

Grace in Strange Places
The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares
Matt 13:24-30; 36-43

What is really going on in this parable? Why has Matthew given it to us? What can we learn from it that will help and encourage us along life's way today?

At first glance the point seems obvious. Be the wheat that produces worthwhile grain! Do not be the weeds that are destined to be destroyed!

The following pre-understanding has guided many readers. God's new world, his kingdom, was announced by Jesus to be present. After Jesus comes the kingdom still continues in the work and life of the disciples and later followers. For the readers of Matthew the story is now known around the world. As Jesus says in his interpretation "The field is the world." In our parable the householder (the Lord) sows the good seed. But there is someone else who has an interest in the field. He is the enemy. Later, identified as the devil, he sows bad seed.

Things take their course. As is the way with seed, it sprouts and grows until the end of the age. The seed has now gone through the cycle until harvest time arrives. At the harvest the householder (The Lord) will sort it all out. He will separate the grain of the good plants from the weeds.

That seems to be what most people think the parable is about. Consequently, many draw as the lesson, let our lives count for something now so that we will be reckoned as part of the good harvest and received into the kingdom.

Is That All?

But if that is all that it is saying it hardly breaks new ground. Right in the center of his gospel Matthew has collected seven of Jesus' most important parables. This one comes toward the end of the collection and takes up a lot of space. Someone has asked cheekily, "Was this parable only given 'to illustrate a truism too trivial even to be described as a cliché?'" Surely there is something more here than simply the admonition that the good will be rewarded on the last day for doing their duty.

Now, Jesus was a master teacher. He could have had a bad day; but I tend to think there is a little more to it than that. After all, why would Matthew give this parable such a prominent place in his gospel? Surely there is something really significant here that he wanted his readers to grasp!

One of the things that I find helpful about interpreting the parables is to look for something unusual in the story as a clue for interpreting it. The parable of the Good Samaritan is a good example. Here I am not thinking about the religious leaders. For understandable reasons they observed their rites of purity. They did not want to be rendered unclean by touching a dead body. So they passed by on the other side of the road. Rather, it was a hated Samaritan who rendered help to a Jew that would strike the reader as unusual. Not only that, but the fact that the

Samaritan showed such overwhelming generosity was – we will say it – almost unbelievable. Thus we learn that grace can come from unexpected quarters.

Here, in our parable today, I believe there is also something unexpected. Did you notice that the owner of the field, when they discovered that the enemy had sowed bad seed in the field, refused the offer of his workers to rip out the bad plants? He told them:

No [don't do that], lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them.

I guess the householder had a point. But it still strikes me as a little odd. I spent a lot of time during my youthful years being sent out into my father's fields in Australia to root out weeds. During the last few weeks many in Texas have wanted to get out of their automobiles and rip up these large yellow flowering plants that are covering our smaller wildflowers in Central Texas to an alarming degree. Thus, I think the farmer would have welcomed the help. Instead he says, "Let it be until the end of the age." This unusual response, I believe, is the clue that moves us to take a fresh look at this parable.

You see, Jesus is reminding the people to recall something they may have forgotten. We know that many in his time (and ours today) think that once you have made the step into the kingdom – from that moment on – everything will be well and God is bound to take care of you at the last day. In the present parlance, God owes you one. For Israel it was blessings after their long period of persecution; an exalted place in the holy city. For us it may be to be ushered into the messianic banquet with no more questions asked. But did you notice in reading this word about the kingdom? Matt. 13:41 says:

The Son of Man... will gather out of his kingdom all those who cause others to fall and those involved in lawlessness.

Contrary to popular opinion, then and now, there will be a separation in the kingdom on the last day. Some may be lost. This is the shocker. Thus everyone in the kingdom is precious. We should do everything possible to have people prepared for the day of reckoning. We do not want anyone in the kingdom to be lost. I think we should consider the implications of that point.

Unexpected Grace in the Kingdom?

So if there is accountability in the Kingdom on the last day, where is this unexpected grace I have been talking about something; like we saw in the parable of the Good Samaritan? Some have had a hard time finding it in Matthew, but it is there. Matthew is the one who says:

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle, and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matt 11:28-30).

Oh, yes, there is grace there! Remember in the parable on the Unforgiving Servant in Matthew 18, out of pity and mercy the Lord (clearly a metaphor for God) forgave the whole debt. And it is here we come to a second clue that leads up to what I believe is the real point of the parable. The point is subtle but it is powerful.

Let us go back to those workers. So often we are like them. We see something terribly wrong in the field. The enemy has done his job and sown all sorts of discord. We want to rush in and tear everything up. Get rid of the malefactors! Throw out everyone who does not see things the way we see them. This is clearly the case in our political life today. But it is not true for the Master and his vision for the kingdom. Who was he? He was the gentle shepherd who, in Matthew, left everything to go out and find the wanderer – the one who had strayed away. In no way would he be the cause of others to fall (Matt 13:41). There is grace in kingdom life. And it can be found both in shepherding the discouraged and being encouraged.

It is precisely here that we find the imperative for what we are to be doing now that will really count on that last day. We who are busy in the kingdom are to imitate the master – we are to find the broken one; we are to pick up the fallen and take him once more to that AA meeting. We are to forgive and do everything to make that sister and brother welcome at our table so that they too will hear the word of the master on the last day:

Well done good and faithful servant. Enter into your reward.

We are God's hands and instead of ripping out the weeds (or tares) we are to help mold those in the field for readiness to come into God's new world.

Conclusion

Recently, I spent a couple of hours watching a program on the life of Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway was not, in most ways, a model for Christian Faith. But he was a great writer and I have enjoyed several of his books over the years. Recently, I came across this comment from Hemingway that I think is especially germane for today. He said, "The world breaks everyone, and afterward some are made strong at the broken places." We need to be healed. Jesus is the healer. The message is that his story has healing powers for others. Our task today is to receive that healing and to be binders, not destroyers. In that way those who are broken will find the kingdom and its blessings. Let us go forth to bless others. And who knows? In so doing we may find grace – even from our fellow brothers and sisters.

AMJ/rk
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