of hell contradicts the clear teaching of the Bible that everyone will not be punished the same.

Jesus said it will be worse on the day of judgment for the towns in Israel that saw his miracles and rejected him than for Sodom and Gomorrah.

He says some will be beaten with many blows, some with few.

God is perfectly just. The punishment will fit the crime.

There are others who have taken the fire in another unbiblical direction.

They argue that fire burns things up, so wicked people will be burned up body and soul and cease to exist. It’s called annihilationism.

It’s a way of dealing with the very distressing idea of eternal punishment.

But that contradicts passages that do speak of hell as conscious and eternal.

It's called the place where "the fire is not quenched and the worm does not die." And then there is the actual phrase in the Bible "eternal punishment" contrasted with "eternal life."

So what does the fire of hell mean?

Well, let me approach that by asking another question:

What do the streets of gold in heaven mean? They mean heaven is a place of great beauty and attractiveness, value and delight. Something we want to see. Fire and burning mean hell is a place of pain and dread.

The Bible says it is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. There is nothing quite like the pain of being burned that makes the body recoil and so the Bible warns and urges to flee from the wrath to come.

What about weeping and gnashing of teeth?

This is not being sorrow for your sins and crying out to God that you are sorry.

It's the weeping of regret.

It is hopeless, self-centered weeping.

And old Scottish preacher said there will be godless fathers weeping in hell because their godless sons are in hell too, and godless mothers weeping because their godless daughters are in hell with them.

And the most miserable will be godless ministers surrounded by congregations.

I don't know if that's right, because hell seems to be a place of isolation, but it does illustrate the hopelessness of hell.

Gnashing of teeth is an expression of frustration and hatred.

Who is this frustration and hatred directed toward? It's directed toward God.

They will be dragged away by the angels cursing God.

As C.S. Lewis so vividly explained it, those in hell have chosen it.

They are in misery, but they would hate being in heaven, because God is there. They will not be softened in hell but will become hardened in their frustration and hatred. It's a dreadful image.

Human beings becoming monstrous in their self-absorbed weeping and raging.

If the Lord Jesus stopped here, this would indeed be a terrible parable.

But there is one more part to this passage.

Jesus asks his disciples if they have understood these things. They say, Yes. Then he says to them:

Therefore, every teacher of the law who has become a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old.

The sorting, the burning, and then finally

MP#3 Treasures new and old

What does this odd statement that Jesus makes at the end mean?

He says teachers of the law who become disciples in the kingdom of heaven are like homeowners who bring out new and old treasures.

It's a kind of mini parable. Imagine someone invites you to their lake house. You walk down to the dock and there is a classic wooden Chris Craft motorboat, and tied next to it is a state-of-the art ski boat, and your friend says—
what's your mood?

Do you want to cruise or do you want to ski?

Do you want mellow or do you want speed?

He's a homeowner bringing out treasures new and old.

The new and the old treasures Christ mentions are obviously teachings about the kingdom of heaven. But can we get more specific than that?

What teachings? What doctrines?

Many of the ancient commentators said things old and new refer to the Law and the Gospel.

So, they say, Christ's point to his disciples is that true teaching about the kingdom of heaven, has to include both—it has to declare both the law of God and the penalty of sin and the Good News of salvation through Christ.

I'm not 100% sure that's what this particular verse means, that the new and the old refers to the law and the gospel, but I do agree 100% true teaching about the kingdom of heaven requires both.

Teaching about the law and judgment and hell is a treasure because it warns us of the danger of our sin and the futility of hiding or denying it.

And it makes us ask, if we are bad fish, how do we become good fish?

How do we move from the category of the evil to the category of the righteous so we are not thrown into hell where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth?

The Good News, and that's what the word Gospel means, good news.

The good news is that God gives righteousness to all who have faith in his Son.

And the way that works, the way you get righteousness through faith in Christ, is by something called theologians call imputation.

Imputation is more than forgiveness.

If God just forgave your sins, that would not be enough for judgment.

You would still not be righteous before him. Because righteousness is more

than simply not committing sins. It's doing everything God requires.
It's loving God with all your heart, soul, strength and mind,
and loving your neighbor as yourself.
If you were just forgiven, would bring you up to zero.

Imputation is the transfer of the perfect record of Jesus Christ to you.
Jesus is like a union negotiator. If you are in a union, and the head of the union
negotiates a contract, that contract is yours. If it's bad it's yours, good yours.
The Bible doesn't use the term union negotiator, it uses the term covenant mediator.
As your Mediator, he lived a perfect life, he loved God and neighbor—
by faith, that righteous life is imputed to you.
Bible describes his righteousness as a white robe you wear.

But that's not all.

It's not just that we get Jesus' perfect record, he got our bad record.
2 Cor 5:21 "God made Him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might
become the righteousness of God."

The perfect man became sin and suffered in his body and soul the pains of hell
during the hours of darkness and rejection on the cross.

And all of the terrible descriptions of hell in the Bible, especially those
from the lips of Jesus himself, and just hints of what he willingly suffered for your
sin, so that you could be forgiven.

But that's not all.

When imputation really happens, something else happens simultaneously.

You are born again. The Holy Spirit and he implants a seed of spiritual life.
From that seed grows real righteousness in your life. Yes, you still sin.

But you start to grow in love, self-control, courage, joy. You do good.
So on the Day of Judgment, not only will you be clothed in Christ's righteousness,
but God will reveal that you have become a righteous person
through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Do you see how this changes everything about the day of sorting and burning?
It means that as a Christian you shouldn't say to yourself—

I better not sin, I might go to hell.
You should say, I can't sin because Jesus has gone to hell for me.
How can I bear to sin against the one who loved me so much?
Lord Jesus, I love you and I love your cross.

I love that instrument of your pain because it is for me righteousness and life.
Lord, I want to be true to who I am and who you are making me.

Jesus says to his disciples: Do you understand these things?
And that is really a question directed to every one of you here this morning.
Do you?

Do you understand why it is so important for Christians to always
have in mind the end of the age and judgment and separation and burning?
Do you understand why this secret of the kingdom of heaven is so important?

Because when you believe it, and when you connect judgment and hell to the cross
of Jesus, and his suffering and his great love—
then you have the greatest possible incentive for obedience and holiness.
And you will await the end of the age with confidence,
and look with anticipation for the kingdom of heaven.