

Dear Friends,

Who is in charge of the Lord's kingdom? That question, though never asked in that specific manner, dominated the conflict between Jesus and the leaders of the temple in Jerusalem. When Jesus (In John's gospel, at the beginning of His public ministry, and, in the other gospels, near the end) accused the leaders of the temple, charging them with degenerating His house into a den of thieves, there could be no doubt of the conflict between them and Him. We can read these lessons and gladly, comfortably agree with Jesus. However, when our home church decides to do something that we do not especially like, and we want to put our personal weight to bear on changing their minds, are we acting as if we believe our church belongs to Him? Or do we suggest by this attitude and conduct that we think it belongs to us? If we think of our church as our own personal domain, we are sadly imitating the Jewish temple leaders, not Jesus. We only follow His example by constantly treating the church, and our church family as our superiors, not as our servants. (Philippians 2:3)

In Jesus' parable of the wheat and the tares, He again reminds us. He, the owner of the field and "Lord of the harvest," (Matthew 9:38) knows far better how to manage His field, even with all the adversarial interference it suffers, than any of His servants. Every time our church meets in a business meeting, every time we informally discuss how to deal with a given issue, we should start our participation with a prayerful reminder of this lesson. "Lord, You are Lord of this harvest, and owner of this field. Please guide us to deal with this need according to Your wise grace, not our personal opinions or wishes."

In the primary focus of the lesson, both fruitful wheat and destructive weed plants were growing in the owner's field. The servants wanted to immediately "Fix" the problem by ripping out anything they perceived to be a tare plant. But the wise owner knew the servants were not nearly as skilled in discerning a wheat plant from a tare plant as they thought themselves to be, so they would invariably rip up wheat plants if allowed to charge into the field and do what they wanted to do. It seems that we live in a culture that almost obsesses over knowing who is saved and who is not saved. In fact, we know no more about that question than the owner's ignorant servants. If we learn from Jesus' teaching in this lesson, we shall work at curbing our quick-to-judge attitudes regarding another person's eternal state with the Lord. Let the Lord judge His kingdom, for He alone knows enough about His own work of loving grace and the hearts of men and women to know who His own are and who are not. "The Lord knoweth them that are his." (2 Timothy 2:19) We can't say that, and, if we follow Jesus' teaching in this lesson, we will work at avoiding such judgment, not claim to be experts at His work.

Serving the Lord in His kingdom today requires a steadfast faith in Him and in His faithfulness and in His infinite competence to do His work His way. Perhaps at times we all need to ask Him to strengthen our faith and give us more longsuffering toward each other than we often manifest. May that be our prayer today and for many coming days.

Lord bless,
Joe Holder

Parable of Wheat and Tares

Another parable he put forth unto them, saying, The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field: But while men slept, his enemy came and sowed tares among the

wheat, and went his way. But when the blade was sprung up, and brought forth fruit, then appeared the tares also. So the servants of the householder came and said unto him, Sir, didst not thou sow good seed in thy field? from whence then hath it tares? He said unto them, An enemy hath done this. The servants said unto him, Wilt thou then that we go and gather them up? But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn. (Matthew 13:24-30 KJV 1900)

Frequently well-meaning Bible students interpret Jesus' parables as if they were allegories, a story in which the author assigns meaning to every detail and every item in the story. Pilgrim's Progress is a classical example of an allegory. A parable is a story set in a common—and commonly known—situation. Jesus typically used stories in His parables about everyday life of the people in Judah in the first century. His most frequent background for His parables was a farm or other agricultural setting such as a shepherd. He used the well-known story line to teach a truth regarding a lesser known spiritual truth. Often His hearers didn't understand His intended meaning. Even the disciples frequently failed to catch His intended meaning. I am thankful that Jesus explained the first two parables in this series.

On the literary premise that a parable is not an allegory, we should look for a single principle or theme, not try to pour imaginary meaning into every detail of the story. For example, in Jesus' explanation of this parable, He taught that the harvest in the wheat-atares parable is the "end of the world." When looking for details regarding any Bible subject, always look to the literal lessons, not to the symbolical passages. If you want to study the details of the Second Coming, go to Jesus' words in John 5:28-29, to Paul's teaching in 1 Corinthians 15 or 1 Thessalonians 4 and 5 or to 2 Thessalonians 1, 2. Jesus taught a key lesson in this parable regarding how His people should live their lives now because of His final victorious return.

In first century farming, wheat was a major crop. A weed was also common to the region known as tares. Some commentaries also refer to it as darnel. Apparently, the darnel or tare plant was quite similar to a wheat plant. Even the darnel seed, during its growing cycle, was like a wheat seed. However, when both seeds reached maturity, the wheat seed turned golden brown, and the darnel seed was black. During the growing season, it would be easy for a farm worker to confuse one for the other. But at the harvest season, the distinction between the two was an easy matter of observation.

In the parable, as soon as the owner of the field discovered that his enemy had planted tare seeds in his field, he informed his servants. Immediately they wanted to run into the field and pull up all the tare plants. A major turning point of the story Jesus told was the owner's instructions.

But he said, Nay; lest while ye gather up the tares, ye root up also the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest.

The roots of both good and bad plants competed for the same nutrients in the soil. If a worker pulled up a tare plant, he would damage a wheat plant. Further, he might well mistake a wheat plant for a tare and pull up the wrong plant. The owner wisely knew his field as well as the nature of his wheat crop. His primary goal was to protect the wheat until it reached its full maturity. While the most skilled worker might mistake a good plant for a bad one during the growing season, at harvest time, the most inexperienced worker would readily see the difference and know how to separate them. Then no wheat plant would be harmed.

Most of the teaching Jesus framed in this lesson builds around this part of the story. Although the workers realize something is wrong in the field, only the owner knows the details. When the workers become over-zealous to “Fix” the problem immediately, the owner knows the danger of that foolish idea to his wheat crop. He regards his whole field, even one wheat plant. His wise decision will result in a full harvest with no damage to a single wheat plant. The workers’ impatient idea would damage the wheat plants and eventually the yield of the field at harvest. The major turning point of the story revolves around the question. How do we deal with the tares? And Jesus’ conclusion in the story is wise. Do nothing. Obey the owner’s instructions and wait. He’ll deal with the problem at harvest time. Given the key role of that episode in the story, I’m inclined to believe it was His primary teaching point for the parable.

If we accept this literary “Turning point” of Jesus’ story as the principle lesson, what should we learn from Him in it? I fear that many believers in our day fail to grasp the lesson Jesus intended. They conduct much of their personal “Kingdom” living based on their personal opinions and ideas, including about wheat and tares, not on Jesus’ example and words.

Our human nature wants to impatiently jump into every situation that we perceive to be unacceptable or bad. We want to “Fix” the problem based on our opinions.

How did this principle manifest itself in the Lord’s “Kingdom” during His personal time? The ruling Jews in the temple at Jerusalem had forgotten that they were laborers in God’s kingdom. It was His temple, not theirs. They thought of the temple and its activities as their own private possession to manage as they wished. At will, they regarded some people as “Acceptable” in their world, and other people they rejected, effectively uprooting them from their perception of their kingdom.

How does the principle manifest itself in the Lord’s “Kingdom” today? When you study the dominant teaching in many churches and denominations, how much time and mental energy do they invest in claiming to know who is saved and who is not saved? In the framework of Jesus’ parable, to knowing immediately who is a “Wheat” and who is a “Tare,” even though both plants are almost identical in appearance at the moment? If we analyze the teaching energy and focus of their preaching, they work hard at trying to convert tare plants into wheat plants, something any informed farmer would know is impossible. And much of their remaining time they spend announcing to all who will hear their supposed personal knowledge of who is saved and who is not saved, who is the “Wheat” and who is the “Tare.” Rather than showing concern for the known wheat plants, they rip through the Lord’s field, pulling up what they privately perceive to be tare plants.

Do they consider Jesus’ words in His explanation of the parable? Not for a minute. That would hamper their self-perceived job of tearing out tare plants. In the process, these folks do indescribable damage to many “wheat” plants, children of God who may, by life or relationship, have some attachment to the people these self-appointed farm experts have judged to be tares.

What is the owner's direction to His servants in the parable? Leave both plants alone. Whatever you ignorantly do in your effort to purge the field will do irreparable harm to His wheat plants, something He will not approve. Instead of listening to and obeying the "Owner" of the field, these folks presume they know as much about who the wheat plants are as the owner, and they eagerly therefore engage in the very activity the owner prohibited, judging between wheat and tare plants, and ripping out any plant they perceive to be a tare. People with this mindset seldom consider, even remotely, that they might be mistaken in their judgment, errantly perceiving a wheat plant as a tare.

In many situations of life, we routinely meet people, briefly interact with them, and go our separate ways. How should we treat them? The self-appointed "Plant experts" often think they should treat everyone they meet as a tare, hoping by their personal influence to transform tares into wheat plants. Nothing in Jesus' framing of the parable or in His explanation of His intended meaning of it directs his followers to treat people in this manner. Nothing whatever.

We might like the idea of the Lord imprinting a red cross prominently into the forehead of every saved person. But the Lord doesn't work in that manner. Based on Jesus' teaching in the parable, the very attitude and conduct observed among populist Christians is what He prohibits in the parable. Wheat plants and tare plants are quite similar in appearance during the growing season, so it is all too easy for a worker to mistake one for the other. Might the Lord be highly displeased at one human errantly accusing one of His children of being a "Tare"? Indeed He is.

Given the pervasive transforming lifestyle that Scripture consistently teaches us to practice, I suggest a far better mindset should be to regard anyone we meet as if they were a child of God. Whether or not they are, the Lord's commandment for our lifestyle is the same. Suppose for the moment that you encounter an unsaved person. If you treat that person with arrogant "There is only one difference between you and me. I'm saved. You are not," we turn them off to any form of respectful faith in the Lord. Even if they may not be saved now, should they be born again at a later time, will they remember how you treated them? Will your judgmental disposition entice them to seek you out and listen to your testimony? Or will it turn them off and push them to seek information elsewhere?

Often the same Christians in today's culture who seem eager to pronounce their judgment, "Saved" or "Not saved," on everyone they meet, are just as eager to judge a believer who believes differently from him with the same harsh judgment.

Do we trust our Lord enough to listen to His teaching? To do what He commands us to do? Do we trust Him enough to know His own family and to save them and keep them in His protective care, both now and at the final "Harvest"? Do we trust Him to know what our best and right conduct should be toward them, agree with us or not?

We should not forget the obvious. Jesus reserved His most severe judgment during His three plus years of public teaching for the very leaders of the temple who practiced the "I'm saved; you are not" attitude that He describes in the parable. In the parable, the owner of the field gave specific directions to his servants. He knew more about how to manage his field than they. Our Lord is yet the Lord of His field. Let's ponder His words in this parable and strive to respectfully practice it daily.

Elder Joe Holder