

THE CASE OF THE MYSTERIOUS HARVEST

by Ray C. Stedman

We are returning this morning to Matthew 13 where we are looking at of parables our Lord gave to describe the age in which we live, the age introduced by his first coming and which has been unfolding now for almost twenty centuries. He looked down those twenty centuries and gave us in parable form some clues to the understanding of our own age. It is very important that we see what these are. We come today to the second in this series of parables. We looked last week at the parable of the sower. Now we come to what is called the parable of the wheat and the tares, or as we have it in our Revised Standard Version, the wheat and the weeds. This is part of the series which our Lord gave all on one day as he sat in a boat on the Sea of Galilee and instructed the crowds gathered on the shore.

One of the issues concerning our world and the course of this age which has been debated for centuries is the question: Is the world getting better or is it getting worse? And from time to time, depending on when you asked that question, you could find a majority of voices raised on one side or the other. At the beginning of this century you would have been laughed almost to scorn if you had suggested that the world is getting worse instead of better. Today it is the other way around. Now it is almost ridiculous to suggest that the world is getting better. Yet there are still some who hold this view. The other day I ran across a rather humorous statement of it:

My granddad, viewing earth's worn cogs,
Said, "Things were going to the dogs."
His granddad, in his house of logs,
Said, "Things were going to the dogs."
And his granddad, in the Flemish bogs,
Said, "Things were going to the dogs."
And his granddad, in his old skin togs,
Said, "Things were going to the dogs."
There's one thing I have to state:
The dogs have had a good long wait.

That is the philosophy which suggests that the world, if not improving, at least is not getting any worse. But there are others who take a very different view today. We are going to seek the answer to that question in this parable of the wheat and the tares because our Lord gives us a key to the understanding of that great question, one of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven. The parable begins at Verse 24:

Another parable he put before 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 weeds among the wheat, and went away. So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the weeds appeared also. And the servants of the householder came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Then do you want us to go and gather them?' But he said, 'No; lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. Let both grow together until the harvest; and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn.'" {Matt 13:24-30 RSV}

There is his story and in it are hidden some wonderfully helpful clues to the understanding of the age in which we live. As Matthew goes on to tell us, Jesus spoke two more parables and then there came a break (probably a coffee break). He left the crowds and went into the house. There his disciples came and asked him about the meaning of the parable. Beginning with Verse 36, we have our Lord's explanation. So let's go back over the

parable section by section and examine it in the light of the explanation.

You notice that this too is a parable of sowing. But the sowing is quite different than that in the first parable. There, you remember, the seed was the Word of God, and the sowing was to go on throughout the entire age. Wherever the Word of God was to be sown it would fall on four different kinds of soils, four kinds of hearts, and in one it would take root and grow up. That has been happening now for twenty centuries. But in this parable the seed is not the Word of God; it is what Jesus, in his explanation, calls "the sons of the kingdom."

Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the weeds of the field." He answered, "He who sows the good seed is the Son of man [i.e., Jesus himself]; the field is the world, and the good seed means the sons of the kingdom; the weeds are the sons of the evil one, and the enemy who sowed them is the devil;" {Matt 13:36-39a RSV}

So the seed sown here is not ideas, not the word of Scripture, not the word of the gospel, but people. However, this does link up with the first parable. The ones which were produced by the good seed of the word in the first parable are now in turn taken by the Lord and scattered throughout the world. That is the picture we have here. But this is a quite different sowing. The first one goes on continuously; this one only once, at the beginning of the age. Yet there is a sense in which it is going on all through this age. In the first we were looking at the soils; here we are looking at the whole field which Jesus says is the world.

It is important to notice how the Lord begins this parable. Do not, as many do in reading this series of parables, make the mistake of taking the very first thing he mentions as being the entire comparison he intends. No, it is the whole picture that he has in view. The kingdom of heaven is compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field, and another man came and sowed some other kind of seed, and it all grew up together, and the servants came and asked the man what to do, etc. The whole story is a picture of the kingdom of heaven. God's work and God's operations in the world of our day -- that is the kingdom of heaven. Literally, the Greek text here means the kingdom of heaven "has become like" this. He says that because in the first parable he began by sowing the word in the hearts of individuals. Some of the seed fell on good ground and brought forth fruit and transformed those individuals so that they became sons of the kingdom. Then in this parable Jesus says he now takes these sons of the kingdom and scatters them throughout the world. He is predicting what will happen in the course of history as God is at work in human events.

You find the historical fulfillment of this in the book of Acts. This is how he began this age. You remember that at the close of the Gospels Jesus gathered with his disciples and said to them, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature" {cf, Mark 16:15}, "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even unto the close of the age," {Matt 28:19b-20 RSV}. He is going to talk in this parable about the close of the age. Therefore that "great commission" was the beginning of this scattering of these sons of the kingdom throughout the world. As you read on in the book of Acts you find that on the Day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit came and empowered the waiting disciples, filling them with himself. Then, a little later on, persecution arose and the disciples were scattered everywhere, preaching the word. That is the sowing our Lord is talking about here. He scattered them throughout the world. And Paul, in his letter to the Colossians, recognizes this. In the first chapter he says,

Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing -- {Col 1:5b-6a RSV}

Thus he recognized this sowing that our Lord had accomplished.

It is essential to notice that the field represents not the church but the world. These sons of the kingdom are put where God wants them -- in the world. Wherever you are, as a child of God, as a son of the kingdom by faith in Jesus Christ, you have been put there by the Lord Jesus. It is so important to understand that he has sown you and put you where you are. The church, you see, is to gather together for worship, for instruction, and for mutual fellowship, but then it is to go out. There is a kind of a rhythm of life within the church -- it comes together, then goes out again, scattered out into the world. And where you are out there is where the word of

witness is given, where the truth of the word is promulgated. That is what the Lord has in mind here. The field therefore is the world, the human race, society, as we normally term it. In that world of humanity the Lord Jesus has scattered his own.

Now into that same field, Jesus says, there came an enemy. He came right at the beginning of this age, and he came while men were sleeping, i.e., while they were not aware of what was happening. Out of sheer malice and hatred he sowed a crop of his own which the Revised Standard Version calls "weeds." Literally it is the plant which today is called *darnel*, a poisonous weed which looks very much like wheat. In fact, when it first begins to grow even an expert cannot distinguish it from wheat. But as it grows it begins to change. And, finally, when it comes to harvest, even a child can tell that it is not wheat. The Jews called it "degenerate wheat" or, literally, "bastard wheat" because it appears to be wheat but it is not. That is the figure that our Lord employs. Now these too are persons that are sown. They are what Jesus calls "the sons of the evil one." They too have been scattered throughout the human race by the enemy -- and especially among the wheat. We will see more about that in a moment.

I know that there is a sense in which the whole world, as the Scriptures tell us, is under the control of satanic philosophy and thought. Jesus referred to the devil as the ruler of this world because he governs the thinking of people. But, in the light of this parable, I think it is wrong to think of everybody in the world, men, women, and children alike, as "sons of the evil one." Jesus never called anybody a son of the devil except the Pharisees who were teachers of evil in the name of righteousness. That was what he called a son of the devil -- someone who pretended to be religiously correct but was actually disseminating wrong, evil, error.

It is true that we are all members of a fallen race. We are all born into this world tainted with Adam's sin so that we all tend toward evil naturally. No one has to teach you how to lie. Did you ever go to school to learn that? Do you have a diploma to show that you have successfully accomplished training in *How To Be Selfish*? No, you learn all this naturally. You never have to be trained in how to be dishonest, how to cheat, how to be a hypocrite. We are all natural hypocrites, and experts at it, because we are members of a fallen race. But babies could hardly be called "sons of the evil one" in the sense our Lord intends here.

I remember that Dr. H. A. Ironside once described a rather stern and austere pastor who went to see a woman. She was showing him her baby, holding the infant up so he could see how beautiful it was. This pastor drew a long face and said to her, "Madam, what a pity that this little one should be a child of the devil!" Well, that is hardly the way to make a hit with the mother -- nor is it theologically correct. Although it is true that the child is in a world dominated by satanic thought, and that, as he grows, he will probably become more and more possessed with wrong ideas and wrong concepts, which he will be totally unaware are wrong and that thus he may gradually become committed to these evil principles, it is only at that point that he can be called a "son of the evil one" in this sense.

What Jesus has in mind here are largely the teachers of evil under the guise of religion. Those are what he calls "the sons of the evil one." In other words, he thinks of the whole human race as a field, bleak, and lifeless. At the beginning, he scattered in it men committed to him, men and women in whom the truth of the Word had taken root and had come alive. He thrust them out into the field, scattered them here and there, in order that they might reproduce themselves and yield men committed to him. Then Satan came and did the same thing. He deliberately scattered in this field of rather lifeless humanity certain evil teachers who appear to be religious and righteous. Jesus began by scattering men committed to the word of truth in order to produce more like himself. Satan began by scattering men committed to the lie in order to produce more like himself. And so both grow together now until the harvest. See how they grow. Jesus said,

So when the plants came up and bore grain, then the seeds appeared also. And the servants of the householder came and said to him, "Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then has it weeds?" He said to them, "An enemy has done this." {Matt 13:26-28a RSV}

He implies here that those who are his servants will become troubled by the sight of these weeds in the field because they will be growing among the wheat. It is important that you see that. Our Lord said that these weeds would be sown not just in the world in general but among the wheat, i.e., in the church, and that they

would grow up within the church. So the wheat are true believers, and the tares are those who appear to be true believers but are actually false, who grow up right within the church. The two are so intermingled that at first you can't tell them apart -- until the fruit begins to appear.

Remember that in Acts 20 the Apostle Paul, speaking to the elders of the church at Ephesus, told them,

I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. {Acts 20:29-30 RSV}

That is the sowing our Lord is talking about here. This fits the historical picture exactly. In the early centuries of this age, it was very difficult to tell true Christians from false. If you read the writings of the early church fathers from the first two or three centuries, you find them hard to classify. Many of them were obviously godly, genuinely born-again, regenerate men who loved God. And yet they sometimes taught errors and heresies right along with the truth, and they are just as strong for the error as they are for the truth. It is rather disconcerting to read these men. You would think that we ought to find a pure fountain of truth in the early centuries, but we do not.

Gradually the great central truths of the faith began to be debated and there was a great deal of doctrinal controversy. They had to hammer it all out and compare it with the Scriptures. But as the truth grew it gradually became apparent that the heresies were leading men astray while the truth was still establishing them. Gradually the tares began to take form and appear to be what they really are. It was then that the truths of the church were crystallized into the creeds as we recite today -- the Nicene Creed, the Apostles' Creed -- these are statements of the truth devised in order to counteract the heresy that was rampant within the church.

Then, during the so-called Dark Ages, you find the next step described by our Lord:

The servants said to him, "Then do you want us to go and gather them?" But he said, "No; lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with it. Let both grow together until the harvest;" {Matt 13:28b-30a RSV}

"Let both grow together until the harvest." That is our Lord's word. It is amazing how many Christians ignore those words of Jesus, and are constantly trying to purify the church in ways unwarranted by the Scriptures. Even in the great awakening we are seeing today, many young people are making this mistake again. They say that they are going to go off and start their own church, and it is going to be a true church, a pure church. There is going to be no heresy in it. And so you find groups splintering off and breaking away and calling themselves the "True Church," the "One Way," the "Only Way," etc. They say they have the truth and no one else does. They are going to be free from error and from any kind of garbled doctrine. But, you see, that is impossible. Jesus said that you cannot do it that way. You cannot separate evil from the church. You cannot even drive it out. It is going to be there in some form. This does not mean that we are not to expose it, and to meet it positively with the teaching of the truth. We are. Nor are we to allow those who exhibit clear forms of error to take leadership within the church. Other Scripture helps us here. But what our Lord wants us to understand is that no human effort is going to eliminate error from the church. "Let them both grow together," he said.

Now, you can deal with it in your own heart. This is how completely intermingled error is with truth -- you will find it in your own heart. No one person is completely true and pure and perfect.

I even have a little error in myself. I don't see it -- but my wife does. And it breaks upon my own astonished gaze from time to time. It is there.

So how are you going to get rid of it in the church? Well, Jesus says you cannot get rid of it. You will find that it is there, and it is going to stay there, and no human effort is going to eliminate it. Therefore all the efforts to try to form a pure church, or a pure council of churches, etc., are doomed to failure before they begin, as Jesus has pointed out.

As I said, this too has happened in history. In the 4th and 5th century there were godly men who honestly advocated the overthrow of heretics with the sword and with fire. And yet notice in the parable how our Lord restrains his true servants. He told them not to do anything like this. But throughout the Middle Ages, when both truth and error in this form were growing together, evil in the name of religion became more and more apparent. Finally, its true nature began to be very evident to people when thousands were perishing at the hands of evil in the name of religion. That is what finally caused the Protestant Reformation.

But even honest servants of God at that time wondered if they should do the same. Luther once said to one of the Catholic emissaries, Emser, "If heretics have deserved the stake, then you and the Pope should be killed a thousand times. Nevertheless, I do not want it to be done." You can see how the Spirit of Christ within him restrained him from going over into this error. Unfortunately such was not always the case. John Calvin ultimately consented to the burning of an heretic named Servetus, so Protestants have burnt their heretics too.

What is the Lord's plan for handling this problem? He says, "Let them both grow together until the harvest." That is, "Don't worry about it, I'll take care of it. I've got my own plan for handling this and nothing you can do is going to eliminate the problem [as has proven true in history]. But don't worry about it. Keep your message positive, preach the word, teach the truth, deal with it in your own hearts, exclude it from leadership, yes, but don't try to eliminate error. Don't launch a crusade that exists only for the purpose of trying to wipe out evil or error, particularly religious error, because you won't succeed."

This is the mistake of many of the separatists movements of our day. Billy Graham is often under attack from them because he recognizes that there is error in the churches and that he does not have the ability to distinguish whether a man is genuinely a Christian or not. So until he can see this clearly by his fruit, he accepts him at face value. There are some who attack him viciously because of this, pretending that they have the ability to make this distinction, while the Lord said that no one could.

There are sons of the evil one in every church. There are some right here among us this morning who claim to be Christian, who talk like Christians, who act like Christians outwardly, but who have never yielded their lives to the Lord Jesus Christ. They are representatives of the doctrines of demons, seducing spirits, as the Apostle Paul calls them, wrong ideas that have infiltrated society. And notice that a major point of this parable is to give us a clue to the way that the enemy works most successfully. It is by imitation, by counterfeit. How simple it would be if evil people would only look evil. Wouldn't that help a lot? If hypocrites would only snarl and growl a little bit it would help so much. But they always look so pleasant. They always talk so sweetly. They are such nice people, and that is why we go along with their ideas. We cannot believe that such nice people could be so far wrong. And, unless we use the Word of God to evaluate their teachings, we can be deceived by the niceness of people who are imitation, counterfeit apostles, as the Word of God calls them.

I picked up a magazine not long ago called *The Children's Friend*. That sounds like an innocent title, doesn't it? I opened it and there were some beautifully colored pictures for children and a text that seemed to be written in such simple and wonderful terms. And yet as I read on I began to detect the implantation of the ideas of one of the notorious cults of our day. It was teaching children error in the name of God. An innocent child would simply be led along and would be deceived by its beauty, its simplicity, and by the warmth of the language. Instead of being the children's friend, the magazine was actually a deadly enemy, seeking to destroy that child, to blight his life, blast his character, seeking to shut off the light of Christ from him and remove him into darkness. That is how evil works in our day, and we have to understand that this is the way the sons of the evil one work in society.

Now look at the way the Lord plans to deal with them:

"... at harvest time I will tell the reapers, Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn." {Matt 13:30b RSV}

He explains that, beginning in Verse 39:

"The harvest is the close of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the close of the age. The Son of man will

send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire; there men will weep and gnash their teeth. Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear." {Matt 13:39-43 RSV}

Our Lord is looking ahead to his return in power and glory at the close of this age. In Matthew 24 and 25 you have the great message our Lord gave about what it will be like at the end of the age. It is a time of great tribulation, of terrible judgment on the earth. Many Bible scholars deduce from the book of Daniel that it probably will be about seven years in length. It is the time covered by the greater part of the book of Revelation. Each visitation of judgment in Revelation is like a swing of an angel's scythe as he goes through the harvest field, reaping the harvest of earth. In fact the book of Revelation employs that very imagery, saying "the time is come for you to reap, for the harvest of the earth is ripe," {cf, Rev 14:15}.

When Jesus sends forth his angels, it will not be something visible. Angelic activity goes on behind the scenes. So this will not be some sudden appearance of angels in the presence of men. He is describing here the activities that will take place in human affairs for which men will not be able to account, for which they will not have any explanation.

The Lord said that the reapers would go forth and bind the weeds into bundles, literally "with a view toward burning." That is, the burning is not to take place immediately when the binding does. It is to come at the end, at the close of the age. What our Lord is saying will happen is that, as we near the close of the age, we will see men of evil gathering themselves together into great associations of evil. That is the work of angels. They are binding the tares together into bundles unto the time of burning, the time of judgment that is to follow. And there are many, looking at our age, who say that this is where we are today, that we are seeing a great clumping together of those of like mind, who hold to evil principles and tendencies (especially those who do so in the name of religion), that as we near the time of the end of the age there seems to be a growing tendency toward the association of evil persons ultimately to be swept away in judgment.

But the wheat is to be gathered into the Father's barn. Now, there is no time schedule in this parable. You cannot tell when this is to happen in relation to other events. It is simply mentioned, and left there. But that is the destiny of the wheat. And Jesus says, "Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father." You remember that in the book of Revelation John sees a great multitude from every tribe and nation standing before God and appearing to shine as the sun in the kingdom of the Father. They have come out of the great tribulation, the harvest of the earth, as men and women perhaps have laid down their lives during that time. And all through this age this is what has been happening. Men and women have been laying down their lives in death -- but not necessarily violent death. Jesus' word to all Christians is: "Be faithful unto death," {Rev 2:10}. That doesn't mean you must have your life taken violently, but you are to remain true to him until you die. This is the sign that you really belong to him.

Then at last, as John goes on to say, the kingdom of the world will become the kingdom of our Lord, and of his Christ. Then shall come the time to which all the prophets have looked forward when all the earth shall blossom like the rose and men shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks and there shall be no more war across the face of the earth. But that awaits the solution of God. Men cannot work that out.

Now let's return in closing to answer the question with which we began: Is the world getting better, or is it getting worse?

Well the answer our Lord gives is clearly, "Both!" Good men are getting better, and more powerful, and more extensive; and evil men are getting worse, and more powerful, and more destructive. The two sowings are growing up to a harvest, side by side. If evil is getting worse, God is matching it with a demonstration of his power and with the increase of good. That is why I think it is logical to expect that, as we near the end of the age, and increasingly see evil amassing itself and breaking out in tremendous authority and power, we will also see the Spirit of God breaking out in authority and power among the same groups of people and an awakening will occur right along with the deepening decline into darkness and evil. That is what is happening in our own day. Jesus says it will go on until the harvest. And when the harvest of earth comes at the end of

the age God will begin to reap -- the good to be his, the evil to be destroyed.

Now, where do you stand?

That is the question we leave each one with today.

Is the seed of the Word of God growing in your heart? Are you a son of the kingdom, and therefore an influence for good throughout the earth?

Or are you a son of the evil one, beginning to spread lies, deceptive concepts, and to spread abroad the destructive philosophies that are so widespread in the world today. They are part of the lie of Satan that man can live by himself, that he is self-sufficient, that he is able to carry on his own affairs, that he can run his own life, and, therefore, does not need God. That is the great lie which always marks the philosophy of the devil.

Or are you one of the sons of the kingdom whom God is using in this day to bring this great harvest to fruition and to produce that which will glorify and delight his heart throughout all time?

Prayer

Our heavenly Father, we thank you for the truth that we have examined this morning. How it searches us out! How it sets our age into perspective and makes us see life as it really is. Teach us, Lord, to value the truth as it is in Jesus, the truth revealed to us by that One who loved us enough to give himself for us. We can trust the One who died for our sakes and who lives to live within us. We thank you for that. We pray that we may be sons of the kingdom today, teachers of truth, openers of eyes, helping men out of their darkness. For the glory of the gospel is that even those who are becoming sons of the evil one can be changed into sons of the kingdom. And you have come to make this dividing mark in history. Help us, Lord, to see ourselves as we are in relation to it. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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