

Parable of the Tares

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“The kingdom of heaven is 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.... 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 them both grow together until the harvest...’” (Matthew 13:24-26,28-30).

Tares sown among wheat is a vivid image of the mixture of good and evil that is well known to us all. In our lives we are constantly faced with a mixture of what is good and what is evil. We see humanitarian, selfless, acts, but we also see self-centered and hateful acts. We see people struggling to follow what they understand to be true and good, and we also see those who carelessly do whatever strikes their fancy at the time, regardless of the effect it has on others.

And we have all been hurt by such actions. We have been mistreated, dealt with unfairly, and have had some of our ideals and hopes damaged through the presence of evil. What is more, we have done the same to others! Evil within us has flared up—in envy, anger, or greed—so none of us can claim to be without sin.

When we are conscious of the presence of evil, and then horrified by it, how we long to escape! We long to get away from its destructive influence on our lives. Unfortunately, there is no safe retreat from evil. We can isolate ourselves, we can join with others who appear to be “perfect” people, but we will never entirely avoid evil on this earth.

The parable of the tares speaks to this problem. Good and evil uncomfortably coexisting is the reality of life. And this story describes how we are to deal with certain evils in our lives.

Each one of us is like a field in which the Lord has sown good seed (*Arcana Coelestia* 29:2, 2813:4, 9295:4). He has planted many good things in our lives. We have all experienced love and affection from parents, relatives, friends. We have inquisitive spirits—a yearning to understand life through the truths revealed in the Lord’s Word. We have a desire to be caring, useful, people. We were not born evil. Rather, we were born with the ability to rise to the highest heaven. This is the Lord’s purpose in creation.

But there is an enemy who would deny us such happiness—our own inclinations to evil. This enemy is our personal hell, sowing the tares of selfishness which can eventually destroy our potential crop of good (see *Arcana Coelestia* 9295:4).

It is of note that the enemy is said to have come at night, not in the daylight. When we are spiritually awake, we see clearly what is true and how we ought to live. It is during our spiritual nighttimes that our enemy operates, sowing tares in our fields. For twisted thinking and distorted loves usually do not enter our lives when we can see them for what they are (*Apocalypse Explained* 336:6, 911, 187:8, 374:15).

Do we consciously decide to be overly ambitious, greedy, or self centered? Do we set out in our marriages to dominate over our spouses, enslaving them to our desires? Do we want to use our friendships to our advantage alone? Do we intend to bear false witness when asked why someone is upset with us?

Of course not! We rarely make conscious decisions to be evil. We don't plan to go to hell! We don't sit down and evaluate the relative benefits of good vs. evil and then make a choice to lie, cheat, or steal. Evils and their delights creep into our lives seed by seed when we are spiritually asleep, that is, when we are not paying attention.

And what a perfect illustration the tares are for this incursion of evil. Tares were probably the weed known as "darnel." Darnel looks exactly like wheat in the early stages of growth. Not even experts can tell the difference. And so our inclinations to evil at first seem to be OK, if not good. After all, a hard worker is not necessarily a work-a-holic; a person who delights in a relaxed life style is not necessarily in love with the world; an assertive person is not necessarily self-centered.

And so darnel at first seems to be the same as wheat, and can only be distinguished as the poisonous weed it is when it begins to bloom. For then, instead of the golden nourishing wheat, it produces an ugly black fruit. "By their fruits you shall know them." A hard worker is not dysfunctional until a total disregard for family or friends becomes evident. A relaxed person seems healthy until a pattern of seeking delight and avoiding work becomes seen. And the assertive personality can be orderly until it steps on others to exalt itself.

The issue then is, how do we respond? How do we react when we first see some facet of evil in our lives? When the servants were first able to identify some tares in the field they wanted to take care of the entire problem immediately. "Let's enter the field and rip out all the tares!" And so our naive zeal might lead us to act. After all, repentance is removing evil so good can grow. So when we first observe a tendency to neglect family we should change jobs! Or when we have overindulged in some natural pleasure we should lead a spartan life. Or when we have pushed too hard for our ideas, we should then refuse to speak up, even if we sense something is wrong.

Like those servants, our initial zeal is without wisdom. To get rid of one minor problem which may be an evil we can easily damage what is good—racing through the fields of our minds tramping down good wheat. It is like trying to avoid a small pothole in the road by violently jerking the steering wheel and thereby hitting another car. If our reaction to the observation of some evil is to cease all action in that area, then chances are we are ripping up some wheat along with the tares.

And in addition to harming some good, the sudden removal of evil almost never works. For if an evil has been growing within us for some time, it cannot be yanked out with one effort, or in a short amount of time. And if we are constantly searching for each and every stalk which might turn into a tare, we will always be focusing upon evil and feeling defeated by it.

The owner of the field said, "let both grow together until the harvest." The wise course of action is to wait—wait until a time of harvest, when the differences between good and evil can be clearly seen.

But what a frightening concept this seems! Isn't it dangerous to allow evils to remain within us after we have seen them? Aren't we supposed to "nip things in the bud"? This is the case with evils which can easily be identified as evil. But tares in our lives are more like the minor flare-ups of irritation and impatience, or a periodic lack of desire to be useful. While we can see that they are not particularly good, we really do not see what it is within us that causes them. The harvest is not yet ready, and so it would be a mistake to identify these symptoms, or superficial problems, as the fundamental issue. If we do that, we will be focusing on such minor imperfections that all our time will probably be devoted to improving our social manners without realizing what the underlying problem is. In fact, we will tend to identify regeneration with how polite we are and whether we have broken any rules. To be serene, socially acceptable, and patient are good qualities, but they are only truly good if the opposing source of evil within us is being removed through serious self examination and genuine repentance.

What the Lord is really telling us is that He does not expect us to be perfect, or fully regenerate, all at once. Removing evils is a lifelong activity. In fact, it is a process, never a finished product. So we should not feel discouraged or lose hope when we find evil within us. We may be intolerant of our flaws, but the Lord is mercifully kind, being more concerned with our attempt to improve rather than with keeping an exact score of how good we are. The Lord can wait for the harvest, so we should not hate ourselves for the existence of tares sowed by our enemies.

And when does the harvest come? Usually when our fields are producing the nourishing wheat. It is far easier to identify what is *not* good when we have a clear sense of what *is* good. When we sense the good of allowing others the freedom to accept true ideas, then we can clearly see when impatience is doing harm. When we recognize the value of giving of ourselves at home and at work, then we can see where overwork is so destructive. But until the harvest, until the wheat is ready to be made into bread, our ability to remove just the tares is extremely limited.

Regeneration, then, is an ongoing process. We may want to speed it up, as the servants wanted to remove the tares as soon as they appeared. But in the Lord's providence there is time to let the good grow. Hasty rejection of ourselves often leads to greater problems as good is torn out also.

So let us not make rash judgments about ourselves. There are tares in us, but we do not have to hate ourselves. Yes, wherever we can clearly see weeds, we should remove them. But let's not become so concerned over the little flaws of life that we never allow the good in us to mature. Periods of harvest do come regularly, just as crops are gathered in annually. And when they do, from the good we will be able to see and remove evils, casting them into the furnace so that they will trouble us no more.

The kingdom of heaven is not as much a final destination as the process of life: planting good seed, recognizing evil tendencies, harvesting heavenly loves, and casting out evils when they are clearly seen for their hellish nature.

Amen.

Lessons: Psalm 91; Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43; *Apocalypse Explained* 911:7