

THE WHEAT AND THE TARES

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SCRIPTURE: 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.

The hour is nigh, and the say soon at hand, when the earth is ripe; and all the proud, and they that do wickedly, shall be as stubble, and I will burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts.

A principle which Jesus repeated several times in his teaching -- a principle which is obviously and unassailably true -- is the principle that "by their fruits ye shall know them." A tree may be ever so beautiful, but if it bears no fruit, it is not a good fruit tree. It is not always possible to look at a cutting from a vine, and tell whether the vine when planted will bring forth good grapes or wild grapes. But the fruit will tell. It is not possible to look at a radish seed and determine whether it will produce a round red globe radish, or a long slim white icicle radish; but if the seed is planted, the fruits of that seed will tell what kind of seed it was. In these days of hybrid corn, it is not always possible even to look at a kernel of corn and know whether it will produce red or white or yellow corn; but by their fruits ye shall know them.

This principle is especially obvious in the case of wheat and tares. The young shoots of the two plants are so nearly identical that even a trained and experienced farmer cannot tell them apart. In the parable, the man who had sowed good seed in his field did not even notice that the tares were growing there also until "the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit; then appeared the tares also." But when the heads of grain appear, even a child can separate the wheat from the tares; there can be no mistaking the tares for wheat then.

In Jesus' interpretation of the parable we are told that the one who sowed the good seed was the Son of man; the field is the world; the good seed is the children of the kingdom (not the word of God as in the parable of the sower); the tares are the children of the wicked one; the enemy who sowed the tares is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels who shall come to gather the good seed into the garner, but gather the tares in bundles to be burned.

Men have been searching for many years to understand the problem of evil and why it should exist in the world. This parable seems to indicate that while men slept, an enemy to God has seen to it that whenever and wherever good is planted in the world, evil is planted with it. From the days of Cain and Abel the children of the kingdom and the children of the wicked one have existed side by side in the world; and according to the parable, good and evil will continue to be coexistent until the time of final harvest. Jesus preached a saving gospel, but almost as soon as he had finished his ministry on earth, the seeds of apostasy were planted in the church, where they have grown and thrived until this day. Many who have suffered from the consequences of

the evil which always exists side by side with the good have raised the question of why God allows evil to continue to exist. Why doesn't he pull up the tares now?

There are at least two answers to this question. In the first place, good men and evil men often look so very much alike, and act so very much alike, that it is difficult to tell them apart on first examination. One of the most pious charming, gentlemanly, and even saintly appearing men I ever knew was a charlatan, a fraud, and a quack who built himself a fortune on the misery and suffering of those he was pretending to help. He studiously acted the part of a saint because people fell more readily into his net that way. All religion has the appearance of good. In every segment of the Christian religion, -- yes, and in every non-Christian religion, there is much that looks like the genuine gospel of Christ. But in many cases there are also error and false doctrine and heresy which are not apparent on the surface, and which cannot be detected with certainty until the fruits of that error have ripened.

Since it is difficult or impossible to distinguish between the wheat and the tares until both have ripened, God allows both to grow together until the time of the end. Any attempt to pluck up the tares while the wheat is still young and tender would not only injure the wheat which was growing in the same soil, but there would also be grave danger that much of that which was left for wheat would turn out to be tares, while some of the good wheat might be plucked up in error -- especially if men and not angels tried to sort out the two. Let both grow together until the time of harvest, and then by their fruits ye shall know them.

The second answer to the question of why evil exists side by side with good is that sometimes the difference between a good and a bad act is simply a matter of motivation -- of the ends sought. Until the motive and the action both bear fruit together, there is no way of knowing whether the action is good or evil. Sometimes, for example, men feed the hungry because they love their fellow men and want to alleviate their suffering. Sometimes other men feed the hungry because they want to buy their votes for a free meal, get themselves elected to responsible public office, and then had completed his scheme -- until the time of harvest. Another example. Offhand, we would say that anyone who made a practice of torturing people by sticking needles into them would be a wicked person; but a hospital nurse may stick needles into dozens of people every day from the best of motives. The end result of each act -- the fruitage which grows from it -- determines whether it was a good or bad act, and whether the one performing it is good or evil.

The church of Christ therefore is not composed of 100 per cent perfect men, but of men who are striving for perfection. Even in the best of us there is a mixture of evil and human frailty. Sometimes with the very best of intention and motivation we do very foolish or wicked things, and have to learn right and wrong by the fruitage of our acts. We should be charitable towards imperfection in others, even as we keep ourselves constantly alert against the evil which Satan is always waiting to sow among us while we sleep, and as we strive together toward perfection.

There is a strong note of warning and of judgment in this parable of the wheat and the tares. Because both grow together, some have supposed that there would never be any judgment -- but that good and evil would always exist side by side. But for individual men, for nations, for churches, for peoples, there always comes a day of reckoning, a day when the seed they have planted bears its fruit for good or for ill. History tells us of many nations and many religions which espoused wickedness and error and sin, and were destroyed in the time of harvest, when their actions bore fruit. Today the signs of the times point to the fact that the whole world is ripening for the final great judgment and harvest. Empires, nations, philosophies, institutions, and systems which were once thought to be eternal and impregnable have gone down in the last hundred years. Everything to which men and nations have pinned their faith -- wealth, armies, guns, planes, tanks, battleships and international alliances, have all failed to bring men happiness or to keep the peace. Now we are depending on the new A bombs and H bombs to save us from the consequences of our sins. Will they, or are the tares merely heading out and coming to the time of harvest? I believe that the hour is nigh, and the day soon at hand, when the earth is ripe; when the angels shall be sent to bind the tares in bundles to be burned, and to gather the good grain into the garners of God's kingdom. Shall we be wheat or tares in that day?