

May 28, 2017

THE FINAL SEPARATION

Matthew 13:47-50

I struggle with this Parable. It is similar to the parable of the *Weeds in the Wheatfield* back in verses 24-30. But in that picture, there was an *enemy* who sowed the weeds. The weeds were gathered separately and burned while the wheat was stored in the barn. There is no particular moral value attached to the burning of the weeds, whereas, here, the “bad fish,” or, “the wicked,” are thrown “*into the fiery furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth!*” (v. 50)

Like the Net that gathers “*all kinds of fish,*” the Church gathers all kinds of people. Could the Church be implied in the image of the gathering? Let’s imagine it is. But...this is where I am left confounded. In some ways, I don’t want it to be the Church. But think – there are actually two churches. One is the church-of-the-world, which people join for various reasons...sometimes, “because my parents made me;” sometimes, “because it seemed like the right thing to do.” The other church is the True Church, capital ‘C,’ which includes people who are sincerely faithful, devout, and have a spirit of servanthood. They are the people through whom the Holy Spirit is able to work. Both types have been gathered together by the Net that might be the church we can see, the church-of-the-world. The hard part is that we don’t really know who is whom...yet.

And a time will come when there is a final separation of the wicked from the righteous. The reasons I can imagine that the Net is the church-of-the-world has to do with several passages of Scripture that warn against a lack of seriousness in a relationship with Christ. Start with belief. Belief is a major step in the right direction, but, according to James, it is not enough just to give intellectual ascent to the truth: “*You believe that there is one God. Good! But even the demons believe that, and it makes them shudder!*” (James 2:19) James concludes this passage by saying that “*Faith without works is dead!*” (2:26) Of course, neither are we saved by works! There are many who have been gathered by the Net into the Church, but whose faith is only superficial, or, only intellectual. It is not a heart-faith. It is not too deep, and no one would really know they are believers because they don’t really live out their faith. Often, they are little more than part-time spectators.

Another passage is a literal warning. It is from The Revelation of John. (2:4-5) “*I hold this against you: You have forsaken the love you had at first. Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first...*” Like seeds sown on the rocky soil in the parable of the sower/the soils, they are the ones who received the Word with joy, but since it had no root, they last only a short time. (Matthew 13:20-21) The church-of-the-world has many members who start out strong, but who just don’t go the distance. Repent! Be reconciled. Keep going!

Another passage from The Revelation is the warning in 3:15-16 – “*I know your deeds, that you are neither hot nor cold. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm – neither hot nor cold – I am about to spit you out of my mouth!*” The church-of-the-world has many members whose faith is only “lukewarm,” their witness is incomplete or ineffective. Meanwhile, Jesus commissioned His disciples to go and make disciples of all nations! (Matthew 28:19) We need to bring people to a heart-warming acceptance of Christ, make disciples; we need to set the world on fire! A good fire!

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus talked about the narrow gate. He said, “*Enter through the narrow gate!*” (Matthew 7:13) And Jesus said that “*the tree is known by its fruit.*” (7:20) “*Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire!*” (7:19) There’s that fire again! Repent! Bear good fruit!

Then Jesus says, “*Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord!’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only those who do the will of My Father in Heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in our Name, and, in Your Name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I*

will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'" (7:21-23) The key to this passage revolves around His saying, *"only those who do the will of My Father who is in Heaven...will enter the Kingdom of Heaven!"* (v. 21) The church-of-the-world has many who claim, "Lord! Lord!" but who then fail to truly do God's will. I have the impression, here, that the idea, again, is that our works do not save us. We need a serious relationship with Jesus Christ. That's what really counts!

In Luke 13:23-24, someone asked Jesus, *"Lord, are only a few people going to be saved?"* And He said to them, *"Make every effort to enter through the narrow door, because many, I tell you, will try to enter but will not be able to..."* There seems to be no rhyme or reason, here, for the exclusion of some, but Jesus often turned everyone's expectations upside down and round and round!

But here's what I want to believe, and, I've preached it before... Anytime you hear a passage about a fiery furnace, or weeping and gnashing of teeth, or judgment, whether it has to do with needing to be as loving as we were at first, or, needing to rise above being lukewarm, or, needing to *practice* faith rather than just believe – it's a warning. No one wants to think of themselves as doomed or excluded, or wicked, or unrighteous. And passages like this make us face ourselves seriously, and ask, "Am I faithful, righteous, and good? Do I live up to God's expectations, or, do I make excuses for myself? Do I justify myself or do I justify Christ?" In his Letter to the Philippians, Paul said, *"Continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling!"* (2:12) In a way, it's like our spiritual life is on a tightrope with no net below us! We need to walk in fear and trembling, keeping our balance. Yes, we are *in* this world, but our goal is to cross over to the other side. Don't look down. Paul said, *"I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me!"* (Philippians 3:12) Work it out. Work out your relationship with Him...until you know He's got a hold on you. And if He does, you'll live like He does. We can always do better. We can always grow! We can press on. We can go forward!