

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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THE PARABLE OF THE TARES

Matthew 13:24-30

The parable of the tares is peculiar to the gospel of Matthew, just like the parable of the growing seed (which we studied in our previous lesson) is only found in Mark. Let's read this story about the sowing of wheat and weeds.

Matthew 13.24. 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.

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 of this parable follows in vv. 36-43.

The kingdom of God illustrated

The first thing we need to notice when we look at this parable is that it is a story that deals with the kingdom of God. It says in the opening words, *The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field.* The 'kingdom of heaven' is Matthew's parallel to Luke's 'kingdom of God.' The kingdom of God means the rule of God, or the kingship of God. In His trial before Pilate, Jesus said, *My kingdom is not of this world* (John 18:36). The RSV has, *My kingship is not of this world.* That is a good translation. So this is a parable about God's kingship, about God's government in the world.

A good verse that we can use to understand this kingship is Matthew 21:43. Let's turn to that passage for a moment. Jesus says, *The kingdom of God (or the 'kingship of God') will be taken away from you, and be given to a nation producing the fruit of it.* Here we learn that God's kingdom can be taken away from a nation and given to another nation. The new nation to which the kingship of God is given is the church, the 'holy nation' as it is called in 1Peter 2:9.

Bear in mind that the kingship of God is not some permanent possession that you will automatically keep forever. God gave His kingship to Israel. But then, He took away this kingship and now gives it to the church. Paul repeated the same thing in Romans 9 to 11. He said, ‘Israel was cut down and now you, who were not part of the original tree, are grafted into that tree. But do not boast of you privileged position. If God broke them off on account of their unbelief, assuredly He will do the same with you in the same circumstances (Romans 11:11-24).’ This is just a different picture to say the same thing.

You see, to have God as king is a supreme privilege because it means that you have entered into a special relationship with God, just as Israel stood in a special relationship to God. No other nation had God as king. Only Israel had God as king. It was through the covenant that He became their God and they became His people. And now, through the New Covenant, we become His people and He becomes our God and our king. We enter into a living relationship with Him when we crown Him as king of our lives. But there are Christians and Christians, as we will see later.

Another point that we need to understand about God’s kingdom is that it comes in two stages. One is the present stage and another one is the future stage. Here we are talking about the present stage when good and evil coexist. The last part of the parable speaks about a future stage, ‘the time of the harvest,’ when all the evildoers will be gathered out. Only then will evil be completely eradicated.

A foundation parable

This is the only parable outside the parable of the sower where an explanation is given. In all the other parables, you find no explanation. In that sense, it is a foundation parable, just like the parable of the sower is a foundation parable.

Jesus’ interpretation makes reference to seven concepts.

the man who sowed good seed	the Son of Man
the field	the world
the good seed	the sons of the kingdom
the tares	the sons of the evil one
the enemy who sowed the weeds	the devil
the harvest	the end of the age
the harvesters	the angels

Jesus teaches that in the kingdom of God there are two kinds of plant, two kinds of people. One kind of plant is the wheat, which the Lord Jesus has sown. This wheat represents the ‘sons of the kingdom,’ i.e., the true children of God who live under the kingship of God and who have crowned Jesus as king of their lives. Then, after Jesus has sown the seed in the world (the field is the world), the devil comes along and sows tares among the wheat.

The tares

Notice that the tares which are sown by the devil are not the weeds that are originally in the field. Who are those tares? Do they refer to unbelievers? Think about it for a moment. These tares are sown after the good seeds have been sown. If they refer to non-Christians, the tares would have to be there before the Lord Jesus sowed any good seeds in the field. The unbelievers were in the world long before the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry. So these tares can hardly represent unbelievers (in the sense of non-professing people).

Also, notice where these tares are sown: right in the middle of the wheat. They are planted with the deliberate intention of being with the wheat, in the kingdom of God. That is why v. 41 speaks about ‘gathering them out of the kingdom.’ That means to say that they are in the kingdom and they have to be taken out of it. Can we say of an unbeliever – someone who has never received the gospel in any sense – that he is in the kingdom of God? Of course not. Therefore these tares, who are part of the kingdom, must refer to people who profess in some way that they live under the kingship of God.

Another important observation is this. The servants realized that the seeds planted by the devil are tares only when the plants have grown up and born fruit. V. 26: *But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared.* The tares were not noticeable until the time when their fruit began to appear. This means that they have been growing for some time before the servants became aware of their presence in the field. ‘Where do these tares come from?’ they asked the master. All this implies that these tares bear a very close resemblance to the wheat. They are indistinguishable from the wheat in the early stages of their growth.

It is generally agreed that the word rendered ‘tares’ denotes darnel, a plant of the same family as wheat. It is virtually impossible to tell which plant is wheat and which one is darnel until the ears appear. As the Lord Jesus says in Matthew 7:20, ‘By their fruit, you shall know them.’ Why can you tell the difference when the ears come up? Because the grain of the darnel is black, in contrast to the whitish color of the wheat. Also, the darnel is poisonous. It was therefore very important to separate it from the wheat. Because of their resemblance, this could be done only as harvest approaches. You see that we are dealing with two plants which look very similar but are completely different in essence.

Let’s summarize what we have seen so far about these tares. They look like the wheat, i.e., they look like genuine Christians, but they are not true Christians. Their fruit is black and poisonous. They grow among the wheat, in the kingdom of God, under the alleged kingship of God. The tares represent the kind of people who function inside the church, who behave like Christians, who really believe that they are Christians. But they only have the outward appearance of godliness. As Paul said to Timothy, ‘they have a form of godliness but they have denied its power’ (2Timothy 3:5).

There is another point that we need to take note of: the close relationship between the darnel and the wheat. These two plants are intertwined in their relationship to each other, emphasizing the fact that they function together inside the kingdom of God. The sons of the evil one are in the company of the children of the kingdom. This is not a case of two kingdoms or camps pitched at a certain distance apart so that you can say that the enemy is ‘over there’ in another location. The devil’s kingdom is within the Son of Man’s kingdom. Jesus gives His disciples the sobering news that the enemy is inside the church. There are other enemies ‘over there’ in the secular world. But the problem described in this parable takes place in the midst of the church. And the intermingling of the wheat and the tares is such that pulling one will inevitably root up the other. That is why Jesus says, ‘For now, allow them to grow together. The tares will be pulled up at the time of harvest.’

Those who practice lawlessness

What kind of people will be plucked out at the Last Judgment? *God’s angels will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness* (v. 41). Literally, ‘all those who are scandals and who do lawlessness’ Those who are scandals to Christ are the people who trip others up either by preventing them from becoming disciples or by driving the disciples away from the faith. The people who ‘commit lawlessness’ can be described as ‘those who live lawless lives.’

This word ‘lawlessness,’ is the same word used by Jesus in Matthew 7:23 when He said, *Depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!* Here, there is something striking. We discover that this word is not used of unbelievers but of Christian workers. Remember, Jesus said in v. 21, *Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord.’* You see, here are people who say, ‘Jesus is King.’ ‘Lord’ means ‘king.’ They claim that Jesus is king of their lives because they say, ‘Lord, Lord.’ *Not everyone*

who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven ('shall,' future tense – there is the future kingdom of heaven) *but he who does* (present tense, right now) *the will of My Father in heaven*. On that day, the very same people that the parable of the tares is talking about, on the last day of judgment, they will say to Jesus, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and do many wonders in Your name?' And notice Jesus' words in v. 23. *And then I will declare to them* (not to unbelievers, but to these people who worked in Jesus' name), *'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'* People who cast out demons, who prophesied in Jesus' name, who did mighty works of healing in Jesus' name, these are the ones that Jesus calls 'doers of lawlessness.'

This is where we find a parallel with the parable of the tares. Those who practice lawlessness are not the unbelievers who have never heard the gospel and who have never accepted Jesus. These people who practice lawlessness are in fact these tares, the ones who call Jesus, 'Lord.' They probably mean it. But unfortunately their lives are not lived in obedience to God's will.

Did these people have faith? Remember what they did. They cast out demons. They prophesied. They performed miracles. People who do all these things in Jesus' name must have a certain 'faith' in Jesus. Whether that kind of faith will save you or not is another matter. So what went wrong with these people? The Lord Jesus tells us what went wrong. They did many miracles but they did not obey the will of the Father. 'Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven in that final harvest, but he who does the will of My Father.' Doing miracles is not equivalent to doing God's will. What does it mean to do God's will? It means to live a life of holiness. And living a life of holiness means that you live completely under God's kingship. You make God to be the king of your life.

Sons of the devil

There is a great tragedy here. These people in Matthew 7 thought that they would be saved. On the day of judgment, they presented their works to Jesus saying, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we do these things in Your name?' They honestly thought that they would be with Jesus. But the Lord turns them away. 'Who are you? You are not wheat. Leave this place.' The tragedy is that they believed that they were true Christians when in reality they were not.

We see the same situation with the tares in the parable. These tares were sown by Satan and they really believed that they were saved, that they were Christians. The tares were in the kingdom of God until they were thrown out by angels. In His story, Jesus calls them 'the sons of the devil.' Now, the sons of the devil are not necessarily conscious that they are sons of the evil one. John 8:44 is a good example of this. There the Jews said, 'We are the sons of Abraham.' But Jesus said to them, 'No, you are of your father the devil.' Jesus was speaking to the Jews, and especially to those who wanted to kill Him, i.e., the Pharisees, the most 'righteous' of the Jews. Observe this well. The unbelievers are not described as 'sons of the devil.' It is the Jews, God's chosen people, the Pharisees, the most religious people of the nation who are called 'sons of the devil.' That's quite a shock!

'If you were Abraham's children as you claim to be,' Jesus said, 'you would do what Abraham did.' What did Abraham do? He crown God as king in his life. As a man of faith, he obeyed God totally. His response to God was, 'Whatever you say, I will do. Wherever you send me, I will go. Because you are my Lord and my king.' Jesus told them, 'You didn't do what Abraham did. That's why I say that you are of your father the devil.' Jesus was not trying to insult them. He was saying, 'Come to your senses. Unless you receive God as king of your life, you are still going to be sons of the devil. And you are going to perish in your sins if nothing changes.'

A mixed body

The NIDNTT makes this comment about the parable of the tares. ‘The allegory of the weeds among the wheat contains the contrast between the ‘sons of the kingdom’ and the ‘sons of the evil one (Matthew 13:38). Just as in the field the grain grows up with the weeds and the two are not separated until the harvest, so, according to Matthew, the church is a mixed body until the day of judgement. Only then does a separation take place’ (New International Dictionary of NT Theology, volume 1, p. 289).

The contrast between the wheat and the tares is the contrast between two kinds of people in the church, i.e., the kind of person who believes in Jesus as Savior only and the kind of person who believes in Jesus as Lord and Savior. If you are a Christian because you simply believe that Jesus is Savior, you have believed a lie of the devil. We cannot separate between Savior and Lord, and say that you can have Jesus as Savior without having Him as Lord. Jesus is only Savior to those to whom He is Lord. You cannot have eternal life if you are not interested in doing God’s will, even if you accept Him as your Savior.

If the church is a mixed body, a church in which good and bad are mixed, why then does God tolerate it? Why does He say to the servants, ‘Don’t pull the tares out. Let them grow together with the wheat.’ We saw how hard it is to distinguish between the tares and the wheat. If we are going to do some weeding, which plants are we going to pull? If you ask them, ‘Do you believe in the name of Jesus,’ these tares will say, ‘Yes,’ just like the people in Matthew who said ‘Lord, Lord,’ but were not accepted by Jesus. We cannot necessarily deal with them in church discipline because they have not committed any serious sin. We have no basis to exclude them from the church. And even if they did do something terribly serious, who are we to decide that they are sons of the devil? It is not up to us to judge. Only God can know a person completely. God only is able to know accurately all the ramifications of a person’s actions and thoughts.

But do they not cause harm to the church? Yes, they do. And they often do it subtly. The damage is being done underground, invisibly, by the roots. Their roots are causing the damage by removing from the soil the nutrients that the wheat needs to grow. These roots might even succeed to choke some of the wheat, as Jesus mentioned in the parable of the sower. So, what can we do? Nothing! The roots of the tares are so tangled with those of the wheat that if you pull out one, you will most likely uproot the other. In the very attempt to remove a false Christian from the church, we can cause great damage to the true Christians. And God doesn’t want any genuine disciple to be harmed. We have to trust God that there will be a day of reckoning. We will have to wait for the harvest when the Lord Himself will separate the wheat from the tares. Until then, we just have to be patient.

This parable argues against fanaticism in the exercise of church discipline. A too-zealous separation of good from evil can seriously hurt believers and is against Jesus’ teaching. We cannot expect perfection in this age. The decisive separation of pure and impure Christians must wait for the day of judgment.

The implication is not, of course, that sin doesn’t matter or that there is no need to resist evil. Jesus teaches later, in Matthew 18, that disciples should confront and if necessary, even exclude from the Christian fellowship a brother or a sister who sins and refuses to listen to reason. Matthew 13 and Matthew 18 must always be kept together as the two-sided rule in the purification of the church.

Strengthening the godly

One final point. What is God’s purpose in all this? Why does He allow the tares and the wheat to grow together? Why didn’t He prevent Satan from sowing the tares in the first place?

You see, the wheat, in its struggle to survive against the tares, becomes more resilient. The very fact of struggling has a strengthening effect. The tares are there in order to test us, to try us. We learn in this way to put our roots down deeper so that we will draw more completely upon His grace. This may not make very good agricultural sense. Farmers don't sow weeds among their wheat to produce a stronger crop of wheat. But the Lord Jesus is not trying to teach agriculture. He is teaching spiritual truths. And the truth of the matter is that holy character is strengthened and perfected by contact with the unrighteous.

Remember that the difference between the wheat and the tare did not become apparent until their fruit began to grow. Paul writes in Romans 6:22, *But now having been set free from sin, and having become slaves of God, **you have your fruit to holiness.*** Holiness in your life is the fruit, the spiritual fruit, by which you will be recognized as a son of the kingdom. And to the godly people, Jesus makes this promise at the end of the parable: a shining glory will be their share at end of the age.