



THE PARABLE OF THE WHEAT AND THE WEEDS

Catalog No. 7122
 Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43
 Mark Mitchell
 January 29, 1995

Christians are concerned today about the rising tide of secularism and evil in society. They are worried about how to get along in a world where fewer and fewer people seem to share their Christian convictions.

There appears to be a growing acceptance of evil in our country. Evil seems even to be legislated. Things that once were swept under the rug are now flaunted as freedoms that are guaranteed under the Constitution—things like abortion on demand, neo-Nazis on high school campuses, homosexual rights, New Age environmentalism, condom distribution. (I have had to explain to my eight-year-old daughter a ten-foot tall painting of a condom on a billboard on the 101 freeway). Christians should be concerned about these things.

One of the words that is thrown around in defense of all this immorality and secularism is the word “pluralism.” We are reminded that these things are the realities of living in pluralistic society. Now pluralism, our ethnic and religious diversity as a nation, is a good thing. But it seems we have confused pluralism with relativism. Pluralism celebrates our diversity and grants people the freedom to choose their own lifestyle and world view. But relativism holds that every lifestyle choice and world view is equally valuable and true. Relativism forces us to deny altogether the categories of right and wrong. We live in a society in which the greatest sin is to say that some alternative lifestyle or belief system might actually be wrong or false. If we hold this viewpoint, we are considered bigoted, or homophobic, or, worst of all, politically incorrect. G.K. Chesterton lamented this when he wrote, “What we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place...A man was meant to be doubtful about himself, but undoubting about the truth; this has been exactly reversed. We are on the road to producing a race of men too mentally humble to believe in the multiplication table.” What a sad state of affairs. So these things ought to concern Christians.

But they also confront us with a dilemma: How should we respond? How should we live and grow in a society where belief in right and wrong is a minority position? These are questions that Christians have had to ask ever since the first century. And at various times in history they have answered them in a number of different ways.

One response has simply been to retreat from society altogether. An extreme example of this is the monastic movement, which began in the second century and continues today in monasteries and convents throughout the world. The monastic life calls for a retreat from the evils of society and the creation of a community that is distinctively Christian.

Another, very different response that Christians have had over the centuries is to fight and seek to conquer the evils of society. There are many extreme examples of this.

For instance, this was the philosophy that motivated medieval Christians to slaughter the adherents of Islam, in the Crusades. Today, we see remnants of this thinking in Christians who are willing to resort to any and all means to root out evil from our society: Engender hatred and violence towards homosexuals. Why not? Murder a doctor who performs abortions. Why not?

So we can retreat or we can fight.

But there is a third option, and that is simply to acquiesce, to give in, to become apathetic and careless. We may seek to maintain our personal beliefs in God and Christ, but publicly we blend in with everyone else. We do not seek to be different at all, or to make an impact on people around us. We simply surrender and comply.

What is the right answer to the dilemma? What should we do about the rising tide of secularism and immorality in our day? Should we retreat? Should we fight? Should we acquiesce? This morning we will look at one of the parables of Jesus which addresses this issue. It is the story of the wheat and the weeds, found among several parables of Jesus in the thirteenth chapter of Matthew’s gospel. Our Lord offered this parable to the crowds (in vv 24-30), and later explained it privately to his disciples (in vv 36-43). Let’s begin by reading vv 24-30:

He presented another parable to them, saying, “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. But when the wheat sprang up and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. 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!’ And the slaves said to him, ‘Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?’ But he said, ‘No, lest while you are gathering up the tares, you may root up 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.”’” (NASB)

Jesus told this parable in order to explain what the kingdom (the reign) of God, or heaven, is like, how the kingdom of heaven works. It functions as follows, according to Jesus.

A farmer sows good seed in his field. But while he and his workers are sleeping, his enemy sows tares, or weeds, among the wheat. This would be considered a vicious act in that first century day. Actually, such behavior was a violation of Roman law. The particular weed in question, dandelion, is a type of grass that grows exclusively in grain fields in the Middle East. The weed contains a poisonous

fungus that ruins crops. The problem is that when darnel first begins to grow, it looks just like wheat. That is why the parable says that it wasn't until the wheat bore grain that the darnel became evident. At that point, the farmer's slaves offered to root out the weed. But the farmer refused, for fear that they might root up some wheat along with it. He told them to wait, to let the two, the darnel and the wheat, grow together until the harvest, when the reapers, not they, would separate the two.

Now, whenever you study a parable you must look for the surprise in the story. In this parable, one of the surprises is right here. The normal thing to do would be to root out the weeds as soon as they were noticed. Thus, the emphasis of the story lies in the farmer's words, "Wait for the harvest. Be patient; it is not for you to root out the weeds." As we will see later, one of the crucial things this story is designed to teach us is patience. It is the strange patience of the farmer that would have struck the crowd listening to Jesus.

But Jesus wasn't trying to teach better farming practices. Later on, in the quiet of a friend's living room, the disciples asked him about the deeper significance of the story. Let's listen to the conversation, in verse 36:

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 in 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; 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." (13:36-39)

In the first few verses, Jesus explains the points of reference from the parable.

First, the farmer. The farmer who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. This was Jesus' title for himself. It comes from the book of Daniel, where the Son of Man is pictured as one who will come with the clouds of heaven and establish his kingdom, exercising dominion over the entire world. It is important to notice that whatever this parable is about, it is meant to be a commentary on Jesus' own ministry. He is the central figure of the story.

Second, the field. We learn that the field is the world. Notice that it is not the church, but the world. This story does not teach us, as many think, about the nature of the church. Rather, it teaches us about the world, within which the church lives.

Third, the good seed. We learn that the good seed is the sons of the kingdom; those who belong to the kingdom of God, who are scattered or sown throughout the world. Notice that this is different from the parable of the sower, which Jesus told earlier. In that parable, the seed was the word of the kingdom, and the different soils were various kinds of people. Here, the seed is people, and the soil, or the field, is the world.

Fourth, the weeds and the enemy. Notice there is good seed and bad seed. The bad seed, or the weeds, are the sons of the evil one, who is identified as the devil. He is the enemy who lurks behind the scenes in the story. He scatters his seed secretly, while the workers sleep.

Fifth, the harvest and the reapers. The harvest is the end

of the age; and the reapers are the angels. Notice, it is the reapers, or the angels, and not the slaves, who do the separating at the end of the age.

In the last few verses, Jesus focuses on this particular period of time. Verses 40-43:

"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."

Jesus speaks of the final judgment of the weeds, which he calls "stumbling blocks and those who commit lawlessness." He says they will be gathered up and cast into a furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. This is biblical imagery for hell. It pictures the ultimate torment, sorrow, and frustration of those who have chosen to go their own way.

But, Jesus speaks here also of the glorious fate of the righteous. He says they will "shine forth as the sun." No longer will they be indistinguishable from the weeds. They will ripen to a beautiful maturity. They will shine forth in the kingdom of their Father.

And notice once again the central place that Jesus has in all of this. He says, "The Son of Man will send forth His angels and gather out of His kingdom." Jesus is not only the one who sows, but the one who oversees the harvest as well.

Thus we have Jesus' explanation of the story.

Let me summarize in three principles what we can learn from this parable about how to respond to the immorality and secularism of modern society.

First, the story teaches that it is God's will that the righteous and the wicked coexist in the world until the end.

This revelation would have startled the Jews. They believed that when the kingdom of God arrived, the wicked would immediately be overthrown. That is why the Jews could not figure out Jesus' ministry. He repeatedly said that the kingdom of God was at hand, but nothing had changed. The ungodly were still doing unrighteous acts, just as they are today. For this reason, Jesus told the crowds this parable, to explain why this situation existed, and to correct their view of the kingdom. In essence, he was saying, "My kingdom is here, but it is not yet completely fulfilled. It's not time yet for the overthrow of evil. So you must expect to live through a period of time where the environment in which you live seems less than ideal."

Earlier I mentioned that one of the ways Christians have responded to the threat of evil is to retreat. But Jesus doesn't give us that option. We cannot retreat from the weeds of our world—nor should we try to. It is God's will that we coexist, side by side, even intertwined, as weeds and wheat sometimes are, with ungodly people.

This principle has critical implications for our view of how we grow as Christians. Most of us feel that the best way to grow is to find an ideal setting, one that is free of harassment and competition from the weeds, and live

there. It makes sense, doesn't it? Weeds hinder growth. I have a large front lawn which I used to care for myself. A while back I noticed that it was getting overrun with weeds. Finally, I relented. I hired a company to come out and spray my lawn once a quarter. Now it looks great. It is thriving in an environment where it has no competition. Doesn't it make sense that Christians would fare better in an ideal environment, one with no competition? Jesus says, "No. I want you to grow together with the weeds."

But some of us spend a lot of time and money trying to find a weedless environment in which to live and raise our children. We select schools and neighborhoods and communities with this in mind. We have a "hothouse" mentality toward Christian growth. Recently I saw a full page advertisement in *Christianity Today*, inviting Christians to buy real estate in a Southwest Florida community called Lehigh. The advertisement says: "Welcome to Lehigh, the southwest Florida community that shares your traditional family values. This community of faith plays a significant role in shaping our town through the leadership of an influential ministerial association which unites over thirty congregations in the preservation and encouragement of traditional family values. Lehigh is growing progressively toward an even brighter future, while defending the fundamental beliefs upon which America was founded. For example, we proudly display a nativity scene in the heart of our town every Christmas. We feel a strong sense of responsibility and love for one another. We cherish the ideals of church, family, and community. For Christians who love being around other people who share their traditions and values, Lehigh is a wonderful place to worship, live, work, retire, or raise a family."

The message is clear: "Your Christian life would be much better off if you got rid of the weeds around you. Think of it: a life without temptation! You and your children wouldn't have to contend with those bad influences." Of course, we can make a case for protecting ourselves and our children from unhealthy and dangerous influences. But we can't make a way of life by separating from people who don't share our values. God wills that we coexist, side by side with the weeds of this world. He refuses our requests for favorable growing conditions.

This has tremendous relevance for Christians living here on the Peninsula. A few months ago, a *Newsweek* magazine article on Christianity in America said that San Francisco's West Bay Area (the Peninsula) has the least number of professing Christians in the entire nation. We have more weeds here than anywhere else in the entire country! Some would say, "What an awful place for Christians to live! How can you grow there? How can you raise your children to be strong Christians in this environment?" Not according to Jesus. He says, "I'm the sower, and that is where I planted you. That is my prerogative. That is where I want you to live and grow."

The surprise is that the parable assures us that we can still grow in this environment. How can we know that? We know it because in the end, there is wheat to harvest. That's the miracle of the story. Some wheat actually made it. So we can trust God to get the job done in our lives in a less than ideal setting. We don't have to move to Elko, Nevada, or Lemmon, South Dakota. We can live and grow, and even bear fruit, right here, in the midst of the weeds. That is the first thing we learn from this story.

Second, the story teaches us that we must restrain ourselves from the temptation to root out the "weeds" of our world.

We learn patience from this story. Though we may want to separate the righteous from the unrighteous, Jesus says it's not time yet. This relates to one of the options I mentioned earlier, that of trying to conquer the weeds in the here and now, like they did in the time of the Crusades. This parable says we can't do that. As much as we are distressed by what we see going on around us, we must exercise patience and restraint in our response.

And the parable is clear on why we must be patient. Listen again to the words of the farmer in response to the request of the slaves to pull out the weeds: "No!" he said, in effect, "lest while you are gathering up the weeds you root out some of the wheat with them." In other words, we cannot weed in a way that won't do more damage than good. We can't be trusted with the job. The harvest hasn't completely ripened yet. As a result, the wheat and the weeds are sometimes indistinguishable from one another. We might root out some wheat along with the weeds.

The bottom line is, we don't always know what is in a person's heart. In this context, we should remember one of Jesus' favorite sayings: "The last shall be first and the first shall be last." In other words, there are going to be some surprises in heaven. So don't try to figure out who is in and who is out. You will always get it wrong. We need to admit our inability to weed properly.

This parable teaches us patience, but it also teaches us humility. We can't be trusted with the job of weeding. One reason for this is that some of the evil that we seek to root out exists within our own hearts. This is the tragedy of many Fundamentalists and Christian reformers in our day. They are arrogant—and the world knows it. They want to root out the evils of society, but they fail to see the weeds in their own hearts. We need to leave the job with God. Earlier I mentioned my lawn. One thing that was hard to do was to humble myself and admit that I could not adequately care for it. I had to be willing to hand the job over to someone who knew what he was doing. That is what Jesus is saying: "Hand it over. Let me do this in my own good time." The great thing about giving over this work is that we don't have to worry about it anymore. Weeding takes a lot of energy. But God says, "Be patient. Let me take care of it."

Isn't it interesting that God is more patient with people than we are? We want to weed now, but God says he will take care of it later. Our story teaches that we serve a slow God, at least according to our time frame. We like to think that God is fast, that he gets things done in a hurry. But the fact is, oftentimes God is slow. He is slow in judging the wicked, because he longs for them to turn to him. God loves them. He loves weeds! Of course, we were all weeds once. Listen to what the apostle Peter says about this in his second letter (from Eugene Peterson's translation of the New Testament): "With God one day is as good as a thousand years, a thousand years as a day. God isn't late with his promise as some measure lateness. He is restraining himself because of you, holding back the End because he doesn't want anyone lost. He is giving everyone space and time to change." Isn't it odd that God is more patient with sinners than we are?

There is an old Jewish story told about Abraham. The patriarch was sitting outside his tent one day when an old man, weary from his journey, approached him. Abraham greeted him warmly, washed his feet, and gave him something to eat and drink. Abraham noticed that the man ate without saying a prayer or blessing. So he asked him, "Don't you worship God?" The old man replied, "I worship only the fire." At that, Abraham became angry and threw the old man out of his tent into the cold night air. Afterwards, God asked Abraham where the stranger had gone. Abraham said, "I forced him out because he did not worship you." God replied, "I have suffered him these eighty years. Could you not endure him one night?"

God is slow in judging the wicked. Shouldn't we be as well?

Third, the story teaches us that at the end of the age, Jesus himself will judge the wicked and reward the righteous.

Don't misinterpret God's slowness. The time will come when he will enter into history in judgment. God is not morally neutral. There will come a day when the righteous are rewarded and the ungodly are punished. It is not here yet, but that time is coming.

We know from other passages that the basis upon which people will be separated is their relationship with the Son of Man. Remember, he is at the center of this story. It is his kingdom; it is his harvest. If we place our faith and trust in him, if we submit to him as Lord and King, then we are assured that we will "shine forth like the sun in the kingdom of our Father."

The language that Jesus used here scares us at times, because it sounds as though he is saying our salvation is based on works. When he speaks of "those who commit lawlessness," we cannot help but see ourselves. But we have to remember that Jesus came to seek and to save the lost (the lawless). We know that our salvation is based on our faith response to the Son of Man, who gives us his righteousness as a gift. But we also know that good works will always be the result of God's presence in our lives. That is why he can call us "the righteous" in v 43. When God invades our lives, he transforms us, and produces in us the fruit of righteousness.

This principle has implications for how we respond to weeds. The third option I outlined earlier was that of ac-

quiescing to the evil around us. Some Christians seem to feel that since they can't retreat from evil, or conquer it, they have to give in to it; they have to let evil set the agenda for them. But our story tells us in no uncertain terms that God does care about righteousness. He wants us to be diligent in our pursuit of true godliness. He is not telling us to give in to sin, or to become apathetic about morality. We are called to be righteous people.

This brings us back to our original question: How should we respond to the rising tide of secularism and evil in our day? The answer given in this parable of Jesus is this: We are to live humbly, patiently, and righteously, in the midst of the world, in the place where God, by his sovereign choice, has planted us. As we do this, God has promised us that we will part of a quiet revolution where, by his grace and power, people around us are transformed from weeds into wheat.

Last February, Mother Teresa was invited to speak at the National Prayer Breakfast, in Washington D.C. As she came up to the podium, President Clinton and his wife Hillary were seated to her left, and Vice President Gore and his wife Tipper were seated to her right. This weak and withered woman mounted that national pulpit, and in the course of her address said this: "I feel that the greatest destroyer of peace today is abortion, because it is war against the child...By abortion the mother does not learn to love and the father does not have to take any responsibility for the child he has brought into the world, and that father has likely put other women in the same trouble. So abortion just leads to abortion. Any country that accepts abortion is not teaching its people to love, but to use violence to get what they want." Apparently, as Mother Teresa spoke these powerful words, the crowd rose and began applauding. Soon the applause was thunderous. The Clintons and the Gores remained seated, staring at their linen tablecloths. When Mother Teresa finished, President Clinton stood up to offer his remarks. Here is what he said: "How can you argue with a life so well lived?"

As Christians, this is our calling—not to retreat, not to conquer using the weapons of this world, yet not to acquiesce, either. Our calling is to be people of whom the world will say, "How can you argue with a life so well lived?" Our calling is to live humbly, patiently, and righteously, until the end of the age.

©1995 Peninsula Bible Church/Cupertino