

Parable of the Weeds and Net

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[0 : 0 0] We are in a summer series on parables, the parables of Jesus, and we've been looking at kingdom parables in particular. So in Matthew 13, there are seven parables.

After the parable of the sower, where Jesus says the kingdom of heaven is like this. So we have this series of metaphors of short stories, which is what parables are, where Jesus very specifically says this is what the kingdom of God is like, the kingdom of heaven is like.

So we've been working our way through those. We have done five of them, six of them actually, because there's an extra one in Mark. And so today we look at the final two, the last two. And as we've said, parables are short stories, taken from things that are very normal, normal life type stuff for a first century person.

And here we've got, again, agriculture, a farmer. And today we add fishing as well, fishing with nets, which is a very normal activity for a first century person, as we still do things like that today.

But in these two parables, we do not have an easy task today, not at all. We have a very difficult task, because you probably clocked it already, if you were reading along with these parables, that they are about divine judgment.

[1 : 1 4] So these are parables that teach us something about judgment, about God's final judgment, and about the concept and the reality of hell. That's really what these parables are about.

So we have a hard thing to talk about today, not easy at all. Let me just say a few disclaimers, a few things by way of introduction about this. One is, first, in the city of Edinburgh, in a city like Edinburgh, many of you who are from here, who are from Scotland, will know very well that for probably four to five generations now, more and more people, and now most people in our city, would say something like, if God is truly loving, how can he send people to hell?

If God is truly loving, how can he be a judge at the same time? And ever since World War II, more and more people, generation after generation, have thought that, and have said that, and also at the same time, more and more churches have taken that line of thought.

And so there are many, many churches, over the past three to four generations in our city, that have come to set God's love against God's justice. And in doing that, have decided, have determined, that the concept of hell, the reality of judgment, is not real.

And the grand irony, there's so much we could say about it, and this is not all we wanna say about it, not at all, but one of the great ironies of that is in the hope that denying the judgment of God would lead to filling up the churches, it did the exact opposite.

[2 : 4 5] Denying this idea, denying this reality, has actually emptied so many of the churches. And the reason for that, and this is really the thesis of our sermon today, of what these parables are talking about, is that good news has a context.

And the context of good news is bad news. And if you take away the bad news, you don't have a message. You don't have good news. You don't have anything to talk about. You don't have the gospel at all.

The second disclaimer by way of intro is, at the same time, we wanna come to the Bible and teach what the Bible teaches. And at the same time, we never wanna come to a subject like this, the reality of divine judgment with a smile on our faces.

We don't want to, I am smiling now. But I don't wanna come today and think that this is a subject we come with a sort of happiness. One of the things, one of the reasons on the flip side, I think that many people in our Western world have left church at times, maybe having grown up in church, is because of an overemphasis on this topic.

Something where this is being, hell is being talked about all the time. And every single week, it seems to be the same theme. And that's sometimes accompanied with a sort of happiness from the front, a sort of an obsession with wanting to talk about the reality of divine judgment.

[4 : 07] And I don't think that's the tenor that the Bible gives us at all. We come knowing that this is really difficult and that there should be, there must be a natural aversion to talking about it, to thinking about it.

There's a hardness in this. And so we don't come at all today with smiles on our faces. R.C. Spruill, one of the more well-known theologians that passed away fairly recently in the evangelical world, one time he was up at a conference in a panel and he was asked, what doctrine in Christianity do you struggle with the most?

And he said, that's easy, it's the doctrine of hell. Exactly, exactly, of course. It's not a happy topic, it's not an easy topic.

Third, will you consider this question? What would it look like to let the reality of this doctrine sink into your heart today?

What would it mean? What can it do for you? Thinking about this, thinking about the reality of this doctrine, one writer writes, I've always believed in hell in my mind, but I've tried never to let the doctrine penetrate my heart.

[5 : 18] Now what if it does? What if the reality of divine judgment, a judgment that we all face, that we all deserve, would really sink into the bottom of the heart? And I think, here's the thesis, here's the big idea.

I think if you will allow that to happen, if you will consider it today, then one thing that can happen is it will bring you straight to God. You will find that you will experience the love of God in your life and the beauty of the gospel, the fact of Jesus, the greatness of the good news, more than you ever have.

Thinking about this can do that. And so let's do it for a few minutes together. We've got two parables that Rowan read for us and they are about the same thing with just a slight bit of nuance.

And so let's think about them. First, we're just gonna think about the fact, the reality of judgment. And then secondly, I'll give you very briefly three aspects of judgment that come out of these two parables.

So first, the fact, the reality of God's judgment. All right, so we see that these parables are about that. Let me show that to you. We've got another parable about a farmer who is sowing seeds in an agricultural setting.

[6 : 32] And in the first parable, we've got a field of wheat. So seeds for planting wheat have been sown and they're growing. And then in the night, an enemy comes that hates the farmer and he sows another seed.

And the text in the ESV translates that as weeds. That is the word weeds in the Greek, but almost every commentator is pretty much in unanimous agreement that what's being talked about here is a very particular weed called Darnell.

Darnell, I don't know if I'm pronouncing that right. Darnell sounds like a name to me, but Darnell is a weed also known as false wheat. And so false wheat, we still have it.

False wheat was very present in the first century. And false wheat looks almost identical to wheat. It's poisonous. And when it gets sown into a field with wheat, the roots wrap around each other and grow together.

And so that's why you cannot go out into the field and pull up Darnell, because you will just pull up the wheat before the harvest. You won't have any wheat at the end of the harvest if you do that. So the commentators are pretty much unanimously agreed that that's what's happening here.

[7 : 39] There is false wheat, poisonous, fake wheat planted all throughout this field. And the field here, everybody pretty much agrees with this as well, is the world we live in, this human life that we're walking through.

So the field is the world. It's our lives, it's this human life. It's life in the city of Edinburgh. And we could say that about everybody in their cities across the world, their towns, their villages. And in this world, God is king, God is creator, Jesus has come.

The kingdom has been brought. And yet the enemy, the enemy Satan from the very beginning has come into the world, come into the human space and sown false wheat, seeds of sin and death and destruction and rebellion.

And that's the false wheat. And Satan has come and he's done that. And so sometimes commentators will come and say, this is all about the church.

And how in the church, we have this mixture of people who are repentant, who are citizens of the kingdom, who have given their hearts to Christ and people who are nominal, meaning in name only Christians, just practicing religion, not, you know, it's weeds and wheat all mixed together in the midst of the church.

[8 : 53] And while there's some truths there, I don't think that's what this parable is about. And I think D.A. Carson, he says it like this, this parable does not address the church situation at all, but instead it explains how the kingdom can be present in the world while not yet wiping out all opposition against the kingdom of God.

That must await the harvest. The parable deals with eschatological expectation, not ecclesiological deterioration. All right, what that means is that this is about the end of history, eschatological, the end of time, not ecclesiological, the church, the local church.

It's saying that in the field is all the world. And this is ultimately about the fact that one day God is gonna come in divine judgment, final judgment at the end of history and separate the wheat from the darnel, the wheat from the false wheat.

That means Jesus is saying that this present state of life, in this present state of life, the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world, everything that stands in opposition against God are growing together, are right alongside one another.

Now, one of the questions that might come up with that is why doesn't God just bring justice? Why doesn't God just end all opposition to everything that stands against the kingdom right now in this very moment?

[10 : 16] And the answer is I don't know, but what this tells us is that God is being patient with every act of rebellion, every sin, every person, every kingdom that stands against him.

God right now in this present age is being patient. He's giving time. One way to think about this is this is telling us that though God could come in immediate divine judgment, instead he exhibits patience to let prodigals come home again.

And that's really the basic meaning of this parable. There's this simple fact in it, that there is a reality to divine judgment, that it is coming and that at the same time God is incredibly patient with us in this present age.

That's the first parable, the second parable, the parable of the nets, and we only need to spend a minute on it because it's so simple. Fishermen, in the first century, they cast a net, and one of the ways they would do this is they would take two boats, they would tie the net between the two boats, and they would run the boats alongside each other and scoop any fish they could at the bottom of the lake up in the net.

And then it says they pull these fish up and they separate the good fish from the bad fish. That's actually a reference to ceremonially clean fish and ceremonially unclean fish, according to the Old Testament law.

[11 : 35] But we're told by Jesus very directly, that's not really what he's talking about. Because he says that the fish here stand for what the angels will do, the angels will come at the end of human history, final judgment, and separate, separate the wicked from the righteous.

Good fish, bad fish, the wicked and the righteous, that's the language that's used. And in both parables, the very end of that separation is that the bad wheat will go and be burned, and then in the second parable, the bad fish, the wicked, will be sent into the furnace.

All right, so that's the picture, that's the image. The reality, the fact that this teaches about divine judgment. Now, it's not an easy thing. It's not an easy thing to think about, it's not an easy thing to talk about.

But let me just bring a little bit of application before we move to the second thing. There's a sense in which we come to the reality of Jesus' teaching. And there's first, I think, a simple thing we've got to do, and that's if you today are a follower of Jesus, then we've got to take the humble step of simply coming, yielding, submitting, of recognizing the reality of the frequency in which Jesus talked about, talked about divine judgment and the reality of hell.

And we've got to yield to that, we've got to submit to that. And it's been pointed out by so many people before, well before me, that while we all, of course, have an aversion to this idea, this concept of divine judgment.

[13 : 09] At the same time, there's a couple of things we need to say about it philosophically or practically to make some sense of thinking about its reality. One is this, we live in a time where there's a culture wide rejection of the idea, the concept, the reality of divine judgment, that God's, the God who was loved couldn't possibly be, at the same time, the divine judge.

And it's just important to say first, that in terms of how recent that total culture wide rejection of the concept of divine judgment is, it's as it's a cliché now, it's about five minutes old in human history.

That there's hardly ever been a culture, hardly ever been a religion, hardly ever been a people group in all of human history that did not in some sense believe that the world would end, life would end, with some sense of judgment.

That people have done bad things and deserved judgment. Very recently in human history has this come about. It's also important to say that, and this has been pointed out by sociologists and many, many others pastors before me, but that when you talk to different people groups from different cultures, they will all struggle with Christianity in different ways.

So in the Western world, a lot of people struggle with this idea, the idea of divine judgment, but in non-Western spaces, in cultures all across the world of different spaces, this is not the thing that they struggle with.

[14 : 36] The sense that there's ultimately a justice that's going to come into this life and bring everything to rights. It's actually not what most people group struggle with. It's a very Western issue. In other people groups, other cultures, the more of the struggle is how in the world could God just lavish mercy, lavish forgiveness?

And so we've got to recognize that we come from a cultural standpoint and that our cultural aversion across a city like Edinburgh in the history of ideas is only about five minutes old.

Now the second thing to think about here, and we'll move on after this, is just to say that when you really think about it, the sense, whatever it may mean, of judgment, an ultimate eschatological end of time judgment, where the divine triune God brings all things to right, makes total sense of this life, the life that we live in right now.

Let me put it like this. Imagine a world where a person commits murder and the murderer goes before the judge in the courtroom and they are proven to have murdered somebody without a shadow of a doubt.

And the judge says, you're guilty, here's your sentence. And the perpetrator stands up and says, how dare you sentence me?

[16:00] How dare you judge me? Don't you know that this is an infringement upon my freedom, upon my rights? How dare you come and judge me? I'm the only person that can define who I am and what's right or wrong, it's relative.

It's only what goes on in my heart. This is an infringement upon my freedom, right? Now, none of us, there's not a single person in this room, I doubt a single person in our city that would come and look at the human court.

And when trials, when convictions are offered in the human court based off criminality and sin and public wrongdoing, would ever say that it's unjust and wrong for a person to be condemned for a crime.

And in the same way, we've got to ask, boy, do we think that if the human court, if the human court has the right to say, this is wrong, this is unjust, this deserves judgment, that the God of all the arts, the judge of all the arts does not have that right.

The king, the judge of all the arts, the one who is most infinite, most holy, the one who sets the moral standards, objective standards for all of human existence doesn't have a right to say, this is wrong, this deserves to be judged.

[17:08] And we've got to simply use our rational, philosophical capability to think about that. It makes sense. God is infinite, God is holy, and every single act of sin, every single act of rebellion, every single rejection of the moral order as God has made it, deserves justice and judgment.

And that makes entire sense if we look out and think about the reality of objective moral order of sin, of our expectation of the human courtroom, it makes sense of the divine courtroom, it makes sense of all that we would experience or read about here in the Bible.

I appreciate one author I was reading about this. She says this, the one truth that allows me to accept the justice of hell is the indisputable certitude of the goodness of God.

And while the notion of hell is incredibly difficult for me to grasp, Jesus Christ with nail-scarred hands is worthy of my complete trust. His goodness causes me to look ultimately not to hell, but to the cross.

Now, secondly, these parables draw out for us just three quick aspects of some of the principles we can think about what divine judgment really is and we'll finish up, okay?

[18:23] So let's look at that. Look, I hope this will help you. These three aspects, these three principles that we see. I hope this will help your soul today.

I think it can, I really think it can do that. If you'll allow it. The first thing to point out here is in both these parables, that moment of judgment comes about and there's this mention of fire, of burning the darnel, the false wheat and the one parable and then of putting the bad fish into the furnace and the other parable.

Now, what do we learn? One thing I wanna say about this is what this draws us to say is quite the opposite of what it might first seem.

And that's that when we see these references to fire, to burning, these images, these classic images of hell that we have in our cultural image, it's very important to point out that these are metaphors.

That instead of coming and saying fire, fire, fire, instead what we have to do is we have to realize these are metaphors and that means that we've gotta be incredibly modest and reserved about what we say about the concept and reality of hell and the divine judgment.

[19 : 36] There are three words that are used in the Bible that are sometimes translated hell. The King James Version translated these three words as hell every single time, but actually only one of them is properly translated hell and it's the Greek word gehinom or gehina and it's used from time to time, but not always when referring to judgment in the afterlife and gehinom, gehinom was an actual place outside the city of Jerusalem.

It was the city of Jerusalem's rubbish dump where you would go and cast your rubbish. And Jesus actually when you read the word hell in the Bible, it's the word gehinom, which is a reference to this trash dump, this place outside the city.

And what Jesus is doing there is he's offering you a metaphor. He's saying divine judgment, the experience, the reality of it is like that. It's like being cast out of the city into the place where the rubbish has gone.

It's like being cast away. These references to fire, it's like that. And so we've got to be first very, very modest, very, very modest, very, very careful about coming to the Bible and thinking that we know fully the reality of what this is talking about.

And so there have been so many times, I think so many instances where churches have maybe overdone this, taken it too far, talked about it too specifically, and instead there's so much that we don't know.

[21 : 02] Instead what we have in the Bible is this, that divine judgment and the consequences of judgment are a reality, a reality that are only pictured for us through metaphors.

And these metaphors tell us something like this, that this experience is one of utter loss, of total loss. One of the things that's helpful here is thinking about the other parable of the rich man in Lazarus.

The rich man goes into Hades hell, the condition of death, and we're told that he tries to speak, he calls upon Lazarus to come and help him.

And in that passage, the rich man has got no name. He's just the rich man. He doesn't have a name. Lazarus has a name, but he's just the rich man.

Why? And it's because when he went into this condition of death and judgment, he lost his self. He loves stuff so much in this life that the only thing that he has left in death is his idols.

[22 : 02] It's the utter loss of a sense of self. And we've got to be really modest, really careful about what we say about it. What we can say, according to these metaphors, is that it's real and it's terrible.

It's an utter loss. It's a real sense of loss. Secondly, the thing of three. We learn here also that there's this clear picture of separation that goes on.

The final judgment is an act of separation. And so in both of these parables, at the end of history, God clearly separates the wheat from the terrace. He separates the good fish from the bad fish, the wicked from the righteous.

Separation from what? What kind of separation is this? Some people often will talk about how hell is being separated from God. And I don't really think that's what the Bible teaches at all. God is omnipresent.

God is the maker of all spaces. And instead, the separation that we're being told about here is a separation from the kingdom of God. These are kingdom parables.

[23 : 05] And living in the kingdom of God, life in the kingdom of God is utter peace. It's utter joy. It's everything you were made for. It's total homecoming. And so the separation that takes place here is a separation from the kingdom.

It's a separation from peace, from shalom. And then the third thing and final thing here is that, and this is probably the most important, is I think these passages, these parables subtly teach us that hell is the choice, the choice we make of absolute independence from God.

And so here, and you can't fully get this picture from here, you've gotta read this in the light of the rest of the Bible. But in verses 49 and 50, we're told that at the end of human history, the angels come and they separate the wicked from the righteous.

And on first glance, you think, okay, what is the condition for going to heaven? What is the condition for being judged, divine judgment? And it's this idea of the wicked and the righteous. But when you read these two words in the light of the rest of the Bible, you learn about the actual condition, the actual condition, the separation.

What is the grounds of it? It's the choice of being absolutely independent instead of dependent upon God. And so you've got something like Romans that teaches this really clearly.

[24 : 23] I like the way the same writer put it. She writes this, contrary to popular belief, hell is not a place where God sins those who have been especially bad.

It is instead our default destination. We need a rescuer. In the Bible, hell is not the place where the bad people go and heaven the place where the good people go.

Hell is not the place where the wicked go in opposition to heaven the place where the righteous go, the good, all the good guys. No, not at all. Instead, what's the condition? What's the difference? What's the separation all about?

And the separation that we read about here is simply this. It's the separation between those who said, who came and said, I want to be utterly and totally free from God forever.

I want my absolute independence. I don't want to depend on God. I don't want to recognize it. The separation is, did you say in this life, God, I want to be left alone?

[25 : 22] God, in the midst of his patience, in the midst of his longing to rescue you, in the midst of his desire to run out to the prodigal son and daughter and bring them home again, did you say, did a person say, no, I hate you.

I want to be independent. I want to be left alone. I want my freedom. I want my absolute independence. That's the difference. That's the condition of separation. And the issue is not, and the issue is not that sinners, bad people go to hell and good people go to heaven.

Oh boy, not at all. Instead, what we learned here is the distinction is, did you come, will you come, have you come and run to the Lord and say, I'm sick and need of a physician.

I need help. It's coming and rejecting absolute independence and leaning into absolute dependence. That's the separation. That's the condition.

We see this finally in verse 50. Sometimes this is a little bit confused. But in verse 50, we learn about in this separation that there will be tears weeping and gnashing of teeth.

[26 : 29] What is the gnashing of teeth? It's a Greek word that means rage. That means utter anger. And so what we have here is not so much sorrow.

But in this act of separation, actually what we have here is utter rage at God. Complete anger. The total embrace of hatred for God.

You see, the separation is all about the choice that we make to say, I want to be absolutely independent from you, God. And it's to say forever, I hate you.

I don't want to know you. I don't want to be rescued. And that means that the call today, the invitation, is simply this, reject your independence.

Come and be absolutely dependent on the one to whom you are actually dependent upon. You know, what do you have in this life that you've not been given? What gifts do you have, the air you breathe, all the way to the hope of your rescue, that is not a gift, a gift from the living God.

[27 : 31] We are totally dependent in the call of the gospel, the call today to reject, to get away from the separation, is to reject independence and embrace absolute dependence on the one to whom you are absolutely dependent.

Let me close with this. Here's a thesis. Boy, I know this is hard. If you let the reality of divine judgment and the doctrine that we get from the Bible, from Jesus' teaching, impact your soul today in any way.

If you think about it, I think it can, it has the power to bring you straight to the arms of Christ, into the love of God. Why? In the same sense that without some sense of divine judgment and justice, it's really hard to make sense of life.

It's really hard to make sense of the courtroom, that it has any objective meaning. It's really hard to make sense of the question of whether there is any objective moral value at all in this world, without some sense of divine justice, in the same way, even more.

If you don't have bad news, you have no reason to celebrate good news. If you can't let the reality of what you deserve, of recognizing that there really is something wrong with every single one of us, that we really have broken and stood against the justice of the world, of the world as God has made it, that we stand against God's divine and infinite holiness, what reason do you have for a gospel?

[29 : 00] What reason do you have for good news? And friends, today, just meditating for a moment on the bad news, it can drive you straight to the arms of Christ to recognize the good news.

And here it is, Jesus Christ, the judge of all the earth, came to be judged in your place. The judge of all the earth was judged for you. The judge, absolutely holy, infinitely righteous, he became your wickedness.

He became your evil, he became your sin. He took your place so that you would never, never be judged for your injustices. You can stand before, every single person, we will be judged, we will be judged either in Christ or apart from him.

And the invitation today is simply this, reject your independence and recognize Jesus Christ, the judge of all the earth was judged in your place. Look, let me challenge you to, without a sense of a divine lawgiver who is good, right and justice, well not the God of all the earth, you're right, it's very difficult to make sense of the moral order.

And even more, you can't make sense of the gospel. You can't make sense of the incarnation. And the bad news tells you this, that Jesus, Jesus loves you. The cross says, Jesus loves you.

[30 : 19] He went to hell for you, he was forsaken for you. In the light of this doctrine, the gospel says, God loves you. And the cross says, God loves you.

And you have a rescuer. Will you see that, will you come to him for that today? That's an invitation. Let us pray. Father, we come today to teach whatever comes up in your word and today you've taught us about divine judgment and so we recognize that, we don't wanna shirk that, we don't wanna run from that, we want to encounter hard things and be honest.

We don't hide here, Lord, we don't wanna hide. So I just pray now, Father, for every single heart in this room and anybody that may be listening as well in line and just ask, Father, that you would help us, that you help us wrestle with the truth, the reality of injustice and justice, of sin and what it deserves, that we would be modest, not pretending we know exactly what's gonna happen at the end of history, not pretending we know all about this reality, but instead, Lord, that we would know just what your word says and long to run to the arms of our rescuer.

So in the midst of a difficult topic, we ask, Father, that you would convict us that we need rescue, redemption. And so I pray for somebody today that they would be helped to run to the arms of Christ, Lord.

That's our prayer, that's our plea, come Holy Spirit, we pray in Christ's name, amen.