

The Gospel According to Matthew

By

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

MATTHEW 13:24-30 AND 36-43

THIS is the second and last parable which the King Himself explained to His disciples. It is perfectly clear that this explanation was given to the disciples alone, and at their request. The form in which they preferred that request reveals the impression made upon them by the parable as the Lord spoke it. They did not say, "Explain unto us the parable of the two sowings" or "the parable of the enemy;" but, "**Declare (explain) unto us the parable of the tares of the field.**" This shows that the emphasis of the King was laid on the matter of the tares.

In considering this parable we shall follow our method with the previous one:

- First, looking at the simple picture suggested,
- Secondly, attending to the explanation of Jesus,
- Thirdly, deducing from that explanation the instruction which it contains for ourselves.

There are three outstanding things in the picture presented. The first may be dismissed quite briefly, but it must not be omitted. "**The kingdom of heaven is likened unto a man which sowed good seed in his field.**" The picture set forth is that of a field, the property of the man who sows the good seed, and not of the one who sows darnel. The proprietor is at work in his own field.

In the next place we notice that there are two sowings.

The sowing of the good seed by the owner with the special desire of gathering a definite harvest is perfectly natural. There is so far nothing out of the common, nothing which specially arrests attention. But now immediately there follows something which is out of place, something which we recognize as wrong, against which our simple sense of right makes protest. It is the sowing of the field with darnel. I make use of the word darnel, because tares as we know them do not bear the slightest resemblance to wheat, and do not therefore suggest to us the essential meaning of this parable.

Darnel, on the other hand, is so much like wheat that in the first stages of its growth it is impossible to distinguish between them. Yet they are absolutely different. The farmers of Palestine are perfectly familiar with darnel to-day, and there are some of them who affirm that it is simply degenerate wheat the effect of a particularly wet and heavy season upon the originally good wheat seed. This, however, is not the case.

It may be that a wet season is one in which darnel will flourish while wheat fails; but there is no doubt whatever as to the essential difference between the two. This difference, however, is only manifested in development, and it is in this fact of similarity that the maliciousness of the enemy is discovered.

The third matter which arrests us as we look at the picture is the enemy.

We know this man of the second sowing to be a trespasser, for, as we have seen, the field was the property of the one who sowed the good seed therein. He had no right whatever in the field.

“**While men slept,**” he came, with subtlety and stealth. In indicating thus the occasion of the enemy’s opportunity, there may have been rebuke in the mind of the Master for the men who slept. Be that as it may, the method so far as the foe is concerned marks his wiliness, his cowardliness, his dastardly determination to harm. He was a trespasser, full of subtlety, animated by malice. There was no other motive in his action.

He could gain nothing by sowing another’s field with darnel, for it is not a saleable produce, and no profit can be made out of its growth. It is as worthless to the man who sows it as to the owner of the field. This sowing, then, was the result of pure malice if I may bring into conjunction so fine an adjective and so fearful a substantive. It was an act prompted by hatred for the owner, and judging the offence as we should a similar one in our own country, there is no one of us, however tender of heart, who would not consent to its punishment. The absolute meanness of the action appalls.

The method of the owner is perfectly natural and proper. “**Let both grow together until the harvest.**”

- First, for the sake of the good, lest while attempting to uproot the evil some of the good may suffer;
- Secondly, in order to the full manifestation of the truth concerning the darnel.

If these sowings are allowed to work themselves out to consummation, discrimination will be possible upon the basis of manifestation, and in that manifestation there will be vindication of the destinies of darnel and of wheat. The darnel will be bound in bundles for burning. The wheat will be gathered into the garner of the owner.

We recognize at once that in the picture we have the simplicity of a great sublimity, and now turn to our Lord’s explanation:

- First, of the field;
- Secondly, of the two sowings;
- Thirdly, of the harvest.

As to the field (verses 36-43), “**He that soweth the good seed is the Son of man,**” and “**The field is the world.**”

The word used for world here is not that which He employs later when speaking of the harvest. The phrase, “**the end of the world**” should certainly be understood as in the previous parable, the consummation or completion of the age, but the word used in this connection is *cosmos*, meaning the whole of the ordered universe, including the earth, its inhabitants, and all creation.

One cannot help wondering why certain fathers of the Church and theologians of an earlier age insisted on teaching that the field is the Church and that the darnel simply signifies the coming into the Church of unworthy persons and ideals. There is, of course, an element of truth in this; but the King was perfectly clear in His statement, “**the field is the world.**” Thus He claims proprietorship of the whole creation.

The same thought underlies the apostle’s teaching in that wonderful chapter in his letter to the Romans, when, dealing with the condition of creation in its sorrow and pain, he writes, “**The whole creation groaneth and travaileth in pain together.**” That which is indicated by the phrase, “**the whole creation,**” is that which was also in the mind of the King when He said, “**the field is the world.**”

There is infinite poetry in this. The whole creation, every form of life, every condition of being, every part of the great whole belongs to the Son of Man. The creation is His field, and if indeed there be mourning everywhere, if nature is “red in tooth and claw,” if it be true that there is suffering throughout all the cosmos let us never forget that this field of the world is His, and it is waiting for the sowing of the good seed which is to produce the harvest of the Kingdom.

Wherever in the midst of the suffering and sorrow and groaning of creation the Son of Man plants a son of the Kingdom, there He helps towards the healing of the wound, the drying of the tear, and the turning of the groaning into an anthem of praise. I do not know how this appeals to you, or how it may affect you. I can never tell the inexpressible comfort it is to me in all life and service. I never feel that I am engaged, even under the leadership of Christ, in attempting to wrest something from one to whom it belongs. Our toil and conflict are directed rather toward bringing back to the rightful owner that which belongs to Him. “**The earth is the Lord’s, and the fulness thereof.**”

A certain man “**sowed good seed in his field.**” I find in these facts a conviction which sends me out upon the track of His feet to serve and to suffer, and to share the travail which makes His Kingdom come. Everything belongs to Him, mountains and valleys, continents and countries, beasts and birds, flowers and fruits, and men of all kindreds and tribes and nations. The recognition of this fundamental fact is necessary to the interpretation of the parable. The great Kingdom of Jesus is far from its perfect order, but no other than He has any crown rights throughout the whole world.

Turn now to our Lord’s explanation of the two sowings.

- First, the good seed, these “**are the children of the Kingdom;**”
- Secondly, we see that the sower of the good seed is the Son of Man;
- Finally, that the harvest He seeks is the Kingdom itself.

Now turn to the other sowing. The sower of darnel is the devil. The very name which Christ uses for him here is suggestive - the adversary, the enemy, or to be perfectly literal, the traducer, the one who from the beginning and continually, traduces, libels, blasphemes God.

Notice what this parable teaches about him.

First of all, as we have seen, he has no right in the world. He is a trespasser. I once heard a Methodist local preacher say, "The devil is a squatter," and then proceed to explain that, "A squatter is a man who settles on land he has no right to, and works it for his own advantage."

With that definition I am perfectly in agreement. It expresses the whole truth concerning the devil. When presently we shall know the mystery of this great personality, we shall perhaps find that he was the god of this world before he fell. It may be that this world was given to him in some past economy which ended in failure.

The opening story of the Bible suggests this possibility. There was a certain economy which ended in darkness and void, and it may be that behind that catastrophe is the story of the devil. Be that as it may, we know from Scripture that he left - mark the words - left his "**own habitation**;" that is, he wandered from the orbit in which the infinite wisdom of God had placed him, sacrificing all right to his principality.

Again I am constrained to exclaim, Oh, the comfort of the certainty that the devil has no claim to the world! I think we have missed much in our thinking and work as Christian people, because we have been too ready to yield to him as his right everything upon which his hand rests. Our business is ever to say, Hands off in the name of the Proprietor: to declare at every point that the whole field belongs to the Son of Man, and wherever it is sown with the seed of evil it is done by an enemy, a marauder.

In this parable the King has done what indeed He did in all His life and teaching dragged the great foe from his hiding-place into clear daylight. To me it is as remarkable and valuable a fact that Jesus came to show the work of the devil as that He came to reveal God. Paul could say, "**We are not ignorant of his devices**," but he could not have said that until he had been brought into the light of the Christian revelation.

It is when a man submits himself to Jesus Christ that he sees clearly, not God only, not himself only, but his enemy also. It is one of the great advantages of coming into the light of Christ's teaching that man is enabled to see the devil for what he is, and is able therefore to place a true value on both his person and his purpose.

Then as to the seed. The seed is the sons of the evil of the evil one. I prefer the word evil to stand in its abstract suggestiveness of not only the evil one, but of all the issue of his work.

The seeds producing darnel are the sons of evil. As to the sowing, there is a phrase which we must not miss, "**among the wheat**." This does not necessarily mean that all who are not Christian people are to be described as darnel.

The word “**among**” has behind it two Greek words. One of these words would suffice for ordinary expression, but the combination of the two lends intensity to the thought. The phrase occurs only four times in the New Testament, once used here, again by Mark in connection with the same teaching, again in the Corinthian letter in quite another realm of thought, and once more in Revelation, where it is said that the Lamb is “**in the midst of the throne.**” It is the most intense way of saying “**among.**”

Herein is revealed the subtlety of the foe.

He scattered his darnel among the wheat. The devil’s method is that of mingling the counterfeit with the real. It is that of introducing into the Master’s own property that which is so like the good that at first you cannot tell the difference. That is the devil’s mission of imitation. It is the heart of the parable.

What is to be the issue of the two sowings? Their time of operation is to be until the end of the age, and until then the word of the King is, “**Let both grow together until the harvest.**”

Let these two sowings work themselves out to final manifestation, and then there will be separation.

No matter how closely together sons of the Kingdom and sons of evil are planted, in process of time the difference must be seen.

- The Kingdom heart will manifest a Kingdom life.
- The evil nature will produce an evil character.

“**Let them alone.**”

The sons of the Kingdom will influence the age toward the Kingdom, and the King will gather His harvest as the result of their presence in the world.

The sons of evil will produce a harvest of abomination which at last the reapers will bind and burn.

The harvest of the sons of the Kingdom will be a harvest of sunlight upon the world. They shall “**shine forth as the sun in the Kingdom of their Father.**”

The harvest of the sons of evil will be one of evil, of things which offend and defile, and He by His reapers will at the last gather them out and cast them forth to burning.

Now, finally, what instruction are we to gather from this parable?

First, that the method of the foe in this age of the Kingdom is that of imitation. This is the teaching of the parable of the darnel. The parable of the mustard seed reveals another quality, and of the leaven yet another; but here the enemy’s method of imitation is revealed.

- He began in the days of the apostles. Ananias and Sapphira, Simon Magus with his following were darnel among the wheat.

- Later on, as the apostolic writings show, men crept in privily, came in unawares, men who were “**not of us,**” who taught another doctrine and yet talked in the language of the Christian faith.

It was perpetually the method of imitation. Leaving behind the apostolic times and passing through the centuries it is still to be found. The essential power of the sons of the Kingdom has been imitated by false power. Their true purity has been counterfeited by that false sanctity which insists upon external things, and knows nothing of cleanness of the heart.

Even to-day the method is still apparent.

In matters of doctrine men are taking the great phrases of the New Testament, and are interpreting them so as to contradict their simplest meaning. In matters of spirituality, some “holiness” movements have run riot, until they have become bestial, and an unholy traffic with matters occult masquerades as spiritual religion. Imitation is the devil’s master-method.

The method of the King is still that of waiting for the development of the inner truth.

No harm can come to the good seed because darnel is sown beside it, and in order that judgment upon the evil may be complete it must be permitted to work itself out to final manifestation.

The two sowings will go forward to the end of the age, and difficulty is often caused through not recognizing this truth. One person tells me that the world is getting worse and worse, while another affirms that it is getting better and better. The pity is that the two quarrel, for they are both right. Evil has become more evil in every age. Devilry has become more devilish with the passing of the centuries. Evil to-day is far more diabolic than anything which existed before the coming of Christ. It is more cunning, more insidious, more cruel in its refinement.

On the other hand, goodness is being manifested on ever higher planes, and the Kingdom harvest is surely growing. Everywhere darnel is growing by the side of the wheat. What, then, is our duty toward the darnel? I am sometimes asked to take part in the uprooting of imitations, but the method of the King is other. He said, “**Let it alone.**”

The King will not always let it alone.

There is a day coming when this age shall end. Then there will be the burning of the darnel and the garnering of the wheat. The King will clear out of His field all the things which offend. There are questions not discussed in this parable, and we must not therefore look for them here. It is taken for granted, for instance, that a man who is a son of evil may be changed into a son of the Kingdom. Thank God that it is possible.

It is the stupendous miracle of Christianity that the son of evil, the darnel, can become changed into the son of the Kingdom, the wheat.

This is one of the things impossible with men, but possible with God.

Everywhere such men are to be found, and where they live and work, the Kingdom of heaven is growing. It is the comfort of the hour. Darnel is everywhere; but wheat is everywhere.

Throughout the world the King has sown the sons of His Kingdom, and their presence everywhere is creating an influence and preparing for the consummation of the age.

~ end of chapter 34 ~

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