

Bible Study Guide: Week of 7-13-2020

1. Read through the passage below
2. Read my notes and commentary
3. Read the questions at the end and ponder or discuss with others

Pastor Andrew

Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43

²⁴[Jesus] put before [the crowds] another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away. ²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’ ²⁸He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ ²⁹But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

³⁶Then [Jesus] left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” ³⁷He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴²and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

²⁴[Jesus] put before [the crowds] another parable: “The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed in his field;

This passage continues Jesus’ act of “teaching the crowds many things in parables” that began with the previous parable (the parable of the sower) that we looked at last week. Once again, Jesus uses an agricultural parable to explain something about the kingdom of heaven. At first glance, this parable seems very similar to the parable of the sower, but as we will see, the meaning will develop differently as the parable unfolds. In the parable of the sower, for instance, Jesus said the seed represented the Word about the Kingdom (i.e. the Word of God; the gospel message). Here, as we will see, the seed will be interpreted differently.

²⁵but while everybody was asleep, an enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat, and then went away.

As we will see, this is a strange parable in many ways. Why would an enemy bother to sow weeds among the wheat? What would it profit an enemy to sabotage a field in this way? If taken literally, let’s face it: there are many easier ways to hurt a neighbor’s field if that is the goal. Sowing seeds is time consuming. Further, an enemy would

have to spend time gathering weed seeds—itself a strange task. Also, to do this work “while everybody was asleep” (i.e. at night), would be tedious and risky.

²⁶So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared as well. ²⁷And the slaves of the householder came and said to him, ‘Master, did you not sow good seed in your field? Where, then, did these weeds come from?’

It also seems strange that the slaves of the householder seem surprised that weeds appear in the wheat field. From an agricultural perspective, weeds are to be expected in any planting. The word for “weeds” here is often translated into English as “tares.” It can also be translated as “false grain.” Although it is not certain, the plant being referred to is likely a plant called “darnel”—a weedy ryegrass that is common in Palestine. Darnel can be poisonous, but it superficially resembles true wheat. It is sometimes called “false wheat.” In English, the term “cheat” is sometimes used to refer to this plant (wheat vs. cheat makes a catchy way to distinguish between the two plants). The idea conveyed here is that the plants look similar to the untrained eye—the wheat and the cheat would be very hard to distinguish from each other at first glance, yet one is a cash crop and the other is deadly poison.

Also, strangely, the Master has slaves, but seems to have done the work of sowing himself.

²⁸He answered, ‘An enemy has done this.’

In another odd twist, the Master knows that the weeds are the work of an enemy.

The slaves said to him, ‘Then do you want us to go and gather them?’ ²⁹But he replied, ‘No; for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them. ³⁰Let both of them grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Collect the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

Not only did the master seemingly sow his own seed (not using his slaves as we might expect of a slavemaster), the master also mentions another group of people who will work for him besides his slaves—“the reapers.” It is curious that the only thing the slaves “do” in this story is ask questions. The order of collection is the reverse of what would be customary in agricultural practices in the ancient near east—the true crop would have been gathered first and the weeds sorted out and destroyed later. Here, the weeds are gathered first and then the wheat is to be gathered.

As with last week, there is a break between this parable and its interpretation. The intervening passage consists of two more parables (the mustard seed and the leaven) as well as a brief explanation of the purpose of Jesus’ teaching in parables. Matthew says this is to fulfill what had been spoken by “the prophet” (actually Psalm 78:2) “I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.” We then pick up with v. 36 as Jesus explains the parable—just as last week, not to “the crowds” but to the disciples alone.

³⁶Then [Jesus] left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples approached him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field.” ³⁷He answered, “The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man; ³⁸the field is the world, and the good seed are the children of the kingdom; the weeds are the children of the evil one, ³⁹and the enemy who sowed them is the devil; the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels.

This interpretation, as I mentioned earlier, is different from the parable of the sower. In the parable of the sower, the seed represented the Word about the Kingdom and different types of soil represented different kinds of people who received (or did not receive) the Seed of the Word. Here, it is the seed, not the soil, that is described as good. Here, the “good seed” represents “the children of the kingdom.” Here, unlike it the parable of the sower, the sower is defined as “the Son of Man,” i.e. Jesus. The field or soil no longer represents people, but rather the whole world. Jesus goes on to fairly precisely define many aspects of the parable. Jesus still leaves some interpretation to the reader: for instance, why is it important that the seed was sown while everyone slept? Why does he say the enemy “went away?” If the good seed are children of the kingdom (i.e. Christians) and the reapers are angels, what is the identity of the “slaves?”

⁴⁰Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, ⁴²and they will throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Let anyone with ears listen!

Jesus concludes this parable with an allegorical interpretation of the harvest described in v. 30. Matthew's version of the parables of Jesus typically focus on judgment at the "end of the age." Matthew's portrayal of Jesus responds to perennial human questions about the existence of evil, the injustices of existence, and the fate of the faithful by pointing to a final judgment that is beyond our knowing and "above our pay grade." It is God's job to sort these things out and make them right, not the task of Christians. So the talk of "weeping and gnashing of teeth"—typical of Matthew's parables—is not a twisted pleasure or celebration of the coming judgment, but rather a reassurance to those who ask the ancient question, "how long, o Lord?" It is also a warning to those who believe ourselves to be "insiders" that we should be faithful in the meantime.

Discussion/Reflection Questions:

- 1. If we are the children of the kingdom—i.e. the true wheat—what is our job, according to this parable?**
- 2. What do you think of Jesus' insistence that evil people in the world are sown here by an enemy—the devil?**
- 3. Do you take comfort in Jesus' promise that "all causes of sin and all evildoers" will be dealt with in God's time? Or does this notion worry or frighten you? What parts of our own lives might need to be "thrown into the furnace of fire" in order for the good and wheaten parts of our selves to endure forever?**