

PARABLE OF THE WHEAT AND THE TARES
Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43.

Technical Notes of Matthew Henry

Another parable He put forth to them, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who 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 grain had sprouted and produced a crop, then the tares also appeared. So the servants of the owner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' He said to them, 'An enemy has done this.' The servants said to him, 'Do you want us then to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No, lest while you gather up the tares you also uproot the wheat with them. Let both grow together until the harvest, and at the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, First gather together the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.' "

Then Jesus sent the multitude away and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him, saying, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field." He answered and said to them: "He who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. The field is the world, the good seeds are the sons of the kingdom, but the tares are the sons of the wicked one. The enemy who sowed them is the devil, the harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are the angels. Therefore as the tares are gathered and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of this age. The Son of Man will send out His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and those who practice lawlessness, and will cast them into the furnace of fire. There will be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then the righteous will shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!"

Observe,

1. The disciples' request to their Master to have this parable expounded to them.

*Jesus sent the multitude away; and it is to be feared many of them went away no wiser than they came. They had heard a sound of words, and that was all. It is sad to think how many go away from sermons with the word of grace in their ears but not the work of grace in their hearts. Christ went into the house, not so much for his own repose as for particular converse with his disciples, whose instruction he chiefly intended in all his preaching. He was ready to do good in all places; the disciples laid hold on the opportunity, and they came to him. **Note:** Those who would be wise for everything else must be wise to discern and improve their opportunities, especially of converse with Christ, of converse with him alone in secret meditation and prayer. It is very good, when we return from the solemn assembly, to talk over what we have heard there, and by familiar discourse to help one another to understand and remember it and to be affected with it. For we lose the benefit of many a sermon by vain and unprofitable discourse after it (see Luke 24:32; Deut. 6:6,7). It is especially good, if it may be to ask of the ministers of the word the meaning of the word, for *their lips should keep knowledge* (Mal. 2:7). Private conference would contribute much to our profiting by public preaching. Nathan's "*You are the man*" was that which touched David to the heart.*

The disciples' request to their Master was, *Declare to us the parable of the tares*. This implied an acknowledgment of their ignorance, which they were not ashamed to make. It is probable they apprehended the general scope of the parable, but they desired to understand it more

particularly, and to be assured that they took it right. **Note:** Those are rightly disposed for Christ's teaching who are sensible of their ignorance and sincerely desirous to be taught. He will *teach the humble* (Ps. 25:8,9), but *will for this be inquired of. If any man lack instruction, let him ask it of God.* Christ had expounded the foregoing parable unasked, but for the exposition of this they ask him. **Note:** The mercies we have received must be improved, both for direction what to pray for, and for our encouragement in prayer. The first light and the first grace are given in a preventing way, further degrees of both which must be daily prayed for.

2. The exposition Christ gave of the parable in answer to their request--so ready is Christ to answer such desires of his disciples.

Now the drift of the parable is to represent to us the present and future state of the kingdom of heaven, the gospel church: Christ's care of it, the devil's enmity against it, the mixture that there is in it of good and bad in this world, and the separation between them in the other world. **Note:** The visible church is the kingdom of heaven; though there be many hypocrites in it, Christ rules in it as a King; and there is a remnant in it who are the subjects and heirs of heaven, from whom, as the better part, it is denominated. The church is *the kingdom of heaven* upon earth.

Let us go over the particulars of the exposition of the parable.

(1) *He who sows the good seed is the Son of man.* Jesus Christ is the Lord of the field, *the Lord of the harvest*, the Sower of good seed. When *he ascended on high, he gave gifts to the world*; not only good ministers, but other good men. **Note:** Whatever good seed there is in the world, it all comes from the hand of Christ and is of his sowing: truths preached, graces planted, souls sanctified are good seed and all owing to Christ. Ministers are instruments in Christ's hand to sow good seed, are employed by him and under him; and the success of their labors depends purely upon his blessing, so that it may well be said, It is Christ and no other who sows the good seed. *He is the Son of man*, one of us, that his terror might not make us afraid; *the Son of man*, the Mediator, and who has authority.

(2) *The field is the world*; the world of mankind, a large field capable of bringing forth good fruit. The more it is to be lamented that it brings forth so much bad fruit. The world here is the visible church, scattered all the world over, not confined to one nation. Observe that in the parable it is called *his field*; *the world is Christ's field*, for *all things are delivered unto him of the Father*. Whatever power and interest the devil has in the world, it is usurped and unjust. When Christ comes to take possession, he comes whose right it is; it is his field and because it is his, he took care to sow it with good seed.

(3) *The good seed are the children of the kingdom*, true saints. They are: [1] *The children of the kingdom*; not in profession only, as the Jews were (ch. 8:12), but in sincerity; Jews inwardly, Israelites indeed, incorporated in faith and obedience to Jesus Christ the great King of the church. [2] They are the good seed, precious as seed (Ps. 126:6). The seed is the substance of the field; so the holy seed (Isa. 6:13). The seed is scattered, so are the saints; dispersed, here one and there another, though in some places thicker sown than in others. The seed is that from which fruit is expected. What fruit of honor and service God has from this world he has from the saints, whom he has *sown unto himself in the earth* (Hos. 2:23).

(4) *The tares are the children of the wicked one.* Here is the character of sinners, hypocrites and all profane and wicked people. [1] They are the children of the devil, as a wicked one. Though

they do not own his name, yet they bear his image, do his lusts, and from him they have their education. He rules over them, he works in them (Eph. 2:2; John 8:44). [2] They are tares in the field of this world. They do no good, they do hurt; unprofitable in themselves and hurtful to *the good seed*, both by temptation and persecution. They are weeds in the garden; they have the same rain and sunshine and soil with the good plants, but are good for nothing. *The tares are among the wheat.* **Note:** God has so ordered it that good and bad should be mixed together in this world, that the good may be exercised, the bad left inexcusable, and a difference made between earth and heaven.

(5) *The enemy who sowed the tares is the devil;* a sworn enemy to Christ and all that is good, to the glory of the good God, and the comfort and happiness of all good men. He is an enemy to the field of the world, which he endeavors to make his own by sowing his tares in it. Ever since he became a wicked spirit himself, he has been industrious to promote wickedness and has made it his business, aiming therein to counterwork Christ.

Now concerning the sowing of the tares, observe in the parable,

That they were sown *while men slept*. Magistrates slept, who by their power ministers slept, who by their preaching should have prevented this mischief. **Note:** Satan watches all opportunities and lays hold of all advantages to propagate vice and profaneness. The prejudice he does to particular persons is when reason and conscience sleep, when they are off their guard. We have therefore need to *be sober and vigilant*. It was in the night, for that is the sleeping time. **Note:** Satan rules in *the darkness of this world;* that gives him an opportunity to sow tares (Ps. 104:20). It was *while men slept*, and there is no remedy but men must have some sleeping time. **Note:** It is as impossible for us to prevent hypocrites being in the church as it is for the farmer, when he is asleep, to hinder an enemy for spoiling his field.

The enemy, when he had sown the tares, *went his way* that it might not be known who did it. **Note:** When Satan is doing the greatest mischief, he studies most to conceal himself. For his design is in danger of being spoiled if he be seen in it, and therefore when he comes to sow tares he *transforms himself into an angel of light* (2 Cor. 11:13,14). He *went his way*, as if he had done no harm. *Such is the way of the adulterous woman* (Prov. 30:20). Observe that such is the proneness of fallen man to sin, that if the enemy sow the tares he may even go his way and they will spring up of themselves and do harm. Good seed, however, when it is sown, must be tended, watered, and fenced or it will come to nothing.

The tares appeared not till *the blade sprung up and brought forth fruit*. There is a great deal of secret wickedness in the hearts of men, which is long hid under the cloak of a plausible profession, but breaks out at last. As the good seed, so the tares, lie a great while under the clods, and at first springing up it is hard to distinguish them. But when a trying time comes, when fruit is to be brought forth, when good is to be done that has difficulty and hazard attending it, then you will return and discern between the sincere and the hypocrite; then you may say, This is wheat, and that is tares.

The servants, when they were aware of it, complained to their master: *Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field?* No doubt he did. Whatever is amiss in the church, we are sure it is not of Christ. Considering the seed which Christ sows, we may well ask with

wonder, *From where should these tares come?* **Note:** The rise of errors, the breaking out of scandals, and the growth of profaneness are matters of great grief to all the servants of Christ, especially to his faithful ministers, who are directed to complain of it to him whose the field is. It is sad to see such tares, such weeds in the garden of the Lord; to see the good soil wasted, the good seed choked, and such a reflection cast on the name and honor of Christ as if his field were no better than *the field of the slothful, all grown over with thorns.*

The Master was soon aware from where the tares came. *An enemy has done this.* He does not lay the blame upon the servants; they could not help it, but had done what was in their power to prevent it. **Note:** The ministers of Christ who are faithful and diligent shall not be judged of Christ, and therefore should not be reproached by men for the mixture of bad with good, hypocrites with the sincere, in the field of the church. *It must needs be that such offenses will come.* And they shall not be laid to our charge if we do our duty, though it have not the desired success. Though they sleep, if they do not love sleep; though tares be sown, if they do not sow them nor water them nor allow of them, the blame shall not lie at their door.

The servants were very forward to have these tares rooted up. *"Do you wish that we go and do it presently?"* **Note:** The over-hasty and inconsiderate zeal of Christ's servants, before they have consulted with their Master, is sometimes ready, to the hazard of the church, to root out all who they presume to be tares. *Lord, wilt thou that we call for fire from heaven?*

The Master very wisely prevented this. *No, lest while you gather up the tares you root up also the wheat with them.* **Note:** It is not possible for any man infallibly to distinguish between tares and wheat, but he may be mistaken. Therefore such is the wisdom and grace of Christ that he will rather permit the tares than in anyway endanger the wheat. It is certain that scandalous offenders are to be censured, and we are to withdraw from them. Those who are openly *the children of the wicked one* are not to be admitted to special ordinances. Yet it is possible there may be a discipline, either so mistaken in its rules or so over-nice in the application of them, as may prove vexatious to many who are truly godly and conscientious. Great caution and moderation must be used in inflicting and continuing church censures, lest the wheat be trodden down if not plucked up. *The wisdom from above, as it is pure, so it is peaceable,* and those who oppose themselves must not be cut off but instructed, and *with meekness* (2 Tim. 2:25). The tares, if continued under the means of grace, may become good corn; therefore have patience with them.

(6) *The harvest is the end of the world.* This world will have an end. Though it continue long, it will not continue always; time will shortly be swallowed up in eternity. At the end of the world there will be a great harvest-day, a day of judgment. At harvest all is ripe and ready to be cut down; both good and bad are ripe at the great day (Rev. 6:11). It is *the harvest of the earth* (Rev. 14:15). At harvest the reapers cut down all before them; not a field, not a corner is left behind. So at the great day all must be judged (Rev. 20:12,13). God has *set a harvest* (Hos. 6:11), and it shall not fail (Gen. 8:22). At harvest every man reaps as he sowed; every man's ground, and seed, and skill, and industry will be manifested (see Gal. 6:7,8). Then they who *sowed precious seed will come again with rejoicing* (Ps. 126:5,6), with *the joy of harvest* (Isa. 9:3), while *the sluggard, who would not plow by reason of the cold, shall beg and have nothing* (Prov. 20:4), and shall cry *Lord, Lord,* but in vain. The harvest of those who sowed to the flesh shall *be a day of*

grief, and of desperate sorrow (Isa. 17:11).

(7) *The reapers are the angels.* They shall be employed in that great day in executing Christ's righteous sentences, both of approbation and condemnation, as ministers of his justice (ch. 25:31). The angels are skillful, strong and swift, obedient servants to Christ, holy enemies to the wicked, and faithful friends to all the saints, and therefore fit to be thus employed. *He who reaps receives wages,* and the angels will not be unpaid for their attendance; for *he who sows and he who reaps shall rejoice together (John 4:36); that is joy in heaven in the presence of the angels of God.*

(8) Hell-torments are the *fire* into which the *tares* shall be burned. At the great day a distinction will be made, and with it a vast difference. It will be a notable day indeed.

The tares will then be gathered out. *The reapers* (whose primary work it is to gather in the corn) shall be charged first to *gather out the tares.* **Note:** Though good and bad are together in this world undistinguished, yet at the great day they shall be parted. No tares shall then be among the wheat; no sinners among the saints. Then you shall plainly discern *between the righteous and the wicked,* which here sometimes it is hard to do (Mal. 3:18; 4:1). Christ will not bear always (Ps. 1:1, &c). They shall *gather out of his kingdom all wicked things that offend, and all wicked persons who do iniquity; when he begins, he will make a full end.* All those corrupt doctrines, worships, and practices which have offended, have been scandals to the church and stumbling blocks to men's consciences, shall be condemned by the righteous Judge in that day and consumed by *the brightness of his coming; all the wood, hay, and stubble (1 Cor. 3:12);* and then *woe to them who do iniquity, who make a trade of it* and persist in it; not only those in the last age of Christ's kingdom upon earth, but those in every age. Perhaps here is an allusion to Zeph. 1:3: *I will consume the stumbling-blocks with the wicked.*

They will then be *bound in bundles.* Sinners of the same sort will be bundled together in the great day: a bundle of atheists, a bundle of epicures, a bundle of persecutors, and a great bundle of hypocrites. Those who have been associates in sin will be so in shame and sorrow; and it will be an aggravation of their misery, as the society of glorified saints will add to their bliss. Let us pray as David did, *Lord, gather not my soul with sinners (Ps. 26:9),* but let it be bound in *the bundle of life with the Lord our God (1 Sam. 25:29).*

They will be *cast into a furnace of fire;* such will be the end of wicked, mischievous people who are in the church as *tares in the field.* They are fit for nothing but fire. To it they shall go; it is the fittest place for them. **Note:** Hell is a furnace of fire kindled by the wrath of God and kept burning by the bundles of tares cast into it, who will be ever in the consuming but never consumed. But he slides out of the metaphor into a description of those torments that are designed to be set forth by it: *There shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.* Comfortless sorrow and an incurable indignation at God, themselves, and one another will be the endless torture of damned souls. Let us therefore, *knowing these terrors of the Lord,* be persuaded not to do iniquity.

(9) Heaven is the *barn* into which all God's wheat shall be gathered in that harvest-day. *But gather the wheat into my barn.* **Note:** [1] In the field of this world good people are the wheat, the most precious grain and the valuable part of the field. [2] This wheat shall shortly be gathered; gathered from among the tares and weeds; all *gathered together in a general assembly;*

all the Old Testament saints and all the New Testament saints, not one missing. *Gather my saints together unto me* (Ps. 50:5). [3] All God's wheat shall be lodged together in God's barn. Particular souls are housed at death as a shock of corn (Job 5:26), but the general in-gathering will be at the end of time. God's wheat will then be put together and no longer scattered. There will be sheaves of corn as well as bundles of tares. They will then be secured and no longer exposed to wind and weather, sin and sorrow; no longer afar off and at a great distance in the field but near in the barn. Nay, heaven is a *garner* in which the wheat will not only be separated from the tares of ill companions, but sifted from the chaff of their own corruptions.

In the explanation of the parable, this is gloriously represented: *Then shall the righteous shine forth as the sun in the kingdom of their Father*. First, it is their present honor that God is their Father. *Now are we the sons of God* (1 John 3:2); *our Father in heaven* is King there. Christ, when he went to heaven, went to his *Father, and our Father* (John 20:17). It is our *Father's house*, nay, it is *our Father's* palace, his throne (Rev. 3:21). Secondly, the honor in reserve for them is that they *shall shine forth as the sun in that kingdom*. Here they are obscure and hidden (Col. 3:3); their beauty is eclipsed by their poverty and the meanness of their outward condition. Their own weaknesses and infirmities, and the reproach and disgrace cast upon them, cloud them; but then they shall shine forth as the sun from behind a dark cloud. At death they shall shine forth to themselves; at the great day they will shine forth publicly before all the world, *their bodies will be made like Christ's glorious body*. They shall shine by reflection with a light borrowed from the Fountain of light. Their sanctification will be perfected and their justification published. God will own them for his children and will produce the record of all their services and sufferings for his name. They shall shine as the sun, the most glorious of all visible beings. The glory of the saints in the Old Testament is compared to that of the firmament and the stars, but here to that of the sun; *for life and immortality are brought to a much clearer light by the gospel* than under the law. Those who shine as lights in this world, that God may be glorified, shall shine as the sun in the other world, that *they* may be glorified. Our Savior concludes, as before, with a demand of attention: *Who has ears to hear, let him hear*. These are things which it is our happiness to hear of, and our duty to hearken to.