

WHEAT & WEEDS¹
 MATTHEW 13:24-30, 34-43
 ABC 4/19/20

Sometimes it's hard to tell the difference between a genuine thing & some lesser form of it. Is it a diamond or cubic zirconium? Gucci or Target? Corona or normal flu? The same is true in the spiritual world. God's children & the devil's children are living together in this world today but won't be forever. The day of separation is coming. An issue that's been debated for centuries is whether the world is getting better & better or worse & worse. Will the kingdom of God evolve out of the increasing goodness of mankind or will His kingdom appear only as a result of a catastrophic event at the end of history? At the beginning of the 20th century, there was an optimism that led many to think we were on the brink of universal peace. But 2 world wars, many other conflicts, diverse disasters, various viruses, & declining morality have led most people to the opposite conclusion. We'd become pessimistic if we viewed this world as our final home. But when we take God's Word seriously, we remain optimistic because we know He holds the future. Jesus gave a series of parables to His disciples that picture different aspects of life between His 1st & 2nd comings & how His kingdom relates to the world. The parable of the sower, which we looked at on March 1st, showed us there will always be a harvest, in spite of hard, superficial, & worldly hearts. Therefore, we're to be faithfully planting the gospel seed at all times & in every place. A question comes from this, *Should we be separating the crop from the weeds, the good from the bad, even now? Should we be pulling weeds so the wheat can grow stronger?* The parable we're looking at today answers that question. 24-43

1. THE PARABLE A. TWO SOWERS This parable uses the figure of a farmer sowing seed in his field like the Parable of the Soils did, but the emphasis here isn't on what happens to the **good seed** but on what happens to the bad seed that the **enemy came & sowed** in with the **good seed**. The **good seed** is presumed to fall on good ground, take root, & grow into a healthy & fruitful plants. The phrase **while men were sleeping** (25) doesn't imply neglect or laziness but simply to the nighttime, when the **men were sleeping** & unaware of what was happening in the field. Instead it speaks of the

¹ Outline adapted from David Jeremiah, *The Greatest Stories Ever Told: Study Guide*, pp 29–33

enemy's cunning & stealth. The field, which is clearly the world (38), is planted by 2 different sowers of seed. Jesus is the Sower who sows good seed into the field of the world, & the devil, the wicked one, is the one who sows weeds in the same field. Notice the 2 sowers are sowing at the same time & in the same field. The problem will come when it's discovered that the field is filled with both wheat & weeds. Why God allowed it isn't for us to know, but there can be no doubt He'll overrule it for His own glory.

B. Two Plants/Seeds Jesus says the good seed is the children of God & the evil seed is the children of the devil. In the 1st parable, the seed was the Word of God, but here it's the children of God or the children of the devil. While we're waiting for Jesus to return, both God & the devil are planting their children in the field of this world. Therefore, the same field has a mixture of 2 seeds germinating & growing at the same time. **Tares** are a variety of darnel weed, a rye grass, that looks like **wheat** & is almost impossible to tell from it until the grain is formed & mature. Because of this resemblance, sowing **tares ... among the wheat** was done out of spite or revenge by an enemy who wanted to destroy or reduce the value of someone else's crop. It happened often enough that the Romans had a law against it.² It wasn't until many weeks later, **when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also** (26). When the slaves saw so many tares among the wheat, they were shocked & asked how this could be. It wasn't uncommon for some weeds to grow among the good plants; but the amount of them made it obvious the field had been sabotaged. The owner explained the obvious: **An enemy has done this!** (28). Both the children of God & the children of the devil are growing in the field of the world & sometimes it's impossible to tell the difference. There are 2 planters, 2 plants, & also 2 plans: how are we to respond to this mixture of good & evil growing together in the world?

C. Two Plans Realizing the seriousness of the crime, **the slaves said to their master, 'Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?'** But he said, **'No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them** (28b-29). The slaves were right to be concerned, fearing the weeds would weaken & possibly ruin the wheat. But if you try to pull up the weeds when they look

² AJ Kerr, *Matthew 13:25: Sowing Zizania Among Another's Wheat: Realistic or Artificial?* JTS 48, pp 108-109

like wheat, you'll uproot some of the good by mistake. That was one plan, but the householder had a different plan. *Just leave it all alone*, he said, *until the harvest. When the crop is ready, it'll be clear what's wheat & what's weeds. We'll separate them then.* Jesus is saying His people have to learn to live in a world over-sown with evil. We're surrounded on every side by that which is evil but which can have the appearance of good. Some Christians think we should try to destroy the weeds & morally reform the world in which we live. But what did Jesus say? *Leave it alone until the harvest.* The owner knew more damage could be done to the wheat by pulling out the weeds at that time than by leaving them alone. The roots would have become entangled & intertwined, & even if all the good & bad plants could be told apart, pulling the tares would also uproot some of the wheat. Not only that, but the wheat that hadn't yet matured would be mistaken for **tares**.

D. Two Prospects The farmer told them, **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"** (30). Only at the harvest could the good & bad plants be distinguished with certainty. The grain identifies the plant. I'm not a gardener nor a farmer. I can't tell a weed from a flower or one kind of fruit tree from another. If I'm asked, *What kind of tree is that?* they're all just fruit trees to me. Unless they're bearing fruit at the time. If a tree is loaded with apples I feel pretty safe in saying it's an apple tree. The reapers were experienced & qualified to weed out the **tares** & **burn** them. Jesus says a harvest is coming when the weeds will be bundled & burned. The true wheat will be taken into the Father's barn (30). After He separates the true wheat from the false wheat, His angels will gather up the false wheat into bundles that'll be burned in a fire that burns forever. The Bible says that hell is the destination of the **tares**. The point of the parable is that good & evil will grow together until the 2nd coming of Christ.

2. THE INTERPRETATION (34-43) Before He gives the interpretation, Matthew explains that Jesus' speaking in parables wasn't an afterthought but had been prophesied 100s of years earlier. **All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and He did not speak to them without a parable. This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:** (34-35a). Asaph, a prophet (2 Chron

29:30), wrote Ps 78, from which Matthew quotes: **I WILL OPEN MY MOUTH IN PARABLES; I WILL UTTER THINGS HIDDEN SINCE THE FOUNDATION OF THE WORLD** (35b). The rejection of His messiahship didn't catch Jesus by surprise, & the postponement of the kingdom wasn't plan B. God didn't change His plan of redemption. Everything was exactly on schedule & according to the predictions of His Word. When one is part of a small minority, it's easy to assume that one can have no impact on the majority. Probably for that reason, Jesus goes on to tell the next 2 parables (31-35). After telling the parables of the mustard seed & leaven, which we'll get to next time, **He left the multitudes, & went back into the house** where He'd been staying (13:1), probably Peter's home in Capernaum. As soon as they were all inside, **His disciples came to Him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field"** (36b). Although they didn't fully understand it, the fact they called it **the parable of the tares** shows they knew the emphasis was on the **tares** not on the wheat. Their question may have reflected the same attitude as that of the slaves in the parable, **Do you want us, then, to go & gather them up?** (28). James & John showed this attitude when they asked Jesus' permission **to command fire to come down from heaven & consume** the Samaritans who refused to receive Him (Lk 9:54). All the disciples were doubtlessly wondering why the wicked **tares** would be allowed to coexist with the good wheat. Had the owner done as the slaves suggested & had all the tares immediately been pulled out & destroyed, the disciples would have understood easily. But as it was, they were confused about the owner's reaction, because they still didn't understand the greatness of God's grace or His plan of redemption. They were confused & so they asked for an explanation.

A. THE ACTORS He said, **"The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man"** (37). Jesus is the One who not only sows the good seed but also directs the harvest. The disciples knew that by **the Son of Man** Jesus referred to Himself. It was the title He most often used of Himself & a title clearly understood by the Jews to refer to the Messiah (Lk 22:69; Dan 7:13). **The one who sows** is Jesus Christ, **the Son of Man**, & He's sowing in His own **field**. We often forget that this is His world, He's the Owner. I don't know about you, but I find that comforting. Our work is to bring back to God what is His anyway. It's Jesus' field, but what is it? Jesus clearly says it's **the world** (38b). He couldn't

have identified the field any more clearly. It's **the world**, not the church. This is a picture of the church in the world, not of the world in the church. Although Satan is temporarily the ruler of this **world**, it still belongs to God, who created it & will one day redeem & restore it. The world is God's field, it's His possession. The Devil has no right to it. He's a trespasser. A preacher from a century ago explained it this way: *The devil is a squatter who settles on land he has no right to & works it for His own advantage.*³ God has allowed Satan to influence the world for a time, but not forever. God's creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans & suffers the pains of childbirth together until now (Rom 8:21-22). Jesus plants His people in the world as His witnesses, to grow & become fruitful plants of righteousness. **The sons of the kingdom** are faithful to the King & reflect His will & His standards before a wicked, corrupt, & unbelieving **world**. We aren't left in the world by accident but are placed here on divine assignment from our Lord. **The tares**, on the other hand, **are the sons of the evil one**, who is Satan (38-39). All people are either spiritual children of God & **sons of the kingdom** through faith in His Son or they're spiritual **sons of the evil one** (Jn 8:44; Eph 2:2-3; 1 Jn 3:10; 5:19). Jesus doesn't make the point in this parable, because it wouldn't fit, but all **good seeds** were once **tares**; all **the sons of the kingdom** were once **sons of the evil one**. To go beyond the scope of this parable, while still using some of its figures, it could be said the primary purpose of the **good seeds** in the world is to make converts of **tares**, that they might also become **sons of the kingdom**. Satan can't uproot the wheat, true believers, so he plants his children all around us. But it won't always be this way. **The harvest** represents God's judgment at **the end of the age**, when **the reapers**, who **are angels** (39), will execute judgment on unbelievers, just as the human reapers in the parable separated out **the tares**, which were then **gathered up & burned with fire**. The one detail left uninterpreted are the servants. They're a different group than the reapers & are simply props to allow Jesus to reveal His thoughts through dialogue.⁴

B. THE ACTION The actors have been identified, now the description of the action begins. **So just as**

³ Rev M.A. Gault, *Christian Nation: Righteousness Exalteth a Nation*, 1/5/1910, Vol 52, p 9

⁴ Robert Stein, *Introduction to the Parables of Jesus*, pp 144-145

the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age (40). The disciples were probably ready to put the sickle to the unbelieving tares right then. It's a natural reaction, one we've all had. Having already heard the 1st parable, they were probably thinking, *There are 3 kinds of people who reject the gospel & only 1 kind who will bear fruit. What's going to happen to the rejecters?* They were probably asking Jesus, *What are You going to do to them?* They wanted to know what would happen to those who rejected the gospel. When they asked Jesus in Acts 1:6, **Lord, is it at this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?** They were asking, *Is this the time when you're going to condemn those who've rejected You? Is this the time for the judgment?* But that wasn't God's plan. We're told in vs 26 that **the wheat sprang up & bore grain, & the tares became evident also.** Jesus doesn't elaborate on that, but in light of His teaching elsewhere, that seems to say true believers can be identified by their spiritual fruit & unbelievers by their lack of it. No matter how closely together sons of the kingdom & sons of evil are planted, the differences will eventually be seen. Christ sows true believers in various places so they'll bear fruit (Jn 12:23-26). The only reason given in the parable for not having the tares pulled out was that, in doing so, they might **root up the wheat with them** (29). Damage could be done to some of the good crop either because some plants matured late & would be mistaken for tares or because the roots were so intertwined that some good plants would be uprooted with the tares. In addition to the fact that the church age is for evangelism & not judgment, we're not qualified to distinguish between wheat & weeds. Every time the church has tried to do that it hasn't ended well. When Constantine required every person to make a profession of faith in Christ on pain of death, he succeeded in killing many Christians who refused to submit to his brand of Christianity. During the Crusades, unbelievable brutality was committed against non-Christians, especially Muslims & Jews, in the name of the Prince of Peace. During the reaction to the Reformation, thousands of Christians who didn't submit to the doctrine & authority of Roman Catholicism were imprisoned, tortured, & executed. This isn't the age of God's judgment & certainly not the time of judgment & execution by the church. While on earth, Christ Himself wouldn't lift a finger against His enemies. At the Last Supper He gave Judas a gesture of love & a final appeal for belief (Jn 13:26). For those who falsely

accused Him & sent Him to the cross, He asked forgiveness (Lk 23:34). How, then, can we as His followers consider ourselves ever justified in taking the role of judge, avenger, & executioner? We aren't God's instruments of judgment & destruction but of His truth & grace. Toward the lost we're not to have hearts of condemnation but of compassion. We're called to preach & teach against sin & unrighteousness, but, in doing that, our purpose isn't to judge but to win souls; not to punish but to convert sons of the evil one into sons of the kingdom. Perhaps more dangerous than the premature removal of weeds from our society is the reverse phenomenon, the premature removal of the wheat. As Christians, we often tend to retreat & isolate ourselves from the world around us. We remove ourselves from society as much as possible. As Christians, we're not called to isolate ourselves. We've been planted in this world for at least 2 reasons: 1st, to be matured by the trouble in this world (Jn 16:33; Js 1:2-4; 1 Pt 5:10). 2nd, to influence the world around us by living as citizens of God's kingdom & telling others the good news of Jesus Christ. In any case, Jesus makes clear that the separation of the sons of the kingdom & the sons of the evil one will be **at the end of the age**. In the meanwhile, we exist side-by-side, breathing the same air, enjoying the same sunshine & rain, eating the same food, attending the same schools, working in the same places, living in the same neighborhoods, & even attending the same churches. **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, & will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth (41-42)**. The whole earth is seen here as the Lord's kingdom & He is the rightful Ruler & King. Out of His world the **angels** collect **all stumbling blocks**, the Devil's children who work against God & **those who commit lawlessness** by disobeying God's Word. When Jesus returns, He'll **come in the glory of His Father with His angels; & will then repay every man according to his deeds (Mt 16:27)**. The **angels** will deal out retribution to those who do not know God & to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. & these will pay the penalty of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord & from the glory of His power (1 Thes 1:8-9). Angels are often used as tools of God's judgment (2 Sam 24:16-17; 2 Chr 32:21; Mt 25:31; 2 Thes 1:7; Rv 8:6; 14:15; 16:1). God has given all authority to His Son (Jn 5:22-27), however angels will assist Him. This isn't the picture the

world has of angels, is it? A whole lot of people are going to be surprised when they see what angels do at that point in time! Angels **will throw them into the furnace of fire...** (42). Fire causes great pain & **the furnace of fire** into which the sinners are **cast** represents the unbelievable torment of hell, which is the destiny of every unbeliever. This **fire** of hell is unquenchable (Mk 9:44), eternal (Mt 25:41), & is pictured as a great **lake of fire which burns with brimstone** (Rv 19:20). The punishment is so fearsome that **in that place there shall be weeping & gnashing of teeth**. Hell won't be a place, as many wrongly think, where the ungodly will continue to do their thing while the godly do theirs in heaven. Hell will have no friendships, no fellowship, & no relief. There won't be any pleasure in hell of any kind, only torment, **day & night forever & ever** (Rv 20:10). That's the fate of the **tares**. Jesus tells His disciples they don't have to worry about it. He's got it covered. Jesus' last word of explanation is positive, beautiful, & hopeful: **Then THE RIGHTEOUS WILL SHINE FORTH AS THE SUN in the kingdom of their Father** (43a). When the Son of Man returns with His angels, they won't only perfectly separate the wicked out for eternal punishment but also the righteous for eternal blessing. The Lord **will send forth His angels with a great trumpet & they will gather together His elect from the 4 winds, from one end of the sky to the other** (Mt 24:31). Then comes the long-anticipated & long-postponed kingdom of righteousness. This is the eternal **kingdom of our heavenly Father**, where, with all **the righteous** of all ages, we **will shine forth as the sun**. There we **will shine brightly like the brightness of the expanse of heaven, & those who lead the many to righteousness, like the stars forever & ever** (Dan 12:3). These righteous people, once the light of the world (5:13-16), now radiate perfection & experience fulfillment of their hopes. Lest anyone fail to take seriously these truths that are both fearsome & wonderful, Jesus added, **He who has ears, let him hear**. Again, a summons to heed the words of Jesus & to consider their importance.

3. Three Implications How should we respond to the truth that good & evil are growing together in this age? What should be our role & what are our responsibilities as Christians?

A. Bloom Where You're Planted If you're a child of God, you must know that God has planted you in the field of the world where He wants you. Christians are seeds in the hand of the Lord, told by Him to bloom where He plants us. He's planted you in your neighborhood & your sphere of

influence intentionally. If we'd all see the importance of this, what a difference it would make! Have you noticed that almost everyone wants to be someplace besides where they are? The grass always appears greener someplace else. Maybe we ought to reflect & ask, *Lord, is this where You've sown me? If so, I want to grow & have an influence right here.*

B. We Cannot Change the World The motto of Campus Crusade & the title of Bill Bright's autobiography is, *Come help change the world.* I understand what they're saying but changing the world is a hopeless task. & it isn't what God's called us to do. As J Vernon McGee reportedly said, *God did not call me to clean up the pond. He called me to fish out of it.*⁵ He's right! It's easy to lose sight of our purpose & focus. God hasn't called us to moral reformation, nor to clean up our culture & make the world a better place to live. Individually, we can do whatever we're able to do to that end. But that isn't the focus of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel calls people out of the world into the church, the *ekklesia*, the called out ones of God. As people are called out of the world into the righteousness of God's kingdom, the world will be changed. But we must stay focused on what is possible, seeing tares become wheat, not changing the world. Remember, the owner of the field didn't say to dig up the weeds. He said to leave it alone until the harvest. That's not easy to do. It's tempting to get on our soapboxes & become activists when we realize the amount of weeds that are growing in our communities. & as good citizens, we must do what we can to be involved appropriately. But to try to reform the world in the name of Christ is to miss the focus of His calling. Again, it's important to remember the field is the world, not the church. We aren't to tolerate good & evil together in the church. That's clear in Scripture. We're to preserve & protect sound doctrine in the church & remove anything or anyone that seeks to change it. The field is the world, not the church.

C. Invite the Tares to Become Wheat This is where the parable breaks down, because, in the farming world weeds don't become wheat. But in the spiritual world, we know that tares can become wheat. Everyone is born as tares. They might look like wheat, but they aren't. We can't tell by looking who is a weed & who is wheat. In the language of the parable of the soils, our job is to sow the seed of

⁵ Quoted in comments at <http://phillipjohnson.blogspot.com/2005/08/bonus-double-post-two-issues-i-might.html>

the Word into their lives & pray that it takes root & bears fruit. Tares can become wheat & that's the promise of the gospel.

Everyone who's uncertain about their relationship to God should ask if they're wheat or weeds; a child of God or of the evil one. If you don't belong to God, you can come to Him, because He's in the business of making wheat out of tares, saints out of sinners. You could be in that condition today. You may be a good, moral, righteous person. People look up to you & talk about your integrity & morality. But that's not the issue. The issue is the seed, which is the good news of Jesus Christ. The joy of reading this parable & understanding it is realizing there's an invitation to all who are tares to become wheat before the time of the harvest. Are you one of God's children? Have you been born into His kingdom? If you haven't been, then allow me to extend an invitation to you to become His child, to make the transformation from weeds to wheat today. How? By receiving the good news that Jesus died for your sins, in your place, & that by faith in Him you will be forgiven. Once this happens, you can live in peace in this world until His return, regardless of the evil around you.

Those who are sure they're sons of the kingdom should **hear** what Jesus says here in order that their attitude toward the world might be the same loving, merciful, compassionate attitude He has. He's called us to witness rather than condemn, to love rather than hate, & to show mercy rather than judgment. In that way we prove ourselves, Paul says, **blameless & innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked & perverse generation, among whom we will appear as lights in the world** (Phil 2:15). What's our duty to the weeds planted around us? Our duty isn't to pull them up, but to plant the gospel & pray for the tares to become wheat. Yes, we have to expose Satan & his lies, but we must also sow the Word of God & bear fruit where He's planted us. Our job is to sow the Word & let God *plant* us in places where we can bear fruit for His glory. We've been planted in this portion of His field, why? To grow & mature spiritually & to sow God's Word so that tares can become wheat. That's the miracle that Christ has done in our lives & that's the miracle He wants to do through us in the lives of others. Are we cooperating with His plan? God will preserve His church, but He wants to do far more than simply preserve it. He wants to grow it for

good in our world & for His glory. Will you pray for God to show you what that might look like in your life, in your small sphere of His grand scheme of things?