**WESTMINSTER BIBLE SCHOOL; THE PARABLES AND METAPHORS OF OUR LORD - THE TEACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**14. THE DRAG-NET**

*"Again, the Kingdom of Heaven is like a dragnet, that was cast into the sea, and gathered some fish of every kind, which, when it was filled, they drew up on the beach. They sat down, and gathered the good into containers, but the bad they threw away. So will it be in the end of the world. The angels will come and separate the wicked from amongst the righteous, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be the weeping and the gnashing of teeth."*

*Matthew 13:47-50*

THE PARABLE of the drag-net is the last concerning the process of the Kingdom in this age. These systematic parables of our Lord found in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew have to do with one age that began with His first advent and ministry, and which will end with His second advent. The dealings of God are not exhausted in any one age in which man is living. These parables; however, all concern this age, and illustrate the process of the Kingdom.

This particular parable is still an illustration for men of faith. Retiring from the crowd, and the public, He gave certain parables that illustrated for these men of faith the Kingdom processes, no longer on the level of earthly observation or understanding, but from the level of heavenly purpose and intention. Such was the parable of the treasure in the field, and that of the pearl. Such is this parable of the drag-net.

In our study of this parable of Jesus we are greatly aided by our Lord's partial explanation. That begins with the word "so" (v. 49), "So shall it be in the consummation of the age." Let it be understood at once that our Lord's explanation of this parable is only partial, having to do with the final fact in the picture used, not with the casting of the net, nor even with the swaying of that net in the tides; but with the drawing of it in at the close. "The consummation of the age" is the key to what our Lord emphasized concerning this age parable.

This is in itself significant, and enables us to place the emphasis of the parable in the right place. The net and its swaying to the moving tides are simply illustrations of the fact not here and now interpreted. But that which is interpreted, and therefore that upon which we must fix our attention, is our Lord's description of what will happen presently, in what He speaks of as "the consummation of the age." It is the parable therefore of all these which supremely shows the method of the completion of this age, in which the Sower sows the Word.

The main value here is that of the fact of separation which follows the drawing in of the net at the end of the age. Recognition of that fact will save us from wrong conceptions concerning this teaching. "The Kingdom of heaven is like unto a drag-net." In the Revised Version the word is "a net," but the marginal reading gives the literal translation of the Greek word, which explains its meaning, "a drag-net."

Again, those fishermen listening to Him understood perfectly what He was talking about. That was one method of fishing. It had nothing to do with individual fishing. Here is no picture, such as Ezekiel gave, of fishermen standing on the banks of the river from Engedi to Eneglaim. That is individual gathering in. This was not the idea in the mind of our blessed Lord when He said to His disciples, "I will make you to become fishers of men" and on another occasion, You shall catch men alive. That marks individual life. This is something other.

The fact is so simple that we need not dwell upon it. It is the picture of a great net that is let down into the sea, and is left, and it swings to the moving of the waters, and there are gathered into it fishes of all sorts, all kinds. Then towards the close of day, or early morning more often, the fishermen draw the net in, and as it comes in it enclosed a vast multitude of fishes. Some of them are of no use. Others are valuable. The fishermen are seen settled down on the shore, and their first business is to sort and sift, to take out the valueless, the worthless, and leave in the good, gathering them together, after the worthless have been cast aside.

Said our Lord, The Kingdom of heaven is like that in its consummation. The Kingdom of heaven is like a net let down into the sea; and at the end of the age, the consummation of the age, there will come the drawing in of the net, and separation.

The net here unquestionably stands for the Kingdom influence which is abroad in the world; and those enclosed are such as have come within the sphere of the Kingdom influence. There are parts of the world where there are multitudes who have never come within that sphere. The parable does not apply to such. Wherever the net has been spread, and wherever men and women have come under its influence, there the net is seen in the sea, that sea which is for evermore the type in Holy Scripture of restless, moving humanity. Something is let down into it. It is the message of the Kingdom, the fact of the Kingdom, the vision of the Kingdom, the ideals of the Kingdom, the teaching of the Kingdom. Remember, the Church is only in view here, in so far as its responsibility is concerned. It is not a question of finding a pearl, whose sacred function lies not in time, but in eternity. That was our previous subject. The Church in the world reveals the Kingdom, in herself, and is the instrument in the world of the influence of that Kingdom.

Think of the age in the broadest way, and of the fact that the Church has been in existence for 1900 years and more. Wherever she has been, men have seen something of the glory, beauty, and holiness, and strength and majesty, and mercy and tenderness of the Kinship of God. Do not forget that has been so. Wherever that has been so the Kingdom influence has been felt. All sorts of reforms in human life, in affairs political, and affairs economic, are the result of the exercise of this Kingdom influence; and the Kingdom influence has been exerted by the Church of God. So the Church is here, but it is not the picture of the gathering out of the Church. It is the picture of something else. The race is not all here, only those parts of it where this Kingdom influence has reached, and only those are seen who by its influence have been in some measure, enclosed within the net.

The process is then described, the process at the end, for that is the emphasis; what will happen as the result of the net being flung into the sea, left, enclosing all the while men, women - fishes. Jesus says, when it is filled, it is drawn in, and men gather the good into vessels, and the bad they cast away. So shall it be at 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." In the forty- first verse we get a similar picture of the consummation of the age, "The Son of man shall send forth His angels." "Angels shall come forth." That is what He now said. In the sixteenth chapter, on that memorable occasion at Caesarea Philippi, our Lord said, "The Son of man shall come in the glory of His Father with His angels; and then shall He render to every man according to his deeds." So the process will be that of separation.

Notice in this parable our Lord did not speak of the taking out of the world the good, but the taking away of the bad. The picture is wholly of this world. Heaven is not in view. The ultimate and eternal state is not referred to. It is an earthly situation at which we are particularly looking. The picture is wholly of this world, and the Kingdom, and its influence here.

What happens? The severance of the wicked that they may be destroyed from all human affairs. The words of our Lord are full of terrible solemnity. We have no more right to forget or neglect this word of Jesus than we have to forget or neglect that He said to humanity, "Come unto Me, and I will give you rest." There was the infinite wooing tenderness of Christ, but He never failed to see the ultimate issue of sin and of evil. His words are characterized by terrible solemnity. There shall be weeping, lamentation, and gnashing of teeth, a figure at once of pain or rage, or both. Persistent rebellion to the end of age, a separation between good and bad, drawn all into that Kingdom net, all having come within its meshes, and felt its influence; and yet some utterly worthless, utterly bad; and the consummation of the age has this as its outcome with regard to Kingdom influence in the world, a separation.

Notice that angels are to be the agents. We are living in a strange age. It is terrible how even godly people have become Sadducean about angels, and try to escape the clear declaration that at the end of the age angels will once more intervene in human affairs. They have interfered in human history and affairs in the past. This is not the age of the angels. It is the age of the Son. It is the age of the Holy Spirit. But Jesus said when this age is drawing to a close, angels will again actually, positively intervene in human affairs. Angels are serving to-day, but unseen and unknown very largely, but none the less definitely. We have our Bibles, and believe it. "Are they not all worshipping spirits sent forth to minister to the heirs of salvation?" It is rendered, "Are they not all ministering spirits?" but the word "ministering" is different in the two places, "sent forth to minister." They are liturgical spirits, worshipping spirits. That is the function of the angels, worshipping in the presence of the Most High; but they are sent forth, their worship in the high places ceasing, to serve, to wait upon, to minister to the heirs of salvation.

Go back into the Old Testament, and study the sixth chapter of Isaiah, where the prophet saw the glory of God, and the thresholds shook, and the house was filled with smoke. He saw the seraphim veiling their faces as they continually celebrated the holiness of God. "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts." Liturgical spirits.

"He maketh His angels spirits,

And His ministers a flame of fire,"

and there they exercise the highest function of their being, worshipping. When the prophet saw that he cried, "Woe is me I for I am undone; because am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts. Then flew one of the seraphim unto me, having a live coal in his hand, which he had taken with the tongs from off the altar; and he touched my mouth with it, and said, Lo, this hath touched thy lips, and thine iniquity is taken away, and thy sin purged." Liturgical spirits, their high function, the worship of God; but if, peradventure, some soul cries out in the agony of conscious sin, they become ministers of God.

We used to sing in old days, "There are angels hovering round." We do not often sing it now, but it is true. They are not seen. They do not come on to the plane of observation, but Christ distinctly said in that word at Caesarea Philippi, and on these two occasions in these parables, that at the end of the age the angels will actually come into human affairs, to carry out His will, and His behests. They have been visible. They will be again. There are strange and wonderful pictures of angels, some of them full of suggestive beauty in art. One great picture, the title of which was, "He was despised and rejected," was exhibited in London some years ago. It was wonderful, though the figure of the Christ did not satisfy me. The crowd surging round Him was typical humanity, but the most wonderful thing to me was the background, the august and awful figure of an angel watching. Jesus said when this age comes to its consummation, the Son of man will send forth His angels. They will deal with this enclosed mass of fish, and will sort and sift it. Angel discrimination means heaven's standards. Angel separation means heaven's might at work, insisting upon the standards, and bringing everything to its measurement, at the end of the age.

We often lose sight of this. Even the Church of God is so possessed oftentimes with the activities of the present. Action in the present loses half its significance, power, and value if we lose sight of the fact of the end of the age, and the issue of it.

What is the issue? This our parable does not declare. For purposes of understanding we may refer to the King's previous and fuller statement, in verses forty-one to forty-three, where we have exactly the same figure of the consummation of the age, and the angels are seen.

In this parable our Lord spoke of what would be done with the things found in that gathered-in net. In the previous parable He went beyond that, and showed what would happen to others, when the angels have wrought their great work of separation. To put those two together, at the end of this age what will happen under angel intervention and ministry? First the cleansing of the Kingdom from all things that cause stumbling, and all that do iniquity - activities and persons. Think what would happen to-day, if suddenly all the affairs of the world were halted by the visitation of angel ministers, acting by the order of the King, and they began to deal with everything that caused stumbling to humanity, casting out all those who were workers of iniquity, the bringing of limitation and sorrow to such, not the limitation of sorrow that has in it the element of repentance, but the element of remorse, as witness the gnashing of teeth. Evil persistence to the very end is to be dealt with, gathered up, and cast out by angel ministry.

What our Lord did not say in this parable, but did say in the previous one was, "Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the Kingdom of their Father." That is far more than a poetical figure, describing the blessedness that shall come to the righteous. It is much more than that. It is rather a figure of the influence that the righteous shall exert when all these evil things are removed, and they shine forth in the Kingdom of the Father. They will create the opportunity for goodness, and the opportunity of nations that have never been reached.

Does that not bring halt and shock to some? Surely all this is going on, until all nations have been reached, and all nations have bowed to Christ. Is that our view? It was not His. Never in one of these parables did He teach anything of the kind. He never suggested the work of the Church was to go on and on until all nations had bowed to Him, and kissed His sceptre, and crowned Him. He knew human nature better than that, and He knew all the things that so often have puzzled the Church, and made them at times feel as though everything was failing. He knew. But when that consummation of this age comes, as the prelude to other ages that lie beyond in earth's history, the angels will gather out all these offending things, and the righteous will shine forth as the sun, and that will create the opportunity for other nations.

The parable is of the nature of a look ahead, There are some senses in which to-day we have little to do with it, for the net is still swinging, and the Kingdom influence is still being exerted, and the reaches of the net are going further and further out, as every great society we call Missionary takes the Kingdom to the peoples of the earth. We have nothing to do with the pulling in of that net. We have far less to do with trying to sort the good and evil enclosed in its meshes.

Yet in other ways this parable is a gracious source of strength as it assures us of a certain process that is going forward which will culminate in an advent, and a clear judgment, in which the King, our Lord and Saviour, through His heavenly servants the angels, will visit earthly affairs, and that gives us all hope when we are inclined to lose it.

"That can't end worst that began best,

Though a wide compass round be fetched."

As we lift our eyes for a moment, not to tarry there, because we have our immediate call and business, we look on and see the day when the. pierced Hand will manifestly grasp the sceptre, and will call the ministries of heaven to His service, in separating the evil from the righteous, the wicked from the good.