

The Field is the World

Rhys Thomas – Fulton – November 3, 2019

Parable of the Sower: Matthew 13:3 – 9, 18 – 23, Luke 8:5 – 15, Mark 4:3 – 9, 14 – 20

Parable of the Tares: Matthew 13:24 – 30, 37 – 43

The world is broken. How do we deal with that? We have natural disasters, governments of all shapes and sizes (all of which are disasters), ethnic groups who hate each other, special interest groups who want what they want even if it means trampling on everyone else, and individuals who have made bad choices into an art form. At various times over the last 2000 years, Christianity has responded with isolationism typified by the monastic movement, hatred resulting in wars, harangues on the street corner about hell and damnation, and various shades of grey in between.

What should be our relationship with those on the outside? Certainly, we do not have a pdf of the Book of Life, so we can't identify exactly who is in and who is out, although, when considering most people, their standing with God may be guessed with a reasonable degree of probability.

Of course, the media doesn't help. Bad news sells. If we were to assume that the whole world were proportionately characterized by the national news, we might come to the conclusion that there are only a few dozen reasonable people left on the planet.

All this brokenness can be depressing, fearful, or stressful, or a combination of all three. How does this mesh with the idea of Good News? What happened to the promises of peace and joy in this life?

Jesus told two parables about the world: The Parable of the Sower and the Parable of the Tares (which is an Old English word for weeds). In both parables, the collection of all people on the earth, what we call The World (not the planet itself but the population that lives on it) is characterized as a field. In the Parable of the Sower, the seed is the Word which falls on varying qualities of soil. In the Parable of the Tares, the Son of Man sows the "sons of the kingdom," whereas the devil sows those who follow him.

Both of these are agricultural illustrations. Israel was an agricultural nation, so it made sense. They understood that farmers are not passive onlookers. They till and fertilize and remove rocks and weeds. Have you ever wondered where all those stone fences came from in areas of the world where farming has been going on for thousands of years? Those are the rocks they have removed from the fields. Small areas that don't produce a good yield get special attention after harvest, before the next planting. But, don't put herbicides and pesticides in your mental image. They had not been invented in Jesus' day.

The Parable of the Sower may be found in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. They are very much the same. The Parable of the Tares is only in Matthew, conveniently, in the same chapter as the Parable of the Sower. For convenience and to prevent you having to flip a lot of pages, I will stick to Matthew 13.

Here is the first parable, starting in verse 3: "A sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But, when the sun was up, they were scorched and because they had no root, they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But some fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundred-fold, some sixty, some thirty."

Skipping to the Parable of the Tares, in verse 24: “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 (weeds) 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 to then 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 and burn them, but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

Fortunately, Jesus explained both of these parables, also in Matthew 13, and we will get to the explanations as we go.

The first soil, the hard-packed pathway, is explained in verse 19, “When anyone hears the word of the kingdom and not understanding, then the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is he who is the pathway.”

A brief note about the evil one, Satan. When Jesus was on earth, Satan had access to both heaven and earth, as demonstrated by demon-possession and the temptation-in-the-wilderness scene. After Jesus went home, there was a war in heaven; Satan and his guys were exiled to earth for a short time, as described in Revelation 12. Things got worse on earth because Satan was upset over losing the war, getting exiled, and the fact that he had only a short time. According to the prediction found in Zechariah 13 as confirmed in 2 Peter 2:4, Jude 6, and Revelation 20:2, shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, Satan and his guys were locked up in the abyss and, as it says in Revelation 20:3, “Could deceive the nations no longer.” So, we, today, have nothing to fear from that quarter.

But even if we lived in the first century, in the period described in the book of Acts, Christians of that time were assured that they could overcome the worst Satan had to offer, as confirmed in Ephesians 6:11, James 4:7, 1 John 3:8, and 1 John 4:4.

So what shall we do with this explanation of the hardpacked pathway in the Parable of the Sower? I think we can apply it to the evil that runs rampant in the world today. Even without Satan to threaten us personally, there is plenty of evil to go around. But the assurance remains; evil perhaps may cause temporary discomfort, it cannot overcome us.

Back to the parable. What can we do about those who hear the Word but don’t understand it? They have been exposed, but they just don’t get it. Perhaps they have had negative interactions with the church in the past, or they were taught a nonsensical gospel. From the parable, we need to learn that we don’t have much time to straighten out this problem, or the birds, like Alfred Hitchcock’s birds, are going to come and snatch away any potential for letting the Word grow.

Prosperous farmers do not sit back and curse the hard ground for not yielding a crop. They do not excuse the hardpacked pathways because, after all, we need somewhere to walk. No, every square foot of a field needs to yield. Did we not scatter seed on it?

We know how a pathway got hard; people walked on it and packed it down. Why do people (the dirt) get hard? Why don’t they understand? I suggest that we need to till up this hardpacked soil by asking questions, not by telling. We need to listen, develop a relationship, and understand both why they are the way they are and where they would like to be. Further, when we think we have some insight into what made them hard, we need use the right tools skillfully. The gospel

must be understandable to ordinary people, even when they are hardpacked. We need to keep it simple and practical. We need to use words they understand – simple words, not religious jargon. And, we need to till up those areas that have made them hard – the rejection, the judging, the feelings of worthlessness – and let them know that the Word neither rejects them nor judges them, but rather wants to get them to where they want to be. This may sound like a tall order for us, something beyond our skill set. But remember, we need to trust in the Spirit whom God has made to dwell in all faithful people, and in the power of the Word. My skill is nothing by comparison. I don't need to show them verses; that is generally counterproductive. We need to keep it simple and just let them read (or you read it to them because, seriously, many people hate reading). The Word is simple and understandable if we just get out of the way. Most people in this category are convinced that, when they turn the page, the Word will make them look really bad. Assure them; the Word is about how to succeed. What good is it to harp on what you do wrong? That helps no one.

Moving on to the next soil type: The Shallow Soil in verses 20 – 21, “But he who received the seed on stony places, this is he who hears the word and immediately receives it with joy; yet he has no root in himself, but endures only for a while. For when tribulation or persecution arises because of the Word, he falls away.”

In the first century, and in many places in the world today, becoming a Christian includes a degree of personal risk. In Islamic countries, you might be arrested and executed for blasphemy. In Mormon areas, if you are a business owner, you will lose a significant amount of business. But, even in places like most places in the US where no one cares one way or the other, problems of a much less drastic nature may arise: family problems, loss of friends. Whatever the source or the severity, the problem, that results in dying out when the going gets tough, is lack of depth of faith.

What can we do about it? First, like a good farmer, remove the rocks to expose the soil. Address potential conflicts. Don't let a new Christian get blindsided. If you know the person well, and you should, you can address potential conflicts with family or loss of friends due to making a commitment to doing the right thing. This may sound odd, but if your family business has existed through shady dealings, which only works if the whole family is on board, becoming a Christian not only hampers the way you have always done business, but the rest of the family will suddenly distrust you, like you may expose them to the tax man or the FBI. Or, the family and friends may be accustomed to shady personal dealings like unfaithfulness or abuse or drug use. Same problem; they will be afraid that they will be exposed. The new Christian needs to think about these things before opposition arises.

Second, like a farmer, till deep. If you have a section of ground that doesn't yield very well, you don't plow shallow for fear of hitting rocks; you plow deep to purposely bring them to the surface. Certainly, bringing up the rocks means you will have a lot of work to do carrying those recently exposed rocks to the edge of the field. But the other choice is to watch the crop wither and die in July. Address real issues, not just first principles (as they are called in Hebrews 6). If the new Christian only knows the rituals and meeting times, they will not have the tools to handle this new life. Rather, they need to know how to access the power of the indwelling Spirit, how to unload guilt and pick up joy and peace.

Moving along to the third type of bad soil: thorny ground, “Now he who receives the seed among the thorns is he who hears the Word, and the cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches choke the Word, and he becomes unfruitful.”

The cares of this world and the deceitfulness of riches. Looking at the cares first, this world has built-in cares. For example, Paul noted in 1 Corinthians 7:32 – 40 that getting married sets up competing demands on your time. Paul is very careful to say that getting married is not a bad thing or a lower condition; he just was warning the Christians in Corinth about that potential conflict. The world, not thinking of that description as a bad thing but just the nature of the world we live in, exerts pressure on us. We need to earn a living. That takes time and effort which we would rather devote to something more fun or satisfying. The economy goes up and down, but we want to provide for our own. The government has periods of more and less craziness that makes it hard to enjoy anything. New Christians need to be taught how to manage their expectations so the pressures of life don't choke out faith.

The deceitfulness of riches – now that is an apt description. When I was a kid, no one had air conditioning. Mobile phones, let alone smart phones, had not been invented. No computers. Two car families were rare. Many had none. Now, those things are necessities. No, they really are not necessities. They are the deceitfulness of riches. Most people think that making more money will make them happy.

Certainly, we live in the richest country of all time. The average income of the poorest 20% in America is higher than the average income of any other country. However, wealth in itself is not a bad thing. Money is not the root of all evil; the love of money is the root of all evil. Money is deceitful. In fact, among those whom we know in those Third World countries, they have next to nothing, but wanting to rise from rice and beans to occasional real meat can be just as deceitful.

Christians need to know what will bring them peace, and it is not money. Otherwise, they will be deceived by the promise of a more comfortable life.

The wealth of our country is not a bad thing in itself. It all depends on how we use it. Do we use it or does it use us? That was Paul's question in 1 Corinthians 6:12. Being productive in the kingdom requires that we first figure out how we can obtain that promised peace and joy, or the deceitfulness of riches will creep up on us and destroy both peace and joy while holding out the illusion of future happiness. Peace and joy are found in the family of the faithful, people whom you trust and who trust you; people who are selflessly concerned about you as you are of them. Money is just comfort food that makes you gain weight.

And finally, the field in the Parable of the Tares, picking up in verse 37, "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."

The characters have changed a little. In the Parable of the Sower, the seed was the Word; people were the various types of soil. In this parable, the seeds (both wheat and tares) are people. The soil is just where they land. The servants are the angels. The point is that the angels wanted to go down to earth and start pulling those weeds, but Jesus knew that the weeding process would harm the wheat, so He is letting both useful and useless grow up, side by side, until the Last Day.

I think there is more to this than an admonition to angels. Certainly, the direct application is to prevent those angels from jumping the gun and trying to clean up the world before the appointed time. But what can we, the good seed, learn from this?

First, if the angels are being restrained from coming down here to weed out the useless who are just taking up space and consuming soil nutrients, then this cannot be our job either. The weeds of this world will be taken out, but only at the right time. Christians are not the enforcers of good behavior. We have to learn to live, grow, and produce in a field full of weeds. Weeding would trample a lot of good people, too. Such a behavioral enforcement function would obscure the real objectives of the gospel. We are not here to make outsiders be better behaved. We are here to teach them about miraculous transformation. Even though it may appear that the weeds are soaking up nutrients that the wheat needs, Jesus says not to be concerned about it. Just grow.

Second, in this country, we have the option of influencing the actions of our government. In the First Century, that was not the case. In most other nations of this world today, the common person has no say in their government. But our opinions about what behaviors our government should enforce can be heard, but not because that is our task as Christians. Rather, every citizen gets a voice in how they think the country should be run, and we would rather not watch bad behavior. Rather, we would like to be exposed to good behavior. That is our preference, so we should participate in government to cause our preferences to become law, just as people with different points of view do. The weeds want to be weeds and would prefer that everyone be a weed. That is their right in our system. If they get their way, don't let it ruin your day. Right is still right and wrong is still wrong. The righteous can still access peace and joy, trust and selflessness. We just happen to be in the minority, so we don't get to have everything the way we would choose. If you want to change that, make more Christians.

The world is not the enemy; we live in it. Don't curse the hard places, the rocky places, and the thorny places; be a good farmer and prepare the ground to receive the Word. And, rejoice that there really is good soil that yields a good crop. Don't hate the weeds, fear for their plight – for the uselessness they will have in this life and the torment in the next one. Rescue them – understand that it's a miracle if you convert a weed into wheat. Harvest time is coming.