

The Wheat and the Tares

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Jesus’ parable of the wheat and the tares, which is sometimes referred to as the parable of the tares of the field or the parable of the weeds, is recorded in Matthew 13:24-30. He later explained the parable to His disciples in verses 36-43.

Jesus began this parable by saying that the kingdom of Heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field, but while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and then they went away. Later, when the wheat plants came up and bore grain, the tares also appeared.

When the servants of the landowner noticed that tares had come up with the wheat, they came to him and asked him if he had not sown good seed in his field. He replied to them saying that an enemy had sown the tares in among his wheat.

The servants then asked him if he wanted them to go and pull up the tares. He answered them: “No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with 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.’” (Matthew 13:29-30).

After they had left the crowds, Jesus’ disciples came to Him and asked Him to explain the parable to them. He answered them saying:

“The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, and the field is the world; 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. So 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 throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will 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. (Matthew 13:37-43).

From the explanation given to His disciples, we can see that Jesus is the One who sows the good seed, the field is the world, and the good seed represents the sons of the kingdom. The tares are the sons of the evil one (the devil), and he is the one who sows them.

The good seed, or the wheat, is the metaphor that Jesus used to symbolize the “sons of the kingdom” (Matthew 13:38), or God’s elect. God’s elect are those who have, or will at some point in time, be brought to faith in Christ. These individuals will indeed bear fruit, bearing a harvest “useful to those for whom it is tilled”, as the writer of Hebrews said (Hebrews 6:7). In contrast to the good seed which bears fruit, Jesus spoke of tares, which symbolize unbelievers. The tares bear no good fruit, and indeed they *cannot* bear any good fruit (Matthew 7:18-19, John 15:6).

Just as the “good soil” symbolizes God’s elect in the parable of the sower, the “good seed” symbolizes God’s elect in the parable of the wheat and the tares. God’s elect are the ones to whom it has been granted to understand the mysteries of the kingdom of Heaven, but to all the others it has not been granted (Matthew 13:11). God’s elect hear His word that was sown in their hearts, they understand it, and they do indeed come to faith in Christ. As a result of their genuine faith, they bear fruit: some thirty, some sixty, and some a hundred times what was sown (Matthew 13:23).

The “good seed” in the parable of the wheat and the tares are those who have been given “ears to hear” (Matthew 13:9, 43). They are those who belong to God, those whom Jesus calls His sheep, and they will all hear His voice (John 10:3-4, 10:27). All the rest will not be able to hear (John 6:44, 6:65, 8:43, 8:47, 10:25-26).

When we consider that the “field” in the parable of the wheat and the tares represents the world, we should also consider that that any large church congregation is a microcosm of the world. There will be “tares” mixed in with the “wheat” in these congregations.

While everyone in these congregations might claim to be a Christian, we should remember Jesus’ warning about false prophets in Matthew 7:15-23. He said they will come to us “in sheep’s clothing”, claiming to be Christians, but He characterized them inwardly as “ravenous wolves” because of the damage they can inflict in the lives of those who are in truth His sheep. Though they will claim to be Christians, and even claim to have done many good works in Jesus’ name, they will one day hear from Him the words: “I never knew you; depart from Me you who practice lawlessness” (Matthew 7:21-23).

Here in the parable of the wheat and the tares, Jesus gave us a teaching that is very similar to His teaching in the parable of the sower in Matthew 13:1-23, the parable of the Vine and its branches in John 15:1-8, and His warning about false prophets in Matthew 7:15-23. The lesson that is given to us in all four of these passages is this: ***professing believers will demonstrate or give evidence that their faith is genuine by the fact they do indeed bear fruit to the glory of God.*** This bearing of fruit is how we show ourselves to be Jesus’ disciples (John 15:8). There is no such thing as a Christian who does not bear fruit. Conversely, an unbeliever will not, and in fact he cannot, bear fruit to the glory of God, any more than the tares of the field can produce wheat.

There are also other lessons that we can learn in the parable of the wheat and the tares. We can recall that as Jesus concluded the parable in verses 27-30, the servants of the landowner came to him after they noticed the tares mixed in with the wheat, and they asked him if he had not sown good seed in his field. The landowner replied, saying that an enemy had done this. The servants then asked if he wanted them to go and pull up the tares. The landowner answered them saying: “No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them.” (Matthew 13:29).

The lesson here is that it can sometimes be hard to distinguish the tares from the wheat, especially in the case of a young believer. When one is first born again, he may not fully understand that God his Father requires obedience from him, and that he can no longer participate in sin without the consequences of the chastening and correction of God in his life (Hebrews 12:5-11). Therefore, he may for a time appear to be no different than others in the world. However, he will soon learn that

he is no longer his own; he has been bought with a price (1 Corinthians 6:19-20), and His God will intervene in his life to correct him.

Another lesson can be gleaned in the final verse of this parable. After the landowner told his servants not to attempt to pull up the tares, he then said to 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.’” (Matthew 13:30).

Here Jesus spoke of the final separation and judgement that will occur between believers and unbelievers. Those who have been brought to faith in Him, the righteous, will “shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father” (Matthew 13:43). However, for those who have not: “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 throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” (Matthew 13:41-42). We can see another very similar lesson on this final separation and judgement that will occur between believers and unbelievers in Jesus’ parable of the net, which is given to us in Matthew 13:47-50.