

**A Surprising Place to Discover Grace:
The Parable of the Tares and the Wheat
(Matt 13:24-30; 36-43)**

I wish to start by drawing attention to one of the more intriguing passages that occurs in the Gospel of Matthew. It is the short word of Jesus, “Many are called but few are chosen” (Matt 22:14). No doubt most of us have heard someone in our family utter these words with regard to some circumstance or other. But the fact that these words have often functioned as a cliché should not be allowed to cover an important set of theological ideas. These are not only important for Matthew and those who spend a lot of time reflecting on the first gospel; but, as we will see, they have significance for our spiritual pilgrimage in the contemporary church. These thoughts circle around the theme of the nature of the grace of God and our election.

Most consider that the words of 2 Peter 3:9 are a given for the God we worship and serve.

[God] is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

Or, we could quote 1 Tim 2:3-4:

God our Savior...desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.

The latter verse goes on to say that the facilitator of this salvation is Christ Jesus “who gave himself a ransom for all.” We can all agree our God is a God of grace.

Much of Protestant theology of the past century took this lure and ran with it. Barth constantly circled around the quasi-universalist motif, “God in his grace has elected humankind in Christ Jesus and our role as ministers is to convince a demoralized people plagued by sin that is the case.”

Of course, if Barth’s emphasis is not held in a proper tension it quickly devolves into “cheap grace.” Too many who listen to your sermons bring this theology to the table. It informs their day by day existence. “Of course when we obeyed the gospel we became aware that we were God’s chosen. We are the saved! Would anyone question that? What is new?”

So let us hear a second time those words of Matt 22:14: **Many are called but few are chosen.**

If we are listening, a surface reading should send a chill up our spine. I do not allude here to the complicated issues about election and predestination. They can wait for another day. What I do mean is that this text suggests there is a wide differentiation between the call of God and the end result (the saved). Many are called but few are finally saved.

Those of you who have an ear for Matthew, of course, will quickly note this is not the only place where this emerges in the Gospel.

Enter by the narrow gate; for the gate is wide – and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. For the gate is narrow and the way is marked by afflictions that leads to life, and those that find it are few (Matt 7:13-14).

As unpopular as it may seem, these texts suggest that not all of us who reckon that we operate within the sphere of the kingdom will make it at the final roll call.

But let us take a closer look at Matt 22:14. The exegetes have been concerned with this text for a long time. The late Ben Meyer produced a very insightful article on its exegetical history. He determined (correctly in my view) that it was not about election in the way magisterial theologians of the last few centuries have dealt with the topic. The verse is simply a remembrance of Jesus' response to the results of his preaching in Israel. Its overall point is quite straightforward. It is not enough to be called. One must respond faithfully. Grammatically, the saying is a special kind of comparative construction.

The more numerous (i.e. all Israel) are the ones called to repentance. The less numerous (i.e. those who faithfully respond to Jesus' call) are those who will attain salvation.

Read this way, it is a fitting conclusion to the two parables in Matt 22:1-13. In the first parable the people made all kinds of excuses; they did everything to avoid active responsible acceptance of the invitation to the king's marriage feast. In the second instance the parable highlights the response to the one who did not bother to bring his wedding garment and thus also showed contempt toward the king. In both cases lack of faithfulness was the deciding factor in differentiating between the called and the chosen.

A Troubling Issue

Although this opening aside on Matt 22:14 may take us away from some of the issues raised by the new Calvinists this saying of Jesus and the parable that will be our focus today (The Tares and the Wheat) nevertheless still have the capacity to make us somewhat uneasy. They seem to be suggesting that salvation may not be a totally settled issue. Does Matthew really mean to say that our personal salvation is not settled by our conversion followed up by living within conventional fences? Is there a possibility that something could go awry at the very end (i.e. the judgment)? I suggest that, carefully construed, to many members of "little complacent churches," this could be slightly troubling.

So often when we think of Jesus' parables we see them as those in Luke 15, as metaphors for unadulterated joy as the lost or sinner is welcomed home. But there are several parables in Matthew, mostly peculiar to him that indicate there may be some surprises at the last day. These, most certainly, capture our attention. So a brief series on what I call peculiar Matthean end-times

parables may well have the effect of a cold shower. Yet they have value. They can wake us up from drifting into spiritual listlessness.

Of course, preaching a series of sermons on parables that involves a lot of talk about the judgment may seem to be swimming against the tide. Matthew represents these sermons as coming from Jesus; but even that causes some folks difficulties. As I was involved in the preparation for my presentation of this series, word came across my computer that in the past several years more than 100,000 people have disappeared from the pews of Churches of Christ in America. And we all know that a large number of them are in the under-thirty population. A couple of days after I received the news about our alarming attendance decline, I came across another widely distributed report that young adults are leaving churches of all kinds in droves because they perceive organized religion as too judgmental. The report indicated that if we want to keep young people coming we had better stay away anything that has the whiff of being judgmental. Thus these texts offer a challenge. Most churches of Christ do not follow a lectionary. So we don't have to preach these parables. But, the last time I checked, these were in the canon which to us is the whole counsel of God. Thus, I suggest, despite the culture, perhaps with due caution, it may still be worthwhile to take a look at what they have to say.

There is one other factor that just may entice a congregation to have some interest in these texts. I call it 'fascination with the unknown.' What will it be like when we approach the other side? When we have to appear at the last day? Some years ago I was sitting with a group of friends having a meal with the great Jewish scholar and English Jurist David Daube. Someone asked about what spiked his interest, as an observant Jew, to take up and study seriously Christian texts. He was only more than happy to reply with a story about how it all got started.

Apparently before Hitler, he lived as a child in one of the innumerable small villages in Germany that had a large Jewish population. There were only two religious communities in the village: a synagogue and a Catholic church. The rabbi had told the young people many times that it ever they were near the Catholic church an evil spirit would get them and terrible things would happen. Well, you can about guess the rest. One night Daube and his friend were out after dark. They saw a light in the Catholic church. Inevitably they were attracted to see what was taking place. Outside one of the windows Daube's friend hoisted him up on his shoulders so that he could peer inside to see what was taking place. Absolutely fascinated, Daube watched spellbound. The priest, alone, in full clerical regalia, was engaged in the rite of the mass. After his friend let him down they returned home that night in right mind to live another day. Now Daube was hooked. He could do nothing else but unpack the mystery of this other world he had encountered. He wanted to know what was behind this rite. It seemed to him to be so suffused with an encounter with the inexplicable. For some reason or other these parables speaking about the other world, rightly handled, may have a similar resonance.

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. Before him will be gathered all the peoples...

Who cannot be fascinated by such language? It has a wonderful capacity to draw us into its orbit. Inevitably we are forced to ask, “Where do I stand in this story?” This is the perspective I would like for you to cultivate with your congregation as you seek to lead them on this search of spiritual discovery. So let us now turn to the first of these parables, the Tares among the Wheat (13:24-30; 36-43).

Locating the Parable

The Parable of the Tares (is it darnel, weeds, wild oats or whatever?) is a crucial part of Matthew’s famous parable unit in Matthew 13. Aside from the Parable of the Sower which leads off this collection of seven parables it is the only one given an extensive interpretive elaboration in this grouping. This parallel with the Parable of the Sower is important. It reminds us that the Parable of the Tares must be read in the context of the entire parable chapter in Matthew 13.

My friend Lamar Cope points out that after Jesus narrates the Parable of the Sower in 13:2-8 it is followed by a brief exhortation in 13:9:

He who has ears (to hear) let him hear.

Cope points out that this same wording occurs in 13:43 at the end of the parable of the Tares. Thus another connection is made between the two parables. Matthew’s point is that the parables are capable of being understood. The question of the disciples in 13:10 querying why then does Jesus speak in parables (riddles) is, without doubt, an interesting request. It gets a direct answer in verses 10-17. Presuming the common process of exegesis in Jewish communities at that time, these verses are saying that when the leader of the community unpacks a biblical text, instructed by the spirit, its deep secrets are made available by that teacher or his close followers. Although the text here is a parable and the teacher (Jesus) is unpacking its secrets (v. 11) it is then interesting to note that the statement

Who have eyes to see, but see not?
Who have ears to hear, but hear not?

is found in a biblical text: Ezek 13:2. There the prophet is speaking against some in the house of Israel: the community of faith. This will be pertinent as the Parable of the Tares unfolds. Israel has the capacity to hear, see and understand. But as Isaiah says (Matt 13:14-15), those outside the core community of righteous ones are beset with confusion. Thus, only those in relationship with the teacher can fully understand.

With regard to the Parable of the Sower, the interpretation shows that it is really a parable about the outcome of the kingdom of the Son of Man. To the special few, the meaning of the parable is clear. The seed is “the word of the kingdom.” Despite the different soils there are only two kinds of people: those who hear and understand (v. 23) and those who do not (vs. 19, 20, 22). The critical point is that the parable anticipates the eschaton. As the later parables point out,

that is when it will be all sorted out. Those who understand the secrets that the teacher unfolds and act appropriately by providing much fruit in their lives of faithfulness will be vindicated. Those who do not will be separated on the last day. I would contend that if you do preach the Parable of the Sower in this series, you plan to preach it in the entirety of Matt 13.

The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares: An Initial Interpretation

This emphasis on being made privy to the secrets of what is emerging with the coming of the kingdom thus brings us to the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares; as noted, this is the only other parable in Matthew's parable collection aside from the Sower that has an extended interpretation. Even though it clearly has an emphasis on the importance of the end-time, there are still some major views about where the exact emphasis falls in this parable. Thus a closer look is needed to determine what is going on here.

Many commentators argue that the meaning centers on the understanding of the field in which the seed is sown. Both the Son of Man and the devil sow respectively their seed in the same field. Matthew 13:38 states that the field is "the world." But what is that? In an ordinary reading of the text many conclude that the parable is saying that the work of the Son of Man, continuing on with his disciples, will have a universal impact. This seems to fit Matt 28:19. And likewise, since the work of the devil and his agents certainly covers the entire realm, this reading also supports the view that "the world" really is a reference to a process that involves every last person in this vast domain. In short, this is a parable about the way it will be for everyone in the whole world.

If this is the reading, as some have noted, the point of the parable is that the kingdom is not especially significant in the present age. For the time being we are to take comfort in the knowledge that although the kingdom has been inaugurated we now know why God's rule is not fully evident – the devil is allowed to continue his work. The kingdom will only fully emerge after the final sorting out at the last judgment.

Yet, although this interpretation is popular in many circles it has serious problems. In a delightful phrase McIver points out that this reading "involves a truism too trivial to even be described as a cliché. The kingdom is here but it is not here." Is that all there is? On the other hand, if our analysis of Matthew 13 is on target, Matthew has set this parable up as something that brings significant insight and understanding that is of use for the present believer. That would be something far more than just the point that God's rule is still not universalized. Turn on your television sets and we can see that is apparent – in less than 15 minutes.

Another View of the Parable

I have often noticed that the key to getting the point of a parable of Jesus is to look around and fix one's eyes on something unusual about the action that is being described in the parable. For instance, in the parable of the widow losing the coin in Lk 15:8-10 we learn that she

turns her house upside down in order to find something that was lost. This is a simple description that would almost go unnoticed by many men. But most women would do about anything in the world rather than mess up their house! That may be just the point! The woman did this because the coin was so precious that she would tolerate total disorder to get it. If the woman would do this for a coin, I think that when the lost is found there is all the more joy. Likewise with the Parable of the Tares. In reading this parable I notice again something unusual. The householder does not allow the workers to remove the tares or weeds from the good plants. Good and bad will just have to exist together until the end.

This strikes me as odd – especially for someone who grew up in the wheat country of Australia. I realize that in a large field of wheat it is impossible to go out and remove plants wholesale without tearing up some of the good ones. But I think we have overdone these difficulties. In ancient Palestine the fields were small and there seemed to be a lot of workers around to clean up the field. They could have done the job on that field! As a teenager on my father's dry land property I was often sent out to chip out weeds and thus save moisture for the good plants. As I read this parable I can hardly hear my father saying, "Don't bother with that. Let everything go until the harvest." As I said, this is odd. It is not the usual thing to do. I think the servants found this unusual as well, and probably the ancient readers would agree.

But in thinking and searching for insight about this I was reminded of Jesus' words earlier in this chapter to the disciples: to paraphrase, "pay attention in order to see, hear and understand." And if we are paying attention then we begin to see, perhaps to our surprise, an important word of grace emerging. To our surprise – Yes! Because there is a lot about the judgment in this parable.

But grace? Here? Yes, because what is really being discussed, if we are hearing, is not so much a lesson on the sifting out process at the end of the age (the weeds will be burned); but a word on what is going on in the kingdom right now. And this is where this business about letting the weeds grow together with the good wheat comes into focus. Because right here we hit a cord that has tremendous resonance in Matthew. There is work to be done now. Things must be done to maintain the integrity and keep within the fold the good plants: those who live in the zone of the kingdom until the very end: even to the extent of not pulling up the weeds because that might hurt the good plants.

We are being told with respect to those in the zone of the kingdom that the wheat is precious. Never give up on it. Allegorically speaking, some of these marginal plants of wheat will eventually constitute part of the good harvest. This is all played out in the community discourse in Chapter 18. Matthew is perpetually talking about the need for believers not to place "a rock of offence" before these "little ones" who are the disciples. In the community discourse of Matthew 18 Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep (Matt 18:12-14). And, in Matthew, what does the shepherd do? He leaves behind the 99 on the mountains and seeks the one who has gone out of Matthew's church: the zone of the kingdom. He does this because there is only one place where he can remain in the guidance of the Teacher and learn what it means to do God's will. Thus the shepherd does everything to bring the straying sheep home in the Kingdom. In other words, the emphasis of the parable, I believe, is on the instruction to the workers, "Don't tear up

the field! Because if you do so, you may lose some of the good wheat” (verse 29). Of course, there are isolated times when we must separate from ugly unrepentant people (Matt 19:15-17). But many times we are far more likely to carry on patterns of conduct in church like where the marginalized believer, “the little one,” says, “What’s the use,” and walks away. Whether we see ourselves as givers or receivers, grace is not cleaning house and deciding who is in and who is out in our assembly. Grace is the understanding that it is our role to seek to pastor the little ones to keep them in the kingdom. The coin of the kingdom is tolerance, not wholesale purging.

Place of the Parable in Matthew’s Theology

As I said, this constitutes a resonant note for Matthew. In the Jewish framework in which Matthew lived and breathed there was a longstanding remembrance that after the suffering of the people of God for so many centuries at the judgment the elect would be vindicated. That day was, in their minds, synonymous with national liberation. In fact, the anticipation of their sure vindication on the last day was the energizing force that undergirded many faithful Israelites to persist with their faith century after century. Like the complacent church of today they considered much could be endured in light of what was inevitably going to be awarded to them in the New Jerusalem. Sometimes, the idea we are the elect does that to us. Many are called. Grounded in the graciousness of that election it, apparently, is very difficult to entertain the idea that some in that great community of Israel could miss out. Their election as God’s special people was thought to guarantee an invitation card to that special day written and engraved with God’s scriptural promises in Torah. There is only one problem. According to Matthew, both John the Baptist and Jesus did not see it that way. For Jesus and John everything depends on living in the zone of the kingdom; but while there you must show the appropriate fruits. Let us hear one text from John and one from Jesus. In Matt 3:7 John says to the Pharisees and Sadducees:

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit that befits repentance and do not presume to say to yourselves ‘We have Abraham as our father’ for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is laid at the root of the trees; every tree that does not bear good fruit is cast down and thrown into the fire.

And with respect to Jesus who also speaks to the cream of those who bask in their own certainty of election in Israel:

Therefore I tell you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a nation producing the fruits of it (Matt 21:43).

So what do we have here? Surely, in the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares, we find a sure and certain emphasis there will be judgment – for the people of God – those in the zone of the

kingdom. Unlike the way many in Israel thought, vindication on the basis of perceived election is not a sure thing. So I would contend that in our parable the emphasis is on what we need to do in life now in view of that coming reality of a final sifting of the good from the bad. Reinforced by Matthew 18 we know that kingdom life is not marked by insistence that because we are the elect, all others in the community who do not meet our standards are to be purged and condemned. That was the way of sectarian Israel. Rather, it is the opposite. Allegorically speaking, the wheat (the church) is nourished by loving care for all our brothers and sisters, graciously encouraging them; and yes, even forgiving them. Indeed, the way I read Matt 13:41 is as a word to the people of the kingdom who think they have it made:

(At the last day) The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all those who furnish causes to sin, and all evildoers, and throw them into the furnace of fire.

Primarily this parable is a word to Matthew's church. This is important stuff. Even in the Kingdom now there is no absolute security.

Many Are Called But Few Are Chosen

What is being underscored here is the importance of a kingdom ethic. Most commentators note that, with respect to the judgment, Matthew has piled on with his own lurid and vivid terminology. The judgment is very real for Matthew. We in "little complacent church" are pushed by the culture to go the other way and forget it. We are like the bulk of Catholic women in America who do not want to listen to their bishops on their views about the matter of family planning. One day there will be a settlement. Final accounting is important. But what is even more important is how we conduct ourselves now in light of that final reckoning. And here is the word of grace. What counts is that we love, encourage and forgive our fellow citizens of the kingdom. As one commentator has noted:

The only way to face the Judgment with assurance is provided our imitation of Christ.

Many are called but few are chosen. If you come to think about it, that is what Matthew is about. When Jesus faced his final test in Jerusalem he was called upon to demonstrate what he advocated in the Sermon on the Mount. In the next two sessions I will explore two more parables in Matthew that underscore this emphasis on what it means to live by the imitation of Christ.

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