

Week 22
February 15, 2009

Are You a Keeper?
The Parable of the Net
Matthew 13:47-52

This is a difficult parable. It suggests that there will be a separation and a judgment. This flies in the face of modern American dogma of *relative goodness: I'm not as bad as an ax-murderer or a terrorist or Hitler or Manson. So I'll see you in heaven.* This wishful notion is steeped in cultural optimism and somewhat Christian notions of God's grace and life in heaven. It has become un-American to suggest that one approach to life is in any way superior to another, and the suggestion that God would separate out one religion over another is the ultimate blasphemy.

Our culture teaches a gospel of okay-ness. You're okay. I'm okay. Let's all be okay. The ones who dare to be more or better than okay (righteous or brilliant or genius) we love to knock over. We are an iconoclastic culture (literally icon-busters) and few events sell more papers than the fall of someone who dares to excel beyond the norm of okay-ness.

And the one who would be more righteous is a fresh target. Maybe this has always been true – people who actually attain a high level of righteousness become a walking indictment of those who don't. And so they will forever be persecuted.

Perhaps this parable would have been controversial in Jesus' day, as well. In that day, the righteousness of the people was based, to a great degree, on their chosen-ness according to the Abrahamic covenant. While there were many things that a person could do to harm or help his or her relationship with God, there was a kind of spiritual status that came with being a child of Abraham. If we're in, then I'm in. There was a *righteousness by association* that came with being part of the Jewish household. So this idea of some being out and others being in might have created a real stir, since so much of the Old Testament instruction confronted the issue of collective spirituality – the devotion of a people, more than of persons.

Or it might have been familiar. The contemporary teachers with Christ taught a lifestyle of righteousness, though apparently with different definitions. Jesus confronts those teachers for their overactive concern for external righteousness and urges a through-and-through transformation of the whole self. Still, the notion of the wicked and righteous being separated out might have been familiar, since people were apparently deluged by teachers who laid the weight of guilt on them.

So what makes Jesus' teachings unique among his peers? How is this parable different from other *turn or burn* warnings that heap guilt on people for their unrighteousness and scare them toward better behavior?

First, Jesus teaches a righteousness that is more accessible. His form of *righteousness-by-association* is by association with himself. Yes, Jesus still taught holy living and refused to discount Old Testament principles of right and wrong. But he offered people, and us, righteousness that comes by faith in him. Much about this

righteousness-by-association finds form in the teachings of Paul, Peter and John. But still, Jesus is very clear about the saving power of believing and following him. “Follow me,” says Jesus in many ways and settings, “and I will forgive your sins and walk you into a whole life and an everlasting life.” This simple step of believing by faith makes Jesus’ form of righteousness more accessible; even the “sinners and tax collectors” could experience this righteousness.

Second, Jesus’ teachings on righteousness were more other-oriented. He spends precious little time instructing his followers to be spiritual ascetics (separatists who deny themselves all benefits of social and physical comforts). He does teach his followers to obey God by loving people; especially people in need. Jesus did not teach a passive form of righteousness that comes merely from staying undirtied by the world and its sickness. He taught and modeled the righteousness of loving intervention and the incarnation of God’s truth and grace into the mess of human life. In this sense, the righteousness of Christ has a *champion* quality that invites everyone to be a hero somewhere, somehow. And because his definition of the heroic looks more like servanthood of others than mastery of others, again, Jesus’ kind of righteousness is accessible even to the humble.

So Jesus does preach that there will be a separation and a judgment. The kingdom of heaven is like a net that scoops up good fish and bad. The angels will separate the wicked from the righteous and the wicked will live in torment.

That part makes us uncomfortable, too. And this is good. Whatever pity we have, and whatever compassion would make us want to cry out in defense of the so-called wicked – this is a good thing. I would be careful about any form of Christianity where the faithful are taught to relish the damnation of the wicked. When I feel even a hint of satisfaction on thinking of people getting their just desserts in hell, the Holy Spirit inspires a touch of nausea to remind me that I’m out of order; I’m not seeing them with the eyes of Christ, who wishes that all might be saved. But, alas, many choose away from God, and God will not force himself on them.

But this we should believe: Jesus spoke often about judgment day. People will be judged perfectly and graciously by the God who knows every heart. This is our confidence: that the blood of Christ is our covering. He has died for our sins so that we can enjoy the benefits of forgiveness and an overlay of righteousness before God. For those who refuse this help and prefer a godless life, that tormented reality will be their future. The particulars are out of our hands and too awful to imagine.

In verse 52, Jesus encapsulates the parables of the kingdom in chapter 13, “Have you understood all these things?”

The people answer, “Yes.”

Then Jesus likens every informed teacher to a homeowner who brings out of his storeroom old treasures and new treasures. Jesus seems to be saying that there are aspects to his teachings that are age-old and forever true. But there are also parts that are brand new.

“Think not,” says Jesus in Matthew 5:17, “that I’ve come to abolish the laws and prophets. I haven’t come to abolish them, but to fulfill them.” His values are age-old and his influence is forever new. He is the embodiment of real righteousness and the pathway toward our righteousness is in association with him.