

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

MATTHEW 13:47-50

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-ge-di 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.

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 at the end of the world** (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 at the end of the world,**" the consummation of the age: "**the angels shall come forth, and sever the wicked from among the just, and shall cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing 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 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 just.”**

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 at the end of the world.”**

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 wailing 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.

The fact 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. 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, the great separation will take place.

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 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.

The new era in the world's history will be ushered in by this strange and marvelous 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. 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 offend, and them which do iniquity, And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing 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.”**

What, then, is the meaning of the angel ministry which will consummate the age? 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.”** 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. The fact is everything **“The Son of Man shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His Kingdom all things that offend,”** everything that causes stumbling.

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. The world, the scarred, seamed, sorrow-stricken earth, will be healed by a mercy that operates in judgment, by justice that operates in mercy.

~ end of chapter 39 ~

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