

Warning: There will be Opposition

The parable of the “Sower” or “Four Soils” teaches that God freely sows His good seed in spiritual hearts, but hard, shallow, and crowded hearts fail to produce a harvest. In fruitful hearts, the seed germinates, the plant grows, and ultimately yields a bountiful harvest.

It is unfortunately true that nothing good comes into the world without opposition. That is especially true in spiritual matters. Adam and Eve were originally good, but opposition brought about their downfall. Jesus incarnate mission of making salvation possible was strenuously opposed. And so it is with all God’s sowing of His good seed. Opposition comes from people and from satanic or demonic sources. Enemies of Christ are enemies of believers. Satan fiercely opposes the extension of God’s rule on earth.

The sequence of presentation in Matthew 13 is (1.) “Four Soils,” (2.) Jesus’ explanation of that parable, (3.) “Weeds” also known as the “Wheat and Tares,” (4.) “Mustard Seed,” (5.) “Yeast,” (6.) Jesus’ statement that He teaches nothing without a parable, and (7.) Jesus’ explanation of the parable of the “Weeds.”

In the “Weeds” parable, the Lord warns against schemes the enemy uses to interfere with Gods’ work of spreading the gospel. The “Mustard Seed” and “Yeast” parables have been interpreted in two opposite ways. First, as warnings of opposition to the gospel, and secondly, as descriptions of the growth of God’s kingdom. The question is “which interpretation did Jesus’ intend?” The presentation sequence is important in answering that question. As will be seen, it appears Jesus intended all three parables to be taken as warnings.

The Parable of the “Weeds”: Like the “Four Soils,” the “Weeds” parable concerns a farmer’s field and the sowing of seed. However, the emphasis and message are very different. As with “Four Soils,” the common knowledge background is farming. The farmer has sown good wheat seed in his field. Afterwards an enemy deliberately sows weed seeds in the same field. This is a metaphor for Satan scattering non-Christians among believers. Jesus is saying Satan will bring forward non-believers who are such perfect counterfeit Christians, that even the servants of God will not be able to tell which is which.

The “weeds” parable is based on the fact that there are noxious weeds in Israel which for much of their life look so much like wheat that you can’t really tell them apart. One such weed is “bearded darnel” also known as “tares.” To some extent darnel is always present in Israel’s grain fields. While having some darnel in a field is common, extensive areas of darnel in a field indicates deliberate sowing of darnel seeds.

Sowing noxious weeds in cultivated fields is a sure way to cause harm. Darnel is particularly nasty (1.) because it looks so much like wheat, (2.) because wheat and darnel plant roots get tangled so that pulling the darnel damages the wheat, and (3.) because the grain produced by darnel tends to have a poisonous fungus. Spreading damaging weeds in fields was so common in the Roman Empire that a law was established specifically against such action.

Simon Kistemaker points out that the nasty practice of sowing weeds continues 2000 years later. In the late 1930’s Kistemaker’s father-in-law bought a farm in western Canada. In the spring, he discovered his fields were covered with a weed called “daisy.” Upon investigation, he found that a neighbor with a grudge against the previous owner had some years earlier rode on horseback through the fields scattering daisy weed seeds. The harm lasted. To this day the fields suffers from daisy weeds.

Darnel is rather like that. It looks so much like wheat that during most of its growth it can’t be separated from the wheat. But, at harvest time, Jesus says it is possible to separate the wheat from the darnel.

In the parable, wheat plants represent believers. Darnel plants represent non-believers introduced by Satan to hinder God’s work. The non-believers are good counterfeits of believers, and in many ways closely resemble them.

Jesus sows his good seed in the hearts of people. He sows seed which has the power to bring about true saving belief. Satan responds by introducing counterfeit believers intending to thwart God’s purpose.

Being in the world, the earthly church is susceptible to counterfeits coming in from the world. That is in fact where the true believers come from. Even the servants of God are not able to reliably distinguish the counterfeits.

When the genuineness of a church member’s faith is in question, how should they be dealt with? Gently! Don’t immediately rush to uproot what is thought to be darnel. It may well be wheat. Only God knows the truth in the heart.

Leave the difficult cases until the harvest. At the harvest, God will see that nothing unrighteous stays in His kingdom. Counterfeits can fool members of a church, but they cannot fool God.

Church Discipline: In clear cases of sin, church discipline is to be exercised (Mt 18) step-by-step both to those considered believers and those for whom there is some doubt. The purpose of church discipline is always reconciliation. Conversion for some who are not yet true believers may occur as the process proceeds. It is not particularly rare to find seekers in a church, who think they have salvation, but have not yet been regenerated. They need compassion and help. There are many such examples recorded in Christian literature.

Extreme care must be exercised to avoid discouraging or damaging someone for whom Christ died. Jesus never pretended the earthly church is perfect, and neither should we. Knowing it is possible that some church members may be counterfeit should never be used as an excuse for not coming to Christ or for not participating in the church.

A Mixture of Believers and Counterfeits: The truth is Satan does mix some counterfeits among true Christians. It would appear to be a risky strategy since he is exposing his disciple to Christ and His teachings and conversion may well occur. Christians need to be alert to the possibility of counterfeits, but be assured that at the right time God will separate the wheat from the tares.

Jesus said *““Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven”* (Mt 7:21). In 2 Cor 11:13-15, the Apostle Paul talks about counterfeit church leaders, *“For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ. And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an angel of light. It is not surprising, then, if his servants masquerade as servants of righteousness.”*

Though it is possible that churches may have some counterfeit believers, the commonly heard charge that the church is filled with hypocrites is simply false. Most church members and attenders are true to God, a few are false. The day is coming when the wheat and weeds will be separated. The wheat will be gathered to God and the weeds will be burned.

As Peter says in 2Pt 1:10, each believer should be careful to make their *“calling and election sure.”* Every true believer is a sinner saved by grace through faith. Do believers sin? Yes! Is professed belief genuine? That question only God can answer.

Church discipline is both important and necessary. It is intended to bring about reconciliation, and where needed – salvation. Only in rare exceptions are there sufficient reasons and evidence to dismiss someone from the body. Keeping church membership totally free of unbelievers is beyond human capabilities, but the Lord says don’t worry, He has it under control.

Warning: Small Things Grow Larger

The next two parables belong together. Each helps in understanding the other. The “Mustard Seed” and “Yeast (or leaven)” each involve things that begin small and grow large. A mustard seed growing into a tree is an unusual event. Mustard is a shrub and would not usually be referred to as a tree. But the real point is that mustard seed is extremely small, and the plant, that develops from it, is large. It is well-known to almost everyone that a small amount of yeast will work and influence a large measure of flour. As metaphors, both parables convey the truth that a small beginning over time can produce big results.

As previously mentioned, seemingly opposite interpretations have been applied to both these parables. On the one hand, they have been interpreted as warnings against Satan’s actions against God’s kingdom. On the other hand, directly opposite to the first interpretation, both have been interpreted as descriptions of the impending rapid growth of God’s kingdom. Proponents of both interpretations make valid points. If the parables are isolated from their context, it becomes impossible to judge which interpretation Jesus intended. But they should not be isolated from their context.

Boice’s View: James Montgomery Boice discusses the opposing views in his commentary on Matthew 13. One view declares Jesus, in both parables, is commenting on the small start and future large growth of the church. That seems a sensible view, especially by hindsight. However, if this view is correct, these two parables introduce an entirely new topic, a topic very different from the “weeds” parable preceding them and from Jesus’ interpretation of the “weeds” that

follows them. That would mean a distinct “change of subject” in the middle the passage. That seems unlikely.

Matthew’s positioning of these two parables between the “weeds” and Jesus’ interpretation of the “weeds” suggests the intervening stories are not on a new subject but are related to and expand the point of the “weeds.” That means, the “Mustard Seed” and “Yeast” parables continue with concern about Satan’s work of promoting the growth of evil and hindering God’s work.

Boice considers this view to be most likely right. Good, especially spiritual good, does not enter the world unopposed. Jesus’ incarnate mission of grace and mercy was being vigorously opposed. It is not surprising Jesus would warn about opposition to His good news continuing and increasing. Opposition comes both from people influenced by Satan and directly from Satan. 1Pt 5:8 warns *believers “Be sober-minded; be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour.”*

Boice points out that in nearly every case in the OT (and Jewish life today), yeast is a symbol of evil. In preparing for the feast of unleavened bread, Jews preparing for the feast must rid their homes of any trace of yeast. Likewise, when Jesus spoke of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees, and of Herod, in each case He meant their evil influence (Mt 16:12; Mk 8:15).

Summary: The parable of the “weeds” teaches that Satan scatters his disciples throughout the world, including in the present earthly kingdom of God. These counterfeit believers can be neither easily detected nor removed. The “Yeast” and “Mustard Seed” deal with small things growing big. The things which grow can be either good or evil. Jesus appears to be warning of evil that begins small (and perhaps hard to detect) and grows big. The NAZI party began small but became an enormous evil impacting the whole world. A small drift in the direction of evil over a long time yields pervasive evil.

Entire Christian denominations have step-by-step moved from orthodoxy to the opposite. The drift from adherence to God’s Word to a mere social gospel or worse is depressingly familiar. Believers are intended to vigilantly protect the “faith delivered by the Apostles” not to modify it to suit changes in moral outlook.

Taken together, these three parables tell us that in this world there is evil everywhere – all around us, even in the church – in everyone we know and in our

own heart. God's saving and common grace limit evil in the world, but even so, the spectacle is dreadful.

God's servants are to do all they can to mitigate evil and its effects. In particular they are to strive to protect the church from false doctrine and wrong behavior. Uncontested evil grows! Yet, it is not humanly possible to root out all deception and evil, even from the church.