

THE CASE OF THE GREAT DRAGNET

by Ray C. Stedman

We come now to the seventh and last in the series of our Lord's parables recorded in Matthew 13. These parables convey what Jesus calls "the secrets of the kingdom of heaven," the mysteries of what God is doing behind the scenes of history in the age in which we live, the age which began with Jesus' first coming and will end with his second. As we look back over this series we can see through the eyes of our Lord something of what has been happening in our present age. We can see the history of this age as God sees it and can understand something of what he is accomplishing through it. We are still involved in it, and thus it has great meaning for us.

You remember that Jesus told us that the age would be characterized by a sowing of truth. There would be a spreading of the ultimate message of reality. That is exactly what the gospel is. The good news is that God is telling men what the lost secret of their humanity is. That is what the gospel is all about. It is a declaration to human hearts that the cause of all their misery, and the aching, the longing, and the loneliness of their lives, is that they are not operating according to the provision, nor on the program, which God intended for man in the beginning. That provision is God himself, living within man, invited into our lives by faith, received there as Savior and Lord. The good news is that God has found a way, despite our rejection, to bring us that message again and to open up our eyes to see and understand it.

That message has been sown throughout the world, as our Lord made clear in the first parable. Some would receive it -- not everyone, but some -- and those who would receive it would begin to grow and develop and blossom into the kind of men and women that God had in mind in the beginning.

Then in the second parable Jesus told us that there would be a scattering throughout the whole earth of the people who had responded to the truth of the gospel. The Lord said he would be responsible to place his people throughout the whole structure of humanity, geographically and socially -- in every tribe and nation around the world and in every class of society.

Some weeks ago I attended a conference in the mountains of Southern California with a group from a church made up largely of middle-class American citizens. But a young man and his wife arrived dressed in black jackets with emblems emblazoned on the backs. They rode up on motorcycles. Both had long hair and looked for all the world like Hell's Angels. I found out that indeed they had been Hell's Angels and that they are still living and traveling and working with them. But these two have become Christians, and now their whole ministry is to the Hell's Angels. They perform it at great risk to themselves. They told me that after they had become Christians the other members of the gang gathered around, and said, "Look, we don't mind your getting religion. We don't even mind your talking to us about it. But you'd better never be phony about it. If we ever sense that you're putting us on, we'll kill you!"

Now that is quite a challenge -- to minister under those terms. And I want to confess immediately how grateful I am that none of you have ever put my ministry to you on that basis. But that is testimony to the Lord's ability to sow his people wherever he wants them to be. This is what has been happening throughout history.

In that same parable Jesus said that another sowing would be going on, conducted by the Devil. He too would have his people everywhere, penetrating every class of society, and especially invading the church so that the good and the evil would grow up together there unto the harvest. History has proven this to be exactly as our Lord has said.

In the third parable we saw the growth of the mustard seed which our Lord planted, the little seed with its

pungent, biting quality, which, again, represents the gospel, with its power to stimulate and change and transform people. And yet, in a strange and unnatural way, the seed grew up into a huge, ungainly tree with many branches in which evil birds nest. This too has proven true in history as we have seen the humble, lowly seed of the gospel planted among men but, by the strange twist of counterfeit Christianity, it has grown into a proud and prominent church which seeks after prestige and favor and position and power among men. This condition is still prevalent throughout Christendom, in both Catholic and Protestant branches, and is still producing much of the untoward reaction against genuine Christianity which we find on every side today.

The fourth parable is of the woman who hid leaven in three measures of meal. By this Jesus indicated that some of those in authority in the church, who should have known better, would stray from studying and teaching the Word of God and would neglectfully permit to enter, and in some cases would even deliberately introduce, various forms of sin and evil into the life of the church. This would corrupt and disrupt the precious fellowship of God's people with him and with each other. And we know that all too often today as well as all through history this has been the case. Impediments to a consistent walk with the Lord have been erected, and disharmony, discord, and turmoil have arisen between individuals and groups and factions of genuine believers, just as Jesus warned.

Then there were the two parables of the treasure hidden in the field and of the valuable pearl, which, taken together, give us the purpose of the cross, the reason why Jesus died. He came and gave all that he had in order that he might purchase the field of humanity which contains the treasure of the secret of world peace and prosperity. And that secret, we saw, is bound up in a tiny nation, Israel, which has been brought back into being in very recent times. It is now very much in the forefront of human events, occupying the center of the stage in current history, as the world is only now becoming dimly aware. All this is happening because God has a purpose for that nation. And when he teaches them again the secret of their own lives there will come that time of world peace and prosperity of which the prophets have spoken.

Jesus also gave all that he had in order to purchase the valuable pearl of a redeemed humanity, to impart to individuals the secret of peace and of meaning in life and thus to fashion a new community, a whole new race of people who would have a wonderful purpose far beyond this life and beyond this planet in God's great program for the ages. This is the pearl of great price, which is the church.

That brings us to the parable of the great dragnet. These are Jesus' words:

"Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a net which was thrown into the sea and gathered fish of every kind; when it was full men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into vessels 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, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth." {Matt 13:47-50}

I don't suppose we could get any introduction to this parable better than those well-known notes which introduced the television serial of the same name, *Dragnet*. Remember how they go?

dummmm!
dumda-
Dum-
dum!

That program, by the way, captured the intent of this parable better than any commentary I have in my library. It was about a police dragnet which swept through the city of Los Angeles and would capture and bring in all kinds of people to be investigated, to have either their badness or goodness in the eyes of the law exposed. That is exactly what this parable is about. Incidentally, it was located in the right place, the City of the Angels, because in the parable our Lord associates angels with the judgment.

This is a description of what is going on in our present day. This lost secret of the kingdom of heaven is the characteristic of the gospel which forces individuals out into the open where they manifest what they really are. There is an element of the gospel, this radical message of Christianity, which exposes people when they come

into contact with it. It makes known what they are, just as a great dragnet sweeping through the seas gathering fish of every kind ultimately exposes whether they are good or bad, as our Lord makes clear. This has been happening throughout our age. The radical truth of the gospel is like a net seining through the tides of restless, surging humanity, and whoever is caught in it is forced to declare himself, forced out into the open to reveal whether he is bad or good.

Now do not misunderstand. Obviously, people are not simply born bad or good. We are all part of a fallen race. We are all born into lost humanity. We all have evil at work within us and that evil will create in our character a resistance to truth, if God does not intervene. We are all in that condition. Bad or good, in this parable, refers to how we respond to truth, to what happens when we come into contact with reality. That is the whole issue. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the basic truth, the ultimate reality, the fundamental secret of life, the way things really are. The good are those who deal honestly with this reality, who when they learn something real and genuine about it respond to it, act on it, do something about it. The bad are those who, at best, turn their backs to it and say, "No, I don't like that and I don't want to believe it; therefore I reject it," or else, at worst, play the hypocrite and say, "Yes, I'll accept that," but yet allow it to make no changes in their life and remain essentially evil within although outwardly they put on a pious garb of sanctimonious self-righteousness. That is what this parable is talking about.

Life presents many illusions. We do not always perceive the difference between truth and falsehood. All of us, even the youngest among us, have learned that you cannot trust everything you see. Many ideas are propounded today as being delightful and capable of bringing you happiness. But when you grasp them they are like cobwebs and they crumble to nothing, to dust in your hands, and you are left frustrated, disillusioned and disappointed, shattered and defeated. Life consists of trying to sort out the illusions from the truth, of attempting to distinguish between fantasy and the real thing.

The truth is that man was created to be indwelt by God. The only way we can fulfill our humanity is to be filled with God and to understand that we are to live, to operate, by faith in him. The gospel message, this good news about the lost secret of humanity, about the fact that Christ in you is able to restore to you all that God ever intended you to have, is like a great net sweeping through the tides of humanity. Whoever is caught in it is made to reveal what kind of people they are, to reveal whether they will deal honestly with the truth or whether they will reject it and turn from it. You can see this process in your own life, in your own experience. You can see it in the record of church history. You can see it working itself out in human events today. The gospel has this radical character about it.

You remember that when Paul spoke to the Athenians on Mars Hill, to the thinkers and philosophers in that great pagan city where the people were given over to superstition and to the worship of false gods, he said to them,

"The times of ignorance [the foolish worshipping of false ideas and following after false gods] God overlooked [he ignored it because he does not ever condemn people for ignorance], but now he commands all men everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man [Jesus] whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all men by raising him from the dead."
{Acts 17:30-31 RSV}

What did he mean by that? Well, Paul's phrase "but now" does not refer to a moment in history before which men were allowed to live in ignorance but from which time on they all have to believe. He is referring to a point in the experience of each individual. We are all born into ignorance. We all grow up following false gods, committed to wrong ideals, and operating on false principles. Ah, but when you hear the truth of the gospel, when the reality of Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, strikes you and you understand that, in the resurrection of Jesus, God has demonstrated before all the world that there is available a wholly different way of life, that there is a new provision for man, and that in Jesus Christ is found the lost secret of our humanity. When you learn that, then you have arrived at a crisis point, then you have to do something about it. You have to act on it or reject it, one or the other.

And then you will be different. It will drive you one way or the other. If you believe it, and act upon it, you

will never be the same again. It will change everything about your life, gradually, little by little, as you see it applied to various areas. If you reject it, you will never be the same again. You will either be constantly playing the hypocrite, becoming more pious outwardly and more devilish inwardly, or you will turn your back on Christianity altogether and go your own way to become a blatant atheistic philosopher, spreading propaganda against God everywhere you go. That is what Jesus is saying. His dragnet exposes the attitude of your heart toward the truth.

You can see that in the passage which we read earlier this morning from Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 2, Verses 14-16: He says,

But thanks be to God, who in Christ always leads us in triumph, and through us spreads the fragrance of the knowledge of him everywhere. For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life. {2 Cor 2:14-16a RSV}

Everywhere Paul went he made an impact and an impression, and people could never be the same, because when they understood the great, thrusting reality of the gospel they had to make a choice. What they determined to do exposed whether they were honest or not, whether they wanted to deal with life as it is, or to fool themselves and kid themselves and go on dreaming about something that would never be. Christians are the aroma of Christ to all men. Wherever we go men must face a fact which changes them. And they go on either from life to life, growing in grace and freedom and liberty, or from death to death, ending in the death of eternal loss. That is what the gospel is like, Jesus said. It is like a net which captures people and eventually exposes what they are.

Our Lord foresaw that this would occur throughout the age. But at the close of the age, he says, there will be a public manifestation before everyone of this division among men. In other words, throughout the age, now almost twenty centuries long, the division has been taking place in the lives of individuals. Anybody hearing this message has been revealed in the eyes of God to be either bad or good, unrealistic or honest. But as the age draws to a close the time is going to come when this division between men, this frank declaration of where people actually are, will come clearly manifest into the open. Our Lord says,

"So it will be at the close of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous." {Matt 13:49 RSV}

It is very important that we understand what Jesus means when he uses the term "the close of the age." He is talking about a time which the prophets had specified would come at the close of the age of the Gentiles. Daniel said it would be seven years long and that during that time strange events would occur in human affairs. Jesus himself describes it in the twenty-fourth chapter of the book of Matthew. He tells us that the close of the age will be recognizable because it will be a time of "great tribulation such as has not been from the beginning of the world until now, no and never will be," {Matt 24:21 KJV}. You students of history know that there have been some terrible times in the past, but nothing like this. And it is during that last seven years of this present age, before our Lord returns in power and glory and with all his angels with him, as he himself describes, that this judgment takes place and the angels separate the good from the bad.

We are not products of our own immediate life. We are tied to the past. We are the results today of what our parents were before us, and their parents before them. And the trend toward the disclosure of honesty versus dishonesty, fantasy versus reality, comes down through all the preceding generations in all of history. But it will all find its focus and its ultimate manifestation in a great and clear-cut division which will take place.

Now, Jesus said that this distinction would be accomplished by the angels, not by men. It is not the politicians who are going to promote this. So it really does not make a great deal of difference whether you vote Republican or Democrat. Neither party is going to be able to accomplish what our Lord is setting forth here. It is going to be done by angels.

On the basis of the Word of God, I believe in angels. I have never seen one, but I believe in them nevertheless. The Bible teaches that angels are "ministering spirits sent forth to minister to those who shall be the heirs of

salvation," {cf, Heb 1:14 KJV}. I believe in recording angels who keep a record of what we are doing. I do not know how they do it, but I believe they do. I believe in guardian angels who protect us from serious disaster. I know I keep mine busy most of the time.

When our Lord was here on earth, and at other times in history, angels have been visibly present among men and manifest in their activity. When the disciples went to the tomb they found angels guarding it and explaining the events of the resurrection. When Jesus ascended into the heavens two angels, robed in white, stood by to explain to the disciples what had happened. As we approach the close of the age it may well be that this kind of angelic visitation will be evident once again. I don't know how it will be received by people. Since it will be apparent that angels are beings of another kind than we, it is apt to be explained as some kind of invasion from outer space. I merely drop that suggestion into your fertile minds for you to mull over for yourselves.

At any rate, Jesus says that at the close of the age the angels will be active. Angels have never ceased to be active, but their activity has been behind the scenes. Wherever angels are at work there is unseen, invisible, divine activity with visible and yet otherwise unexplainable results. Oftentimes something happens in human affairs which cannot be explained by the people who make it their business to study and analyze trends in human reactions and thoughts. They can only record it, but do not know why it is happening. That usually is a manifestation of some kind of angelic activity.

Jesus says that is what is going to happen at the close of the age. Increasingly, inexplicably, there will be divisions into groups, either evil or good. This links closely with the parable of the wheat and the tares. There too Jesus said that the angels would divide men, that clusters of evil men would gather together and the righteous would do the same. Here Jesus says that the angels will come and separate the evil from the righteous and what people actually are will become plain to all.

In other words, as we draw near to the end of the age hypocrisy is going to be more and more difficult. It is going to be harder to pretend to be a Christian. People will be more and more driven into an open manifestation of the evil that is within and no longer able to cloak it with some form of outward righteousness. That will be the result of angelic activity, exposing the bad in order that it might be destroyed, and allowing the good to remain for the harvest of God, just as this parable makes very clear.

I am not at all certain how this is going to work out. Our Lord does not give us the details of how this will actually appear in history. But I am sure this trend will occur. In fact it may well be occurring right now, as the issues are becoming increasingly clear and it is not as easy as it used to be to hide behind a facade of counterfeit Christianity. The reality must be there. The whole trend in our day toward honesty, this cry of a whole generation for reality and genuineness, is probably the result of the activity of angels moving us toward this final manifestation.

Notice that our Lord closes with a very solemn word:

"The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth." {Matt 13:49b-50 RSV}

Weeping speaks of remorse and sorrow. Gnashing of teeth speaks of frustration and hostility and anger. It is all gathered up in the burning phrase "the furnace of fire." I do not know fully what that means. And I do not like judgment any more than you do. I have always been uneasy whenever I have had to deal with these passages which speak of hell and judgment, of death and of the wrath of God. I do not like them because I don't like to think that God will have to do this one of these days. But I have been helped greatly by recognizing that, in the New Testament, the one who speaks most often and most solemnly about judgment and wrath and flames, etc., is Jesus himself. The One with the outstretched arms, with the compassionate heart, who longs to heal sick and wounded humanity, is the One who speaks also about the ultimate end of those who turn their backs and refuse the healing grace of God.

So we must live with this passage the way it is. Our Lord is simply indicating that the issue sharpens as we draw to the close of the age and that at the end it will no longer be possible to hide. As he himself said in another connection, "That which is hidden shall be revealed. That which is spoken in closets shall be shouted

from the housetops." That which has been hidden in obscurity and which we think we have gotten away with shall be exposed before the gaze of all. Nothing shall be hidden. Everything shall be uncovered. That is what this parable moves toward.

The final question which it leaves with us is this: Are you really changed by your contact with Jesus Christ and are you still changing?

Everyone in this congregation in one way or another has had a contact, a touch, with Jesus, has heard his voice. What has it done to you?

What has happened? Are you gradually moving more and more into wholesomeness, into health of spirit, into a departure from childish ideas and actions? Are you becoming genuine and loving and concerned for others?

Or does your form of Christianity leave you unchanged within, outwardly pious and respectable, outwardly part of the Christian community, singing the hymns, attending the meetings, doing all the expected things, but inwardly just as bitter and resentful, just as self-centered and concerned for your own ends, seeking after prestige and favor and advancement just as much as you always have been, perhaps more difficult to live with at home? That is what this parable is driving at.

When we are dealing with God we are not dealing with someone who can be bought off. We are dealing with ultimate reality, striking deep into our lives and exposing whatever it finds. And the only way we can meet this reality with any possibility of survival and chance of acceptance is with honesty, simple honesty, just saying what we are. Because, when we say that, then the healing glory of Jesus Christ is able to take us and remove the evil from our hearts and restore the good, to change us into the kind of people that we want to be and which God wants us to be.

As we come to the close of this searching parable we need to pray David's great prayer:

**Search me, O God, and know my heart!
Try me and know my thoughts!
And see if there be any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting! {Psa 139:23-24 RSV}**

That is the only ground upon which ultimately we can stand before our Lord. The final, ultimate test is a searching one. Our Lord describes it again in Matthew 25 in his story of the separation of the sheep from the goats when he comes again. The test is, "Inasmuch as you have done it unto the least of these my brethren, you have done it unto me," {cf, Matt 25:40}. Inasmuch as your inward motivation, your whole heart, has been awakened with compassion for those who are hungry and sick and in prison, etc., then you have been changed. But if your brand of Christianity is only that of mere outward form, of respectability, a certain moral standard, a degree of a "live and let live" attitude, and yet you have no compassion, no willingness to reach out and expend yourself to meet the need of someone else, then you have never been changed. God has yet to do a work of grace in your heart. This is where this parable leaves us.

As we bring this study to a close, we can see how our Lord has clearly and completely captured all the great trends of our day and our age. He brings us at last now to stand naked and open before him, and all that we are is made clear. Our only hope is to say, "Lord, here I am. I cannot change myself. I can only admit what I am and put myself in your hands. And you, Lord, can change me."

Prayer

We ask you now, Lord Jesus, to measure each heart and show each of us what our own heart is. May there be many who will pray, "Lord Jesus, change me. I am just what I am, and I cannot change myself. But I do not want to be what I am any longer. Lord, please change me." Many of us are Christians already, Lord, and we really have believed in you. But there are areas of our lives in which we are still resisting you, still trying to pretend that we are something we are not. So we ask you, Lord Jesus, to change those areas too, to redeem

them. Help us to acknowledge them and claim your healing grace. We ask in your name,
Amen.

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