

The Parable of the Tares of the Field

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The Parable of the Tares of the Field appears only in Matthew 13:24-30:

Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.

Like the Parable of the Sower (see the article at <http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/par1sower.htm>), Jesus explains this parable both so that we can understand this parable and to help us understand other parables.

Jesus' Explanation of the Parable

In Matthew 13:36, we read, "Then Jesus sent the multitude away, and went into the house: and his disciples came unto him, saying, Declare unto us the parable of the tares of the field." Notice that Jesus sent the multitudes away. This is in keeping with what I said in "The Parable of the Sower" article cited above and in "Introduction to the Kingdom Parables" (<http://www.wordofhisgrace.org/parkingintro.htm>). The understanding of the parables or the "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (verse 11) or what Jesus calls the "things which have been kept secret from the foundation of the world" (verse 35) is not for the average person of the multitudes (who were following Jesus

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for their own carnal reasons—see, for example, John 6:26). Understanding is a gift given to God's elect. Once Jesus dismisses the multitudes, He explains the meaning of the parable to His disciples.

I. The Sower: In Matthew 13:37, Jesus explicitly states that He is the sower: "He answered and said unto them, He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man."

Sower=the Son of Man, Jesus Christ

II. His Field: In verse 38, Jesus, very clearly, says, "The field is the world." The word "world" in this verse is translated from the Greek word *kosmos*. *Kosmos* literally means the orderly arrangement. It is used in several ways, such as: the universe; the earth; the world system; the whole human race; or a subset of the human race, such as Gentiles only, believers only, or non-believers only. From the context of this parable, it is probably best to take *kosmos* to mean either the earth or the world system. Either one makes sense and preferring one over the other does not change the meaning of the parable. This word is also found in verse 35. It is the world in which the secrets have been hid since its founding. This is the world in which we live. Although in the explanation, Jesus refers to the field as "the field," in the parable, He calls it "his field." The significance of this is that, even though evil takes place in it, the world is His; He is in charge of it; it is all going according to His plan.

His field=the *kosmos*, the earth, the world's system

III. The Good Seed: In verse 38, Jesus says, "The good seed are the children of the kingdom." In the Parable of the Sower, the seed is the Word of God. In this parable, Jesus has changed the symbolism. Unless Jesus has clearly changed the symbolism, we should assume that it remains the same from parable to parable. In this case, Jesus has changed the meaning of "seed."

The word "children" is from the Greek word *huioi*, which means "sons." I believe that this is significant because, in the culture in which Jesus spoke this parable, it would have been understood that sons, not just children in general, inherited. These sons—and this includes all true believers of either sex—are those who will hear, "Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world" (Matthew 25:34).

Good seed=sons of the kingdom

IV. The Tares: Again, in verse 38, Jesus explains, "The tares are the children of the wicked one." In this case also, "children" should be "sons." These are the heirs of their father, the wicked one, who is identified in verse 39. They are heirs of the same fire as their father (Revelation 20:10, 15).

I will mention here that "tares" in the King James Version is translated from *zizania*. A better translation is "darnel" or "cockle." Specifically, Jesus was likely referring to *Lolium temulentum*, a type of ryegrass (not to be confused with rye) that looks very much like wheat the entire time it is growing until near harvest season. At that time, the seed heads look different. It is also interesting that the seeds of *Lolium temulentum* contain a poisonous drug that can be fatal.

The tares=the sons of the wicked one, the devil

V. The Enemy: In verse 39, Jesus names the enemy who sowed the tares as the devil. In verse 38, he is also called the wicked one.

The enemy=the wicked one, the devil

VI. The Harvest: Jesus, in verse 39, says, "The harvest is the end of the world." It is important to know that the word "world" in this verse is from a different word than in verse 38. Here, "world" is from *aiōnos*, which means age. Jesus is speaking of the end of the age in which the Gospel is preached, the children of Jesus and the children of the devil live together, the age in which we now live.

The harvest=the end of this present age

VII. The Reapers: "The reapers are the angels" (Matthew 13:39). These are God's messengers who, in this case, have the task of reaping both the children of the devil and the children of Jesus and then separating them.

Jesus further explains:

As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be

wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear.

Matthew 13:40-43

The reapers=the angels

Notice that "all things that offend, and them which do iniquity" are gathered "out of his kingdom." This is further evidence that the kingdom of God or kingdom of heaven is in this world right now in which Christians and the children of the devil live side-by-side. The identity of the kingdom and the fact that it contains both good and evil are crucial to understanding this and other parables. They are, in fact, the major points that Jesus is conveying in this parable.

The Lesson of the Parable of the Tares of the Field

In this parable, Jesus states the nature of the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom is sown in "his field," which Jesus says is the "world," the *kosmos*, the earth, or the system of this world. This parable shows us that in the kingdom of heaven there is both good and evil. Although Jesus works in the kingdom of heaven to sow His good seed, the enemy—Satan—also works to sow his bad seed. In the kingdom, both the good and the bad grow together.

What, then, does this tell us about the kingdom of heaven? It tells us that the kingdom of heaven has been planted in this very world in which we are living. It tells us that both Jesus and the devil sow their seed, their sons, in the kingdom. Only Jesus' seed are called the children or sons of the kingdom, but the two groups of sons grow up together, side-by-side in the world. They stay mixed together until the end of the age, when they will then be harvested and separated to different ends. The sons of the wicked one will be thrown into fire. The sons of the kingdom will be glorified ("shine forth as the sun") in what Jesus calls "the kingdom of their Father." This "kingdom of their Father" is the kingdom Paul writes of when, after telling of the resurrection from the dead, he says, "Then cometh the end, when he [Christ] shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death" (1 Corinthians 15:24-26). That future eternal kingdom will be perfect. But the kingdom of heaven or kingdom of God on the earth right now is not.

With this information, we can have more discernment. Jesus' explanation of the Parable of the Tares of the Field tells us that those who think of the kingdom of heaven as being heaven are wrong. Heaven does not contain the children of the wicked one. It tells us that those who think of the kingdom of heaven as being a future millennial (or one thousand year) reign of Christ in Jerusalem over the earth are wrong. "The millennium," as people who teach it call it, is depicted as a time that begins at the end of this age. But the world that Jesus depicts in this parable ends at the end of this age, with the kingdom then becoming a perfect kingdom of the Father. Also, "the millennium" is supposed to be a time when Satan has been removed and does not work. But Jesus tells us that the kingdom of heaven is a time when Satan plants his sons. Jesus' explanation also tells us that those who think of the kingdom of heaven equaling, or being precisely the same thing as the church or *ekklēsia* are wrong. Why? Because Jesus says that the tares are to be left to grow with the wheat until the end of the age. But numerous Scriptures concerning the church tell us to separate from evil doers (see, for example, 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14; 1 Timothy 6:3-5; 2 Corinthians 6:14).

Using the Parable of the Tares of the Field as a Key to the Other Parables

As with the Parable of the Sower, Jesus' explanation of the Parable of the Tares of the Field will help us to understand other parables. Not only does Jesus' explanation reveal the meaning of various symbols, but, very importantly, His explanation tells that the kingdom of heaven or kingdom of God is on the earth in this world's system (*kosmos*), in this age (*aiōnos*), contains both good and evil, and both Jesus and the devil work in it. This understanding of the mixture of good and evil in the kingdom of God will be especially helpful in understanding the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Parable of the Leaven.

Application of the Parable to Our Lives

Knowing from the parable that good and evil are to co-exist until the end of the age can help us make some practical decisions.

1) This parable tells us that the sons of the kingdom and the sons of the devil cannot be distinguished until the end of this age. Therefore, we are to preach the Gospel to all indiscriminately.

2) The command in the parable is specifically to leave the tares and the wheat to grow together. We must not try to disobey this. But the

centuries following Jesus are filled with the history of those who did disobey. The Catholic church, the Orthodox church, and the Protestant churches have all used the sword of the state to ruthlessly try to root out of the nations or states in which they were the established church anyone they felt was not properly living as a Christian. I have no doubt that in the process they exterminated thousands of true Christians and did great harm to many thousands more.

Roger Williams, the seventeenth century theologian who founded Rhode Island, was undoubtedly one of the inspirations of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. In his book, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience*, Williams used, among other arguments, the Parable of the Tares of the Field to argue that the civil government should tolerate the "weeds" of the world because, in persecuting them, it also harms the "wheat." He pointed out that it is God's prerogative to judge between the two, not man's.

Today, thanks to men like Williams, we live in a much more tolerant society. Many nations have freedom of religion or, at least, tolerate other religions. In the United States, we have no established religion and can freely exercise our religion. Yet there are still those, such as the Christian Reconstructionists, Dominionists, and theonomists, who, contrary to the parable, would like to go back to the time of persecution. These people would like to see their idea of biblical law applied to civil law. They want biblical case law used in the judicial system. And they want only "Christians" elected to public office. Their ultimate goal is a "biblical theocratic republic." Can it be that what John Adams said in a letter to Thomas Jefferson nearly two hundred years ago is still valid?:

Do you think a Protestant Popedom is annihilated in America?... What a mercy it is that these People cannot whip and crop, and pillory and roast, as yet in the U.S.! If they could they would.... The multitude and diversity of them, You will say, is our Security against them all. God grant it. But if We consider that the Presbyterians and Methodists are far more numerous and the most likely to unite; let a George Whitefield arise, with a military cast, like Mahomet, or Loyola, and what will become of all the other Sects who can never unite?

John Adams in a letter to Thomas Jefferson, 18 May 1817

We must be careful not to take actions that are contrary to the message of the Parable of the Tares of the Field. Jesus is clearly saying

that attempts to root the children of the devil out of society at large wind up also hurting the children of the kingdom.

3) We know that this parable is about the sons of the kingdom, true Christians, and the devil's sons, everyone else, growing and living together in this world until the end of the age. Therefore, the parable does not have specific application to the *ekklēsia* (the word mistranslated in most English Bibles as "church"). The *ekklēsia* is the assembly of the people God has called out of the ways of this world even while we physically live in it (see, for example, John 17:14-16). Yes, these are the same people who are the sons of the kingdom in this parable. But the parable only sees the *ekklēsia* from the outside, from the viewpoint of seeing the world as a whole with the sons of the kingdom and the devil's sons living together under God's sovereign control in the world. But the parable does not deal with conditions within the *ekklēsia* itself.

This parable, then, must not be used as an excuse to tolerate public sin among church members or their continued teaching of error after being warned. In other words, the Parable of the Tares of the Field is not an excuse for not exercising church discipline. Within the *ekklēsia*, discipline can be exercised as an aid to helping someone see the error of his way and to maintain purity as much as possible. This discipline never exercises the sword, which is the tool of the state to be used only in civil matters. Discipline in the *ekklēsia* consists of warnings (Titus 3:10, 1 Thessalonians 5:14), exhortations (Titus 2:15), and, if need be, exclusion from fellowship and treating as an unbeliever (Matthew 18:17-18; 1 Corinthians 5:1-13) with the loving goal of repentance and restoration (Galatians 6:1; 2 Corinthians 2:6-8). It is always done in love and never with cruelty. Any change the person might need to make is a work of the Holy Spirit. True repentance can never be forced. Church discipline is only a wake-up call. Church discipline does not remove the offender's salvation. If the person was saved, he or she remains saved even after being removed from fellowship.

4) In line with all the above, this parable should teach us not to condemn others. We are to appeal to the Word of God to discern between true and false teaching, and, thus, true and false teachers (anyone can make mistakes, but I would define a false teacher as someone who is chronically in error). And we must avoid being yoked together or having communion with those who are in obvious, unrepented of sin. But while there is life there is hope, and whether

someone is one of God's elect or is a child of the devil will be determined in judgment at the end of this age.

The next parable we will examine in this series will be the Parable of the Seed Growing by Itself.