

# **BIBLICAL INSIGHTS #145:**

## **THE PARABLE OF THE TARES: A PARABLE FOR OUR TIME**

**By John Temples**

I saw a YouTube video the other day entitled "It's Time To Leave Earth." I didn't watch it, but I thought, yes, this must be the thinking of many today. It seems that almost every day, there's some new and even worse evil going on in the world.

After finally getting some relief after two years of fighting COVID, just recently we woke up to fears that we were on the precipice of World War 3 with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Even some faithful Christians look at what's happening and wonder, Why does God allow all this evil to go on? Can the Bible help us make sense of all this and give us some peace of mind?

Jesus spoke a parable that is especially relevant in our day. We call it the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares (tares are noxious weeds that resemble wheat as they grow). It is found in Matthew 13. Fortunately, this is one of a few parables that Jesus interpreted for us. Let us study it together. First, the text:

*The parable (vs 24-30): 24 Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; 25 but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. [Tares are weeds that resemble wheat.] 26 But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. 27 So the servants of the owner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' 28 He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' 29 But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. 30 Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn."'"*

*The explanation (vs 36-43): 36 Then Jesus sent the multitude away and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field." 37 He answered and said to them: "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. 38 The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. 39 The enemy who*

*sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. 40 Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. 41 The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, 42 and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!*

This is the second of two parables Jesus gave about sowing and seeds. The first part of the chapter contains the Parable of the Sower (more accurately titled the Parable of the Soils). The focus of the Parable of the Sower is the nature of the soils God's seed falls on—people's hearts. In this parable, Jesus deals with the hostile environment in which the seed has to grow.

We learn from verse 24 that this parable is about some aspect of the kingdom of heaven. The kingdom is the church, Colossians 1:13. The terms church, kingdom of God, kingdom of heaven, and kingdom of Christ are interchangeable terms referring to the same institution. What aspect of the kingdom is the Lord emphasizing in this parable? The fact that the church is surrounded by evil in this world, and what Christians are to do about it.

It is helpful to think about this parable in terms of twos:

- There are **two sowers** who sow seed in a field: the owner of the field and an enemy.
- There are **two crops** that are sown: wheat and tares (noxious weeds, false wheat).
- The servants of the sower ask **two questions**: (1) Why does your field have tares in it? (2) Do you want us to root them up?
- There are **two answers**: (1) An enemy has sown the bad seed. (2) Let both crops grow together until the harvest.
- There are **two harvests**: (1) The wheat is gathered up and placed in the owner's barn. (2) The tares/weeds are gathered up and burned.

Here are some helpful definitions, taken from Jesus's explanation of the parable:

- The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man (Christ), verse 37.

- In the parable of the sower, the original (good) seed is the word of God (verse 19, Luke 8:11). In this parable, the good seed sown may refer to the original, pure state of the world and mankind before sin entered.
- The enemy who sowed the tares is the devil, verse 39.
- The wheat represents righteous people (“sons of the kingdom”), verse 38. The bad seed (the tares) are wicked people (“sons of the wicked one”), verse 38.
- The field is the world, verse 38.
- The harvest is the end of the age, verse 39.
- The reapers are the angels, verse 39.

The subject of this parable is the presence of evil in the world. “Sir [God], did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?” is an age-old question. God did not introduce evil into the world! Satan is the ultimate source of evil. So the expression used by insurance companies for disasters--”acts of God”--is ironic and totally wrong.

Why did the enemy sow tares among the wheat? For the sole reason of showing his hatred of the owner of the field by sabotaging his harvest. Satan knows he will not ultimately win, but he wants to cause God (and us) as much grief as he can until then.

The tares growing alongside and intertwined with the wheat signifies the fact that wicked people live alongside the righteous, and many times resemble them. The particular tares Jesus was talking about look very much like wheat in early stages of growth. Only time and maturity reveal the difference. So also, the wickedness of some people is only apparent after some time.

Before we get too far into the parable, let us look at the two questions asked of the owner by the servants: (1) Didn't you sow good seed in your field? (2) Do you want us to take out the bad seed? Both these questions reveal an all-too-common naive and simplistic attitude about evil in the world.

FIRST: Didn't you sow good seed? How then does your field have tares? I think this is calling attention to the idea a lot of people have that if they just do good, play fair, and be nice, others will also; and everybody will live happily ever after. They are surprised when evil rears its ugly head. This isn't supposed to happen.

Where, then, did these weeds come from? From sin and the devil. But aren't we making social progress? Isn't mankind getting better and better? Do not be deceived: the Bible makes it clear that evildoers will wax worse and worse, not get better and better.

THE SECOND QUESTION the servants asked is "What do you want us to do about the weeds?" Many times, we might feel like asking God, "Lord, do you want us to go and round up the wicked people in the world and exterminate them?" The problem is, the ability to infallibly separate the wicked from the righteous is beyond our present capacity, for a simple reason: The wicked don't always look wicked. Sometimes they even appear to be righteous. (Satan and his followers can look like angels of light, 2 Corinthians 11:14).

For another thing, the righteous and the wicked are joined together by many factors, including family ties, political alliances, and simply occupying the same space together. To try to uproot all evil in the world would be fruitless and destructive. In rooting out the tares, many good people would be harmed. We must resist the urge to take matters into our own hands and root out the evil in the world (which would be impossible anyway).

Let's talk about an important factor in the parable: where the seeds grow. Jesus said in explaining the parable, "THE FIELD IS THE WORLD" (verse 38). "The field" in this parable is NOT the church, as many think. This is a parable about evil in the world. By mistakenly assuming that the field is the church, some have concluded that church leaders cannot discipline erring members or false teachers, because Jesus said "let both grow together until the harvest." This is incorrect. Verse 38 plainly says, "The field is the world."

The Bible *does* give the church authority to deal with evildoers **within** it, but not evildoers **outside** it. 1 Corinthians 5:12-13 reads, "For what have I to do with judging those also who are outside? Do you not judge those who are inside? But those who are outside God judges. Therefore put away from yourselves the evil person." Furthermore, 2 Thessalonians 3:6 says, "But we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw from every brother who walks disorderly and not according to the tradition which he received from us." It is clear from these passages and others that the church can and should discipline erring members. But judging evil in the world is not our area of authority; God will

judge evil in the world. Go back and read the part of the parable that addresses this, verses 40-43:

*40 Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. 41 The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, 42 and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!*

The clear message here is that the wicked will not be separated from the righteous until the end of the world.

“The kingdom” in verse 43 obviously means the church in its glorified state, so the kingdom in verse 41, just two verses away, has to mean the same thing. Therefore, this part of the parable must refer to false Christians being judged and receiving the same punishment as the worldly wicked. This agrees with Matthew 7:21, where Jesus says, “Not everyone who says to Me, Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven,” and 2 Peter 2:1, which reads, “But there were also false prophets among the people, even as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Lord who bought them, and bring on themselves swift destruction.” There are two groups of people who will be punished at the end of time: (1) Wicked people of the world (the tares, verse 40); (2) False Christians (those in His kingdom that offend, verse 41).

To review, here are the meanings of the elements of this parable:

1. The sower is Christ (stated in verse 37).
2. The field is the world (stated in verse 38).
3. The sowing of the pure, original seed is probably a reference to God’s original, pristine creation, before sin defiled it.
4. The enemy who sowed the bad seed is the devil (verse 39).

5. The wheat are the sons of the kingdom (verse 38)--righteous people.
6. The tares are the wicked (same verse).
7. The harvest is the end of the age (stated in verse 39).
8. The wheat being gathered into the owner's barn (verse 30) represents the reward of the righteous in heaven.
9. The tares being gathered and burned in the fire symbolizes the fate of the wicked in hell (verse 40).

#### LESSONS FROM THE PARABLE:

- There is both good and evil in the world, both in human beings and in societies, and even in the church.
- God is not to blame for the evil in the world. "An enemy has done this" (verse 28).
- God originally created only good, but because of man's disobedience the world was corrupted.
- Satan is still sowing seeds of wickedness in the world (in fact, lately he seems to have gotten hold of some extra-potent seed).
- God intends for His people to resist evil and not participate in it, but not to try to forcibly punish or restrain evil in the world. Both are to "grow together until the harvest," verse 30.
- Jesus is saying that God will sort things out in the end. In the meantime, we are not to assume the role of judges passing sentence, because we cannot infallibly tell the weeds from the wheat.
- This is not saying we can make no judgments about evil in the world. In fact, Jesus says we will know evil people by their fruits (Matthew 7:16). He also

tells us to speak out against evil in society (Ephesians 5:11–"Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them").

- This parable is not discussing or prohibiting the church from disciplining erring members. However, it does prohibit doing so violently. No burning heretics at the stake! We are told to withdraw from and have no fellowship with Christians who walk disorderly. Beyond that we may not go.

On the theme(s) and scope of this parable, the comments of Adam Clarke are instructive: "Christ seems to refer, first, to the origin of evil. God sowed good seed in his field; made man in his own image and likeness: but the enemy, the Devil, corrupted this good seed, and caused it to degenerate.... He seems to refer also to the state in which the world shall be found, when he comes to judge it. The righteous and the wicked shall be permitted to grow together, till God comes to make a full and final separation."

Other thoughts found online: "We live in a world where tragedies and accidents occur every day and where injustice and violence still wreak havoc in people's lives. Where is God and why doesn't He do something? The Parable of the Wheat and Weeds teaches us that God does have a plan for this world and He is working to accomplish it. However, it is unfolding over time and that means there's some waiting to do, something we find difficult. Jesus is teaching us patience – the patience of a God who chooses to delay His judgment. God is not in a hurry and we must be prepared to trust Him and wait for His time. In the end, God will win and good will overcome evil."

This parable deals with sad realities, but closes with an optimistic note: "Then [at the separation of the wheat and the tares] the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (verse 43). We need to make sure we are part of the "good seed" by obedience and faithfulness, and let God deal with evil in His own good time. –John Temples