

THE WHEAT AND THE TARES

Interpreting the Parables of Jesus by Craig Blomberg¹

SIMPLE 3-POINT PARABLES

The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares - (Matthew 13:1-3, 24-30, 34-43)

I. The three main characters and their correlating identities

The Wheat and the Tares

Who they represent

The one who sows the good seed	→	The Son of Man (Jesus)
Wheat (good seed)	→	The sons of the kingdom (believers in Christ)
Weeds (tares or bad seed)	→	The sons of the evil one (those of the world controlled by the devil)

Subordinate characters: Servants, reapers, and an enemy

II. Things to consider about the parable - (Discussing the color provided by Jesus)

- The harvest was a standard metaphor for judgment. Unusual features suggest that the parable is meant to point to a second level of meaning. The enemy's coming stealthily to sow the tares and the farmer's refusal to make any attempt at weeding can be explained by ancient horticultural practices (a kind of primitive bioterrorism!) but nevertheless remain atypical (*uncommon*). Roman laws against sowing tares in someone else's field show that the practice had likely become a problem somewhere, but we don't know if it ever happened in Palestine in Jesus' day.¹⁸²
- The specific kind of weeds mentioned in Matthew 13:25 (ζιζάνια—darnel) often looked outwardly quite similar to wheat as the two plants matured. *BDAG describes this weed as nearly indistinguishable from wheat until the ear appears*. Yet even if they were accurately distinguished, fully uprooting the weeds would frequently pull up the wheat plants at the same time (Mt 13:28–30a). Darnel grains, moreover, are poisonous, "so that to have it mixed in with wheat renders the crop commercially useless as well as potentially harmful."
- The farmer would have to hope against hope that the wheat could somehow grow successfully despite the weeds. Then, when the crop was ripe, the wheat could be harvested first, and if that uprooted some weeds in the process, so much the better. The field was about to be fully weeded anyway (Mt 13:30b). Interestingly, verse 30c reverses the sequence of the weeds and wheat in its description of their final destiny.
- The parable is thus not unrelentingly tragic, like some, but climaxes with the encouraging reminder to the disciples of the protection of the faithful, even when circumstances may seem to belie (*fail to give a true notion or impression*) God's promises. In the interpretation, the future the righteous can anticipate is actually quite glorious: "[they] will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father" (Mt 13:43). Even for this life, the parable teaches "the *unperceived* care with which the needs of 'righteous' humanity are assessed and protected, so that it may come to full harvest."
- Frank Stern notes three different "understandings" of the parable—a missionary focus highlighting the good seed, a christological focus highlighting Jesus as the sower, and a spiritual warfare focus highlighting the weeds and the attacks of the enemy.

¹ Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, Second Edition. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic: An Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2012). **Almost all of this study is taken directly from Blomberg while small portions are italicized to identify a synthesis of his book or a question generated for the purpose of this study.**

- This tripartite message seems confirmed by the parable’s three-part structure. Each of the main “characters” of the story takes a turn holding the upper hand as the parable unfolds over three periods of time. At the beginning, the enemy and the *weeds* he sowed seem to have triumphed (Mt 13:24–28a). In the middle, the *wheat* has survived, growing despite the presence of the weeds (Mt 13:28b–30a). In the end, the *farmer* still harvests his crop, destroying the weeds and salvaging the wheat (Mt 13:30b).
- At the spiritual level of meaning, Jesus could see the world in his day as in bondage to sin and Satan, offer his message and ministry as the first stage in the solution to the problem, and promise a future day when God’s people would win a total victory over their enemies. Dividing the message of the parable 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 weeds or in the final harvest. Beginning, middle and end—the obstacles to God’s kingdom, the inauguration of that kingdom, and its final consummation—all are in view. A climactic stress may fall on the last of these but not to the exclusion of the other two.
- Jesus’ interpretation in Matthew 13:36–43, then, need not be viewed as arbitrary allegorizing but as simply spelling out the natural referents of additional details in the parable, which fit in with the core symbolism of the farmer, wheat and weeds. Once the referents of the three main characters are identified, the other equations thus all fall into place naturally. God’s enemy is obviously the devil. God’s Word is preached throughout the world. The harvesters are the angels, who regularly figure in Jewish descriptions of the final judgment as God’s helpers. **The kingdom in Matthew 13:41, in keeping with Jesus’ consistent use of the expression elsewhere in the Gospels, must refer to God’s universal, sovereign reign rather than being equated with the church.**
- The one detail left uninterpreted throughout all of Matthew 13:36–43 is the servants. They are a different group than the reapers and, as in many of Jesus’ other parables in which the servants are not among the three primary characters, they are simply props to do the bidding of the master and to allow the storyteller to reveal the master’s thoughts through dialogue form.
- **The foremost danger in Jesus’ mind was the attitude of his supporters, who were already growing discontent with the opposition. As when the disciples wanted to call down fire from heaven on the unreceptive Samaritans (Lk 9:54), they would have preferred to invoke God’s wrath more directly. In reply, Jesus enjoins patience and alerts them to expect continued hostility from those who rejected his message.** At a later date, the church could legitimately apply the same lessons within its own ranks, when false teachers or nominal adherents hindered its work. 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 suggested by the imagery of the narrative. Jesus elsewhere certainly charged his would-be disciples with single-minded service and devotion to him (e.g., Mt 8:18–22 par.; Lk 14:25–33).

III. Three main characters and three main points

Even if the parable were left uninterpreted, therefore, it would seem fair to summarize its meaning under three headings, related to each of the main “characters.”

- (1) God permits the righteous and the wicked to coexist in the world, sometimes **outwardly almost indistinguishable** from one another, until the end of the age.
- (2) The wicked will eventually be separated out, judged and destroyed.
- (3) The righteous will be gathered together, rewarded and brought into God’s presence.

IV. Contemporary Application

Questions about how we should respond to evil are spawned by the parable, but not addressed. Other texts must be brought in for that discussion, but clearly any idea of doing God's work of judging (*sentencing or punishing*) or any thought that we will obliterate evil are [*sic*] set aside by the parable. The biblical message always leaves us dealing with tension. We **cannot** be tolerant of evil, but the destruction of all evil is not our task. **We must stop being evil, and we must stop evil from destroying, but how can we stop evil without becoming evil in the process? That may well be *the* human question.**

V. Personal Application

1. *According to the first main point, why does God allow wickedness to continue in the world?*
2. *How does knowing the truth of the second main point assist the Christian in the midst of being oppressed by the wicked?*
3. *What do you suppose is the reward for the righteous that Bloomberg mentions in the third main point (see verse 43)?*
4. *How might this parable help you process unstoppable wickedness that you see occurring in the world today?*

Looking Ahead: Another Simple 3-Point Parable (The Dragnet (fishermen) - Matthew 13:47-50)