

If the Spirit of God has softened your hearts, Rejoice! Only the Spirit creates good, regenerate soil in which the Gospel seed can flourish. Such true conversion, which the fourth soil in the Parable of the Sower represents, is never to be taken for granted by us and deserves frequent meditation. What God has begun, He will complete (Phil. 1:6).

Since the theme of this summer's Bible notes on the parables is to see how Jesus handles the discouraging darkness of sinful opposition to the Kingdom, we turn to a second parable which shows us how the enemy of souls works – not just to snatch up Gospel seed; not just to wilt such seed under the heat of trials; not just to choke that seed out (all descriptions of the different soils in the Parable of the Sower) – but also to sow the weeds of false brethren in the midst of God's field. So we turn now to the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares.

How do the servants of Christ's Kingdom respond when they see the terrible effect of the sowing of tares among the good seed of the Kingdom in Matthew 13:27-28? In their shock they ask if their Master wants them to tear out all the weeds as they seek to purify the Kingdom of God on earth. To this offer the Lord replies: "Let both the evil seed and the good grow until the harvest." In this way, the Lord Jesus, who is identified as the Sower in Matthew 13:37, testifies to evil's growth in the very midst of the Kingdom of God – a difficult but essential topic which will occupy this week's notes on the growth of God's Kingdom.

Mon/Tues: Read Matthew 13:24-30

Vigilance and Realism

In describing the sowing of tares in the wheat, Jesus describes both an agricultural and a historical reality. It is agriculturally true in the ancient near East that the weed "darnel" could and indeed was sown intentionally among wheat by those who would sabotage their neighbor's wheat harvest. It was easily done, since the immature darnel plant looked much like wheat until it matured at the time of harvest. Ancient Roman law lists such an act as a crime.

It is also an historical fact that false teachers, like darnel, crept into the midst of believers even in the early days of the Christian church. For example, in his first letter, John describes these early false believers as those who, "... *went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.*" In the same way in our day, there is never a group of believers which can claim the title of a "perfect church." Always the enemy, Satan, seeks to introduce the weeds of false teaching as well as false professions of faith into the midst of Gospel assemblies.

It is always shocking when someone we thought was a true believer turns away, causing many to stumble at their scandalous behavior. Given this reality, much vigilance and realism is needed, lest we be overcome with shock and sadness when such apostasy occurs. We are not surprised when wicked men show themselves in the "field" of the world, their normal habitat, since the world is under the power of the Evil One. But it is harder for us to face the fact of evil's existence *in the church*. Nevertheless, we must prepare for the shock of Matthew 13:27-28, when such "tares" grow up in the midst of the true wheat of Christ's church. Such is the meaning of this parable.

Meditate and Pray: Take John's Calvin's description of apostasy in the church to heart, as he explains the Parable of the wheat and the tares this way: "As soon as Christ has gathered a small flock for Himself, hypocrites mingle with it and persons of immoral lives creep in ..."

But at the same time, Rejoice that not even the full eruption of wicked seed is able to strangle the growth of true Gospel seed. The Kingdom of God will grow in our hearts, and in the church. No amount of the enemy's sowing unbelief can stop it! Let our prayer be for only good seed to grow in our hearts, as hymn # 376, esp. verse 3:

*Open now thy gates of beauty,
Zion, let me enter there,
Where my soul in joyful duty
Waits for Him Who answers prayer.
Oh, how blessèd is this place,
Filled with solace, light and grace!*

*Here Thy praise is gladly chanted,
Here Thy seed is duly sown;
Let my soul, where it is planted...
...Bring forth precious sheaves alone,
So that all I hear may be
Fruitful unto life in me.*

*Lord, my God, I come before Thee,
Come Thou also unto me;
Where we find Thee and adore Thee,
There a heav'n on earth must be.
To my heart, oh, enter Thou,
Let it be Thy temple now!*

*Thou my faith increase and quicken,
Let me keep Thy gift divine,
Howsoe'er temptations thicken...
...May Thy Word still o'er me shine
As my guiding star through life,
As my comfort in my strife.*

Wednesday: Read Matthew 13:24-30

The Perseverance of the Saints

It is shocking that in the infancy of the 1st century church false teachers crept into the midst of believing fellowships of early Christians. This continues in the church on earth today. Almost as soon as Christ sows the seed of the Gospel, the Enemy seeks to sow seeds of false faith. To comfort His true church in their shock at such “false brethren” growing up in their midst, Jesus promises an ultimate separation of the weeds from the wheat in Matthew 13:30. In this way, on the Day of Judgment, the true church will be preserved, and the false brethren burned up. John Calvin well expresses this parable’s promise of a final separation when he says:

Jesus speaks of a separation, in order to prevent the minds of the godly from giving way to uneasiness or despondency, when they perceive a confused mixture of the good along with the bad...Jesus intended to exhort those who believed in Him not to lose courage, because they are under the necessity of retaining wicked men among them...

Our minds ought to be fortified with confidence; for the Son of God, who commands His followers to walk in the midst of “stumbling blocks” of false brethren, will unquestionably give us strength to overcome them all.

Meditate and Pray: What safety the godly are promised, even amid all the falsehoods and wicked schemes of those who infect Christ’s church through the ages! Remember hymn # 345 and celebrate once again that God knows those who are His and will preserve them from enemies within as well as without!

*Round each habitation hov’ring,
see the cloud and fire appear
for a glory and a cov’ring
showing that the Lord is near:
thus deriving from their banner light by night and shade by day,
safe they feed upon the manna which he gives them when they pray.*

Thursday: Read Matthew 13:31-34

Secret Power

Jesus does not leave His listeners wrestling with the existence of evil seeds in the midst of the true Gospel “plants of faith” in the church. He seeks to further reassure His disciples by promising them that the *vigor, potency and growth* of the true seed will far outstrip the increase of the weeds of wickedness. He does this in Matthew’s Gospel by means of the parables of the mustard seed and of the leaven.

Regarding the mustard seed, the point is straightforward but nonetheless greatly encouraging. The seed of the Gospel, though small and contemptible in the eyes of the world, nevertheless has the Divine power to grow into the biggest plant in the garden. Some of these bushes were known in the Middle East to grow to ten feet tall! No wonder the “birds” roost in its branches. No wonder the Christian faith has endured for thousands of years! And no wonder God tells us not to despise the day of small things. In the end, God’s small beginnings shame the mighty and proud of this world. Because God is so powerful, He is able to take “things that are not” and make them mightier than the greatest worldly powers.

Regarding the parable of the leaven in Matthew 13:33, Jesus likens the almost imperceptible growth of the Kingdom of God to the power of leaven, which even in a small amount can spread its influence through a whole loaf of bread.

Meditate and Pray: Let us rejoice in the hidden but real power of growth in the Kingdom of God, and not grow discouraged when our efforts for the Gospel appear to bear so little fruit. In the words of John Calvin on these two parables:

If the aspect of Christ’s kingdom be despicable in the eyes of the flesh, let us learn to raise our minds to the boundless and incalculable power of God, which at once created all things out of nothing, and every day raises up “things that are not,” (1 Cor. 1:28) in a manner which exceeds the capacity of the human senses. Let us leave to proud men their disdainful laugh, till the Lord, at an unexpected hour, shall strike them with amazement. Meanwhile, let us not despond, but rise by faith against the pride of the world, till the Lord give us that astonishing display of His power, of which He speaks in this passage.

Friday: Read Mark 4:26-29

Monergism

The parables to do with seeds growing and leaven spreading through a loaf of bread are not the only parables of growth. In Mark’s Gospel, there is a parable unique to him about the “seed growing on its own,” as Mark 4:28 puts it in the NIV. Here is a miracle indeed – the seed of the Gospel is described by Jesus as being “monergistic” in its growth. (“Monergism” is the work theologians use for the Bible’s teaching that regeneration is exclusively the work of the Holy Spirit.)

In this simple parable, the encouraging truth about the nature of Salvation is highlighted. The seed of faith which God plants in us when we hear and believe the word of God is a heaven-sent seed, with all the vigor of God contained within it. Its growth is not dependent on the soil of this world, which bears only weeds. Faith grows with a power which God gives it to grow. The entrance of this Gospel message gives light and life all by itself!

Meditate and Pray: Are there not hymns which speak of God’s power to cause growth? How about hymn #164, with its “impossible” commands to the deaf, blind and lame to respond to Christ. Nothing is impossible with God when it comes to raising the dead to believe on Christ. You’ll notice some extra verses written by Wesley below:

*O for a thousand tongues to sing
My great Redeemer’s praise,
The glories of my God and King,
The triumphs of His grace!*

*Jesus! the name that charms our fears,
That bids our sorrows cease;
'Tis music in the sinner’s ears,
'Tis life, and health, and peace.*

*He speaks, and, listening to His voice,
New life the dead receive,
The mournful, broken hearts rejoice,
The humble poor believe.*

*Hear Him, ye deaf; His praise, ye dumb,
Your loosened tongues employ;
Ye blind, behold your Savior come,
And leap, ye lame, for joy.*

*In Christ your head, you then shall know,
Shall feel your sins forgiven;
Anticipate your heaven below,
And own that love is heaven.*

*Glory to God, and praise and love
Be ever, ever given,
By saints below and saints above,
The church in earth and Heaven.*

*On this glad day the glorious sun
Of righteousness arose;
On my benighted soul He shone
And filled it with repose.*

*Sudden expired the legal strife,
'Twas then I ceased to grieve;
My second, real, living life
I then began to live.*

*Then with my heart I first believed,
Believed with faith divine,
Power with the Holy Ghost received
To call the Savior mine.*

*I felt my Lord's atoning blood
Close to my soul applied;
Me, me He loved, the Son of God,
For me, for me He died!*

*I found and owned His promise true,
Ascertained of my part,
My pardon passed in heaven I knew
When written on my heart.*

*Look unto Him, ye nations, own
Your God, ye fallen race;
Look, and be saved through faith alone,
Be justified by grace.*

*Harlots and publicans and thieves
In holy triumph join!
Saved is the sinner that believes
From crimes as great as mine.*

*Murderers and all ye hellish crew,
Ye sons of lust and pride,
Believe the Savior died for you;
For me the Savior died.*

*With me, your chief, ye then shall know,
Shall feel your sins forgiven;
Anticipate your heaven below,
And own that love is heaven.*

Sat/Sun: Read Matthew 13:36-43 and Revelation 14:14-16

Cultivating Patience

As Jesus explains to His disciples the parable of the wheat and the tares, His focus is on “the end of the age” in Matthew 13:40. It is then that the final harvest of the Kingdom of God will be gathered in and the destruction of the tares will take place in the fiery judgment of the Last Day. This is why Jesus always urged patience. because the godly would have to wait that long to see wickedness finally destroyed.

But do you realize how much this message of a delayed judgment cost Jesus? Jesus came to His own people, Israel, as their Messiah. But how He was persecuted for separating in His own life and ministry the arrival of Messiah and the day of vengeance of Divine judgment! Why? Because the Jews wanted immediate Messianic victory over the Romans. To quote Dennis Johnson in his comments on Revelation 14:14-16:

The common expectation was that the Messiah would immediately execute this harvest judgment when He appeared, but Jesus' parables (the Sower, the Tares among the Wheat) taught that He came to inaugurate the long-awaited Kingdom of God not as a grim reaper but as a patient planter. Through sowing the word as seed, apparently so vulnerable to the world's hostile environment, Jesus would launch a harvest of grace in His first coming and continue it through the church's gospel witness (John 4:35-38)... Jesus made clear that the final harvest ... would only come at the "end of the age" (Mt. 13:40).

Meditate and Pray: Ask the Lord to help you cultivate that fourth fruit of the Spirit: "Love, joy, peace, **patience**" as you wait just punishment of all wickedness. God does tarry: Lord, give us poise and confidence as we wait your timing in all things. Especially help us to leave room for your vengeance and persevere in praying for our enemies and our lost family as well as neighbors. We ask this in the Name of your Son, who in His powerful patience "does not raise His voice on the streets," but quietly "brings forth justice to the outermost ends of the earth" - in His own time (Isaiah 42:1-4). Amen.