

The Parables of Jesus

Lesson 5: The Parable of the Wheat and Tares

In this lesson we look at the second parable of the kingdom, the parable of the wheat and tares. This parable highlights a separation between true wheat and weeds (tares) that look like wheat and grow among the wheat. What is Jesus trying to teach using this parable. That's what we will explore in this lesson.

The Parables of Separation and Contrast

The first issue to address before we get into the parable is this idea that we see over and over again in many parables... the issue of contrast or separation. There are many parables that often highlight the contrast between two groups of people. Usually these groups can be generally seen as those who respond rightly to God and those who do not. Here's a list of key parables that fit this theme, along with what the separation represents:

- 1. The Wheat and the Tares (Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43):** The wheat (true believers) and the tares (false believers or unbelievers) grow together until the harvest when they are separated.
- 2. The Sheep and the Goats (Matthew 25:31-46):** The sheep (righteous) are placed on the right and the goats (wicked) on the left.
- 3. The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31):** The rich man suffers in torment, while Lazarus is comforted in Abraham's bosom.
- 4. The Prodigal Son and the Older Brother (Luke 15:11-32):** The younger son rebels and returns repentant, while the older son remains self-righteous and resentful.
- 5. The Two Sons (Matthew 21:28-32):** One son initially refuses to obey his father but later repents and does his will. The other son agrees to obey but never does.
- 6. The Wise and Foolish Virgins (Matthew 25:1-13):** The wise virgins have oil for their lamps and enter the wedding feast, while the foolish ones are unprepared and shut out.
- 7. The Two Builders (Matthew 7:24-27):** The wise man builds on the rock (solid foundation of Christ's words), while the foolish man builds on sand (unstable, worldly foundation).
- 8. The Two Prayers (Luke 18:9-14):** The Pharisee prays proudly, trusting in his own righteousness, while the tax collector humbly asks for mercy.
- 9. The Wedding Banquet and the Guest Without a Wedding Garment (Matthew 22:1-14):** Many are invited to the banquet, but one man is found without a proper wedding garment and is cast out.
- 10. The Net and the Fish (Matthew 13:47-50):** The net catches all kinds of fish, but the good fish are kept while the bad are thrown away.

Each of these parables challenge on **how people respond to God's grace** and emphasizes that **what we do with Christ determines our destiny**.

What Are We to Make of the Themes of Separation and Judgment?

The general consensus among Bible teachers is that the parables that speak of judgment solely indicate the idea of the final judgment at the end of human history (Revelation 20:11-15). However, I don't believe these parables were relegated to just one meaning. Another way to view the parables of separation is not just pointing to the "final judgment" in a universal sense but that Jesus was speaking to first century Jews as God's covenant people for something more **imminent and covenantal** that was happening to Israel, particularly in the first century.

The Context of Matthew 3 and John's Warning to the Pharisees

John the Baptist's warning in **Matthew 3:7-12** is significant:

Matthew 3:7-12 "But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath?"⁸ Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.⁹ And do not think you can say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our father.' I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. ¹⁰ The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire... ¹² His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire."

What Was the 'Coming Wrath'?

- John the Baptist and Jesus were not just warning about a distant **end-times judgment** but about a **very near, covenantal separation happening in their day**.
- Many assume this is **final judgment**, but in context, it seems to be **an impending judgment upon Israel**, specifically **on the unfaithful religious leaders**. The wording parallels the OT prophets.
- Historically, this aligns with **the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple in A.D. 70**, which was a judgment on **Israel's leadership and corrupt system** (Matthew 23:37-39).
- Jesus frequently warned the Pharisees and religious leaders of judgment falling upon their generation (**Matthew 23:36; 24:34**). The Pharisees and religious leaders were at the **end of their "harvest season"**—they had run their course, and now Jesus was **bringing the winnowing fork** to separate the faithful remnant from the unfaithful.
- The **winnowing fork** imagery suggests that Jesus' ministry itself was **already beginning the process of separation**—deciding who among Israel was truly faithful and who was merely outwardly religious.

The 'End of Harvest' for Israel and the Covenantal Shift

- The **wheat and chaff** language fits a **first-century transition**, where **Jesus was separating true Israel (his followers) from apostate Israel (those who rejected him)**.
- Jesus, as Messiah, was bringing about a new **covenantal reality**, where faith in Him—not ethnic heritage or Temple-based religion—determined who was part of God's people.
- The Pharisees, despite being Israel's religious leaders, were about to **experience being "cut off" from the true people of God**.
- The **Temple's destruction in AD 70** was the visible sign that the Old Covenant had been judged and the New Covenant had been fully established.
- So, while these parables still have **eternal implications**, they are primarily about **the shift from Old Covenant to New** and the judgment that fell upon Israel's corrupt system.

This a Key to Reinterpreting the 'Judgment' that Jesus is speaking of

This **covenantal reading** helps us rethink what **"judgment"** Jesus was speaking of in these parables. It could either solely be the final judgement at the end of human history, or it could be a covenantal judgment on apostate Israel at the end of the Old Covenant age, with AD 70 being the coming 'Day of the Lord'. A third option is that Jesus is speaking of the immediate covenantal judgment on Israel but his words were also pointing forward toward a final judgment and a general pattern of how God judges the wicked.

The Parable of the Wheat and Tares

²⁴ Jesus told them another parable: "The kingdom of heaven is like a man who sowed good seed in his field. ²⁵ But while everyone was sleeping, his enemy came and sowed weeds among the wheat and went away. ²⁶ When the wheat sprouted and formed heads, then the weeds also appeared. ²⁷ "The owner's servants came to him and said, 'Sir, didn't you sow good seed in your field? Where then did the weeds come from?' ²⁸ "An enemy did this," he replied. "The servants asked him, 'Do you want us to go and pull them up?' ²⁹ "No," he answered, 'because while you are pulling the weeds, you may uproot the wheat with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest. At that time I will tell the harvesters: First collect the weeds and tie them in bundles to be burned; then gather the wheat and bring it into my barn."

36 Then he left the crowd and went into the house. His disciples came to him and said, “Explain to us the parable of the weeds in the field.” 37 He answered, “The one who sowed the good seed is the Son of Man. 38 The field is the world, and the good seed stands for the people of the kingdom. The weeds are the people of the evil one, 39 and the enemy who sows them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the harvesters are angels. 40 “As the weeds are pulled up and burned in the fire, so it will be at the end of the age. 41 The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil. 42 They will throw them into the blazing furnace, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. 43 Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. Whoever has ears, let them hear.

About the Parable

The Parable of the Wheat and the Tares is often understood as a picture of the final judgment at the end of the world, and while it certainly has eternal implications, what if Jesus was primarily speaking of a **judgment happening in his own generation**—the transition from the Old Covenant to the New and the judgment that would soon come upon Israel’s corrupt system?

Symbol	Meaning
The sower	Jesus, the Son of Man
The field	The world (Greek: <i>kosmos</i> – the system/order of things, which could refer to Israel’s covenantal world)
The good seed (wheat)	The sons of the kingdom (faithful followers of Jesus)
The weeds (tares)	The sons of the evil one (false followers, apostate Israel)
The enemy	The devil (working through opposition, including corrupt religious leaders)
The harvest	The end of the age (the transition from Old Covenant to New, and ultimately, final judgment)
The reapers	Angels (divine agents of God’s judgment)

What are Tares?

A tare is a **type of weed** that closely resembles wheat during its early stages of growth but is ultimately worthless and even harmful. The plant most commonly identified as the tare in Jesus’ parable is known as **darnel or false wheat**.

Key Characteristics of Tares (Darnel)

1. **Looks Like Wheat** – In its early growth stages, darnel is nearly indistinguishable from wheat.
2. **Deceptive Growth** – It grows among the wheat, taking up valuable nutrients and resources.
3. **Toxic & Useless** – While wheat produces grain for food, darnel is often poisonous if consumed.
4. **Only Revealed at Harvest** – The key difference becomes clear at the time of harvest when wheat produces good grain, but darnel remains empty.

The Takeaway

Jesus’ choice of **wheat and tares** is powerful because the difference **was not immediately visible**—it required time and growth before the truth was revealed. Similarly, those who outwardly **claimed to be God’s people** but inwardly **rejected the Messiah** would eventually be exposed and face judgment. If Jesus’ parable is seen through this **covenantal lens**, it is not just about a distant end-times event, but about the **separation that was already taking place in Israel**.

Breaking Down the Key Themes of the Parable

1. The Sower and the Field

- The sower (Jesus) plants good seed, showing **that the kingdom of God is intentional**.
- The field is the world, meaning the kingdom exists **within a scope that contains both good and evil**.
- Jesus does not immediately remove evil, teaching that **God's plan involves patience**.

2. The Enemy and the Tares

- The enemy (Satan) sows bad seed while men sleep, implying **deception and hidden opposition**.
- The tares (darnel) look like wheat—meaning **false believers**, especially the religious elite, blend in with the true people of God.
- This explains why Jesus faced opposition from **Pharisees, scribes, and priests**, who appeared religious but opposed the kingdom.

3. The Question of Removing the Tares

- The servants ask, "Shall we pull them up?" but the master says **"No, lest you uproot the wheat as well."**
- God's patience allows the righteous and the wicked to coexist **until the right time for judgment**.

4. The Harvest and the Separation

- The harvest represents the decisive moment when **God brings judgment and justice**.
- The reapers (angels) separate the wheat and tares, showing that **judgment is not our job but God's**.
- The tares are burned (a picture of **judgment**), and the wheat is gathered (a picture of **salvation**).

How This Parable Relates to Jesus' Mission

This parable directly **addresses Israel's spiritual condition** in Jesus' day:

1. The true people of God (the wheat) are **those who follow Jesus**.
2. The tares represent apostate Israel—the Pharisees, Sadducees, etc. **who rejected the kingdom**.
3. The harvest was near—Jesus repeatedly warned that **judgment was coming upon Israel** (Matt. 23-24).
4. The burning of the tares is a vivid image of **the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70**, when the city and temple were set on fire by the Romans.
5. The wheat (true believers) survived and became the **foundation of the Church, the true people of God**.

VI. The Parable's Broader Implications

While the immediate meaning concerns Israel's judgment in the first century, its pattern applies to all history:

1. God allows good and evil to **coexist** until the right time.
2. Not everyone who looks religious belongs to God's kingdom—there are **false believers** in every age.
3. Judgment is certain, but it happens in **God's timing**.
4. The kingdom of God grows despite opposition—God's true people will be gathered into His presence.

Understanding the Parable in Context

Jesus tells a story of a man who sows good seed in his field, but an enemy comes and sows weeds (tares) among the wheat. The wheat and the tares grow together until the harvest, when the tares are gathered, burned, and the wheat is gathered into the barn.

What Was "The End of the Age?"

- Many assume "the end of the age" means the end of time, but in **Matthew 24:3**, the disciples ask Jesus about "the end of the age" right before he predicts the destruction of the Temple.
- The phrase **"this age"** in Jewish thought referred to the **Old Covenant age**, while **"the age to come"** referred to the Messianic age.
- Jesus was **declaring the end of the Old Covenant system**, not the end of the world.
- Thus, the **end of the age represents the judgment that was coming upon Old Covenant Israel**—fulfilled in the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70 with the destruction of the Temple. But can point forward toward the final judgment

The Two Groups: Wheat and Tares

This parable portrays two groups growing together: **true sons of the kingdom** (wheat) and **false sons** (tares).

1. The Wheat – The Remnant of Faithful Israel

- These are the Jews who recognized Jesus as the Messiah, such as the disciples, the early church, and those who accepted the New Covenant.
- Like wheat, they were **planted by God** and **belonged to His kingdom**.
- In a general sense the wheat can represent the true people of God (the true believers in Christ)

2. The Tares – The Apostate Leaders of Israel

- These represent the Pharisees, Sadducees who claimed to be God's people but rejected Jesus.
- These leaders opposed Jesus, persecuted his followers, and ultimately led to his crucifixion.
- In a general sense the tares can represent false believers. Those who profess Christ but they are either deceived or deceivers.

By **AD 70**, this distinction was made clear. The Temple was destroyed, the old religious system was judged, and **true worship continued through Christ and His people**.

The Fire and the Gathering

Old Testament frequently uses fire as a symbol of God's judgment, especially in the context of national destruction, divine wrath, and purging. Fire in these cases would symbolize total destruction.

- **Jeremiah 4:4** (Judgment on Judah) *"Circumcise yourselves to the Lord, remove the foreskin of your hearts, O men of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem, lest my wrath go forth like fire, and burn with none to quench it, because of the evil of your deeds."*
- **Lamentations 4:11** (Babylonian destruction in 586BC) *"The Lord gave full vent to his wrath; he poured out his hot anger, and he kindled a fire in Zion that consumed its foundations."*
- **Isaiah 66:15-16** (Judgment on Israel's National Enemies) *"See, the Lord is coming with fire, and his chariots are like a whirlwind; he will bring down his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For with fire and with his sword the Lord will execute judgment upon all men, and many will be those slain by the Lord."*

1. The Tares Burned (Judgment on Apostate Israel)

- The **"burning in the fire"** speaks of **the destruction that fell upon Jerusalem in AD 70**.
- This was not just about hell, but about the national judgment that Jesus warned of in Matt. 24.

2. The Wheat Gathered into the Barn (The True Israel, the Church)

- Those who followed Jesus became part of **the new, enduring people of God**—the Church.
- The destruction of Jerusalem was a visible sign that the **New Covenant had fully arrived**.

Conclusion: Practical Application for the Church Today

The Church is God's wheat field today, and this parable gives us essential lessons on how to live faithfully in a world where the righteous and unrighteous grow together.

1. Expect That There Will Be Tares Among the Wheat: There will always be false teachings, hypocritical religion, and counterfeit faith within Christianity. Paul warns many times of such. We must be discerning—test all things by Scripture, not outward appearances (1 John 4:1).

2. Be Patient and Trust God's Timing in Judgment: It is not our job to bring judgment—that belongs to God. The Church should be known for grace, not judgmentalism. Instead of trying to "weed out" sinners, we should focus on growing in Christ, preaching the Gospel, and trusting God's justice.

3. Remain Rooted in Christ and Bear Fruit: The wheat doesn't need to focus on the tares—it just needs to grow and bear fruit. Our role as believers is to focus on abiding in Christ, producing the fruit of the Spirit, and making disciples. Instead of being distracted by the problems around us, we must focus on growth and faithfulness.