

Separating Tares from Wheat What is the True Meaning?

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Let us prayerfully look at the parable of the wheat and the tares and the parable of the net of good and bad fish. Read Matthew 13:24-50.

Do these parables speak of the professing church having both good and bad, regenerate or unregenerate? If so, then are there to be no disciplinary measures to remove the good and the bad “until the end of the world” — and that by the angels?

It is true that the professing church has and will always have “until the end of the world” both good and bad, regenerate and unregenerate. But in the church of God there IS a continual, perpetual sanctifying process going on. The faithfully proclaimed Word and the revealing work of the Holy Spirit is making manifest true believers and false believers. True believers are bearing fruit and false believers are falling by the wayside. False believers cannot for long stand the searchlight of the Word of God or persecution that accompanies true Christianity. So there is a continual culling out process where the Word of God is adhered to. There need not be any extra-biblical restrictions added (as some have added) to assure the successful working of this process.

However, in looking at the two parables above, what is the Spirit of God teaching? If He is speaking of the professing church, then it seems we would tend to acquiesce and even become complacent relative to the fact that tares and wheat are together in the church and supposedly, then, we should leave the status quo alone so that the tares will not be stirred or uprooted or cast out by any method at our disposal. Thus even bold, faithful preaching that steps on toes and causes the tares to come no more could be construed to be an unwarranted method of uprooting! “Are we not to let them alone until the harvest at the end of the world?” And “is not the separating process the work of angels?” But the fact is, as I have already indicated, and I believe the Word of God teaches, there is indeed a perpetual uprooting and sanctifying process going on under the faithful preaching and discipline of the church of God. Therefore, the separating process that awaits the end of the world *cannot be* this process we now observe in the church, a process that has always existed. It is something different. Whatever it is, it is something we must yield to and accept without taking matters into our own hands to correct by “removing” the tares from the wheat or the bad fish from the good.

In the parable of the wheat and tares, both good seed and bad seed are sown in a field. The “field” is not the church, although wheat and tares *are* there also. But the Lord Himself explains it to us plainly. Verse 38 — “The field is the *world*; the good seed are the children of the kingdom; but the tares are the children of the wicked one” — in the *world*. Thus we see that we are dealing with children of God and the wicked children of Satan on this planet earth. In speaking of these enemies of God, you may remember that two of the early disciples, James and John, asked the Lord if they should call down fire from heaven to destroy them. The Lord rebuked them and said, “Ye know not what manner of spirit ye are of.” (See Luke 9:51-56.) And I suggest to you that just this spirit that has shown itself in church history by the burning of “heretics” and doing violence to remove supposed tares (real or not) is of *just this same Satanic spirit* that can even grip Christians! We are to do violence to no man (Luke 3:14). We are to be wise as serpents but as *harmless* as doves (Matt. 10:13). We are not to rail against or retaliate against our enemies and persecutors but rather bless them and pray for them (Matt. 5, Rom. 12:14). We *are* to rebuke and reprove the works of darkness, but we are to do violence to no one.

This *has* to be our attitude if we are to be like the Lord and follow Him. We must rest in “vengeance is Mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.” And we must pray even for the conversion of our enemies. We all are enemies of God by nature. We were all under spiritual and even physical bondage to Satan before the Lord sovereignly regenerated us and broke that bondage, setting us free — free to believe and serve our Savior. By nature we are no different from other men.

This was the attitude of the early Christians. Suppose it hadn't been. Suppose they had taken it upon themselves to “remove the tares from the wheat.” A classic example would be Saul of Tarsus. The early Christians would have mistaken him for a “tare” and killed him. In fact, the Jews later tried it because they were of a Satanic spirit. But if the Christians had accomplished the dastardly feat before Saul's conversion, there never would have been an apostle Paul! No wonder the Lord says in Matt. 13:29, “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.”

These two parables have nothing to do with faithful preaching that uproots the unregenerate from the midst of the saints' fellowship or with church discipline. The field is not the church but the world. The harvest here spoken of is not now but “the end of the world.” The “reapers” are not harmless saints but angels (verses 39, 40). The reaping we are doing is in being used in the calling forth of the elect by the proclamation of the Gospel by word and life.

“The Son of man shall send forth His angels, and they shall gather out of His kingdom all things that offend, and them which do iniquity; and shall cast them into a furnace of fire. There shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth. Then shall the righteous shine forth

as the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Who hath ears to hear, let him hear” (Matt. 13:41-43).

Now the same can be said of the parable of the net. It is not the ministers or saints of God that cast the bad fish out from the church of God, even though there is a casting out or separation going on in the midst where holy lives and faithful preaching are in evidence. But we do violence to no man. And the Lord explains His parable. The time of separating the good fish from the bad, children of the kingdom and children of the evil one on this *earth* is at the end of the world and by the *angels*. “So shall it be at the *end of the world*: the *angels* shall come forth and sever the wicked from among the just, and cast them into the furnace of fire: there shall be wailing and gnashing of teeth.”

May we say what the early disciples said when the Lord said unto them, “Have ye understood all these things?” They said unto Him, “Yea, Lord.”

Now before closing this article I want to share with you some insight on the subject from Arthur Gish in his book, *Living in Christian Community*:

“A related common objection to church discipline refers to the parables of the wheat and the tares (Matt. 13:24-30, 36-43) and the dragnet (13:47-50). The classical interpretation of these parables is that they apply to the church and that until the end of the age, both righteous and unrighteous will together form the church. This would seem to contradict all the New Testament teachings on the importance of church discipline.

A brief examination of these parables will show, however, that they apply not to relationships in the church, but to the world. Verse 38 clearly states “the field is the world.” There is no hint that saints and sinners are indistinguishable. Rather the assumption is that they are. Tares or darnel are pseudo wheat whose differences from wheat become more obvious as they both mature. The point is that the church should not use violence or coercion to root evil out of the world, but rather call together a righteous community that already is gathering the harvest of the faithful. “Lift up your eyes, and see how the fields are already white for harvest” (Jn. 4:35). We are called to reap the harvest that is now ripe. The way to separate the wheat from the tares is through proclamation of the gospel and the voluntary gathering together of those who hear the Word and obey it. There is already a separation, but the work of the church is not to root out evil people in the world. This in no way contradicts church discipline. Rather, the point is that the church may not impose her discipline on the world.

Although we are not basing our understanding of church discipline on the concept of the purity of the church, there are enough references in the New Testament to the church being pure that we cannot ignore the idea or rationalize it away. God keeps pruning His vine, cutting off the dead branches so that the resulting plant may be strong and healthy and will bear plenty of good fruit. God is preparing a community that will be pure, holy, and undefiled.

The church is holy not because of her members, but because God is holy and calls us to be holy. We can be righteous only to the extent that we recognize that God is righteous. The purity of the church is not to be thought of as a gradual achievement, but in terms of our relation to the One who is pure and perfect. We are invited to participate in that completeness even now. It is a gift and promise which we can already claim and realize (Col. 1:12-23; 2:9-13).

The church is composed of those called to be saints. Although this term has moral implications, it is primarily one of relation to God. It means to be holy, to be consecrated to God alone, to be set apart. The saints are those who are set apart to be God's own people. Thus seeking to be faithful should not cut us off from mission. God's act of making us holy is a process called sanctification (2 Thess. 2:13). But it is also a task. "You shall be holy, for I am holy" (1 Pet. 1:16).

Church discipline assumes that true faith and discipleship do become visible. The problem is not in deciding who is a true Christian, but how to relate to those actions and attitudes in the church which are a clear contradiction of the gospel. Discipline is the way we help each other make our discipleship take flesh. The command in Galatians 6:2 to bear one another's burdens comes immediately after the command to admonish each other when we sin.

Although we never measure up to the command to be pure and perfect, we are always measured by it. The point is not that we are perfect, but that we as a community have submitted all to God and that we seek the admonition of the Word and of the brothers and sisters at any point where we are unfaithful. Our weaknesses are being recognized and put in God's care. The unregenerate are not willing to admit their sin or seek this admonition."

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