

The Wheat and the Tares

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Quite a while ago I was in a situation in which a couple was given some tragic news about the death of a family member. As you can imagine I will never forget their reaction - especially the wife's reaction. As her knees buckled and she fell to the ground, she said, "How can there be a God in heaven?" I really have no idea if that's her settled conviction or if that's just what came out of her heart at that moment.

But her comment reflects a troubling question that all of us face at one time or another: If God is all-loving and all-powerful, why is there so much suffering and so much evil in the world? Why doesn't God step in and preempt more of the tragedy and heartache that we experience in this world? Why does it so often look like God is losing and evil is winning?

We think these types of thoughts when we look at conditions across the world: terrorism, environmental ruin, wars, famine, etc. We think about this on a smaller scale when we look at families and individuals: tragic relationships, illness, personal suffering. Sometimes we wonder why God doesn't step in and eliminate more of the evil and tragedy all around us.

In order to help us think about the existence of evil (and evil people) in this world, today we are going to consider a parable in Matthew 13 known as the parable of the wheat and the tares. This parable doesn't answer every question we might have about the problem of evil in the world, but it does give us a valuable perspective. After we examine this parable and its interpretation, we'll talk about what our response might be.

A Perspective on Good and Evil in the World (Matthew 13: 24-30, 36-43) Jesus is speaking to a crowd that contains both His disciples and others. After telling the parable of the four soils, He tells the parable of the wheat and the tares.

24 Jesus presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. 25 "But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. 26 "But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also.

Farmers always have to deal with weeds (unwanted plants that rob the wanted plants of nutrients and water and sunlight). But Jesus puts forth the scenario in which this man's "enemy" came while his men were sleeping and secretly sowed tares among the wheat. The preposition Jesus uses ("**among** the wheat") suggests that the weeds were distributed throughout the wheat field. It wasn't until the wheat sprouted and the plants became mature that all of this became obvious.

27 "The slaves of the landowner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?'

They were confused about why the tares were so abundant when they had sown such “good seed” in the field. The landowner was very wise and discerning:

28 “And he said to them, ‘An enemy has done this!’ The slaves said to him, ‘Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?’

Given that their master’s fields had fallen victim to an enemy’s sabotage, they want to take action and undo the damage. They ask whether they should pull up all the weeds so that the wheat could grow by itself. . .

29 “But he said, ‘No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them.

Since the roots of the tares would have intertwined with the roots of the wheat, pulling out the tares would have also uprooted the wheat. You would solve the weed problem, but it would be at the expense of the crop you were after. And so the landowner tells them:

30 ‘Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, “First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.” ’ ”

When it’s time for the harvest, it’s okay that the wheat is uprooted along with the tares. At the harvest, the landowner would command the harvesters to first gather up the tares, bind them in bundles and burn them together. Then the wheat would be gathered into the barn.

You can imagine being in a crowd of people, hearing this story, and scratching your head, “Uh . . . great story . . . but what’s the point?” Back in verse 10 we read how His disciples had asked him “Why do you speak to them in parables?” Maybe you’ve wondered the same thing: Why didn’t Jesus come right out and tell the masses in plain language what they needed to know? Many of the parables are very opaque and most of them are left unexplained.

The answer to the question is rather complex, but basically Jesus told them that His parables both revealed **and** concealed truth. To those who are able and willing to receive His teaching, the parables revealed the kingdom of God in clever, insightful, interesting, memorable ways. To those who really didn’t want what Jesus offered, the parables concealed the truth; Jesus was following His own advice of “not throwing pearls before swine” (Matthew 7:6).

Down in verse 36 we read that the disciples later came to Jesus and asked Him to explain the parable of the wheat and the tares.

36 Then He left the crowds and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field."

Jesus' explanation is fascinating on at least a couple of different levels. The meaning of the parable itself is very profound. But it's also interesting because Jesus' interpretation of this parable has an unusual degree of detail. In last week's parable, for example, the only point of comparison between Jesus and the thief in the night was that both show up unexpectedly. The parable before us has *seven specific points of comparison* - which is unusual. But even with this level of detail, we need to be careful not to press the imagery beyond Jesus' intent.

37 And He said, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, 38 and the field is the world; and *as for* the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil *one*; 39 and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels.

Jesus first identifies the main characters in the parable. **Jesus** (the Son of Man) is the landowner who sows the wheat seeds and who told his servants NOT to pull up the tares. **Satan** is the enemy who sneaks in and sows the tares. The field represents the **world** at large. [Some have taken the field to be the church (which is clearly not Jesus' intent) and have made implications about the purity of the church.] The good seed (the wheat seed) represents the **sons of the kingdom**, believers who submit to God as their king and who live under His reign. The tares represent the **sons of the evil one** - those who (whether knowingly or unknowingly) carry out Satan's purposes in the world. The harvest is **the end of the age** - when Jesus returns in power. Those who burn the tares and gather the wheat are **angels** - who are depicted as fierce warriors in Scripture, not chubby little babies with wings (as they're popularly characterized).

These simple identifications speak volumes about how we should think about evil in the world in which we live. Just as the landowner let the wheat and the tares grow together, God allows the righteous and the unrighteous to coexist in this world. Just as the landowner didn't (really couldn't) address what his enemy had done until the harvest, God has his reasons for not uprooting everything and everyone associated with His enemy until "the end of the age." We may or may not fully understand God's reasons, and we may or may not find those reasons fully satisfying. Sometimes it's enough to know and believe that God has His reasons and that He has a plan.

There's a certain freedom in understanding that we aren't called to "pull all the weeds out of the field"; God doesn't expect us to eradicate all of the evil and all of the evil people from the world. It's not that we should never confront evil or that we shouldn't work to change social structures that are evil. Down through the centuries Christians have been at the forefront in addressing the major societal evils of their day. But even when we do everything we are supposed to do, this world will still be like the field in which wheat and tares grow together. God is not willing to pull out the tares until the day of the harvest.

Verses 40 through 43 explain Jesus' plan at the very end of the age.

40 "So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. 41 "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, 42 and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

At the end of the age (when Jesus returns) God will remove and judge everything and everyone incompatible with His kingdom. In verse 41 He mentions "all stumbling blocks" (NIV "everything that causes evil") and "those who commit lawlessness" (NIV "all who do evil"). Just as the tares were gathered up and burned at the harvest, those who have rejected God (and Jesus His Son) in this life will be excluded from God's presence in the next life. Jesus describes this existence as a place where "there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth" - a place without joy and without pleasure, only heartache and pain.

As you know, this teaching on the destiny of those without Christ is incredibly offensive to many. I don't know any way to soften this teaching; and I don't think we should soften this teaching. Several months ago a friend told me that he had listened to a recording of the NT, and one of the things that struck him while listening to the gospels was how much Jesus talked about hell and judgment. And nobody can accuse Jesus of being calloused toward humanity's destiny; He died on the cross so that anybody who wants to enter the kingdom can do so - simply through faith.

Verse 43 tells the experience of the righteous.

43 "Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

Jesus had told His disciples, "Let your light shine before men that all may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." Those who let their light shine in this world will eventually "shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father"! There's continuity between how we live in this world and what we become in the next.

It's interesting that Jesus says to His disciples, "He who has ears, let him hear." He commonly said that when He taught the crowds. But even here Jesus introduces the possibility that not all of His disciples would accept this teaching about good and evil in this world. He wants us to consider whether or not we really "buy" what He's saying in this parable.

The glimpse of God we get from this parable is that ***God allows the righteous and the unrighteous to coexist in this world in the present age, but ultimately He will reward the righteous and judge the unrighteous.*** This world is a mixture of good

and evil, but it won't last forever. A day will come when a permanent separation will take place.

In our time remaining I want us to consider ***Our Response*** to this parable and to this glimpse of God. I really want us to consider whether or not we have "ears to hear" - whether we "buy" what Jesus is saying in this parable.

If we do have ears to hear, one response is ***Perseverance***. Sometimes when we encounter evil in this world or evil within ourselves, we feel like giving up or giving in. We wonder whether it's worth it to keep trusting God and walking with God. Knowing that this struggle is only temporary can help us persevere. That's one of the things Paul stresses in Romans 8.

18 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God.

Down in verse 25 he writes:

25 But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it.

By faith we know that the day is coming when Jesus will return and right all wrongs. As we eagerly wait for that day, we persevere. Perseverance isn't merely "gutting it out" - as if we pull in and protect ourselves and live a joyless, small life because this world is so horrible. No, perseverance involves walking with God in spite of the evil in this world and in the midst of the suffering we experience.

This coming week you will encounter situations in which you need to persevere. For example, this coming week, it's likely you will encounter someone who is angry (perhaps angry at you). The most natural thing in the world (key phrase: "in the world") is to respond in kind. But perseverance demands that we don't "return evil for evil or insult for insult, but giving a blessing instead" (1 Peter 3:9). That's just an example. I'd encourage you to think through ways that you need to persevere: in relationships, in circumstances, in relation to temptations, etc. Think of the things you have to endure because we live in a sin-sick world, things you won't have to endure when the kingdom is fully established.

Our second response should be one of ***Compassion*** - compassion toward those who are represented by the tares in Jesus' parable. The imagery in this parable doesn't tell us everything we need to know about our attitude toward those who don't yet know Jesus. For example, in the parable a tare can't become wheat; but in real life a son of the evil one can become a son of the kingdom. I'm living proof of that; many of you are too. Everybody who now believes has been transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light.

Anybody can curse the darkness. Anybody can condemn people who are far from God and who do all sorts of evil in this world. But as followers of Christ, our response should be compassion. In this way we are like our heavenly Father. In 2 Peter 3:8–9 Peter explains why there is a delay in Jesus' return (and in the harvest):

8 But do not let this one *fact* escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like one day. 9 The Lord is not slow about His promise, as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.

The harvest is delayed because God is compassionate. There is yet time for people to turn from their sin and turn back to Him in repentance. If we have the heart of God and the mind of Christ, we too will be compassionate toward people who might now be described as tares/weeds.

One of the ways that we express this compassion here at Faith is by offering the Alpha course. It's one of the life group offerings you'll find in the catalog. Alpha is a course on Christianity that is open to anybody in our community who wants to learn and who wants to have honest conversations about who Jesus is and what He has done for us. We'd estimate that 80% of those who live in Manhattan aren't part of a church here in town. It's hard to say for sure, but many of them would probably say that they don't know anybody that they trust with whom they can talk about God and faith and the big questions of life. Many, many people live with stereotypes about Christians and even God.

Alpha provides a safe place to hear and talk about God, Jesus, eternal life, the Bible, prayer, suffering, etc. This room is set up with tables and chairs; you come in and enjoy a meal; then you listen to teaching on the screen; then you have discussions in smaller groups. If this course would be good for you, you are more than welcome to join us for the Alpha course.

But I'd also encourage you to think about the possibility of inviting someone as an expression of compassion. Because you care about people who need the life that Jesus made possible, one of the most compassionate things you can do in the present age is include your friends in this type of helpful conversation. Pray about it and see if God would have you invite someone.

Yes, living in this world in which good and evil coexist is painful and frustrating and disheartening at times. But there are also tremendous opportunities. Most of those opportunities involve showing compassion.