

Introduction

This morning we come to the parable of the wheat and the weeds. To understand the parable, we need the backdrop of the following basic considerations. 1) The kingdom promised in the OT is present. 2) It is present in a way unexpected. 3) It comes in the preaching of the gospel. It comes by the word of the king as a Sower, sowing seed. These considerations arise from the parable of the Sower, and understanding the parable of the Sower is essential to understanding all the parables as Jesus said, **Do you not understand this parable? Then how will you understand all the parables?** (Mk 4.13).

We will cover two things today in the outline: the central point of the parable, and the basic lessons of the parable.

1A. The central point of the parable

Let's get the details of the parable before us, itemize the specifics that the Lord gives in His interpretation, and, in this light, focus the core teaching or central point of the parable.

1B. The details of the story

It should immediately strike our interest to note that the Lord tells us that the kingdom is like a man ("the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man," 13.24), but not simply like a man. We have to read the account holistically: the kingdom is like a man that sowed good seed in his field, but this and that happened. In other words, the kingdom of God is like this story about a man that sowed good wheat seed, an enemy who sowed weeds among the wheat, the growing of both seeds together, the inquiry of the servants with two questions (how can this be? and what should we do about it?), and the master's answers (it came about by an enemy, and you are not to do anything about it). Let us read 13.24-30 listening for these details.

He put another parable before them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, ²⁵ but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. ²⁶ So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. ²⁷ And the servants of the master of the house came and said to him, 'Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have weeds?' ²⁸ He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹ But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

Interestingly, there is no explanation attached to the parable. Matthew, our narrator, records two more parables without explanation (the mustard seed and the leaven), and then it is not until after he cites the purpose of parables based on Psalm 78 that he comes back to the parable of the weeds and records the explanation (13.36-43).

2B. The specifics of the explanation

Some time passed and the Lord got off the boat, left the crowds, and went into someone's house (13.2, 36), where the disciples sought explanation saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field" (36b). The Lord answered them first by interpreting the specifics of the story.

He answered, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed is the children of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels (Mat 13.37-39).

He simply identifies the sower, the field, the wheat, the weeds, the enemy, the harvest, and the reapers in 13.36-39. The Sower is the Son of Man. The field is the world. The wheat are the children of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one. The enemy is the devil. The harvest refers to the close of the age, and the reapers are angels.

3B. The central point of the parable

The central point or basic thrust of the parable comes out in 13.40-43:

⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, ⁴² and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

There is a slight shift in the explanation here from outlining details to weaving the details together into a story with a powerful message. Furthermore, when we compare these words with the original telling of the story, it seems that we need to do justice to the second question of the servants: **So the servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' ²⁹ But he said, 'No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn (13.28-30).**

What then is the central thrust of the parable? Let us consider some options in a process of elimination so we can gain perspective.

1) Options

There are those who think that the parable turns on the activity of the enemy. He sows a counterfeit seed. Emphasis in this view is on the devil's mission of imitation.

Another approach emphasizes the nature of the church. Here the idea is that the kingdom and the church are equivalent. Thus, the confessing church is a mixture of believers and unbelievers, and we cannot differentiate between them now. The main lessons grow out of this mixture.

However, both of these views fail at a crucial point, namely, the wheat and weeds in the parable are distinguishable. The servants see them both and identify them both. If the idea were imitation, it would be poor imitation, and the kind that hardly shows the work of the great deceiver. If the mixture represents the confessing church, then the point would be that we *could* differentiate between those who are hypocrites and those who are genuine, but we know that we cannot differentiate between people in this way.

2) Central thrust

It seems best to get the main thrust of the parable from the following verses (put back to back). **Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn (v. 30) ...at the close of the age... the Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers (vs. 40-41).** The pressing issue here is the time of the separation. The point is that the kingdom of heaven (13.24), which is the kingdom of Christ (13.41), comes to realization in history without effecting the final separation of men (we should not miss the important fact that it is Christ's kingdom!). The kingdom comes in a way unexpected. Its coming involves the "delay" of final judgment ("delay" is figurative of our perspective on the unexpectedness).

3) Perspectives

a) OT/Daniel

The promises of the OT come to fruition in the kingdom of Jesus Messiah, the Son of Man (Mat 13.41). He receives universal dominion and glory, as it was foretold by the prophet, Daniel: **I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. ¹⁴ And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed (Dan 7.13-14).** The coming of this kingdom is like a stone that breaks in pieces all the kingdoms of the earth when the God of heaven sets up a kingdom that shall never be destroyed (Dan 2.35, 44). Accordingly, note the universalism that emerges in the parable. The kingdom is geographically, nationally, and temporally universal. The field (the ground, land, or earth) in which the wheat and weeds grow is

the world. Thus, the wheat and weeds of the world refer to all law-breakers and by implication all the righteous ones. In other words, all nations are in His kingdom and under His rule.

b) What happens?

Surprisingly, however, when this kingdom comes in the appearing of Christ, He does not crush the nations to pieces (Dan 2.35, 44), and He does not usher in the final Day of Judgment. The OT promised the coming of the kingdom and the enthronement of the David of Davids. However, when the Davidic kingdom in fact arrives on the scene of human history, the end of history, as it were, is delayed. Alternatively, we might say that the crushing of the nations that oppose the Lord and His anointed comes at the end of the kingdom age rather than at its beginning.

c) What happens if we press the point of judgment?

If we press the point of judgment at the dawn of the kingdom, then we have to look at the unexpected fact that *Israel* receives judgment. God's wrath falls *on His covenant people* and not on the wicked nations of the earth. The time of Jubilee (Lev 25.3-4, every 7th year is a Sabbath year), the Jubilee of Jubilees (Lev 25.8-12, every 7th Sabbath year leads to a special jubilee year), and the tenfold Jubilee of the seventy weeks prophecy of Daniel comes to Israel and Israel stands under divine judgment (Dan 9.24, ten Sabbath years lead to the atoning work of Christ and the coming of the kingdom). Thus, when Jesus read from the scroll of Isaiah 61.1-2, He announced the year of the Lord's favor (Lk 4.19, the year of Jubilee!) saying, **Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing** (Lk 4.21). Then He told the people of His hometown, there in the synagogue on that Sabbath day, that His coming to Israel as the promised prophet is like the coming of blessing in the days of Elijah and Elisha. In those days, there were many widows in Israel, but Elijah was sent to none of them. Instead, God sent him to a widow in the land of Sidon outside of the land of Israel. In those days, there were many lepers in Israel, but the only one that God blessed through the prophet Elisha was Naaman the Syrian outside of the land of Israel. By these penetrating words, Jesus announced the passing by of Israel in the coming of her king and the coming of her kingdom, in the coming of her Jubilee king and her Jubilee kingdom.

2A. The basic lessons of the parable

We have to ground our approach to the lessons here in the refrain of 13.43b: **He that has ears let him hear**. As we have noted before (cf. Mat 11.15 in the conclusion of the sermon on 11-16-2005), this language of hearing gives an exhortation to obey. What we have here, then, is the unusual case where the Lord calls us to obey His teaching, even though the teaching does not express a duty (there is a critical lesson here for all theological work). In other words, duty is implied in our Lord's teaching, and He expects us to be on the lookout for it with willing commitment to obedience.

What specifically is the duty in this context? Or, we might ask, is it a cluster of duties? Perhaps, we may find different exhortations when we come to the text in light of different circumstances in our lives. We can safely say that the Lord directs us to a territory of duties where the ones that strike us depend on our entry point. The idea is like going onto a football field: if you enter on one side, your duties are defensive, and if you enter on the other side, your duties are offensive. There are different duties for the work of offense from those of the work of defense. Of course, you may lock on to things that I do not even see. Still, we can begin with the following lessons.

1) Jesus calls us to think some uncomfortable thoughts

A duty arising from the parable of the wheat and weeds relates to the fact of judgment to come at the end of the age. Surely, we are to take it into our hearts and absorb the sobering reality into our souls. We are to think about the consequences of sin that extend unendingly out

into the eternal future. We may not, we do not, enjoy reflecting on what judgment involves. The thoughts here are too heavy to ponder very long.

Going down this road is very unpleasant but necessary. It is so unpleasant that many believers try to find ways to explain the ongoing consequences of sin away. This is the case in the attempt to make a case for annihilation, where the effect lasts forever but the pain endures for only a moment. The pain of punishment ends quickly, but the result is permanent.

However, eternal *punishment* is the great danger that hangs over us in all of our existence on the earth. Granted, the word eternal does not occur in our context, but what does occur is the hard fact of the place where “**there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth**” (Mat 13.42). When we compare this text with the fact that the punishment is like being thrown into prison from which “**you will never get out until you have paid the last penny**” (Mat 5.26), and with the fact that the punishment is eternal (Mat 25.46a), and with the fact that the eternal punishment of the wicked stands in marked contrast to eternal life of the righteous (Mat 25.46b), then we know that the doctrine of hell is not a description of annihilation. Final punishment is not being burned into absolute oblivion in a moment by infinitely powerful (i.e. eternal) fire. Punishment involves weeping and gnashing of teeth that abides without end. Therefore, although the thought of eternal punishment is troubling, stifling, and overwhelming, it is a thought that we should think, absorb into our worldview, and mix into our daily living.

Remember, there are doctrinal idolatries and doctrinal sins. As the confession puts it, the Scriptures teach us what God requires that we believe and what duties He thereby requires of us. Thus, believing the truth is a duty, among the duties that believing the truth leads to.

One of the sins of the doctrine of annihilationism is that it thinks of sin too lightly. Thus, the hymn writer captures a powerful truth when he says, “you who think of sin but lightly, nor suppose the evil great, here may view its nature rightly, here its guilty may estimate. Mark the sacrifice appointed, see who bears the awful load, tis the word, the Lord’s anointed, Son of Man and Son of God” (Trinity Hymnal, 192). Jesus calls us to think some uncomfortable thoughts, but finally we must think about His suffering and death for sinners; the cross defines our punishment and gives us our only hope of forgiveness (cf. 1 Peter 2.24, He bore our sins...that we might die to sin and live to righteousness).

2) Jesus calls us to live a righteous life

One duty that this context implies is all that is bound up with living a righteous life. “Righteous” people are those who cling to Christ as mediator-priest and who with repentant hearts earnestly pursue obedience to His will (cf. Mat 5.3-9; 6.24; 7.24; 11.28-30).

Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted. ⁵ Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth. ⁶ Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled. ⁷ Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy. ⁸ Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God. ⁹ Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God (Mat 5.3-9).

No one can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and money (Mat 6.24).

Everyone then who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock (Mat 7.24).

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰ For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light (Mat 11.28-30).

The righteous (or true Christians) are those who choose to live under the authority of God with a deep sense of spiritual poverty, while they hold on to Christ for rest of soul, and submit to the Lord Jesus as their king.

An aspect of righteous living is the due recognition of what sins deserve, of what our sins as Christians in fact actually deserve. Each sin we commit merits eternal death. This fact has to be part of our outlook toward sin as we aim at righteousness. What this does is show us how bad sin is. This goes beyond simply thinking about the punishment that we avoid in Christ because it makes us conscious of the nature of evil. It makes us conscious of how deep the offense is against God. Then our discomfort is not just with the nature of hell, but also with the nature of sin as a profound contradiction of the holiness and righteousness of God, as a contradiction that calls forth His holy wrath and calls for a day of unparalleled judgment.

When we join the demand for righteousness with the uncomfortable thoughts about the consequences of sin, then we must understand that there is a call here to thank God from the depths of our beings for His saving grace. In turn, this orientation of our thinking drives our worship of Christ our king who endured the infinite cost of suffering in our place to give us access into the kingdom where we will “shine like the sun” (13.43).

3) Jesus calls us to love our enemies

Part of the holy life conditioned by due recognition of the consequences of sin is the posture that we take toward those who oppose us and sin against us.

To be sure, they may persecute us and cause us to call out, “how long shall my honor be turned into shame” (Ps 4.2). However, because of this parable, how are we to think about the wicked and our relationship to them? We are to think of them as people God spared from final judgment. He delayed the judgment of the nations until the harvest at the end of the age. What then do we give to the nations instead of judgment? We give the gospel to them.

Therefore, we are to be longsuffering in sharing the gospel with those in need across the face of the earth because God is longsuffering in sparing them from final judgment in the present day of salvation. Growing in this parable parallels the sowing in the parable of the Sower. This is necessary now because God has so ordered it. Therefore, as individual Christians and as a church we need to reexamine our testimony and our involvement in outreach continually. This entire time between the comings of Christ is a time for the spreading of the word of God to the ends of the earth.

Why is that the case? It is the case because Christ is the universal king who rules the earth. Thus, His people Israel are now the world of nations. All families of the earth are His covenant people cast off in judgment, but now in the kingdom of Christ, because Israel has been blended into the nations. He is the King of kings, and Lord of lords. He is the Sabbath king and universal sovereign now in a way unexpected. He tells us to spread the word like sowing seed, to give the nations the word of salvation from coming judgment. Then one day He will make the final separation and gather out of His kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers and “throw them into the fiery furnace” to the place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (13.42). At that time, Jesus tells us, “the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (13.43). Therefore, now we are to love our enemies.

To begin some lessons, we can say that Jesus calls us to think. He calls us to think some uncomfortable thoughts about the consequences of sin, to live a repentant life in earnest pursuit of the things of God day by day, and to love our enemies as we live out our lives in a sinful world being hurt by our sins and by the sins of others against us.

May we fall down before the majesty of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ the risen Lord; may we confess our sins, and take up the diligent and earnest pursuit of learning His word and obeying His will. To Him be all glory. Amen.