

Wheat and Tares
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43, 47-50

Priests molesting altarboys. Pastors running off with church secretaries. Congregations dividing over pastoral ambitions or personality conflicts. Evangelical denominations flirting with Marxist racial theories and mainline denominations embracing same-sex marriages. To say that the Church is a hot mess is a bit of an understatement.

And while we Christians squabble with one another about matters both great and small, the unbelieving world continues on its path away from God. In fact, skeptics often use the many divisions among us Christians to dismiss everything we say – “Y’all talk a lot about the love of God, but you don’t show it to each other. So, if y’all can’t agree with each other, why should you expect anyone else to agree with you?” And whenever any Christian leader is caught in a moral failure, all of us get a black eye – for why should anyone believe in the abiding presence of the cleansing, renewing Holy Spirit if those of us who proclaim His reality so clearly lack His power?

So, what should we Christians do about all this division, all this impurity within our ranks? Well, in today’s passage, Jesus teaches two parables that should be of help: the story of the wheat and the tares, and the story of the net. Taken together, they should give us a healthy dose of perspective.

For in the first place, Jesus makes it clear that our problems are not primarily of our own making. In verse 25, He says that it was an enemy that sowed the tares among the wheat, and in verse 39 He identifies this enemy as the devil.

So, why does that matter? At the very least, it can help us understand why God’s people keep falling into error and division. After all, Satan was the one who brought sin into the Garden of Eden, tempting Adam to rebel against God. Later on, after the Exodus, even while Moses was up on Mt. Sinai learning how God wanted the people of Israel to live, those same people were busy at the foot of the mountain making a golden calf for themselves to worship. And of course, the prophets tell us in exhaustive and exhausting detail about all the theological and ethical problems that caused God’s people eventually to be sent away to Assyria and Babylon.

But when the people returned from their exile, they went right back to many of their old ways. Nehemiah had to discipline the people not once, but twice for marrying foreigners who did not share their faith. And by the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry, the religious leaders had become so corrupt that they condemned their Messiah to death, boldly stating that they had no king but the Roman emperor.

And the same problems of error and division have continued among God’s people, even after the resurrection and ascension of Christ. Way back in the first century, Paul had to write two letters to the Church in Corinth because they were just as divided and confused as we are about a whole host of important issues. John spoke of people who had left the fellowship of the faithful, their departure making it clear that they never had been true believers after all. Peter and Jude warned of the rise of false teachers, who would bring disgrace upon the Church by twisting the doctrine of God’s grace into an excuse for sexual license – and it sounds like they were reading from today’s headlines.

And all this error and all this division keep spreading because the same enemy has been working against God’s people from the days of Moses until today. That’s why, whenever the Church seems to

settle one dispute or heal one schism, another always pops up. The Council of Nicaea proposed to settle the question of the divinity of Christ once and for all, but Ancient Arians and their modern descendants the Unitarians and the Jehovah's Witnesses continue to disagree. The northern and southern branches of Presbyterians divided in the 1860's over the issue of slavery, but even before they could reunite in agreement that racism is wrong, they came to blows once again in the 1960's over the authority of Scripture. Satan loves nothing more than to see God's people reject the truth, and turn away from one another in the process.

So, what can we do about all the error, the confusion and discord Satan continues to sow in our midst? Well, the most obvious answer is the one the landowners' servants propose in verse 28 – to go out into the field and pull up the tares. After all, as Jesus' listeners would have known only too well, tares were weeds. Not only would they draw nutrients away from the wheat, but they were also host to a fungus that was poisonous to either animals or men. In the same way, those who call themselves Christians but are really unbelievers can sap the strength of those who are honestly trying to follow Christ – they can even tempt us to go astray. So why not get rid of them in one way or another?

Yes, perhaps that's why the Church has all too often engaged in this kind of weeding, trying to ferret out the agents of Satan who are within our midst. The Roman Catholics established church courts called inquisitions to root out heresy first in France, and later in Spain and in Spain's colonies in the Americas – it continued in Peru until 1820. Of course, American Protestants did the same sort of thing, banishing Roger Williams in 1636 from the colony of Massachusetts, and thus bringing about the formation of the state of Rhode Island. And then there were the witch trials which took place in Salem, Massachusetts in 1692 and 1693. Well over 200 people were accused and around 150 were arrested for consorting with the devil in various ways. Nineteen went to the gallows, and Giles Corey died after being tortured for three days for refusing to enter a plea – he was 80 years old.

So, perhaps it's no wonder that in verse 29 the landowner rejected the possibility of weeding out the tares. After all, if you tried to do it, you might pull up some of the wheat along with them. And that's because when wheat and tares are still immature, they look very much alike – you can't be sure that you're sorting them out accurately until wheat begins to bear grain. And by that time, pulling up a weed would risk pulling up the wheat growing right beside it – perhaps they even had their roots entangled.

And that is what the people of Salem came to realize, even many of those who had participated in the hysteria about witchcraft. The Governor of Massachusetts eventually pardoned and released all those who had been charged, and the General Court of the state ruled that the trials had been unlawful. In 1711, the legislature of the colony went so far as to make financial restitution to the heirs of those who had been executed. But they couldn't bring those 19 folks back from the dead – much wheat had been pulled up in an attempt to destroy tares.

So, even though it is critical for Christians to engage in earnest discipline, holding each other accountable for the professions of faith we have made, and while it is perfectly legitimate for us to notice and even to point out the amount and quality of fruit someone bears in his life, it's not our job to pass judgment on one another, saying that anyone is somehow too far gone to be saved. Instead, we are called to wait, to wait for God to do His job of sorting out the good from the wicked. For that, after all, is the conclusion of the parable of the tares, and the main point of the parable of the net, isn't it? For while a net catches all sorts of marine life, fishermen keep only the ones they can sell. The rest they

now call “by-catch,” and they throw them away. In the same way, at the time for harvesting grain it is only the wheat that is gathered into the barns – the tares are burned up as so much yard waste.

And just to clear up any possible confusion or misunderstanding, Jesus doesn’t give us these two parables and then leave us to wonder what they mean. No, He takes the trouble to explain both of them, thus leaving no room for doubt about the truth He is telling us.

For the good news is that at the end of the age, the day that Jesus returns to judge the earth will be a glorious day for the good fish, for the wheat, for those whose hearts are good soil, for those who receive His Word and bear fruit for Him. Quoting from Daniel chapter 12, Jesus says that on that day, the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. For they will experience the beautiful reality described in our responsive reading this morning: the new heaven and the new earth, the holy city that is filled with the glory and the light of God, the place in which the Father and the Son dwell in the midst of the faithful, a place of perfect peace and safety.

And the reason the gates of the city will never be shut is that it will be completely free of sin – and of sinners. For the sad truth is that if the wheat is gathered into barns, the tares are burned on the trash pile. If the good fish are sold in the market, the bad fish are discarded. So as Jesus clearly says in verses 41 and 42, all the stumbling blocks that currently trip us up or cause offense to those trying to live according to God’s will, all those who practice iniquity, rejecting God’s right to direct their choices and rule their lives – on the day of His return they will be cast into the furnace of fire. And just so there’s no misunderstanding about any of this, Jesus says the same thing in His explanation of the parable of the net: the wicked will be cast “into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

Yes, the sad fact is that hell is just as real a place as Heaven. But it’s not our job to try to figure out and declare who’s going to end up in what place – remember, when they start out, wheat and tares look just the same. It’s not our job to go around pulling weeds, condemning anyone else, behaving as if we can really know what’s going on inside anyone else’s heart.

No, our job is simply to grow as wheat among the tares. And as we learned in the parable of the sower and the soils, we are called to distinguish ourselves from unbelievers primarily by the fruit that we bear. That means we are to hold fast to what is true, even while we are patient with those who don’t yet understand that truth. We are to live lives of loving welcome as well as bold proclamation among the lost, lives of loving acceptance as well as holy discipline among the followers of Jesus.

But most of all, we are to wait on the Lord to come and reveal His glory, a glory that will terrify and dismay those who reject Him, a glory that will enrapture and enthrall those who love Him. And we are to pray – to pray that God will foil Satan’s schemes, giving us the wisdom and strength to stand against all manner of division and temptation. We must pray that God would give us the courage to speak the truth into one another’s lives, as well as the grace to hear loving words of admonition, especially when our sin is too close for us to see it for ourselves. And we can pray that the Lord would quickly come to put a final end to sin and raise His glorious harvest home.