

The Parable of the Tares

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

Part I

By Louis Rushmore

Introduction

The Parable of the Tares is one of only two of our Lord's parables that he explained. *The Parable of the Sower* is the other. Both parables share the same background so familiar to Jesus' auditors.

Each of these two parables features the sower and his good seed. However, whereas in *The Parable of the Sower* any righteous soul (including Christ) is the sower, in *The Parable of the Tares* the sower of the good seed ("the householder") is Jesus alone. The Word of God was identified as the seed in *The Parable of the Sower*, but in *The Parable of the Tares* the good seed represents righteous people. The bad seed ("tares") represents unrighteous souls.

The Parable of the Tares also has a second sower — the devil. Additional persons include servants of the householder (the righteous) and angels. Further similarities and contrasts involve the four soils in the former parable and a single field of good soil in the latter parable.

Further the term kingdom is used differently in the two parables. "Kingdom" in its usual sense (when the Bible addresses spiritual matters) pertains to the dominion of God — to us the church — and is employed in the *Parable of the Sower* (Matthew 13:19; Luke 8:1). In the *Parable of the Tares* and the *Parable of the Pounds* or *Money* (Luke 19:11-27) the word "kingdom" refers to the world, in which are both righteous and unrighteous souls.

The Parable of the Tares develops through two questions accompanied by two answers. The questions and answers are prefaced with essential details on which the parable depends for illustration and background ("good seed," apparently good soil ["field"], "while men slept," "enemy," weed seed ["tares"], "the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit" and "servants").

The Parable

"Another parable put he forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both

grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn” (Matthew 13:24-30).

“Then Jesus sent the multitude away, and went into the house: and his disciples came unto him, saying, Declare unto us the parable of the tares of the field. He answered and said unto them, He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man; The field is the world; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one; The enemy that sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the world; and the reapers are the angels. As therefore the tares are gathered and burned in the fire; so shall it be in the end of this world. The Son of man shall send forth his angels, and they shall gather out of his kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; And shall cast them into a furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Matthew 13:36-43).

Jesus then explained that the “field” represents the “world,” “the good seed are the children of the kingdom,” “tares are the children of the wicked one,” the “enemy” is the “devil,” “the harvest is the end of the world” and “the reapers are the angels.” Jesus identified the sower in this parable as “the Son of Man,” which phrase appears in the New Testament about 80 times and applies to Jesus Christ (Acts 7:56).

The soil (“his field” or “world”) into which the wheat seed was sown belongs to our Lord. “He [Jesus] here claims proprietorship.”¹ “The heavens are thine, the earth also is thine: as for the world and the fullness thereof, thou hast founded them” (Psalms 89:11). The material universe, our planet, all creation including our souls and our bodies belong to our Creator. The devil may rule in the kingdoms of men (2 Corinthians 4:4), but everything really belongs to God. “The earth is the Lord’s and the fullness thereof, and they that dwell therein” (Psalms 24:1).

The good seed and the resulting wheat are Christians. In the wheat field, whatever is not wheat is a weed. There is no in between. Christians necessarily are in the world, but we must not be of the world (John 15:18-19; 17:9-18) and we must not conform to the world (Romans 12:1-2; James 4:4).

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Discovery of the tares was a “sad surprise.”² Apparently, the tares were indistinguishable from the wheat, not only as seeds but as developing plants, too. However, after the ear was formed the difference became obvious. This gives

heightened meaning to Jesus' words, "wherefore, by their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20).

Tares among the wheat amounted to opposition to a bountiful harvest by imitation. Similarly, world religions and denominationalism purport to offer communication to and from God and promise redemption or some other type of a reward. Especially some denominations closely imitate primitive, New Testament Christianity. Further, even within the Lord's church there may be impenitent, sinful souls who, unknown to us, are lost. Though men may not always be able to discern sinners, God is not fooled. He will separate the wicked from the righteous (Matthew 25:31-46).

These tares were sown "while men slept" which may simply mean the deed was done under the cloak of night darkness. If so, no indictment of the sleeping men is warranted because good men ordinarily sleep at night. Contrary to the tactics of the devil, Jesus Christ and his followers work in the light (John 3:18-21). Our Lord's mission, in which we participate, is to turn souls from the darkness of sin to the light of righteousness (Matthew 5:14-16; Acts 26:16-18).

The devil delights in counteracting the work of Christ. Satan is the enemy of Jesus and his church. The spiritual conflict in which we find ourselves is the greatest confrontation imaginable (i.e., more significant than WW1, WW2, or WW3 should it occur).

This second sower in *The Parable of the Tares* is variously identified in the passage before us. He is referred to as "his enemy," "an enemy," "the wicked one" and "the devil" (Matthew 13:25, 28, 38-39). From three perspectives, the "enemy" was trespassing when he sowed tares. He was a trespasser (1) for secretly entering the householder's property, (2) for entering another man's property for the explicit and premeditated purpose of causing harm, and (3) simply because he was "an enemy" and therefore rightfully unwelcome. This enemy was also cowardly.

The tares, after they attained a certain stage of development, were at once recognized as counterproductive to the anticipated harvest. The sole reason these tares were in the wheat field was to vent the hate of an enemy. No party had anything substantive to gain by sowing tares among the wheat.

The householder elected to separate the tares during the harvest. Separating the tares from the wheat was a difficult, time consuming and unpleasant added chore at harvest time.

The harvest in this parable represents the end of the world and judgment. Hence, this is a judgment parable; the final judgment will come. There will be a separation between the righteous and the unrighteous (2 Peter 3:10, 12; Revelation 20:11-15; Matthew 24:31, 46). Though we do not know when the judgment harvest will occur, there is a God-appointed time that it will be executed (Acts 17:31).

The reapers are the angels (Matthew 13:41; 25:31; Jude 14-15). The disposition of the tares in the parable represents hell (Matthew 5:22; Hebrews 10:27; Mark 9:43,

48). The judgment of the tare — souls in this parable — is described: “furnace of fire” and “wailing and gnashing of teeth” (Matthew 13:42). These phrases and companion passages portray the horror of hell, fierceness of torment and hopeless despair (Luke 10:19-31; Revelation 20:11-15; Matthew 25:31-46).

Happily, this parable also pictures an eternal reward for those in the parable represented as the good seed and the wheat (Matthew 13:43). The last verse of the parable, with the phrase “who hath ears to hear, let him hear,” intimates that the soul in this life represented by the tares could change. Thus hell can be avoided by conforming to the doctrine of Christ (Romans 6:17-18; 1 Corinthians 6:9-11).

Conclusion

Good and evil stand beside each other in this life. However, eventually there will be a permanent separation. For now, though, the world is like a field of wheat and tares.

Jesus taught that there will be a final judgment, illustrated by the harvest at the end of the growing season. Until the Lord returns, this is the growing season. We must prepare to meet God (Amos 4:12).

Clearly, our Lord taught the existence and activity of the devil. Consonant with the personage of the devil, he taught the reality of a devil’s hell. As assuredly as there is heaven for which we long, hell, too, exists and must be avoided.

Though used as a popular quibble, *The Parable of the Tares* does not teach against church discipline. Church discipline (Romans 16:17-18; Titus 3:10) is not discussed in the parable. Contrariwise, the church is obligated to exercise church discipline when necessary (1 Corinthians 5).

Finally, *The Parable of the Tares* and the erroneous doctrine of premillennialism conflict. “The millennium theory is refuted in this parable.”³

Endnotes

¹Herbert Lockyer, *All the Parables of the Bible*, Zondervan Publishing House, p. 180.

²W. Gaddys Roy, *Sermon Outlines on the Parables of Jesus*, W. Gaddys Roy, p. 22

³*Ibid.*, p. 23.