

THE PARABLE OF THE TARES*

Mark L. Bailey

The parable of the tares of the field is the second parable Jesus "put" before the crowds (Matt. 13:24).¹ Like the parable of the sower, this one conveys through an analogy truths relative to the kingdom of heaven. The parable of the tares appears only in Matthew (13:24–30) and is one of three (along with the sower and the dragnet) that Jesus interpreted (vv. 36-43). It continues the agricultural metaphor of seed and harvest.

Like the parable of the seed growing secretly (Mark 4:26-29), this parable too presents the relative "inactivity" between the sowing and the harvest. While Jesus may have used similar imageries on different occasions and for separate purposes, the differences between these two far outweigh the similarities.² The parable in Mark makes no mention of enemy activity. Matthew's parable concerns what the servants (disciples) should not be doing with regard to weeding, whereas Mark's parable, by focusing on the miraculous growth of the seed, showed what was impossible for the servants to do--produce growth. Matthew's parable addresses the simultaneous growth of good and bad seed. He was interested in showing the conflict between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Satan, whereas Mark was showing the uninterrupted progress and growth of the kingdom.³

The parable of the tares of the field is also the first parable in a series that utilizes the likeness formula in reference to the

Mark L. Bailey is Academic Dean and Professor of Bible Exposition at Dallas Theological Seminary, Dallas, Texas.

*This is article three in the eight-part series "The Kingdom in the Parables of Matthew 13."

¹ Παράτιθημι means "to put or place something before someone." Matthew used it here and in 13:31. The fact that this is "another" (ἄλλην) parable (13:24) argues that this second parable of the kingdom is of the same kind as the first, indicating that the parable of the sower is also a kingdom parable.

² Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990), 263–66; and Donald Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, TX: Word, 382).

³ David Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New Century Bible (London: Marshall, Morgan, and Scott, 1972), 230.

kingdom of heaven (Matt. 13:24). In this formula of comparison the verb "to be like" (*ὁμοιῶ*) is used, while in the next five parable introductions the adjective "like" (*ὅμοιος*) is used. The aorist passive form of the verb (*ὤμοιώθη*) indicates that Jesus viewed the kingdom of heaven as having present reality.⁴ This parable describes a stage in God's kingdom program that has already begun--the present form of God's rule, which is explained as "the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven" (v. 11).

THE SETTING OF THE PARABLE

The historical, geographical, and literary settings of this parable are the same as that of the sower except that additional information was given in that parable. The historical context shows that the kingdom of God was suffering attack during Jesus' ministry.⁵ As Beasley-Murray says, "Not without reason Jesus could characterize these events as a countermovement to the divine sovereignty operative in his ministry."⁶ Geographically the parable was spoken by the sea, and the interpretation was delivered in a house (13:36). In its literary setting, referring to the character or conduct of people by the analogy of seeds and plants has its precedent in the Old Testament (Isa. 55:10; Jer. 4:3-4; Hos. 10:1). Rabbinic parables employing the contrast between intertwined trees which were left to grow together⁷ and the separation of stubble, straw, and wheat⁸ demonstrate the common practice of using farming analogies. In the parable in Matthew 13 the emphasis is on the dialogue between the master and the servants; in Jesus' interpretation (vv. 36-43) the emphasis is on the beginning and the end of the parable.

⁴ Jack Dean Kingsbury, *Matthew 13: A Study in Redaction Criticism* (Richmond, VA: Knox, 1969), 67; and Herman Hendrickx, *The Parables of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986), 54. The aorist of this verb is also used in Matthew 18:23 and 222.

⁵ In Matthew 11:12; 12:28; and Mark 3:27 the attacks are from both human and demonic forces. The parable of the tares and its interpretation likewise present the attacks as involving both satanic and human agency (Matt. 13:38-41).

⁶ George R. Beasley-Murray, *Jesus and the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 133.

⁷ *Genesis Rabbah* 61:6 uses this imagery in commenting on the dilemma of Abraham having to pronounce blessing on the children of Ishmael and Keturah as well as Isaac..

⁸ *Genesis Rabbah* 83:5 contains a fable about stubble, straw, and wheat personified as arguing. The struggle was not resolved until the stubble was burned, the straw scattered, and the wheat gathered into a stack over which there was great rejoicing (Harvey K. McArthur and Robert M. Johnston, *They Also Taught in Parables* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990], 187-88).

THE NEED OR PROBLEM PROMPTING THE PARABLE

Some say Jesus' purpose in telling this parable was to denounce the exclusiveness of various Jewish sects.⁹ The problem with this is that there is no specific mention of such sects in Matthew 13.

Blomberg rightly criticizes those who see this parable picturing the mixture of evil and good within the church, "To conclude that a 'mixed church' was inevitable, however, and to use this parable as a justification for doing nothing to attempt to purify the church (as with St. Augustine) goes well beyond anything demanded by the imagery of the narrative."¹⁰

Since the parable is interpreted only for the disciples, it seems that the primary application was for them. Jesus may have told the parable to help curb their hostile feelings in view of opposition to Jesus by the religious establishment.¹¹ The disciples and others may have been wondering, "If the kingdom has arrived, why has it not triumphed more overtly and visibly? If Jesus is its herald, why is response to Him not uniformly positive?"¹² As Wenham states, "Matthew's parable spells out what sort of action they were looking for, namely, the weeding out of evil and evildoers."¹³ Jesus' disciples needed to be made aware of the presence of opposition to Him.¹⁴ They wondered, why has "such a large segment of the chosen nation . . . not responded to the Word in obedience and faith?"¹⁵ As Bonnard said, "If Jesus is the Coming Messiah, how can his coming coincide with such an onslaught of evil?"¹⁶ Or, "If Jesus is the Son of God, why is there such resistance to him?"¹⁷

THE NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND DETAILS

This parable has six major sections: the introduction (v. 24a), the sowing (v. 24b), the countersowing (v. 25), the result (v. 26), a first

⁹ Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News according to Matthew*, trans. David Green (Richmond, VA: Knox, 1975), 304; and Archibald M. Hunter, *Interpreting the Parables* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 46.

¹⁰ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 200.

¹¹ Similar attitudes were demonstrated in other settings. For example the disciples wanted to call down fire from heaven on the rejecting Samaritans (Luke 9:54).

¹² Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), 218-49.

¹³ David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989), 58.

¹⁴ Hendrickx, *The Parables of Jesus*, 60.

¹⁵ Kingsbury, *Matthew 13*, 72.

¹⁶ Pierre Bonnard, *L'evangile selon saint Matthieu* (Neuchatel: Delachaux et Niestle, 1963), 199.

¹⁷ Frederick Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary* (Dallas, TX: Word, 1990), 498.

exchange between the servants and the owner (vv. 27-28a), and a second exchange (vv. 28b-30). The first half of the parable is narrative (vv. 24-26) and the second is dialogue (vv. 27-30). The first exchange in the dialogue shows that only the tactics of the enemy can explain the presence of the weeds. The second exchange shows that the ultimate solution to the problem will not come until the harvest. The narrative moves the reader through the chronology of the harvest by focusing on the roles played by various sowers, servants, and harvesters.

Blomberg divides the parable into three stages by which he believes he offers a solution to the debate over the emphasis in the parable. "Dividing the message into 'thirds' ends the needless debate over whether the emphasis of the parable lies in the period of the simultaneous growth of the wheat and the weeds or in the final harvest, and it refutes the notion that the interpretation of the parable must be inauthentic because its emphasis does not match that of the parable. Beginning, middle and end—the obstacles to God's kingdom, the inauguration of that kingdom and its final summation are all in view. A climactic stress may fall on the last of these but not to the exclusion of the other two."¹⁸

Gundry points up the contrasts in the narrative between the man and the enemy, the sowing and the countersowing, the good seeds and the bad seeds, the coming and going of the enemy, the coming and going of the servants, the plan of the servants and that of the master, and the gathering in barns and the bundling for fire.¹⁹ Jesus' interpretation of the parable countered the false impressions that both the crowds and the disciples must have had concerning their role in solving the conflict created by opposition to the kingdom. His interpretation of this parable of the tares of the field²⁰ included His explanation of seven details in the parable (vv. 37-39) and a discussion of the judgment at the end of the age (vv. 40-43).

THE SOWING SCENE OF THE PARABLE (13:24—25)

The opening scene has two sowers, two seeds, and two sowings. "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 also among the wheat, and went away'" (Matt. 13:24-25).

Two kinds of sowing are described in this opening scene of

¹⁸ Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 198-99.

¹⁹ Robert Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 262.

²⁰ This title is specified in 13:36.

the parable. An owner of the field sowed good seed in a field he owned. He is referred to as a man (ἄνθρωπος) and later in verse 27 as a householder (οἰκοδεσπότης²¹), whom his servants addressed as "Sir" (κύριε). Presumably the sowing of wheat seed, as customarily carried out, took place in the course of a normal workday. An enemy of the owner²² came during the night and sowed the same field with weed seed and then left.

The sowing by an enemy is specifically identified as an unwanted sowing.²³ Darnel (ζιζάνια) is a weed (*Lolium temulentum*) that grows exclusively in the Middle East. It is botanically related to wheat, but a poisonous fungus grows within its grain. Wheat and darnel are all but indistinguishable until the wheat is ready for harvest.²⁴ The two grow with an intertwined root system so that to uproot the weeds would destroy some of the wheat.²⁵ The enemy clearly intended to ruin the crop of the owner of the house.

THE SOWING SCENE IN THE INTERPRETATION (13:36a-39)

The record of Jesus' interpretation includes the request of the disciples (v. 36); the explanation,²⁶ with seven identifications in parallel form (vv. 37-39); the main analogy of the parable with reference to the end of the age (v. 40); judgment on the wicked (vv. 41-42) and the destiny of the righteous (v. 43a); and a final exhortation (v. 43b). Though not every element of the parable is interpreted, an unusual amount of detail is given.

"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 of 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'" (vv. 36-39a).

As the Son of Man, Jesus identified Himself as the one who

²¹ Of the twelve occurrences of this noun in the New Testament, seven are in Matthew. The emphasis in the parable reinforces the authority theme in Matthew, especially in light of the "household" He will establish in contrast to that of the religious establishment.

²² The phrase "his enemy" (αὐτοῦ ὁ ἐχθρὸς) is emphatic.

²³ The verb ἐπισπείρω, "to sow over or upon," is used only here in the New Testament.

²⁴ Michael Zohary, *Plants of the Bible* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 161; and Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus*, trans. S. H. Hooke, 2d ed. (New York: Scribner & Sons, 1954), 224.

²⁵ "The roots of the darnel are stronger and deeper than those of wheat, so that the removal of one would often result in the uprooting of the other" (Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 384).

²⁶ The verb διασάφισον ("to explain") is used only here and in 18:31.

sows²⁷ and who will judge (vv. 37, 41; cf. 9:2-6; 10:23). He called the kingdom "His kingdom" (13:41). The field is the world, and the harvest (the judgment) will take place at the end of the age. The good seed (καλόν σπέρμα) is identified as the "sons of the kingdom,"²⁸ whereas the first parable refers to "the word of the kingdom" (vv. 19, 38). "The sons of the kingdom" (οἱ υἱοὶ τῆς βασιλείας) in this context are those who are associated with Jesus and who, as His righteous ones, will participate in the future kingdom of the Father (v. 38). Conversely "the sons of the evil one" (οἱ υἱοὶ τοῦ πονηροῦ) are those associated with Satan, the evil one (cf. John 8:44; 1 John 3:10). Jesus had referred to the "evil one" earlier in Matthew (5:37; 6:13) and particularly in the parable of the sower (13:19). The enemy is the devil (ὁ διάβολος, v. 39). Jesus had previously said the kingdom was under violent attack (11:12), and on many occasions He had already confronted demonic opposition. By the "Spirit of God" He cast out demons (12:28), thus showing that His strength is superior to that of the "strong man" who had control of his house (cf. Mark 3:27).

THE GROWTH SCENE OF THE PARABLE (13:26-29)

The growth scene consists of the discovery of the two crops followed by two rounds of questions and answers between the servants and the owner. "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' " (vv. 26-29).

Sometime in the growth phase both wheat and weeds appeared in the same field. This was when the blades of grain (χόρτος) grew and produced their fruit (καρπὸν ἐποίησεν). This is the first time the "weeds" (ζιζάνια) appeared.²⁹ In the first conversation

²⁷ The use of the present participle may reflect the fact that the planting by Jesus is continuing throughout the present age until the harvest. Beasley-Murray says the sowing reflects an initiation of the saving sovereignty of God in the words and deeds of Jesus (*Jesus and the Kingdom of God*, 133). While no doubt there is a soteriological import to the message of the kingdom, there is more (in relation to the earthly kingdom promised to Israel) than Beasley-Murray is willing to concede.

²⁸ In Matthew 8:12 "the sons of the kingdom" refer to the Jews who were expected to participate in the kingdom but who are shown there to be excluded. Here in 13:38 the phrase appears in a positive context to describe a new set of "sons of the kingdom"—those who have rightly responded to the message and become a part of the family who will inherit the kingdom because they have done the will of God (12:50).

²⁹ Adolf Julicher maintains that the weeds manifest themselves before the wheat

round, two questions relate to the appearance of the weeds. The first question is designed to confirm the quality of the seed sown by the owner; the second question asks the reason for the appearance of the weeds. The first establishes the fact of the problem and its source, while the second deals with whose responsibility it is to solve the problem. The servants' first question is introduced by οὐχί, indicating they expected a positive answer to their question about the quality of the seed sown by him.

Separating the good and the bad is to be left to the householder and his servants and is to be delayed until the harvest. Kistemaker insightfully comments on the wisdom of this delayed separation. "While these two are growing and maturing, the farmer is unable to take steps to remedy the situation. This inability does not stem from ignorance. On the contrary, the farmer, fully in control of the situation waits it out. He knows what to do. He knows where the weeds came from and how they were sown in his field—by night, while everyone was sleeping."³⁰

In the second round in the dialogue the servants asked whether they should uproot the weeds. The master's answer, an emphatic negative, points up the danger of uprooting before the harvest. The verb for "root up" (ἐκρίζωσῃτε) is used elsewhere in contexts that speak of a person's destruction by the judgment of God (15:13; Jude 12). The servants were to allow both wheat and weeds to grow until the harvest.

THE HARVEST SCENE OF THE PARABLE (13:30)

In the parable the householder told his servants, "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'" (v. 30). At harvest time the owner would supervise the reapers, who would bind the weeds for burning and gather the wheat into his barn. Mounce comments on the cultural background of the imagery. "Quite often after the grain had been cut with a sickle and the grain removed, the remaining weeds and shorter stalks would be burned off. In Palestine, where wood was scarce, certain weeds would be cut and bundled together to be used as fuel. Grain was normally stored underground in large pottery jars or put in pits lined with brick."³¹

because of a shorter maturation period (Die Gleichnisreden [Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche, 1963], 2:548).

³⁰ Simon J. Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 40.

³¹ Robert Mounce, *Matthew* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985), 131; and Daniel Harrington, *The Gospel of Matthew* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1991), 205.

THE HARVEST SCENE IN THE INTERPRETATION (13:39b-43)

In these verses Jesus' interpretation shifted to the scene of final judgment, the central point of the analogy. "And the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. 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" (vv. 39b-43). At the end of the age (συντελεία τοῦ αἰῶνος)³² angels will be instruments of judgment³³ sent by Jesus, who alone is qualified to serve as the Judge.³⁴ The harvest is a metaphor in the Old Testament for final judgment (Jer. 51:33; Hos. 6:11; Joel 3:13). The kingdom is called "His kingdom,"³⁵ since He is planting the seed of the kingdom, and since the harvest will be accomplished under His direction.

The judgment will separate the wicked from the righteous. The tares are those who will be judged and gathered (συνλέγεται, Matt. 13:40) out of the kingdom of the Son of Man. Based on this verb in the Septuagint in Zephaniah 1:3, Hill says the verb means to gather together for judgment.³⁶ This is strengthened by the Hebrew of Zephaniah 1:3, where the obscure phraseology, "the stumbling blocks [מְכַשְׂמֹת] along with the wicked" (NKJV), is used as a reference to those in Judah under the threat of God's judgment. This Old Testament imagery may have been the basis for Jesus' metaphor in Matthew.

That evil is associated with this phase of the kingdom is no more a problem than the presence of rebellion at the end of the millennium (Rev. 20:8-10).³⁷ The present phase of the kingdom of heaven will one day conclude with judgment by the Son of Man, a judgment that will determine who will enter the next phase of

³² Matthew used this phrase five times (13:39-40, 49; 24:3; 28:20); the only other New Testament occurrence is in Hebrews 9:26, where "age" occurs in the plural.

³³ Also in Matthew 16:27; 24:31; and 25:31 the ἄγγελοι are agents of eschatological judgment. In 13:41; 16:27; and 24:31 they are called "His angels" to highlight Jesus' claim to authority as the eschatological Judge.

³⁴ A similar imagery and vocabulary of judgment is used in Matthew 24:30-31.

³⁵ Other references to "His kingdom" are in Matthew 16:28; 20:21; Luke 22:29-30; John 18:36; and Colossians 1:13.

³⁶ Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 235-37.

³⁷ For discussion on this shift from the world to the kingdom at this stage in the parable, see M. de Goedt, "L'explication de la parabole de l'ivraie (Matt 13:36-43)," *Revue biblique* 66 (January 1959): 32—54.

the kingdom, referred to as the kingdom of the Father. The specific objects of this judgment of evil are "all stumbling blocks" (πάντα τὰ σκάνδαλα) and "those who commit lawlessness" (τοὺς ποιοῦντας τὴν ἀνομίαν, v. 41). In Matthew "lawlessness" is an appropriate word to describe Jews who had disobeyed the Mosaic Covenant (7:23; 23:28; 24:12; cf. 1 John 3:4).³⁸ By their sin they had violated the Law.

What did Jesus mean when He said the wicked will be gathered out of His kingdom (συλλέξουσιν ἐκ τῆς βασιλείας αὐτοῦ)? Some say the kingdom means the church and that evil will be removed from the church. However, it is preferable to say that the world will become the kingdom of the Son of Man when it is freed from the power of the the evil one (Dan. 7:14; Rev. 11:15).³⁹ The phrase, συλλέξουσιν ἐκ τῆς βασιλείας αὐτοῦ, would then mean that the unrighteous will not be permitted to enter the kingdom.⁴⁰ Two observations support, this conclusion. First, the field is never called the church, and nowhere in Matthew are the kingdom and the church identified.⁴¹ Second, the world is that sphere in which the Son of Man will establish His kingdom through the planting of its message and its messengers.

When the wicked are judged, there will be weeping (κλαυθμὸς) and gnashing of teeth (βρυγμὸς τῶν ὀδόντων)⁴² in the fiery furnace (Matt. 13:42). This imagery of the furnace of fire is drawn from Daniel 3:6, 11, 15, 20 and Malachi 4:1-2. This same statement is made later in Matthew 13:50.

Of the destiny of the righteous Jesus said, "The righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (v. 43). As Morris observes, "Here the righteous are those accepted as righteous on the last great day; the term points to their acceptability,

³⁸ "Lawlessness" (ἀνομία) occurs in the Gospels only in Matthew.

³⁹ Robert Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981), 145.

⁴⁰ This correlates well with Matthew 8:12, where Jesus said the unrighteous will be "cast out" of the kingdom by not being allowed to be present in the kingdom at the table with believing Jews and Gentiles (George Eldon Ladd, *Jesus and the Kingdom* [New York: Harper & Row, 1964], 230).

⁴¹ Stein observes, "It appears therefore far from certain that Matthew made or could have made such a one-to-one correspondence between the kingdom of heaven and the church Rather we should see in this expression the consummation of the kingdom of heaven which will take place at the coming of the Son of man" (*An Introduction to the Parables*, 146).

⁴² This expression is found six times in Matthew (8:12; 13:42, 50; 22:13; 24:51; 25:30) and once in Luke (13:28) in reference to the terrible state of suffering by being separated from the righteous and the kingdom of the Father. For further discussion of these metaphors see Schweizer, *The Good News according to Matthew*, 215--16.

not to their meritorious achievement."⁴³ In Matthew the behavior of the righteous demonstrates their righteousness. The phrase, "shine as the sun," is unique to the New Testament and speaks of "the radiance of the life to which they have come."⁴⁴ This may reflect Daniel 12:3 and Malachi 4:2, which refer to the righteous as shining and as being identified with the coming "sun of righteousness."⁴⁵ The latter obviously speaks of the coming Messiah; Jesus was echoing the message of the prophets and applying it to Himself. The destiny of the righteous is said to be "the kingdom of their Father" (Matt. 13:43).

This is the only place in Matthew where the kingdom is linked to God the Father. In 12:50, however, a person's relationship with Christ is linked to a relationship with the Father. The kingdom that belongs to Jesus as the Son of Man also belongs to the Father. As Hagner writes, "The Kingdom of the Son and the Kingdom of the Father refer to the same reality and are essentially interchangeable."⁴⁶ In light of 1 Corinthians 15:24, which refers to Jesus' future deliverance of the kingdom to God the Father and the corresponding subordination of the Son to the Father for all eternity, the eternal guarantee of the righteous may be more in view in this portion of the parable. Matthew was stressing that what Jesus is doing is the will and work of God and that the kingdom of heaven is His by virtue of His relationship to His Father and His role as the Son of Man.

CONCLUSION

The final exhortation, "He who has ears, let him hear" (Matt. 13:43), parallels the end of the parable of the sower (v. 9; cf. 11:15). This is further evidence of the connection between the first two parables as parables of the kingdom.

THE CENTRAL TRUTH IN RELATIONSHIP TO THE KINGDOM

In interpreting this parable Jesus made no mention of the sleeping, the questioning servants, the growth of both the wheat and the

⁴³ Leon Morris, *The Gospel according to Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 358 (italics his). Morris here may be inserting more of a Pauline positional emphasis than is present in Matthew, because Matthew described righteousness as manifested in character and obedience (7:21; 12:50).

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Daniel 12:3 states, "Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever" (NIV). According to Harrington, "There may be a connection between the 'wise' of Daniel and the Matthean disciple who 'hears the word and understands'" (*The Gospel of Matthew*, 206).

⁴⁶ Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, 394.

weeds, the gathering of the wheat into the barn, and the bundling of the weeds for fire. Two questions raised by the parable involve the origin of the conflict between the wicked and the righteous, and the rightful responsibility to solve it: Where did the conflict originate, and whose responsibility is it to deal with it?

Kistemaker says the conflict is between God and Satan.⁴⁷ However, the parable focuses more on the judgment to be supervised and executed through angelic agency by Jesus, the Son of Man. This will be the final answer to the problem of satanic opposition to His kingdom purposes.

THE ORIGIN OF THE OPPOSITION

The sons of the evil one are the followers of Satan, who opposes God's work. Bruner writes, "No reading of the Gospels can escape the impression that the earliest disciples of Jesus believed, and believed that Jesus believed, in the existence of an Evil One, who sought to thwart the purposes of God."⁴⁸

THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR JUDGMENT

Some maintain that Jesus told this parable to counter the expectation that the disciples were the ones to decide on who should be considered members of the kingdom community.⁴⁹ Others have challenged this view, because the conversation between the servants and their master, they suggest, is not referred to in the interpretation section of the parable. This matter, however, is indeed addressed in the interpretation. Since Jesus has the prerogative to judge who will enter His kingdom, the disciples are not to prejudge the people of this world. They are to "allow both grow together until the harvest" (13:30). Judging is the prerogative of the Son of Man. The good and the bad will coexist until the judgment takes place at the end of this age. "Only God Himself may distinguish the good from the evil: it is God's business alone to decide who belongs to the kingdom."⁵⁰ The disciples were taught that it was not their right or responsibility to judge those they believed were not acceptable for the kingdom of God (7:1-5).

THE REALITY OF JUDGMENT

One of the central truths in this parable is the reality of the judgment that will separate the wicked from the righteous. As Julicher states, "The promise of fire shows that Jesus is not indifferent to

⁴⁷ Kistemaker, *The Parables of Jesus*, 38.

⁴⁸ Bruner, *Matthew: A Commentary*, 498.

⁴⁹ Hendrickx, *The Parables of Jesus*, 63.

⁵⁰ Hill, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 235.

evil, and wickedness will meet its righteous end in punitive judgment."⁵¹

THE KINGDOM IMPLICATIONS

Several significant truths in relation to God's kingdom program are revealed in this parable. First, the world is the stage of the continuing opposition of Satan against the plan of God. Unique to this parable is the fact that this conflict is personal—between Jesus and Satan. The unbelieving in Israel were charged with being under the influence of Satan and in danger of final judgment. Second, since judgment will be carried out by the Son of Man, believers are not responsible for separating the righteous from the wicked before that event at the end of the age.

Third, the wicked will be judged by the wrath of God, and those who are righteous will enter the kingdom of God, which will come in visible reality at the end of the age. It is possible that Jesus deliberately chose to echo the words of John the Baptist in this parable concerning the seriousness of divine judgment. Both John and Jesus predicted that He will be the Agent of that fiery judgment (3:12; 13:41).

Fourth, the present age is distinguished from the events that will culminate at the end of this age. The present age of God's kingdom program is one of sowing and growth. The end of the age will be marked by the decisive judgment of the wicked and their separation from the righteous. The present age is not to be characterized by any kind of "holy war" instigated by those who would consider themselves servants of the Lord.

Many have wrongly applied this parable to the church.⁵² Dodd states, "The lesson taught is that there are good and bad members of the Church (the Kingdom of the Son of Man), and that it is not the Lord's will that any attempt should be made to expel the bad before the final judgment."⁵³ Carson counters with this assertion: "The parable does not address the church situation at all but explains how the kingdom can be present in the world while not yet wiping out all opposition. That must await the harvest. The parable deals with eschatological expectation, not ecclesiological deterioration."⁵⁴ Blomberg puts it this way: "From the actions of the

⁵¹ Julicher, *Die Gleichnisreden*, 2:549.

⁵² John P. Maier, *Matthew* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier, 1980), 148.

⁵³ C. H. Dodd, *The Parables of the Kingdom*, rev. ed. (New York: Scribner & Sons, 1961), 147. Even Dodd considers this conclusion suspicious, for he writes, "We should do well to forget this interpretation as completely as possible" (*ibid.*, 148).

⁵⁴ Donald A. Carson, "Matthew," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 8:317.

farmer and the fate of the wheat and the weeds, one learns that God will permit the righteous and the wicked to coexist in this age but that He will eventually separate the wicked, judge them, and destroy them, while gathering the righteous together to be rewarded by enjoying His presence together."⁵⁵

THE INTENDED APPEAL TO THE AUDIENCE

That the parable has a two-pronged thrust can be argued from the fact that it was delivered within the hearing of the multitude as well as the disciples. And the fact that the interpretation was given only to the disciples denotes a special application was intended for them. The parable was meant to explain as well as challenge. Jesus' interpretation explains the enigmatic presence of what is false but which looks much like what is real. The parable also points up that Jesus will separate the two later. His purpose in the present age is not judgmental but is the widespread "planting" of the people of the kingdom in the world. This planting is being done in the face of satanic opposition. The evil one is Satan, the enemy of the Son of Man, and of His purposes in establishing the present phase of the kingdom.

The righteous are challenged to remember that judgment will be executed by Jesus. This should prompt the believing community to do the will of God without worrying.⁵⁶ The unbelieving also are challenged to realize that the Son of Man will judge those who refuse to become "sons of the kingdom." They need to realize that this eternity-determining judgment will be irreversibly final.

Hendrickx says the parable applies to the first community level (the audience of Jesus) and the second community level (the early church). Those in the first community needed to understand that they were part of the new believing community and to understand the reason for the present opposition. Those in the second community needed to realize that absolute purification of the world in this age is impossible.⁵⁷ No doubt a major appeal from the parable is for patience as Jesus' followers can expect continuing hostility from those who reject His message.⁵⁸

The parable was also relevant to the multitude who heard it and resented the rule of Rome. Attempts to overthrow the power of

⁵⁵ Blomberg, *Matthew*, 219.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Hendrickx, *The Parables of Jesus*, 60.

⁵⁸ So Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 200.

Rome would not be appropriate. Conversely, anticipating the final judgment should cause them to question whether they were ready for that judgment. In addition, the fact that Jesus is the Son of Man would mean they were responsible to Him.

The need for such teaching in the *Sitz im Leben* of Jesus was clearly manifest for several reasons. For one, the zealots and others were impatient and desired the separation of the wheat from the tares immediately and this meant for them the destruction of the Roman Empire. The Pharisees also may have criticized Jesus for his teaching that the kingdom of God had come in his ministry when there was no judgment of the wicked. Qumran in its own way sought such a separation by isolating itself from the unrighteous and seeking to establish in the wilderness a community prepared for the coming of the Messiah by eliminating from its presence any "weeds." Even the disciples may have had similar needs, as John's and James' desire to bring down fire from heaven to consume the Samaritan "weeds" indicates (see Luke 9:51-56). Judgment, Jesus taught, was coming. There would be a final separation, but their task did not involve this separation.⁵⁹

The parable was also intended to encourage the "sons of the kingdom"; that one day the Son of Man will be victorious over the evil one and all his ploys. Jesus' followers need not fear that the kingdom of God will fall prey to the powers of darkness. In the meantime they are to evangelize others. "The confidence in the certainty of the coming separation keeps one from worrying about the fate of the seed. It sets one free for the ingathering of people into the kingdom of God without any constraint to bring about a 'pure' community of righteous people. The parable speaks of unconditional invitation, not of the formation of a holy remnant."⁶⁰ Therefore this certainty of the future separation of the righteous and the wicked at Jesus' second coming warns unbelievers about false profession and encourages believers to be faithful disciples of the Lord.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables*, 144.

⁶⁰ Hendrickx, *The Parables of Jesus*, 59.

⁶¹ Gundry, *Matthew: A Commentary on His Literary and Theological Art*, 262.

This material is cited with gracious permission from:

Dallas Theological Seminary
3909 Swiss Ave.
Dallas, TX 75204
www.dts.edu

Please report any errors to Ted Hildebrandt at: thildebrandt@gordon.edu