

# Like a Net



Matthew 13:44-52

Year A Proper 12

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## Parts by scene

■ = large part   ▲ = medium sized part   ● = small part

		1	2	3
▲	<b>Joanna</b> - a wealthy woman with a perceptive and agile intellect who abandons her life as the co-manager of King Herod's household to follow Jesus	▲	▲	▲
▲	<b>John</b> - the gentlest and most caring of the disciples	▲	▲	▲
▲	<b>Judas</b> - possibly the deepest thinker and best organizer, the one who usually sees the big picture most clearly, and also the disciple with the best sense of humor	▲	▲	▲
▲	<b>James</b> - the most officious disciple, often the most frustrated with Jesus' unconventional decisions (such as his allowing women to join the group)	▲	●	▲
▲	<b>Matthew</b> - a former tax collector (i.e. a agent of the Roman occupation of his own people) who in his repentance from that past life is the most religiously fervent of the disciples	▲	▲	▲
▲	<b>Jesus</b>		■	

## Scene 1

James , Joanna , John , Judas , Matthew

*{Joanna and John are in the middle of a debate.}*

**Joanna**      We have to confront him about this!

**John**        I agree we should talk, but let's wait until after tomorrow's sermon.

**Joanna**      Do you really think the last sermon will somehow make everything okay? I think it could make things worse.

*{Judas, Matthew, and James enter.}*

**Judas**        Make what worse?

**John**        We've been discussing the rabbi's parables.

**James**        *[confrontationally]* Discussing - or criticizing?

**Matthew** *[honestly curious]* Is this about the good seeds and bad seeds?

**Joanna** Yes. That parable where everybody's either righteous or wicked from birth, and there's no changing them. And what he said the day before: that he's preaching in parables specifically to keep the wicked from understanding and being healed.

**James** I keep telling you, he can't be preaching that!

**John** Well, that's why I think we need to talk to him. Because it sounds like it is what he's preaching.

**Judas** *[to John]* I agree that was his message, but what I don't get is why you think it's a problem.

**Joanna** I would have thought that was obvious!

**Judas** Is it? Matthew, do you agree that it's obviously a problem?

**Matthew** No, I don't, as a matter of fact.

**John** Really? Why not?

**Matthew** Because the rabbi taught it.

**Joanna** We're in agreement that he taught it. Why do you think it's an acceptable teaching?

**Matthew** *[simply]* Because he taught it.

**John** So, Matthew: you're comfortable with the idea that every soul is already predestined to a certain fate?

**Matthew** No! I'm not comfortable with it at all!

**Joanna** Then why do you accept it?

**Matthew** Because. The rabbi. Taught it. *[with some anger]* Honestly, are you going to follow the rabbi only if you agree with his teaching? Do you think you know more about the Kingdom of Heaven than he does?

**James** That's exactly right! We signed on to do a job, and I for one am not going to quit before it's done! One little sermon here or there is nothing. The Kingdom is everything. Are we going to be the ones who bring it in, or not?

**John** *[quietly]* Bring it in for who? Just the ones who are predestined to inherit it, or everybody we can possibly reach and persuade?

**Joanna** Judas, you also have no problems with any of this, right? What's your reason?

**Judas** Frankly, I think the rabbi is simply right about this. People *don't* change. They really do seem to march straight into their destinies.

**John** People change all the time. Matthew here is probably the biggest example. He changed his life completely.

**Judas** Maybe. Or maybe he was destined to follow the rabbi all along. Maybe all those years as a tax collector were him running away from who he really was. Maybe his "conversion" is just more proof that we all finally end up where we were fated to be.

**Joanna** But you can prove anything that way! If he repents, it's because he was a good seed all along. If he doesn't, it's because he was a bad seed all along. It signifies nothing!

**Judas** Here's the significance: If the Children of Heaven are already out there, slowly ripening on their own all the time, then maybe we should be changing our approach to them. Maybe there's a way to be picking the low hanging fruit, rather than wasting time and energy trying to convert weeds into wheat.

**James** So are we agreed we're not going to disturb the rabbi tonight?

**John** I think we need to speak with him more than ever!

**Judas** How about if we just ask him what he plans to preach tomorrow and take it from there? How about that?

**James** I guess that would be okay.

**Matthew** I wish everybody could just accept his teachings no matter how difficult they might be, but to tell you the truth, I'm pretty curious about what he's going to preach tomorrow, so I'll go along with it. But if he repeats the same doctrine, will you finally accept it?

**John** *[solemnly]* I will.

**Joanna** I don't know if I can promise something like that. All I can say is that we'll see how it goes.

**Judas** Well, I have no problems at all with the concept in the first place, so I'll obviously accept it. But I *will* suggest that we should start

talking about how to match our methodologies more closely with that worldview.

**James** I already accept it, too, so that's that.

**Matthew** Wait, you accept it? You accept the idea that everyone's fate is predetermined, and so it's okay for the rabbi to purposely confuse the lost ones so they won't learn the truth and be saved?

**James** No! That's a horrible thought! Why do you keep saying that's what he's preaching? I keep telling you: there is no way he would say that!

## Scene 2

James , Jesus , Joanna , John , Judas , Matthew

*{The group approaches Jesus to ask what he plans to preach on the next day.}*

**John** Rabbi?

**Jesus** *[whimsically through the first part of this scene, as if he knows what's coming]* Yes?

**John** *[awkwardly]* We were wondering...

**Jesus** Yes...?

**Matthew** *[awkwardly jumping in]* We were just curious, you see...

**Jesus** Yes.

**Joanna** *[bluntly]* We were wondering what you're planning to preach tomorrow.

**Jesus** Ah!

**James** *[abruptly]* I just want to say that I'm not with them. I'm fine with whatever you preach!

**Jesus** Noted.

**Judas** Your last two sermons suggested a new way of looking at our ministry that I think would be worth discussing.

**Jesus** Every good student of the scriptures is like a homeowner who brings out from his attic treasures both old and new!

**Judas** *[uncertainly]* Uh, right. So, could you tell us what you'll be bringing out to the crowd tomorrow?

**Jesus** I think I'll be telling them three more parables, and the first one is this: The Kingdom of Heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, that a passerby stumbles on one day. Now, what do you think he does?

**James** Grabs it!

**Jesus** But it legally belongs to the owner of the field, and he doesn't want to risk being caught stealing it.

**Joanna** He should just tell the owner. Maybe the owner doesn't know about it, or maybe he doesn't realize that his efforts to hide it were ineffective. Either way, it's the right thing to do, and maybe the owner will reward the man for his help. But I'm not sure how this fits into the parable.

**Jesus** It doesn't! That's not what the man does. Matthew, I would think you would know this.

**Matthew** *[laughing]* Well, I know what I would have done in my past life!

**Jesus** Tell us.

**Matthew** I'd make the owner an offer for the field.

**John** Without telling him about the treasure?

**Matthew** Of course not! And what's more, I might even hide it more securely first, just to make sure no one else stumbled on it.

**Jesus** What if the farmer's price was so high you'd have to sell everything you owned to buy the field?

**Matthew** Well, then it's simple math. Are the combined value of the treasure and the field greater than my own net worth? If so, it's a no-brainer.

**Judas** So what does the man actually do?

**Jesus** Exactly that!

**Matthew** *[shocked]* What?

**Jesus** He hides the treasure, and sells all that he has, and buys the field.

**James**       Awesome!

**Judas**       Interesting.

**John**        Rabbi, I understand that the point of the parable is the preciousness of the kingdom, but is it a good idea to portray such unethical behavior?

**Judas**        It's perfectly legal behavior.

**Joanna**      He didn't say "illegal". He said, "unethical".

**James**      *[to John]* Didn't you say the other day that we can't make too much of the things used in the parables?

**John**        True. It's just a little unsettling to hear a parable that uses greed and deceit.

**Jesus**        Maybe you'll like the next one better, then. A merchant discovered a pearl of great price, and sold all that he had so that he could buy it.

**John**        *[happily]* Yes, that *is* much better!

**Matthew**     *[muttering in disgust, almost to himself]* Not by much!

**James**        What was that?

**Joanna**      Matthew, are you all right?

**Matthew**     *[accusingly to Jesus]* What does he do with it?

**James**        What does it matter what he does with the pearl?

**Matthew**     *[angrily]* With the treasure!

**John**        I think he's asking about the first parable.

**Matthew**     *[more forcefully to Jesus]* What does he do with it?

**Jesus**        *[mildly]* I don't know. That's the end of the parable.

*{There's a brief, tense silence.}*

**Joanna**      *[lightly, trying to break the tension]* Anyway, I think we can all agree that this set of parables is a big improvement on the previous ones.

**John** I agree. I was a little bothered by the first one, but I can see now that it shows the value of the Kingdom even more if the man was willing to resort even to deceit in order to gain it.

**Judas** I think there's a lesson for us, too. This work of ours to *bring in* the kingdom is also a pearl of great price. It's worth doing whatever we have to do to achieve it.

**James** What's the third parable?

**Jesus** The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea and caught fish of every kind. When it was full, the fishermen drew it ashore and sorted out the fish, putting the good ones into baskets but throwing out the bad. So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous and throw them into a furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

### Scene 3

James , Joanna , John , Judas , Matthew

*{The disciples discuss the final parable after Jesus has gone to bed.}*

**Joanna** When he began that third parable, I got little worried, but I thought it turned out okay.

**Matthew** *[bitterly]* You should have kept worrying!

**James** Dude, what's bugging you?

*{Matthew refuses to speak.}*

**John** Actually, I think I might agree with Matthew. That last parable was a little worrisome.

**Joanna** How so? I'm okay with the idea that there's going to be a judgment. I'm even okay with the idea that many will be condemned, as long as they all get a fair chance to make good. It wasn't like those good seeds and bad seeds.

**James** Women!

**Joanna** Excuse me?

**John** *[jumping in to keep the peace]* It's not that you're a woman; it's that you're not a fisher.

- James** *[derisively]* What did you think it meant for there to be good fish and bad fish? Did you think that some of the fish were stand-up guys while others were jerks?
- Joanna** *[coldly]* I guess I didn't think about it.
- John** *[in a mild, teacherly voice]* When we haul in our nets, the fish we keep versus the ones we toss isn't usually about whether they're in good condition or not. It's more about types of fish. Some aren't edible, and others aren't sellable.
- Judas** So that one was also about fixed fates.
- Joanna** Not necessarily. I don't think we can make a parable say more than...well, more than it says. The parable of the sower explicitly reports that different kinds of seed were planted, and that the bad seed was condemned from the start but they were allowed to grow together until the harvest, but the parable of the fishing net just talks about the fishing.
- John** That's true, and if it was an isolated parable, I'd agree with you. But it came in a sequence along with other parables that taught a fixed fate.
- Judas** Actually, only one other parable taught that. There were two others that were about how fast the kingdom would grow, remember? And then there were the two today about how precious it is.
- Matthew** Ha!
- James** *[sternly to Matthew]* Look, we're just going to ignore you until you decide to speak in complete sentences!
- John** Actually, the two about the growth of the kingdom might have really been about the fixed fates, or at least about two fates.
- Joanna** You mean the mustard seed that grew into a tree and the rising bread dough? How?
- John** Some of us, including Matthew, think the mustard seed parable was really about the evil birds of the air roosting in the tree of the Kingdom, and the one about the dough really about the flour and the yeast coexisting in the dough.
- Joanna** That's a bit of a stretch, isn't it?



**Judas** It would be if there weren't these other parables that all fit into the same general theme. Except for the treasure and the pearl of course.

**Matthew** Fools!

**James** *[angrily]* All right. I've had just about enough -

**John** *[interrupting in a gentle voice]* Matthew? Do you believe those two parables also fit the pattern?

**Matthew** *[firmly]* James, you heard about the rabbi before John, right?

**James** Yeah.

**Matthew** And what did you do as soon as you heard about him?

**James** I told the family.

**Matthew** Exactly. You didn't keep it a secret so you alone could benefit, right?

**James** Of course not!

**Matthew** *That's* how the parables "fit the pattern"!

**Judas** I see. They teach you to grab the kingdom for yourself rather than share it with others.

**John** Because no sharing will help. Those destined to receive it will, and those destined to judgment...

**Matthew** Should be left in the dark, even if you have to deceive them to do it.

**Joanna** Whoa! You're stretching a couple of really short parables a long way!

**Judas** In isolation, yes. But combined with all the others...?

**John** I guess the question is: did the rabbi intended for all the parables to work together like that, or are they just random lessons that stand on their own?

**Matthew** We have to find out! Let's wake him.

**James** No! No! No! Nobody's waking anybody! We're going to bed, and tomorrow, he's preaching his last sermon and we're moving on.

And he's going to preach brand new sermons to the next town, and we're going to forget all about the ones he preached here! Got it?

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*You can read my thoughts about this play and respond with your own at [www.WineskinProject.net/blog/net](http://www.WineskinProject.net/blog/net)*

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