

The Parables of Jesus

Wheat and Tares

By [Rev. Kevin Chiarot](#)

People have always been attracted by utopian visions of the future. By utopian I mean grand, sweeping visions, where all evil is eliminated and the world is at peace. Whether it's Marxism's classless society, or the politician's idea of a world where all the needs of men are met by the state, or a religious vision of a world without infidels, the lure, it seems, has always been with us.

Now, two factors tend to heighten this desire to see the world remade and purged of evil. One is being a beleaguered and oppressed minority such as Jesus' disciples surely were under Roman rule at the time of His ministry. The oppressed dream, with greater urgency than the rest, of liberation.

The second factor is having an apocalyptic vision of the future, a belief in a future Day when evil will be destroyed, and the world set right. The disciples certainly had this in the many OT prophecies of the Day of the Lord, which were full of imagery promising the punishment the wicked and the vindication the righteous. And at the outset of Jesus' ministry John the Baptist, in fulfillment of the OT prophets, proclaimed that the Day was at hand, and that One was now to appear with His winnowing fork in hand, ready to gather the wheat into His barn and burn the chaff with unquenchable fire. It is into that combustible situation that Jesus stepped and announced that the Day is at hand, the kingdom of God has arrived.

Yet, as His ministry progresses He begins to meet more and more stiff resistance, and He continually refuses to take up the political stance of the Zealots. He doesn't appear at all interested in destroying the hated Roman overlords. You can, with little effort, imagine the disciples' confusion. If the kingdom has come, why is there still evil? Why are we still poor and oppressed? Why have our opponents not been destroyed? Where is the promised new world order? And it is that string of questions that this parable is designed to answer.

This morning we are looking at the parable of the wheat and tares (weeds), a text unique to Matthew's gospel. Two points: the parable (24-30), and the interpretation (36-43)

I. The Parable

Verse 24 begins: He put another parable before them. The “them” Jesus is speaking to, as v.36 makes clear, is the crowds. The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. As in the parable of the sower, this sowing process is underway in the ministry of Jesus. The kingdom has come.

But something perhaps unexpected has happened on the way to the apocalypse and the new world order. The kingdom has met fierce resistance and rejection. This is the quandary the parable is addressing. We see the resistance in v.25: while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. This was not a hypothetical situation in ancient Palestine. There are actual reported cases of such sabotage, and there were laws designed to prevent it. It’s a primitive form of bio-terrorism. At first it’s impossible to tell what has happened, but in v.26, once the plants came up and bore grain, there was enough differentiation to see the weeds.

This leads to a lengthy conversation between the servants and the owner of the field in the rest of the parable. In v.27 they ask the master: “didn’t you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?” The master knows immediately what has happened and in v.28 says: an enemy has done this. So the servants say: then do you want us to go and pull them up, meaning gather out the weeds?

In v.29, presumably because their root systems were intertwined, the master surprisingly says: no, because while you are pulling the weeds you may root up the wheat along with them. The master’s prescription is in v.30: Let both grow together until the harvest. The kingdom has come in an unexpected way. In a form which requires time and growth and ripening. In a way which, shockingly, does NOT destroy evil- until the harvest. In fact, the master strictly prohibits his disciples from removing the weeds before the end. Let both grow together until the end. At that time the reapers (harvesters) will gather the weeds and bind them to be burned and gather the wheat into the master’s barn. That’s the parable.

II. The Interpretation

Jesus’ interpretation of the parable begins in v.36. This is, along with the Sower which we looked at last week, the only other parable to get a detailed explanation from the lips of Jesus. In v.36 the disciples, as distinct from the crowds, come to him and this time, instead of asking why he speaks in parables generally, they ask for the interpretation of this particular parable. Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field. Notice, in their minds, it’s the WEEDS that need explanation. And in vv.37-39 Jesus gives a glossary of the main actors in the parable.

First, in v.37, He says the one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. This was not explicit in the parable of the sower, but it is here. By using the term Son of Man Jesus is identifying Himself with the Messianic judge of Daniel chapter 7. The one who receives a kingdom and ushers in the judgment. As the Son of Man who sows the seed and, later, directs the harvest, Jesus is ascribing to Himself the prerogatives the OT reserved exclusively to God. Yahweh sows and plants Israel and Yahweh is the Judge of all the earth.

So there is an implicit argument throughout the interpretation for the divinity of Jesus. Verse 38 is crucial: the field is the world. Starting with Augustin, there is a long history of seeing in this parable the teaching that the church is a mixture of wheat and tares which has to be simply, or at least largely, accepted and tolerated until the harvest.

The result of this is that the parable has been used, if not to eliminate, at least to caution against the over-use of church discipline. And this interpretation is part of the reason the medieval church, and many churches today, tolerate an enormous amount of corruption in their midst. After all, the church is wheat and tares and we are forbidden – or at least urged to great care – in dealing with the weeds lest we damage the wheat.

Let me make three quick points here. First, the church is a mixed community and we DO have to exercise discipline with great care and caution. But, as we will see in a moment, that is NOT the teaching of THIS text.

Second, this text cannot be prejudicial to church discipline because a few chapters later in Matt 18 Jesus gives us lengthy instructions on how to handle sin in the church, up to and including excommunication. He cares very deeply, as all of Scripture attests, about the purity of the church.

Third, and this is the key point, the text does not say the field is the church. It says the field is the world. The point of the parable, as indicated in my introduction, is that when the kingdom comes it does not eliminate evil in the WORLD. The WORLD is the sphere of gospel proclamation and it is the realm, the full extent, of the Son of Man's kingdom. The kingdom is wider than the church, precisely because the King is the Lord of the whole world.

The glossary continues in the middle of v. 38: the good seed stands for the sons of the kingdom; the weeds are the sons of the evil one. In the parable of the sower there were four classes of people, but we saw that those four classes really reduce to two: those who hear the word and endure, and those who don't. Here the duality (two-ness) is stark. There are two kinds of people and the use of the words "sons of" indicates two basic relationships. Sons of the kingdom related to Jesus and sons of the evil one related to the prince of darkness.

Verse 39: the enemy who sows them – meaning who sows the weeds, the sons of the evil one, is the devil. Notice It is PEOPLE who are sown here. The emphasis in the Sower is on the Word being sown, but here people are sown or planted (every plant which my heavenly father...).

The glossary continues in the middle of v.39: The harvest is the close of the age. A point highly disappointing to utopians and zealots of all stripes. They always want to do a little harvesting now. Even the disciples, in Luke 9, wanted to call down fire on the unbelieving Samaritans and were met with Jesus' rebuke. The kingdom has come, but not as expected. The harvest is the end of the age. Finally, the harvesters (the reapers) are the angels.

Having looked at the glossary, let us look at the harvest in vv.40-43. This is quite straightforward and rooted in traditional OT apocalyptic expectation. Here we finally get what many in Israel thought was at hand when Jesus announced that the kingdom had come. Verse 40 says: as the weeds are pulled up and burned with fire, so will it be at the END of the age. Not now, but after long delay. The Son of Man, v.41 continues, will send his angels and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil, meaning they will gather out the weeds, the sons of the evil one.

Notice the divine majesty of the Son of Man who currently is in the form of a slave meeting great resistance and refusing the overthrow of his enemies. At the close of the age He sends out HIS angels. Angels which, in the OT, are God's angels mediating God's judgment. And they will gather out of HIS kingdom. The kingdom of GOD is here identified with the kingdom of Jesus, the Son of Man. Thus, this whole scene, where Jesus is the Lord of the harvest, depicts Him as divine and equal to the Father. This kingdom, his kingdom, in v.41, is identical with the "world" in v.38. Again, we see the kingdom is broader than the church; it refers to the cosmic rule of Christ. In v.42, the wicked are thrown into the fiery furnace where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. A sign of the agony of separation from God and His kingdom.

Finally, in v.43 then – at that time and no sooner – then the righteous will shine like the sun – an allusion to Daniel chapter 12 and the final resurrection of the just. There will be a time when opposition is overcome, when our hiddenness and suffering and heartache will be transfigured into open, public vindication and glory, but that time is THEN, not now. The righteous will shine in the Kingdom of their Father. The Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of the Son of Man and the Kingdom of the Father are all one in this text. The end of v.43 leaves us with the same charge we saw last week in the parable of the Sower: He who has ears let him hear. So, what is it we are supposed to hear?

Notice that, while Jesus explains a variety of elements in the parable, he does not provide an explanation for everything. What is striking is that the Lord gives no interpretation of the interim period where they we are to allow both the wheat

and tares to grow together. Yet, this is what has so often been fixated upon, usually with the implication that church discipline is in view. Hopefully, we've been disabused of that. The reason Jesus doesn't comment on that discussion is that once you understand the question the parable is designed to answer the point is obvious.

Let me repeat the point: when the kingdom comes it does not eliminate evil in the WORLD. This means the interim is full of ambiguity, of complexity, negotiated settlements, of small victories, of setbacks, of the continual presence of evil, and thus of living with less than ideal political realities (doesn't mean we can't fight certain battles against evil, but choose carefully, make sure we don't damage good or innocent people, not mistake ourselves for the divine reaper – we don't bring the eschaton). We are called here to a patient acceptance of the fact that kingdom has come, but it has come in a weak, provisional form, in the weakness of a crucified Messiah and the foolish weakness of the Word of the gospel. The Kingdom will co-exist with evil and evil people UNTIL THE END. The kingdom is present IN SPITE of evil, yet evil will be removed decisively ONLY AT THE END.

I might point out that there is a highly effective Christian theodicy in this passage. A theodicy is a defense of God's justice and goodness in the face of evil. One answer, not the only answer, but one given here to the horrible problem of evil, is simply this: Jesus told us it would be just this way. That does not remove the anguish; but it does call us to sober realism.

So, God, unlike the disciples, is not in a hurry. Thus, all utopian schemes and all attempts to bring in the kingdom by any means but faithful discipleship in the gospel are condemned. If the point is: when the kingdom comes it does not eliminate evil in the WORLD.

The application of the point is what I just said: all utopian schemes and all attempts to bring in the kingdom by any means but faithful discipleship in the gospel are condemned. Wary of political and social schemes of transformation from the left or the right. Shun messianic politics.

As our closing hymn will put it, in the interim:

(It is) not with swords loud clashing,
nor roll of stirring drums;
with deeds of love and mercy
the heavenly kingdom comes.

We are sons of the kingdom and we draw our identity, not from this age, but from the age to come. And the glory of the age to come will far outstrip any human efforts for total glory now. Look for more than the elimination of present evil....resurrection of the dead... Let us live like true sons and daughters of the

kingdom, with sober realism, faithfulness, and glorious hope in the final and certain harvest. Amen.

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