

## **Parable of the Wheat and Tares** **Matthew 13: 24-30; 36-43**

This parable of our Lord Jesus appears only in the Gospel of Matthew. Even though the Lord Himself clearly explains the parable, notably telling us that “the field is the world (Matthew 13: 38), the matter is nonetheless much debated. It is truly amazing how many commentators disregard the Lord’s explanation and tell us that the field is the church.

But this is not a parable about false saints within the church, it is a parable about evil in the world. It is not a parable which tells us not to perform church discipline (allow both to grow together until the harvest), for there are substantial references elsewhere that tell us what to do with the “hidden reefs in [our] love feasts” (Jude 12), and the immoral ones among us (1 Corinthians 5:1).



Fortunately, for us, an explanation of the parable spoken to the multitudes in Matthew 13: 24-30 follows hard on the heels of the Parable of the Mustard Seed and the Leaven. The explanation, found in verses 36-43, is separated from the body of the parable because Matthew, preserving for us a sense of his eyewitness testimony, relates the Mustard Seed and the Leaven parables at the place and time they were told by the Lord. Later on, with those additional parables spoken, He left the crowds and went into

the house with the disciples following Him. It was in the house, away from the crowds, that the disciples asked for an explanation of the Parable of the Wheat and Tares. How often we wish the original 12 would have asked that He explain them all.

Therefore, the body of the parable is spoken to the crowd while the explanation is spoken only to the disciples. Thus, the Lord, of necessity being on His guard when speaking to the crowds, was able to specifically instruct His disciples without casting His pearls before a divided multitude, where both dogs and swine were listening, not with pure hearts, but seeking an opportunity to ensnare Him (Matthew 7:6).

Parables veil or conceal the truth. They do not make matters more clear to hearers, as asserted by some. Even the disciples had to ask for an explanation. But why conceal the truth from the sincere seekers who are not among the twelve? The presence of those dogs and swine in the context of the larger crowd, make any other course impossible. Besides, the veil is soon enough lifted when the sincere seeker begins to earnestly inquire of the Lord. The Holy Spirit is our teacher, and He will guide us into all truth (John 16:13). Sincere seekers will not give up until they finally understand, while the casual and insincere will quit the hunt and fade away.

**The overall Meaning of the Parable.** The message is this: Righteous believers and wicked people will exist in the world until the day Jesus returns at the end of the age, and the final harvest takes place. Until that glorious day, we are not to try to separate out the salt and light from the deteriorating body which is the world. We are not to withdraw ourselves to a fortified castle, prepared to fight off the attack of the world, waiting out the return of the Lord. Despite the presence of those nasty evil weeds (people), the crop will mature. Good will not be overcome by evil. The righteous will not be eliminated by the enemy's tactic to sow evil seed in God's field. Also, the source of evil in the world is clearly spelled out in the parable. "An enemy has done this."

**The elements of the parable.** Here are the terms of the Wheat and Tares as defined by our Lord in Matthew 13: 36-43.

A. Who is the sower? Jesus identifies the sower as Himself in verse 37: "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man . . ." "Son of Man" is commonly understood as a messianic title which Jesus uses, along with "Son of David."

B. The field: ". . . and the field is the world . . ." (verse 38). As I previously observed, "the world" does not mean the church. No matter how one might try to apply this parable to those in the church, the text only supports "the field is the world." All other interpretations will lead to false applications of other elements of the parable.

C. The good seed: ". . . and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom . . ." (verse 38). Whatever good seed there may be, those redeemed souls who acknowledge Jesus as both Savior and Lord of their lives and live their words, such seed is sown by the Son of Man and Him only. The good seed is not sown by Mohamed, Buddha, Confucius or ourselves (by evolving into a more and more perfect existence by our own will). These good seeds sown into the world, meaning they are planted by the Lord in every place upon earth. They sprout up all over the place, from lands under the rule of iron fisted dictatorships to the shores of benevolent democratic republics.

D. And as for the tares: they are "the sons of the evil one" (verse 38). An examination of verse 41 reveals two synonyms: Stumbling Blocks and Lawless Ones. "The Son of Man will send forth his angels and they will gather out of his kingdom all stumbling blocks and those who commit lawlessness . . ." These people may look like believers, but they are not. Not even the safe haven of the church will protect them when the end comes. And, although they may be hard to distinguish from believers now, in time their true nature will manifest itself, making their identity an easy matter. These are the false prophets of Matthew 7:15-20.

What should we do about them? Nothing. Let them grow along with us. Their true natures will become as evident as grapes versus thorns and figs versus thistles.

E. The enemy who sowed them [the tares] is the devil. More about this presently in the exposition section.

F. The harvest is the end of the age. The world is not yet ready to be reaped, but someday, and perhaps soon, the "Lord will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God . . ." (1 Thessalonians 4:16).

G. The reapers are angels. The angels of Revelation await their command to reap the earth (Revelation 14:14 and following).

**Exposition of the parable.** Matthew 13: 24-25 “While his men were sleeping his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went away.” The men were not sleeping because they were lazy, but rather because it was the normal time to sleep. However, the enemy is very clever and full of deceit. He does not approach during the daylight, but lurks in night shadows, steals in to the field and sows the weed seed in stealth and perfidy. He prefers darkness. We “are all sons of light and sons of day, we are not of night nor of darkness” (1 Thessalonians 5:5). Once the damage has been done, he slips back into the night and disappears.

The devil sowed tares into the field where the good seed were already sown. These tares represent evil or evil people in the world. The volumes on the source of evil in the world



must number in the tens of thousands. In our own time we frequently take note of books which attempt to answer the question, “Why do bad things happen to good people?” Those with a Biblical perspective on the question will always come back to this: “an enemy has done this.”

Therefore, we cannot and should not blame God for the fact that tares are growing alongside wheat in the world. God is infinite in purity and holiness. He is full of goodness and would never be the one to sow evil into the world. Rather the enemy, Satan, has done this.

Satan is he who sows evil, discord, disharmony, division and evil followers themselves in to the world. He is the father of lies and the father of all evil ones. God is not the father of anyone who practices evil. But when Jesus addressed the Pharisees He flatly declared, “You are of your father the devil, and you want to do the desires of your father” (John 8:44).

[Photo: Bearded Darnell (top) compared to wheat—by John Dubler]

The Bible speaks of mysteries, one of them being the “Mystery of Iniquity.” “For the mystery of lawlessness [iniquity] is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way.” **2 Thessalonians 2:7**

The tares are, in reality, a troublesome sprout which resembles wheat in the early stages, but once the wheat heads up it becomes obvious that the tares are imposters and not genuine wheat. The tares are sometimes referred to as “wild oats.” In North America these wheat imposters are actually *Bearded Darnel*. The weed is not poisonous, and may be eaten without harm to humans. But in the field it causes havoc. Sucking up vital soil nutrients and moisture, they deprive the wheat plants of what was intended for them. The *Bearded Darnel* also plays host to *Ergot Smut fungus*, which is deleterious to a healthy wheat crop.

Matthew 13:26. “But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also.” What is not obvious now will be plain later on, for the Lord promises in the Parable of the Lamp (Luke 8:16-18), “For nothing is hidden that will not become evident, nor anything secret that will not be known and come to light.” In Colorado the differences become dramatic in late June and early July when the winter wheat is ready for harvest. Since today’s wheat plants have been genetically engineered to have less stalk and more prolific grain than in time past, the plants at maturity are not very tall—only about 12-15 inches. The tares, on the other hand, keep on growing, poking their unproductive heads four or five inches above the wheat crop making them easy to distinguish. Even without this rather important give-away, the end of the growing cycle would reveal what is genuine wheat and what are weeds. At the harvest time *Bearded Darnel* resembles wheat like a Chevy resembles a Cadillac.

Matthew 13:17-30. Dealing with the problem. The solution given in the parable is remarkably simple, “Allow both to grow together until the harvest . . .” The wheat and tares are allowed to grow together in the same field, receiving the same amount of water and sun. The tares cannot be cultivated nor weeded out without damaging the wheat.

The tares cannot simply be uprooted without causing a great deal of harm to surrounding plants. That is because the tares have a web-like root structure which moves out horizontally to ensnare the roots of as many wheat plants as may be possible. Wheat, on the other hand, sends its roots down and out, but not as widely as tares.

At harvest the wheat is cut and threshed along with the tares. *Bearded Darnel* is crushed and blown off with the chaff.

Why not root out the tares right now? The answer given by the landowner is as applicable today in wheat farming as then, and spiritually speaking will be forever. One who would uproot the evil from among the good will destroy many good people with the evil ones. In the process of implementing such drastic methods, the gates of society itself would be torn down. Chaos would ensue.

The tares are dealt with at the harvest; evil is dealt with at the end of the age when Jesus returns. The Son of Man sends forth His reaping angles, and in the parable we learn that the tares are gathered up first. These are the stumbling blocks and those who commit lawlessness (verse 41). Those evil ones are thrown into the furnace of hell fire.

By contrast, “the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of the father.” No doubt the trials, tribulations and testing they have endured while growing up in the world have burnished their countenances until they fairly glow. Meanwhile, they too are reaped and then stored safely in the Lord’s barn. By contrast with the fire, we can assume that this barn is heaven itself.

Do not be surprised to discover that at the end of the age, at harvest time, this entire world is reaped and threshed. It will not be pleasant; no threshing could be. The field must be harvested sometime before that danger of rot to the plants becomes too great.

Therefore, do not be surprised at any fiery trials now or at the end of time:

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal among you, which comes upon you for your testing, as though some strange thing were happening to you; 13 but to the degree that you share the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation. 14 If you are reviled for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests on you. 15 Make sure that none of you suffers as a murderer, or thief, or evildoer, or a troublesome meddler; 16 but if anyone suffers as a Christian, he is not to be ashamed, but is to glorify God in this name. 17 For it is time for judgment to begin with the household of God; and if it begins with us first, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God? 18 AND IF IT IS WITH DIFFICULTY THAT THE RIGHTEOUS IS SAVED, WHAT WILL BECOME OF THE GODLESS MAN AND THE SINNER? 19 Therefore, those also who suffer according to the will of God shall entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right (1 Peter 4:12-19).<sup>1</sup>

In the mean time, and while we are waiting for the reapers, let us take away two lessons from this parable:

First: We will be side-by-side with worldly and ungodly people until the very end of the age. Therefore “let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works and glorify your father who is in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). We will, by God’s grace and His power, be in a position to “have mercy on some, who are doubting; save others, snatching them out of the fire; and on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment polluted by the flesh” (Jude 22-23).

Second, let us never lose our perspective on the reality and origin of evil in the world: “An enemy has done this.”

---

<sup>1</sup> New American Standard Updated edition, used with permission.