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The Wheat and Tares

Shortly after Christ began His public ministry, He began telling stories.

Matthew 13:1-3, "On that day Jesus went out of the house, and was sitting by the sea. And great multitudes gathered to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat down, and the whole multitude was standing on the beach. And He spoke many things to them in parables, saying..."

Now unlike the stories we might tell to entertain, arouse attention, or just be funny, the stories Christ told illustrated the nature of the Kingdom of God.

Matthew 22:1-2, “And Jesus answered and spoke to them again in parables, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king, who gave a wedding feast for his son.’”

And thus, we learn that a parable — which literally means to “place alongside of” — is a truth carried in a vehicle. Accordingly, though it is tempting to make application from every element in the parable, we must resist. We owe no more to “the story” than what is necessary to determine the truth it seeks to illustrate.

And so, unlike the practice of many throughout church history who read into Christ’s parables all kinds of meanings, applications, and/or spiritual truths, sound interpretation demands that we be content with the one truth that Christ is seeking to illustrate (unless of course Christ Himself states in the passage that there is more than one application to the parable).

Now having said this, it is appropriate to ask: Why did Christ speak in parables? What was His purpose in teaching through stories? We could answer this from a variety of angles: Christ taught in parables because:

1. They are an effective tool in teaching.
2. They heighten the attention of all in attendance.
3. They lower the defenses of those listening.

However, we need not speculate. Christ Himself responded to this question.

Matthew 13:10-11, “And the disciples came and said to Him, ‘Why do You speak to them in parables?’ And He answered and said to them, ‘To you it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, but to them it has not been granted.’”

In answer to the disciples, Christ explained that He spoke in parables to both reveal and conceal the truth...

Matthew 13:11a, “To you [who believe] it has been granted to know the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven...”

Matthew 13:11b, “...but to them it has not been granted.”

And so, Christ spoke in parables to further the understanding of His children and yet to further the hardening of the hearts of those who would not believe.

Now lest there be any here disturbed that Christ would keep truth from the reprobate, consider that God does NOT owe man a thing, much less truth. Through the Fall, mankind not only rebelled against God and His word/truth, but they also became subject to God's wrath. If a reprobate gets anything but wrath, they have not been cheated. The non-Christian doesn't want any of the truth Christ could give them. They currently are "suppressing the truth in unrighteousness" (Romans 1:18) and so does "not accept the things of the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 2:14)!

And that is why as we look at the parable of the wheat and the tares, I am excited. For as we have gathered as the children of God to worship and praise our Lord, to preach through a parable will, by God's grace, further our understanding of the nature of the Kingdom of God and thus our ability to serve Him.

Matthew 13:24, "He presented another parable to them, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field.'"

Upon explaining the meaning of the parable of the four soils, Christ sought to illustrate the kingdom of God yet again with another parable.

Now the parable in this context has to do with farming which would have been quite familiar to the people of Christ's day. Everyone could identify with this. Christ's parable on farming would be akin to a parable on purchasing gasoline at a gas station or shopping at a supermarket. Few if any listening could not draw to their mind multiple examples of what Christ was speaking about. And so, Christ compares the Kingdom of Heaven to the enterprise of farming and a horrible crime associated with this occupation.

Matthew 13:25, "But while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares also among the wheat, and went away."

This was such a common crime in Christ's day that the Romans had a law forbidding such activity. There were at least three reasons sowing weeds was a crime. The first reason is that an infiltration of the tare in a farmer's field in Christ's day could ruin the whole crop. And thus, not only would the farmer be without food, but so also the whole community! That is why this was quite serious since, often times, the community's well-being rested upon the productivity of its farmers.

Secondly, there was a danger in the tares. Tares ζιζάνιον (*zizanon*); are a variety of the darnel weed, type of rye grass. Because a fungus can grow on and within the seeds of this type of rye, the seeds are poisonous both to man and beasts. And thus, any thought of selling the harvest of a field *seriously* infested with tares as low-grade or damaged wheat would be out of the question.

Thirdly, there was a great difficulty in identifying the tares.

Matthew 13:26, “But when the wheat sprang up and bore grain, then the tares became evident also”

Tares closely resembles wheat. In fact, the grass looks so much like the wheat plant that it is only when the plants head out that the fruit of the wheat and that of the tare can be distinguished. And for these three reasons, those listening to Christ as He told this parable would have understood the serious nature of this crime.

Matthew 13:27-28a, “And 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?’ And he said to them, ‘An enemy has done this!’...”

All of us know how easy it is for a few weeds, including tares, to grow up among good plants. But because tares were sown in this field, the infestation of weeds in the wheat crop made it obvious that this was intentional sabotage. Thus, the obvious conclusion was that the tares were the work of an enemy.

Matthew 13:28b, “And the slaves said to him, ‘Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?’”

The request of the slaves was to weed that crop would have been a common practice among farmers in Christ’s day — as in our own. And with a light infiltration of the darnel grass, children (on account of their small fingers) would go out into the wheat fields with their fathers and mothers and carefully pull up the tares that grew alongside the wheat. And yet, notice the land-owner’s response was to wait.

Matthew 13:29, “But he said, ‘No; lest while you are gathering up the tares, you may root up the wheat with them.’”

The landowner says, “No.” This was before our times of precision planting and pulling out the tares could result in rooting up much of the wheat with them because the roots would have become closely intertwined. And since the wheat had yet to produce fruit, it would be easy to mistake wheat for bad plants — especially among children. And so, the landowner chose another course of action.

Matthew 13:30. “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.’”

And here is where we have yet another interesting deviation from the normal practice of burning the field. Rather than burning his field, the landowner decided to opt for another solution: “allow both to grow together” and then at harvest there would be the very difficult, and time-consuming task of the yet necessary separation of the wheat from the tares.

In this context, notice two important words:

- Reapers: *θεριστής (theristēs)*; refers to a special class of workers who specifically “reaped” fields. Because of their experience, they would do a much better job at distinguishing between the wheat and tares.
- Burn them up: *κατακαίω (katakaiō)*;⁹ this was the fate of all tares in Christ’s day. Because they are good for nothing except to produce more “tares,” farmers in the days of our Lord would “burn the seed” rather than throw them out.

That is the end of Christ’s parable. And thus, we ask: What is its point? What message is Christ giving us by this parable?

With this parable, Christ teaches a very important lesson about the Kingdom of God, namely, that the visible church contains both regenerate and unregenerate individuals, for the sake of God’s people, judgment is postponed. However, judgment will come — of that we can be sure!

Notice Christ’s explanation of this parable,

Matthew 13:36-38a, “Then He left the multitudes, and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him, saying, ‘Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field.’ And He answered and said, ‘The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, and the field is the world...’”

Based on Christ’s description “the field is the world.” Many want to limit the scope of this parable to a description of just the world and NOT the church. However, that’s wrong. That this parable is referring to the visible body of Christ becomes obvious when we observe that in Matthew 13:24 Christ says that “the KINGDOM OF HEAVEN may be compared...” And in Matthew 13:41 Christ says that His reapers will “gather out of HIS KINGDOM [used synonymously with ‘world’] all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness”— each group corresponding to the “tares” of this parable.

Thus, this parable gives us a clear description of the constitution of the visible church in the present age with the “world” being synonymous with “God’s Kingdom” (cf. Psalm 50:10-12; Job 41:1-11).

Matthew 13:38b-43, “...and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one; and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. Therefore just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. 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, and will cast them into the furnace of fire; in that place there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.”

This is a strong message that should sober us all. Because Christ is explaining the nature of the Kingdom of God as containing both wheat and tares, each of us should take notice. The tendency for most of us, in light of a rather hard passage like this, is to conclude that this is NOT speaking in reference to us BUT to the ungodly who attend church *just once in a while*. And since we aren’t these “ungodly people” — by virtue of our attendance here today — we can agree with the teaching of this text all the while never allowing its truths to sink into OUR hearts! And yet, we must not do this — the truth presented is too important! Don’t Miss It! The visible church is made up of both wheat and tares.

2 Timothy 2:20, “Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor.”

And so rather than quickly sluffing off the teaching of this text, it is imperative that we allow it to draw us in, reveal our heart, and challenge/rebuke us with regard to our profession of faith in Christ!

And what is the challenge of this passage? Essentially, one can be a member of an evangelical church all your life, or go forward in an altar call, or be a missionary and be used of God to bring many to Christ, or even have prayed the sinner’s prayer and yet, one could still receive the wrath of God on account of your sin.

Matthew 7:22-23, “Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven; but he who does the will of My Father who is in heaven. Many will say to Me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in Your name, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name perform many miracles?’ And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness.’”

In fact, that is why Paul admonished the Corinthian believers.

2 Corinthians 13:5, "Test yourselves to see if you are in the faith; examine yourselves!"

So how do we test ourselves? One way is by asking ourselves the following questions:

- Can you finish the sentence, "God accepts me because _____"?
- In a religion of Moral Hypocrisy (pharisees, priests, scribes), the answer to this is manifold. God accepts me because:
 - I asked for His forgiveness.
 - I went forward on an altar call.
 - I let go and let God.
 - In all that I do, I seek to praise Him!
 - I accepted Christ as my personal Lord and Savior.
 - I have prophesied or cast out demons.

None of the above are reasons for why God accepts you! And if you find yourself believing otherwise, it very well could be that you are among the moral hypocrisy referenced in our text!

What is the one and only answer to "Why God accepts me"? The Cross!

Colossian 1:21-22, "And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach."

Galatians 6:14, "But may it never be that I should boast, except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ..."

The BASIS upon which we are accepted, approved, saved, sanctified and glorified is THE CROSS!
It is NOT...

- My profession of faith.
- My purity or devotion.
- My confirmation.
- My holy living.

You say, "Yet I must trust Christ to be saved..." And that is true. Yet the point in all of the above is simply to ask, "In what am I trusting? In what am I placing my confidence for salvation?" Nothing I do can save me, only the cross of Christ — that is my boast and joy!

Do you find yourself living on the basis of yesterday's graces?

In a religion of Moral Hypocrisy, what occurred yesterday is the strength through which the present is lived.

- I was confirmed.
- I was baptized.
- Last year I memorized the book of James.
- I said "Yes" to Jesus.
- I have had great quiet times in the past.

Amazingly, this is where many in the church live! We're like a bunch of washed-up athletes living in the present on the glory of the past. Indeed, how does the child of God live? In light of future grace! Speaking of the Second Coming and the life we will receive, Peter wrote this:

1 Peter 1:6, "In this you greatly rejoice, even though now for a little while, if necessary, you have been distressed by various trials."

That is why Paul wrote so emphatically:

Philippians 3:13-14, "...but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."

The child of God does NOT live and move with a backward look about him — always looking to past accomplishments as the basis for present acceptance before God. RATHER, he forgets the past (good or bad) and lives each day with a renewed faith and hope in the Lord Jesus Christ and His coming!

God calls us to present our bodies a living and holy sacrifice (Romans 12:1-2). How then does the Christian approach God? As a blemished sacrifice struggling in sin? Or as an unblemished sacrifice conquering sin?

Those in a religion of Moral Hypocrisy approach God as an unblemished sacrifice conquering sin!

Luke 18:11-12, "...God, I thank Thee that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers... I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get."

Luke 15:2, "And both the Pharisees and scribes began to grumble, saying, 'This man receives sinners and eats with them.'"

The implication is that the Jews of Christ's day believed that

- (1) They themselves were the unblemished ones that God accepted and
- (2) That which enabled them to worship God was their holiness, their devotion, and their righteous living.

But the genuine child of God, knowing that the BASIS of his acceptance is the cross, approaches his God BECAUSE he is a blemished sacrifice in need of grace! Christ said, "...It is not those who are well who need a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Luke 5:31-32). Thus, the one who finds forgiveness is the one who beats his chest and cries, "God, be merciful to me, the sinner!" (Luke 18:13)

Let us not forget the words of John.

1 John 1:8, "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

Indeed! Let us "test ourselves" to see whether we are the tares or the wheat! Let us "examine ourselves" to discover if our lives manifest the properties of wheat. And what, in summary, are the properties of wheat?

Psalm 51:17, "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise."

Matthew 5:3-4, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted."

Romans 7:24, "Wretched man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?"

Truly those who receive God's wrath on the last day are the ones who live TO please God! But those who are accepted in the sight of God are those who live BECAUSE they please God through the cross!

Now in light of this, notice one of the most incredible promises awaiting all in Jesus Christ — the wheat of this passage. According to Christ's interpretation of this parable in Matthew 13:43, the barn into which the wheat is gathered is akin to the eternal rest awaiting all in Christ. And in this context, notice that "the rest" that is ours in Christ is a rest in which we will "[shine] forth like the sun." This denotes not only the glory we shall share with Christ (Philippians 3:20-21),

but also our changed character! As Matthew Henry put it, “Their sanctification will be perfected, and their justification will be published.”

In other words, on Judgment Day the believer, far from being the time of dread and woe, will be the day when they are vindicated (cf. Colossians 3:4; Hebrews 6:10)! No deed that they have done for the Lord will be overlooked, no suffering missed, and no trial overlooked! Instead, their salvation in Christ will be published for all to see — to the glory of God!

Christ closed this parable this way:

Matthew 13:43b, “...He who has ears, let him hear.”

Christ is saying “Respond to this message!” If the teaching of this passage has brought you to the point in your life where you see that your life is a sham and that you do not possess the salvation spoken about here, then cast aside your vain attempts at pleasing God — nothing you do can earn His favor. Turn from your sinful living. Trust Jesus Christ — His sacrifice and so His wrath removing death — as the basis upon which you stand before God and be saved!

Do this and you shall be saved! On the other hand, if the teaching of this passage has brought you to the point of conviction that you’ve been saved by grace, but you’ve been living like a tare, then run back to Christ! God’s love for you in Christ is NOT based on your holy living, good intentions, or fulfilled obligations, BUT on His own good pleasure. Return this day to your Father — as the prodigal returned to his father — and so

- (1) Receive the forgiveness of God BEFORE you even have asked for it, and so
- (2) Enjoy the embrace of your God and His repeated kisses- He loves you so much!
- (3) You needn’t be so hungry! Go to God this day as a broken man or woman and He will receive you!