The passage of Scripture that has been read consists of two parts, viz. a parable, and its explanation. In the former we have,

1. The thing represented: the kingdom of heaven.
   
2. The similitude.

In the explanation is explained who are represented by the fish that are taken, viz.

   [1.] Who by the good.
   [2.] By the bad.
   [3.] By those that sever the fish one from another: angels.
   [4.] What time there is respect to in the parable, in those words, "when it was full, they drew to shore, and sat down, and gathered the good into vessels, but cast the bad away": [the] end of the world.
   [5.] What is implied in the bad being cast away.
   [6.] And lastly, the consequence of this is declared: "There shall be wailing."

From the words that have been read, several observations may be raised.

Observation I.
The conversion of sinners may fitly be compared to the taking fish in a net.

And that on the following account:

1. Men in their natural state are like fish at liberty in their element, wild and ungoverned.

Natural men in their sins, and in the enjoyment and pursuit of their lusts, their worldly pleasures, profits and honors, and in their evil practice, are in their element. The nature of man, as he is by nature, is sinful, and wickedness is as natural to him—that which he is, is naturally inclined to and delights [in], and what he naturally lives in and lives by—as water is to a fish.

As a fish constantly lives in the water, {so natural men constantly live in their sins}.

As a fish, contrary to the nature of all other animals, lives without breath, so [natural men live] without the influences of the Spirit of God.

The air, which is the very life of other animals, is what is exceeding contrary to the nature {of a fish}; so {the Spirit of God is contrary to natural men}.

The nature of man, as he is by nature, is as diverse from that of the children of God, as {the nature of fish is from other animals}: that which one lives by, is the death of the other.

That which drowns and quickly kills other animals, is the life of fishes, and their delight; so [natural men delight in their sin].

Fishes at their liberty in the sea, are wild and out of the possession and government of mankind; so natural men are far off from God, are not subject to the law of God, will not be controlled by God's commands and held within the limits of their duty to him, being aliens and strangers, and under the power of a carnal mind that is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be.
Man is born as the wild ass's colt, Job 11:12, that is noted as an animal that is not be subject to the government of mankind, that cannot be tamed, or kept to rules, or held under restraints by human discipline. See Job 39:5-8, "Who hath sent out the wild ass free? or who hath loosed the bands of the wild ass? Whose house I have made the wilderness, and the barren land his dwellings. He scorneth the multitude of the city, neither regardeth he the crying of the driver. The range of the mountains is his pasture, and he searcheth after every green thing." Jer. 2:24, "A wild ass used to the wilderness, that snuffeth up the wind at her pleasure; in her occasion who can turn her away?"

2. The conversion of sinners may fitly be compared to the taking of fish in a net, inasmuch as it is not of themselves, but is wholly the effect of the power, will and design of another.

The fishes being taken in a net, is an effect that is not of them. 'Tis nothing agreeable to their inclination, no fruit of their design or contrivance, but contrary to their will.

So is the conversion of a sinner. Sinners, if left to themselves, would choose to continue in their sins. And thus it is with sinners, even to the very time of their conversions. Although there are many sinners that are not yet converted that are awakened, and in some measure sensible of their misery, and are seeking deliverance from their misery, yet {they continue in their sins}.

Conversion is really not the thing that they aim at. [They] are enemies to conversion. They are not properly designing any such thing; are striving against it; and their hearts do wholly oppose it, till the moment that they are actually converted.

[Conversion is] not the effect of their power or strength, not the effect of their contrivance, not the consequence of the natural tendency of anything they do, not agreeable to their wills. 'Tis from God, as
counteracting their natures and their inclinations, aims and designs, as much as the taking of a fish in a net is not from the fish, but the fisherman, altogether the fruit of the will, power, design and contrivance of the fisherman.

If the fish were left to himself, he never would be taken {in a net}; so [with the natural man].

3. The conversion of sinners is the fruit of the peculiar wisdom and skill of the Author if it, and also secondarily of the instrument of it.

As the taking fish in a net is owing to the fisherman's art--men are wont to exercise their cunning and display their art in catching of birds and fishes and other animals that are wild--so the bringing souls out of a state of nature home to the Lord Jesus Christ is an effect of the wonderful wisdom of God. This is the wisdom spoken of, Prov. 8:12, "[I] dwell with prudence, and find out knowledge of witty inventions."

The wisdom of God wonderfully appears in what he has done, whereby a foundation is laid for the conversion and salvation of sinners. Eph. 1:8, "abounded in all wisdom and prudence." Eph. 3:10, "the manifold wisdom of God."

And the wisdom of God commonly wonderfully appears in preparing the way for, and bringing about the effect itself, of a sinner's conversion: [in] disposals of providence; turning the temptations, subtil devices and violent assaults of Satan against himself; overruling the exercises of the corruption {of nature}; conducting the soul through the terrible [snares]; [and] leading it along in a marvelous manner through the mazes and labyrinths it is brought into.

So then it is commonly so, when a sinner is converted and comforted, and comes to look back, those dealings of God with him that appeared most mysterious and dark in the time of it, now appear plain.
And so is God pleased to make use of means in this affair, that the conversion of sinners is commonly secondarily owing to the wisdom and skill of ministers of the gospel, that are called fishermen; and those of them that are faithful, have a holy skill, and a kind of divine art given to them by their Lord and Master, who has made them fishers of men. He instructs them in the art of catching men. Some of them, he makes wise as serpents; makes [them] wise scribes; gives 'em the tongue of the learned. This holy skill the apostle Paul used, and was abundantly successful in it

4. The sinner, before his actual conversion, is as it were enclosed round on every side by God's net, as the fish is first enclosed by the net of the fisherman before he is drawn out of the water. Hos. 2:6-7, "Therefore, behold, I will hedge up thy way with thorns, and make a wall, that she shall not find her paths. And she shall follow after her lovers, but she shall not overtake them; and she shall seek them, but shall not find them: then shall she say, I will go and return to my first husband; for then was it better with me than now." [The sinner is] pent up more & more closely, [has] less and less room.

5. Sinners are often seized by convictions in order to their conversion, when just before they were in the depths of security. [When] in the midst of their career in sins. [Such as the] apostle Paul.

6. Sinners are commonly brought home to Christ in a way very unexpected to them. [They] are laying out ways, [they] form motives; but [they] are all wrong, [they] can have no idea.

When [they] think themselves nearest, [they] are furthest off. When [they] think themselves furthest off, [they] are nearest.

Unexpected means, and in an unexpected way; the event is quite unexpected.

All new and strange.
Ps. 126:1, "we were like them that dream."

7. The drawing of [fish] out of the water by the [net] is death to 'em. So the conversion of sinners is often spoken of in Scripture as being in several respects the death of the sinner.

8. Sinners are oftentimes converted in great numbers at a time.

APPLICATION.

I. What has been observed may be of conviction unto those that are in a natural condition, to convince them of their sin and misery, and how justly they might be left to perish.

[You are] like fish in your element.
Constantly.
Your life.
Nature exceeding contrary.
Are enemies to your own life.
Ungoverned and untameable.
You continually oppose your own conversion and salvation.
Shows your misery.
Shows how just.

II. And from what has been observed, we may learn the reason why the awakenings of some sinners do not issue in their conversion, viz. because they don't find themselves on every side enclosed in God's net.

[The fish] yet has room in the water.
Many are like fish partly enclosed, and are affrighted, but make their escape through a gap. Is. 57:10, "Thou art wearied in the greatness of the way."

III. From what has been observed, we may learn what will become of those that God lets alone, and don't seize them by his irresistible and efficacious power and grace.
They will be caught in a net indeed, in another sense.

IV. From what has been observed, we may learn how great a thing it is to be indeed converted

Changing their element.

Changing their very nature as much.

'Tis death.

Without any assistance or concurrence from sinners, but against an universal opposition.

V. Hence, let all sinners that are concerned for their salvation be warned not to trust in themselves, as though their conversion was ever likely to be owing to their own power, will or wisdom.

Thus sinners are wont to do.

Imagine that [they can convert themselves].

[This is] owing to their great ignorance.

Ignorance of two things especially:

[First.] Ignorance of themselves.

Their own insufficiency.

Ignorance of their hearts, {of} their aims.

[Second.] Ignorance of the nature of conversion, not knowing what manner of thing it is.

But what has been observed shows the vanity {of trusting in ourselves}.

Their trusting is one instance of their opposing [God].

VI. From what has been observed, we may learn what reason they that are converted are under to adore sovereign grace.

'Tis owing to that.

If you had been let alone, you would forever have gone on. Yea, if God had not as it were arose and clothed himself with his almighty power, [you would never have been converted].

There was nothing in you tending to it.
All [was] against it.

[You] really acted like fish in a net. [You] strove against [it], continually strove to find the way out.

How froward and perverse was you.

How did the perversion and enmity of your heart appear while God was striving with you.

How wonderful the grace of God in bearing, and how much more wonderfully and finally conquering.⁶

PARABLE OF THE NET (1746, Sermon II)

Matthew 13:47.

And gathered of every kind.

Two things seem to be intended:

1. That every kind of persons are brought into the visible kingdom. That this is intended is evident.

2. That persons of all sorts are changed and brought into the spiritual and invisible kingdom of Christ. There is reason to think that this also is intended, because 'tis evident that Christ does often compare conversion, or bringing men out of a state of sin into the spiritual kingdom of Christ, to the taking fish in a net.

OBSERVATION II.

The mercy and grace of God revealed in the gospel extends to all sorts of persons.
The *Use* that I would make of this Observation, is to call upon all sorts of persons to forsake their sins, and above all things seek salvation.

**[First.]** Persons of every age.

[1.] Those that are in their youth.

Now you have a most precious opportunity.

Indeed, the opportunity that is past is in some respects the best. But that, you have lost. That should stir you up. Consider how much of your life {is spent} already. [The] devil has had your most early days. You have grown up in sin. [As you have] grown in strength and stature, [you have] grown in guilt. You had many calls and warnings when you was a child.

But yet you have a most precious opportunity.

Don't flatter yourself with promises of future opportunity.

[2. I] call upon those that are middle-aged that are in sin, as fish in their element.

How much of your life is gone. Your best season. [It] can't be recovered. You have, it may be, put off in hopes of a better opportunity.

I appeal to you, whether you have found your opportunities grow better. [You] had need to make haste. Most of you are come to have families.


If there be any such that are sensible, [their] case is sorrowful indeed. [You have] spent away first your childhood. What a dreadful load of guilt. What hardness of heart. [In] how many respects have your disadvantages increased. But you are in no less necessity, yea, much greater.

And by what you have heard, you may learn that the mercy {of God} extends [to such as you]. Some are called at the eleventh hour.

Though such as you are the most rarely awakened, yet such above all others have need to be awakened, and to be in good earnest.
And such as you have in many respects more to convince 'em. You have had more experience to convince you. You have had more to convince you of the vanity of the world, more to take off your heart from this world. You have had more to convince you of your own weakness and instability. You have gone through the world, as it were.

[4. To] those that are yet children.

You stand in infinite need {of conversion} as well as others. [You] came into the world in a miserable condition. But yet the mercy {of God} extends to such as you. Yea, you now enjoy the most precious opportunity. Happy are those persons that, though the opportunity that you enjoy is so good, yet but few improve it.

And this is one reason that there are few saved. Many die in their childhood. Doubtless many children go to hell while they are children. If this should be your case, consider how dreadful your case will be.

Therefore now hearken, lest you at last convince yourself and say, as Prov. 5:12-13, "How have I hated instruction, and my heart despised reproof; and have not obeyed the voice of my teachers, nor inclined mine ear to them that instructed me."

[Second. I] call upon those that [are] comparatively poor and low in the world. [God's grace] extends to such. Many such are called. [You] will not be despised [for] it. The blessed Virgin was poor; Christ was poor. I offer to you this day, in the name of Christ, glorious riches. I Sam. 2:8, "He raiseth the poor [out of the dust, and lifteth up the beggar from the dunghill, to set them amongst princes, and to make them inherit the throne of glory]."

We read of Lazarus [Luke 16:20-25]. Jas. 2:5, "[Hath not God] chosen the [poor of this world rich in faith, and heirs of the kingdom which he promised to them that love him?"

You have but a little portion in this world; seek a better portion.
You suffer peculiar difficulties and hardships here.

[Third. To] those that are weak in understanding.

Mercy extends [to you.]

You are capable of obtaining that wisdom that {is from above}.

[Fourth.] You that are despised.

[Fifth.] And you that are in higher circumstances in the world than many of your neighbors, hearken. [Mercy extends to] some such as you. [As] "Caesar's household," Phil. 4:22.

Otherwise, all your possessions and outward advantages will be of no advantage. You must in a very little time be stripped {of your possessions}. [You] will be poor. What reasonable comfort can you take in your outward good things if {you are not saved}? When you sit down at a full table, when you put on better garments, when you take your place above others: these things will all but aggravate your future misery.

Take heed that ben't said to you hereafter, that was said to the rich man when begging for a drop {of water}: "Remember that thou in thy lifetime receivedst thy good things, and likewise Lazarus evil things: but now he is comforted, and thou art tormented" [Luke 16:25]. And take heed you don't do as that other rich man did that we read of, Luke 12:16, etc., "Soul, thou hast much goods [laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry. But God said unto him, Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee: then whose shall those things be, which thou hast provided?"

[Sixth.] Let those that have been great sinners, lived in immoral practices, [hearken]. [Mercy] extends to such as you. We read of many such: I Cor. 9:6, etc.; Col. 2:5, etc.; Tit. 3:3, etc. Indeed your guilt is dreadful {when you sin} under such light. [Your] danger is very great. Especially is this probably the case of some.
[You have] sinned against great opposition of conscience, [in] repeated acts. [You have] been very obstinate. [Your] guilt is grown up to heaven. 'Tis a wonder that God has spared you.

And how dreadful will God's wrath be if {you are not converted}. But yet there is a possibility.

[Seventh.] Such as have been guilty of backslidings, [hearken]. Mercy extends to some such. Jer. 3:14, "Turn, O backsliding children, saith the Lord"; [v.] 22, "Return, ye backsliding children, and I will heal your backslidings." Indeed, there is one sort of backsliding {to which mercy does not extend: refusing to return [Jer. 8:5]}. But {yet there is a possibility}. There is hope if you can but be persuaded to be in good earnest.

There is the greatest difficulty with backsliders. The judgment of God upon them usually appears in that.

[Eighth.] Those that have been long seeking God's grace, and have not yet obtained, [hearken]. Mercy extends [to such]. [As] Saul.

The probable reasons why you have been unsuccessful, [is because you are] not in good earnest, not self-condemned, trusting in your self, unconvinced of the righteousness of God, blaming God and not yourself.

Thus you have gone on with weapons in your hand wherewith to fight against God; if now at length you can but be persuaded to lay down your weapons.

[Ninth.] All dark and melancholic persons, [who are] apt to entertain gloomy apprehensions, to sink in discouragement, have long been in such a way, [hearken].

Grace extends [to such]. God is he that causeth the light to shine out of darkness, gives seeing in the night, and turns the shadow of darkness into the morning. Therefore, lift up the heads that hang down. Don't spend your time and strength in poring on your dark circumstances. Attend to God's voice, consider your duty, apply yourself and persevere in it. If it
continues long dark, {continue to seek}. As long as God continues life, continue to seek him, and cry earnestly to him, and hope and wait for the salvation [of the Lord]. Look to the glorious, all-sufficient, compassionate Redeemer, how far soever you are off, though in the ends of the earth, though in the lion's dens, yea, though as it were in the belly of hell. If you look to him, you will be enlightened. He will strengthen and uphold you with the right hand of his righteousness.

Consider those most encouraging words, Is. 40:27, etc., Why sayest thou, O Jacob, and speakest, O Israel, My way is hid from the Lord, and my judgment is passed over from my God? Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, the Creator of the ends of the earth, fainteth not, neither is weary? there is no searching of his understanding. He giveth power to the faint; and to them that have no might he increaseth strength. Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the young men shall utterly fall: but they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."
Notes

1 Cf. Isaac Walton's *Art of Angling.*
2 MS: "Eph. 2. 10."
3 MS: "the."
4 MS: "sinners that."
5 MS: "them."
6 End of first preaching unit.
7 MS: "sp. of K."
8 MS: "are of weak."