

The Wheat and the Tares, the Mustard Seed, and the Leaven

Matthew 13:24-43

Matthew 13:24-43 - *“Another parable He put forth to them, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field; ²⁵ but while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat and went his way. ²⁶ But when the grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. ²⁷ So the servants of the owner came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?’ ²⁸ He said to them, ‘An enemy has done this.’ The servants said to him, ‘Do you want us then to go and gather them up?’ ²⁹ But he said, ‘No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, “First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.””*

³¹ Another parable He put forth to them, saying: “The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field, ³² which indeed is the least of all the seeds; but when it is grown it is greater than the herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.”

³³ Another parable He spoke to them: “The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three measures of meal till it was all leavened.”

³⁴ All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, ³⁵ that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying: “I will open My mouth in parables; I will utter things kept secret from the foundation of the world.” Then Jesus sent the multitude away and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him, saying, “Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field.”

³⁷ He answered and said to them: “He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. ³⁹ The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. ⁴⁰ Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, ⁴² and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!”

Background Notes

There are seven kingdom parables in Matthew 13, and they reveal the Kingdom of heaven in its present form – that is, the form of Kingdom between the two advents of Christ. The present form of the Kingdom has come about because Israel rejected the King and His Kingdom. During this present time, Israel has been temporarily set aside from the position of God’s favor while the gospel goes out to the Gentile world (Romans 11).

The present form of the Kingdom may possibly be dramatized in the actions of our Lord in this chapter. Look back at verses 1-2: *“On the same day Jesus went out of the house and sat by the sea. And great multitudes were gathered together to Him, so that He got into a boat and sat; and the whole multitude stood on the shore.”* The Lord - having been rejected by Israel’s leaders in Matthew 12 - left the house and sat down by the Sea of Galilee. In the spiritual picture, He left “the house of Israel” and sat down by the sea, that is, “the sea of the Gentile nations,” and great multitudes gathered to Him. This may be a spiritual picture or dramatization of our Lord’s ministry.

Now look at verse 36: *“Then Jesus sent the multitude away and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him...”* This too may be part of the spiritual picture or dramatization. The “house of Israel” will be restored to the position of God’s favor in the future, with the disciples representing the godly remnant of Jews who will receive the King and His kingdom when our Lord returns. So there may be an additional spiritual picture here. We find that many times in Scripture. The **miracles** of our Lord have meaning, and certainly the **parables** have meaning, but even the **actions** of our Lord may be a dramatization of His teaching.

Key to understanding the background of the parables of the mustard seed and leaven (as well as the parable of the wheat and the tares) is to remember that **the Kingdom of heaven is not the same as the Church**. The Kingdom in its present form certainly includes the true Church, which consists of all true believers in our Lord Jesus - but the sphere of the Kingdom is much larger than just true believers. The sphere of the Kingdom also includes people who falsely profess to be believers, as the parable of the wheat and the weeds clearly indicates. In its present form, the Kingdom is the “realm of Christendom,” which includes both the true and the false.

In both parables the Kingdom of heaven is seen as growing and spreading from something small into something large. Christianity has certainly grown from its small beginnings in Jerusalem 2,000 years ago, but it no longer has the same purity. The birds of the air now nest in the branches of the mustard tree. In this parable, the birds represent the agents of Satan, just as they did in the parable of the sower. Think of cults, for example, that “nest in the branches of Christendom.” Cults flatly deny the full deity of Jesus Christ, and yet they call themselves Christians. Cults sneak in under the umbrella of Christianity.

In Scripture, leaven usually represents evil. In the parable of the leaven, we have the idea of evil, specifically evil doctrine, spreading and permeating throughout the pure meal, or flour. The pure flour represents good food for God’s people - the nourishment that is found in the true teachings of the Bible.

Some Christians interpret the leaven to be the gospel being preached, and spreading in accordance with the Great Commission, until the world is evangelized. Although that may be a possibility, throughout the Bible leaven always represents evil. Under the Law, God commanded His people to clean all the “leaven” out their homes before they celebrated the Passover (Exodus 12). The Lord Jesus warned against the “leaven” (evil) of the Scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 16). And in Galatians 5:9, the apostle Paul likens false teaching to “leaven.”

So it would seem that the birds in the mustard tree and the leaven in the flour represent the evil and the false teaching that is within Christendom today - that is, within the present form of the Kingdom on earth today. This concept becomes clearer in the parable of the wheat and the tares.

Doctrinal Points

1. The wheat and the tares may appear the same now.

We don't have to wonder about the meaning of this parable because the Lord gave the interpretation, just as He did with the parable of the sower. Verses 37-39 tell us that the One who sows the good seed in this parable is the Lord Himself. The field is the world, the good seed are believers, the enemy is Satan, and the "tares" are unbelievers. "Tares" are weeds. Before harvest time, wheat and weeds growing together in a field can appear very much the same. Sometimes you can't tell the difference.

What's the meaning in the parable? If you looked out at an audience of people who all claim to be Christians, would you be able to tell who are true believers and who are those who only "profess" to be believers? Could you tell just by looking? No! And that's the point of the parable. There are both true believers and professing believers in the Kingdom of heaven, or Christendom, today. The wheat and the tares may appear the same now.

2. The wheat and the tares will be separated later.

In the parable, the harvest time is when the Lord returns. At that time, the wheat and the weeds will be separated. Those who falsely profess to be believers will be exposed, and they will be removed by the holy angels and taken away for judgment. Their ultimate destiny is hell, where there will be eternal weeping and gnashing of teeth. *"The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth"* (v41-42).

True believers will be rewarded, and they will shine forth in the glorious Kingdom of our Lord here on this earth. *"Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"* (v43). What a great time that will be! Christ will reign as King over this whole earth, and true believers will reign with Him.

What a difference in the destinies of the wheat and the weeds! Is it possible that you're a weed? You may look like a Christian, you may talk like a Christian, you may pose as a Christian - but have you in truly committed your life to Christ as personal Savior and Lord? Why not invite the Lord into your life today? Become a true believer, and become part of the wheat harvest. The wheat and the tares may look the same now, but the wheat and the tares will be separated later.

Practical Application

Don't misuse the parable of the wheat and the tares in church discipline.

"The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, 'First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn'" (v28-30).

In these verses, was the Lord teaching that church leaders should be more tolerant and not discipline sin in the church today? Shouldn't they just wait until the final judgment? Doesn't the parable say to wait until the harvest?

What's the answer? No, it doesn't mean that! Remember - this is a parable of the Kingdom of heaven - not a parable of the Church! 1 Corinthians 5, for example, clearly indicates that church leaders must exercise discipline when members of the congregation sin. Read 1 Timothy in this connection as well.

So - don't misuse the parable of the wheat and the tares when it comes to church discipline.