

The Character Of The Church On Earth.

Text: Mat 13:47-50

Suggested Hymns:

503, 182, 186, 294, 211

1) The parable itself

2) The characteristics of the imperfect church

3) The remedy

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The text for our sermon today is Matthew 13:47-50, ⁴⁷ *“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind,* ⁴⁸ *“which, when it was full, they drew to shore; and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away.* ⁴⁹ *“So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just,* ⁵⁰ *“and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

In the Nicene Creed we all confess, *“And I believe in one holy Christian and Apostolic Church.”* We must realise that the *“one holy Christian and Apostolic Church”* is more than an earthly institution. It includes not only all those people on earth who by faith have embraced Jesus Christ as their personal Saviour from sin and death, but also all those who have died in this faith and have passed on into heaven.

The saints in heaven have been transferred from the Church Militant to the Church Triumphant, and their membership is continuing on into eternity.

But there is a difference within the church as it is represented in both places. Our Lord Himself makes a distinction in the parable which serves as our text for today.

Here Jesus points out that the one sad feature about the earthly church is its impurity. He also warns that those people who merely pretend to be members of the church will be removed. The church in heaven will be a perfect church.

The impurity of the church on earth is a matter of deep concern to those of us who hold membership in the church. Our own eternal welfare is involved. We

should therefore become alerted to the dangers to which we are exposed, lest we be numbered among the removals. Let us, therefore, in all earnestness consider the imperfect character of the Church on earth. May the Lord bless our meditation.

1. The Parable

Let us firstly look briefly at the parable itself. It has two parts. The first is, *“Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind,”*⁴⁸ *“which, when it was full, they drew to shore.*

The net is the largest kind of net, weighted below and with corks on the top, sweeping perhaps a km of water. It is the opposite of the small casting net mentioned in Matthew 4:18. The net fulfilled its purpose. It *was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind* of fish. This net is the gospel. The sea is the world, and *“of every kind”* means some of every kind, race, type, social and intellectual grade of people.

Being the gospel, the net belongs to God or Christ and, of course, is handled by all who proclaim the gospel, that is, the church. But the parable omits mention of these, as not belonging in the picture at this time. To bring them in, nevertheless, spoils the whole comparison, because all the members and the pastors of the church are also the fish caught in the net.

This catching takes in the entire work of the gospel — the whole of it is one great sweep of the net through the waters of the sea. The picture is not that of repeated casting. Note the success of this grand sweep of the net. It *“was full.”* The gospel does its work.

The second part of the parable is, *and they sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away.*⁴⁹ *“So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just,”*⁵⁰ *“and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”*

What now follows is an ordinary scene of the activities of fishermen. The net is hauled to the beach, the fishermen sit down and pick out all the edible fish and the fish that can be sold. They throw them into vessels but they throw all the worthless fish “outside,” on the ground. The subject is again left indefinite because the comparison lies not in the people who do all this but in the acts alone.

The phrase, *they drew to shore* means that the net is hauled up on the beach. It signifies that the gospel era and work are done. The “*vessels*” are the counterpart of the “*barn*” in verse 30, the “*many mansions,*”¹ and the *everlasting habitations* in Luke 16:9. They simply refer to heaven.

The Lord’s exposition deals with what shall happen on the Last Day, for all that precedes this has already been made plain. The net and its great catch are brought in as being necessary to understand what happens at the end. When they are fishing, the fishermen handle the net and pick out the good fish.

But the gospel is preached by the church, and the separation of the godly from the wicked is made by the angels. The fact that the latter belongs to the angels is the constant teaching of the Scriptures.² The all-sufficient reason is that the entire church is a part of those who are to be separated.

“*The bad*” are the worthless fish. The worthless (fish), are “the wicked,” and “the good (fish),” “the righteous.” In what sense the former are wicked the second term shows. They lack the righteousness that avails before God.

The parable deals with all those who are caught by the great gospel net. All kinds and conditions of people are swept into its meshes, but these are of only two classes. Here on earth both are mixed together in the outward body of the church. They all confess and profess faith, but not all have true credentials and thus pronounced “righteous” by the divine Judge.

Some are hypocrites, sham Christians, and mere adherents of the church system. Church discipline cannot eliminate them because we cannot judge people’s hearts. The demands of Donatists in the early Church are failures of the worst kinds. The other extreme is the liberalism which discards the Scriptural church discipline.

In our parable Jesus points us to the consummation with its divine separation of the false Christians from the true. The separation is “from” in the sense of taking the wicked “out of the midst” of the righteous. These wicked are the ones that shall be done away with as being “worthless.” The fate of the wicked is described in the words, *cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.* This means spending eternity in hell.

In addition to the instruction which it conveys, the parable is intended chiefly as a mighty warning. All you who are in contact with the gospel, what kind of

fish are you? How will the judgment day find you? What if you should be thrown into that furnace? How some are found to be “good” and others “bad” is not detailed in the imagery, but it is indicated in the exposition.

Every proclamation of “*the kingdom of the heaven*”³ is a call to repent and to receive the righteousness by faith in Christ⁴ and thus to declared “righteous.” The wickedness of “the wicked” lies in this very point; outwardly they accept the gospel but inwardly they refuse to repent and to rest their faith on Christ. They are like the hard path, the rocky soil, and the thorny patch.⁵

Let us now look at this parable in the light of the imperfect church on earth.

2. The Characteristics Of The Imperfect Church

Firstly, we need to note that the visible church on earth includes the wicked among the just. The imperfect condition of the church on earth is an undeniable fact. Actually it is unavoidable because of the manner in which the church gathers its members.

Jesus brings this out quite vividly when He likens the earthly church to a “*dragnet that was cast into the sea and gathered some of every kind*” A net is well designed to gather a large multitude and variety of fish, but it is not equipped to select the good fish and to throw the bad away. This selection must be made in some other way. And the fisherman is well satisfied with his net so long as it simply gathers good fish along with the bad.

In the same way the church on earth, through the net of the Gospel, gathers a large variety and a great multitude of human souls to itself. But it is not equipped by God to pass on the sincerity of all who profess faith in the Gospel. As long as a person professes the Christian faith and as long as he leads a Christian life, the church must regard him as a true believer. It cannot look into anyone’s heart and see the character of his faith.

Secondly, we note that hypocrisy makes the church imperfect. This is where the possibility of imperfection lies. Associated with those who actually are Christians, we find those who are not. They only appear to be. In other words, hypocrisy is one of the chief things which makes the Christian Church on earth an imperfect church.

For this reason it has been said that the greatest harm to the church does not come to it from the outside but from within. Its greatest enemies are not those who openly oppose the will of God but those who, with poisoned sweetness, give every appearance of uprightness and faithfulness.

There is probably no greater form of dishonesty than the practiced deceit of the hypocrite, and there is probably nothing more detestable. Jesus denounced the hypocrites vehemently on many occasions. Most of His “woes” were directed against them. Even the children of this world despise the religious pretender.

No doubt most of us present here share these feelings. However, it may come as a surprise to learn that this heinous sin is more widespread than we realise and that all of us are vulnerable to it. Every person, you see, is a potential hypocrite.

God says both in the Old and in the New Testament that all people are liars. Even after a person has been released from the power of Satan and has been born again, he is still susceptible to this ugly and detestable form of wickedness, and he will have to fight against it all the days of his life. With God’s help he must constantly overcome it.

Now, this may be a distasteful subject, but it is nonetheless one which must be discussed in view of Christ’s warning. Let us, therefore, submit to a frank examination by asking ourselves a few searching questions. It is necessary that we recognise the first marks of a sin if we are to struggle against it successfully.

Do you have the habit of censuring other people? Do you read books and articles only to find fault? Do you listen to others only with an ear toward correcting mistakes? Do you watch the actions of your fellow men to judge them? Do you become resentful when good things happen to other people? Do you belittle the achievements of your neighbour and the blessings which he has received? Do you perform works of charity for the purpose of making an impression? Are your works motivated by a spirit of competition? Does the sentiment of the heart match all your services to the Lord? And, finally, as you hear these questions, are you searching in your own heart for an honest answer, or are you thinking about how well they apply to someone you know?

If you have had to say yes to any of these questions, then you should become startled into a quick concern for your condition, because they reveal the marks of hypocrisy. The hypocrite, you see, is the world's worst fault-finder. He does this either because he wants to direct attention away from himself or because, in his wicked pride, he actually considers himself better than his fellow man.

The hypocrite is also an envious person. He simply cannot stand it when something good happens to other people, especially when it has not happened to him. Moreover, the hypocrite is a show-off. Living in constant fear of discovery, he goes to great lengths to reveal what great things he has done for the Lord and how devout have been his ministrations. And, finally, the hypocrite is reluctant to look at himself, because he is afraid of what he will see, a "white washed tomb" with corruption inside as Jesus points out in Matthew 23:27.

It is extremely important that we become aware of our natural tendencies in this direction, for they jeopardise our faith. And we should implore God for strength to overcome this detestable meanness of character because God abhors it and wants His children to lay it aside.

3. The Remedy For The Imperfect Church

Firstly, we consider the Final Judgment. In our text Jesus mentions that when the catch of fish was brought to shore, the fishermen "*sat down and gathered the good into vessels, but threw the bad away.*" ⁴⁹ "*So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come forth, separate the wicked from among the just.*"

The fishing net, as we stated before, is not able to sort out good fish from bad, but the fisherman is able to make his selection when the full catch is brought to shore.

And in the same way, while the church on earth cannot sort out the true believers from among those who are covering their unbelief with an outward show of faith, yet God is able to do so, and He will, as our text tells us, "*separate the wicked from among the just,*" ⁵⁰ "*and cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth.*"

This is a frightening prospect, but our Lord intended it to be this way when He put the matter so bluntly before the people of His day. He had been subjected

to constant annoyance at the hands of the Pharisees. They had appointed themselves to be His critics and sought at every opportunity to trap Him.

When they invited Him to dinner, it was not for the purpose of extending genuine hospitality but for the purpose of finding fault. When they went to hear His sermons and discourses, it was not for the purpose of being led into the truth but for the purpose of finding something to criticise. Whenever they engaged Him in conversation, it was not for the purpose of exchanging ideas but rather for the purpose of grasping something which they might later misquote.

Their so-called “artful” questioning was done for the purpose of using His answers to condemn Him. They were, in effect, “saving up” a whole array of little things. With this mass of “evidence” they hoped to convict Him later on.

Secondly, in this section we must also realise that Jesus suffered and died for all people. This means that Jesus dealt with the hypocrites just as He would with any other sinful human being, for they, too, were objects of His universal love for mankind.

Jesus strode purposefully forward toward Calvary that He might suffer and die for their sin of hypocrisy just as fully and completely as He died for every other sin. His many warnings to them, while they were issued in anger and disgust, were nonetheless motivated by a deep love for their souls, which He considered just as precious as any other.

And therein lies our great comfort today. Whether we attempt to cover our sins against God’s Law with a show of uprightness, or whether some of us go so far as to cloak outright unbelief with a lying profession of faith, there is help and salvation if we repent.

Our precious Lord and Master came down from heaven to live the life of a human being in order that He might successfully meet the challenge of God’s Law and conquer sin; and He died on Calvary’s cross bearing in His body the full and eternal punishment for all people’s sins. The victory which Christ won can become the personal victory of any person if he will earnestly repent of his sins and accept forgiveness through simple faith in Him.

For those who are true believers but are besieged by recurring sins, this means not only a glorious assurance of forgiveness for every sin, no matter how

often it occurs, but also renewed strength in the daily struggle against the weakness of the flesh.

For those whose hypocrisy covers outright unbelief, it means that the hypocrisy will vanish automatically as soon as they become believers. *“The blood of Jesus Christ, His Son, cleanses us from all sin,”* even the sin of hypocrisy.

One of the great joys which so frequently accompanies this new-found faith in Christ is that the convert can quit pretending to be a child of God. His is the wonderful realisation that he has actually become God’s child. Gone forever are all the tangled webs of falsehood and deceit, which can so easily trap a person who makes the slightest mistake.

Gone forever are all fears of discovery. And gone forever is the awful knowledge that someday he will be severed from among the just and cast into the furnace of fire.

With faith in Christ we are given strength to walk in the newness of life and to battle gainfully against our weaknesses. May God’s Holy Spirit, therefore, impress upon us the deep seriousness of Christ’s warning against this type of impurity within the church. May He strengthen us with the power of Christ lest any of us continue in this guilt. Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

¹ John 14:2

² Matthew 25:32, 33

³ Matthew 3:2

⁴ Mat 5:20

⁵ Mat 13:4-7