

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the *Parable of the Wheat and the Weeds*, we are confronted with a puzzling teaching. When Christians “struggle to know how to respond to violence directed against individuals or communities, (they) turn to the praxis and teaching of Jesus. One text (they consult) is the *Sermon on the Mount* where he teaches the disciples “not to return violence for violence.” But in a number of the parables presented and explained in Matthew’s gospel, there is an ending with “violent consequences for those who do evil.” How can this seeming contradiction be explained? Why would Matthew’s story have the angels sent by the Son of Man collect “all causes of sin and evildoers and...throw them into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth”? How can this kind of God be reconciled with the nonviolent God of the Sermon on the Mount?

There are a number of possible answers to this question. One explanation that enjoys the support of many scholars today is this: the parable teaches that “the kingdom is present, even though judgment is not (yet) taking place...but judgment will certainly come.” That is, the parable concerns end times and is a stern warning to change behavior before it is too late. Actually, the parable not only teaches about the consequences of sin for those who *refuse* to abandon it but also offers “an encouragement, a promise of future blessing” for the *faithful* ones who remain true to the teaching of their Lord. We can find confirmation for this interpretation in the words of Jesus himself in his effort to explain the meaning of the story to his disciples: “the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age.”

In a sense, the parable offer commentary on the human condition. The biblical message “always leaves us dealing with tension.” We cannot be tolerant of evil, but “the destruction of evil is not our task.” We are asked to stop being evil and stop evil from destroying, but “how can we stop evil without becoming evil?” That is the human question to which the parable offers a very incomplete answer. Like all parables, this one engages and puzzles us, as it was intended to do. Figuring out exactly what Jesus intends by teaching in this way is not meant to be easy. And this is why the parables continue to interest us and also leave us guessing.

In one sense, the parables are usually about waiting, something we all find difficult to do: “the farmer waits for the harvest-time, watching in frustration as the weeds grow alongside the wheat.” And that’s what God’s kingdom is like. We grow impatient as we view the persistence of evil in a time we have been told is the dawning of a new age in which God’s justice and God’s peace will prevail, yet the forces which persist in opposing God’s will are allowed to proliferate. One could argue that “the central problem in the parable is not the weeds and wheat but the impatience of the slaves and the assumption they knew exactly what their lord wished.” Ideally, “the servants could just rip out the weeds, but the sower knows

that to tear out the weeds now risks ruining the maturing wheat as well. And so the sower must wait, living with both the wheat and the weeds until the day of the harvest when they may be separated in due time.”

And Jesus “shows more interest in growth than extermination.” The separation between wheat and weeds is not all that clear-cut. Jesus seems to be saying, “let them grow together until the harvest.” He advises us not to simply pull up the weeds, “for in gathering the weeds you would uproot the wheat along with them.” These aren’t generic weeds. The parable speaks of a particular weed called *zizania* which is also known as *darnel* or *false wheat*. “It grows with the wheat. It looks like wheat. Its roots intertwine with the roots of the real wheat. The difference between the two is not always readily apparent.”

Because the scriptures so frequently deal with eschatological issues --- the end times --- this explanation has a lot to recommend it. But there are other considerations that can help us explain the seeming contradictions in this parable. And first, we should recognize that this particular parable is found only in Matthew. So, it would be understandable if the author “shaped this parable to address some situation regarding two groups of people in his congregation.”

We know that Matthew’s gospel was directed to “a community in crisis, (one) divided and full of disputes. It would make sense, then, that the author would have an interest in the question: how do you get two groups in conflict to get along in a mixed setting? And we also note that Matthew seems to view nearly everything from the perspective of the two opposing camps. He values “the contribution of the older Jewish faith,”...is loyal to Torah, and expects his compatriots to observe the Sabbath and follow the dictates of the Law. On the other hand, Jesus frequently challenged orthodox Jewish teaching.

We know that Matthew was “writing to a mixed Jewish and Gentile congregation.” And we believe his gospel was composed by a follower of Jesus in about the year 90 A.D. in the Syrian town of Antioch to which Paul and Barnabas had been sent as missionaries. He was therefore writing to a very mixed group of people with competing allegiances and interpretations, and neither group was willing to compromise or fully accept the other. The way in which this parable is written could lead us to conclude that this conflict was “pretty serious and destructive.” This would explain the way in which the story features diametrically opposing views and ways of approaching truth. He may well have thought that his congregation needed “motivation to be obedient.” And fear is a great motivator. The consequences of persisting in evil ways is made explicit in the story: productive wheat and harmful weeds, the good seed and the tares of the “children of the evil one,” the sowers and the reapers, the collectors and those charged with burning the harmful growth. And even in the Sermon on the Mount, there is an exhortation to “be *do-ers* and not just hearers of Jesus’ teachings.”

Unfortunately, this parable has in the past been misused to extol “a passivity with regard to right living.” This misuse comes from the notion that patience counsels not to separate the wheat from the tares. But

in view of the teachings of Jesus, “any thought of passivity toward evil or assertion that the church does not need to be a pure community is bizarre.” For example, in light of what we know of the thrust of Jesus’ overall ministry, “one cannot imagine legitimately being Christian and taking a passive approach to racism, adultery, and other such evils, whether in church or in society.” This simply points to the care we need to take in interpreting these notoriously difficult stories in the New Testament.

If it is true that “the new age has dawned in the midst of the old, but the old is not removed,” the issue becomes “at bottom one of identity.” From which reality will we take our own identity --- the evil of the old age or the righteousness of God’s new age?” The challenge is this: “let the one who has ears hear.” And what this calls for is “discernment, decision, and right living.”

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

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