

### Matthew 13:24 – 43

<sup>13:24</sup> Jesus presented another parable to them, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. <sup>25</sup> But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. <sup>26</sup> But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. <sup>27</sup> The slaves of the landowner came and said to him, ‘Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?’ <sup>28</sup> And he said to them, ‘An enemy has done this!’ The slaves said to him, ‘Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?’ <sup>29</sup> But he said, ‘No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them. <sup>30</sup> Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, ‘First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn.’”

<sup>31</sup> He presented another parable to them, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed, which a man took and sowed in his field; <sup>32</sup> and this is smaller than all other seeds, but when it is full grown, it is larger than the garden plants and becomes a tree, so that ‘the birds of the air come and nest in its branches.’ <sup>33</sup> He spoke another parable to them, ‘The kingdom of heaven is like leaven, which a woman took and hid in three pecks of flour until it was all leavened.’

<sup>34</sup> All these things Jesus spoke to the crowds in parables, and he did not speak to them without a parable. <sup>35</sup> This was to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet: ‘I will open my mouth in parables; I will utter things hidden since the foundation of the world.’ <sup>36</sup> Then he left the crowds and went into the house. And his disciples came to him and said, ‘Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field.’ <sup>37</sup> And he said, ‘The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, <sup>38</sup> and the field is the world; and as for the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil one; <sup>39</sup> and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. <sup>40</sup> So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. <sup>41</sup> The Son of Man will send forth his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, <sup>42</sup> and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. <sup>43</sup> Then ‘the righteous will shine forth as the sun’ in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.

#### Cultural Background

- Jesus told parables to highlight a few truths, not all. So not all points should be pressed for theological ‘reality.’ For instance, this parable makes it sound like people don’t have any real choices about being a wheat or a tare. But we do.
- ‘Tares: The bearded darnel... a species of rye-grass, the seeds of which are a strong soporific [sleep inducing] poison. It bears the closest resemblance to wheat till the ear appears, and only then the difference is discovered. It grows plentifully in Syria and Palestine.’ (*Easton’s Revised Bible Dictionary*)
- Mustard is a wild and unruly plant, typically planted outside a garden.
- ‘Birds of the air’ are also an Old Testament allusion to Gentiles (Ezekiel 31:1 – 6)
- ‘Leaven’ is yeast, meticulously avoided by Jews on holy days and most occasions (cf. Leviticus 23)
- ‘Three pecks of flour’ approximately 50 pounds of flour, enough bread for over 100 people. The quantity suggests a festive occasion. We are probably to see here an allusion to Genesis 18:6 where Abraham asks Sarah to prepare cakes from three measures of flour (probably unleavened) for his heavenly visitors.

## Questions

1. Give the cultural and historical background:
2. What do you think about the strategy of the wheat and the tares?
  - a. Has Jesus spoken of 'tares' before, under another name? Compare Matthew 7: false prophets
    - i. False prophets look like sheep but are wolves. Tares look like wheat.
    - ii. False prophets can be known by their fruits. Tares have bad fruit.
    - iii. False prophets will be cut down and burned. Tares are to be gathered and burned.
  - b. (After you let the conversation go for a while,) Ask: Is there a reason that the mustard seed and leaven parables are sandwiched in between the parable of the tares and its explanation?
3. Mustard seed
  - a. State: What is a mustard seed? It's a wild and unruly plant, like zucchini. You have to be careful where you put it and how you manage it. If you give big zucchini to people, they know you don't love them (it's your compost!). It was a profane plant. Mustard seeds were used but it was considered unholy and unruly.
  - b. What about those birds? Who wants birds in your garden? They eat *your* food.
  - c. Furthermore, birds refer to Gentiles! Look at Ezekiel 31:1 – 6, referring to how Assyria and Egypt became Empires spanning nations, like trees where birds nest in the branches. But Jesus seems to want these birds, these other nations.

Ezk.31:2 Son of man, say to Pharaoh king of Egypt and to his hordes,  
'Whom are you like in your greatness?  
<sup>3</sup> Behold, Assyria was a cedar in Lebanon  
With beautiful branches and forest shade,  
And very high,  
And its top was among the clouds.  
<sup>4</sup> The waters made it grow, the deep made it high.  
With its rivers it continually extended all around its planting place,  
And sent out its channels to all the trees of the field.  
<sup>5</sup> Therefore its height was loftier than all the trees of the field  
And its boughs became many and its branches long  
Because of many waters as it spread them out.  
<sup>6</sup> All the birds of the heavens nested in its boughs,  
And under its branches all the beasts of the field gave birth,  
And all great nations lived under its shade.'
  - d. So would you really plant a mustard seed in your garden? No! It was usually separated from the field/garden and put somewhere else, at a distance, in the wild area.
  - e. How would you feel if you had 'birds' over as guests to your home? Birds aren't that considerate...
  - f. State: In Mt.12:46 – 48, Jesus redefined family not by blood but by whoever heard the word of God and did it. We use the concept of family to exclude, but Jesus uses it to include.
  - g. Notice that Jewish norms of hospitality had become influenced by the desire to preserve status. Since who you ate with and who you welcomed reflected on your social status, Jesus' kingdom challenges the norms of hospitality. This is about hospitality so radical that we struggle with it. Jesus uses negative terms to describe it because that's how it may feel to those who resist it, or to us when we struggle with the expansive nature of Jesus' kingdom. This is Jesus' kingdom, not ours.
  - h. What are ways we would perceive the wide-open hospitality of the kingdom of God a nuisance? Are people unwanted pests? What are ways we sometimes want to keep our Christian fellowship small? Or certain people out?
4. Leaven
  - a. There are some problems with this picture, too.
  - b. Where does the three pecks of flour come from? It's what Abraham and Sarah used to bake bread in Genesis 18:6, to be hospitable to God when he showed up in the form of three men. It was a classic Jewish symbol of hospitality.
  - c. But other elements of the story have an ambiguous tone. What is leaven? Yeast, an impure substance. It's what you get out of your house during Passover. Yeast works by corrupting; it's a bacteria.

- d. She 'hid' the leaven? That's an odd term. People usually intentionally mix the leaven in bread if they want bread. Why would she 'hide' it? Of course it won't *remain* hidden when it rises and gets baked!!
  - e. If you're expecting a more 'holy' meal, how would you feel if you were served unleavened bread?
  - f. Have you ever entered a Christian community and thought, 'Oh, *you* are here?'
  - g. But the kingdom is like this leaven: It surprises the person who is expecting unleavened bread. The kingdom challenges the norms of hospitality. Again, Jesus seems to be using this type of language to shock his audience. The kingdom is like receiving hospitality that you're not accustomed to. It gets into something and works from within.
5. The hospitality theme explains the parable of the wheat and the tares.
- a. What do the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven have in common? The theme of hospitality.
  - b. If you want to be apathetic towards others, then do you agree with the parables of the mustard seed and the leaven? The kingdom of heaven, from a certain perspective, is like offering hospitality for unwanted guests, or receiving hospitality from people you don't like. So if you want to withhold hospitality and keep certain people out of the Christian community, are you a wheat or a tare?
  - c. Who opposes the radical hospitality of the kingdom in your fellowship or church? You don't have to say that they *are* tares, for we don't know that yet, and only Jesus makes that call in the end. Back in Jesus' day, they were the Jews who didn't want the Gentiles. They are self-centered, self-serving people who don't really grasp the love of Jesus. They want to center Christian fellowship around themselves instead of the world around them. Perhaps they see the Christian community only as a safe haven from the big, bad, unholy world out there.
    - i. Illus: When I first met S\* on campus, she wanted to meet with me and talk about her relationship with her boyfriend, her questions about her major, her past experiences with friends and church, and so on. That's fairly normal for a college student, and I was glad to sit down for lunch with her. But during the second meeting, I found myself feeling sleepy. My mind was wandering. So I asked her if she could help me do evangelism by manning a large interactive display. She was game for it. She actually showed up to it a few days later. She had conversations with non-Christians. She realized that she didn't have answers to questions they asked. So that deepened our conversations. She was up for doing it again, so we did. She realized how much more she needed to learn, and to integrate Jesus into every part of her life and heart and mind. She also learned how to ask other people good questions and listen much more attentively. S\* became one of the most dynamic student leaders I've ever worked with.
    - ii. How is this a practical leadership lesson? By giving us one measure of who is really growing or not. A true Christian – a person who is showing signs of being truly wheat – shows signs of offering herself or himself to others in the mission. A person who is iffy – a person who is showing signs of being a tare – draws other people to spiritual sleep, not mission. The priorities of a person who is becoming a tare is a spiritual introversion and a focus on self and the Christian group at the expense of Christ's mission to the world.
    - iii. Also, Jesus tells us that we are not doing anyone a favor by sheltering them from his own mission. It's customary in some churches and fellowships to think of evangelism as something that only some people do. That is wrong. Evangelism is something we are all called to do. We care for people and their spiritual lives. We do that thoughtfully and not obnoxiously. We do it intelligently and not by turning off our brains and repeating things we don't understand. So Jesus calls everyone to grow in an outward way. Whether or not people respond to that is up to them. But a ministry needs to call for numerical growth through outreach to non-Christians, invite conversions, be prepared to disciple new Christians, and be structured for growth.
    - iv. Illus: There was a time when my church didn't have evangelism in our vision statement. I was invited to become a leader under those circumstances. I said no. There were several reasons for that, including personal limitations at that time. But one of them was that I would not serve in a church that did not have that as central to their vision, and neither should you. Why? Because without it, ministry becomes all about personality and too personal. Ministry is always has a personal element to it. But if you don't connect personal growth to outward growth, here's what you lose. You lose any objective way to evaluate your strategies, because everything becomes personal. You lose any objective way to make decisions, because everything becomes personal.

- d. How does wheat multiply itself? Wheat bears seed to be spread even further. As Jesus had said in 13:8 and 13:23, 'a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty.' These are true Christians who advance the kingdom beyond themselves. You don't have to be a flaming evangelist, but you have to care about the advance of God's kingdom and the welcome of those outside. By contrast, tares induce sleep, inaction, lethargy. They slow down kingdom growth and suck resources away from the mission. But we are to continue with them, perhaps in the hopes that they would change. By continually calling for more radical hospitality, and calling them to find their life in Jesus and his mission to the world.