

[Isaiah 44:6-8](#)

[Psalm 86:11-17](#)

[Romans 8:12-25](#)

[Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43](#)

SERMON FOR JULY 23, 2023

THE WHEAT AND THE TARES

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Summary: We are one in the Spirit

The central theme of the collection of extraordinary and matchless writings that comprise what we now refer to as the Old Testament, the theme that served to define the world view and self-conception of the historical nation of ancient Israel and that motivated the authoring and preservation of those writings, and that was the fundamental determinant of both the character and the actual history of that amazing nation over the course of the many centuries of its existence prior to the birth of Jesus, is the theme of separation.

From the beginning in Genesis and running through the first five books of Moses, through all the historical works, through the psalms and prophets, right up to the very end of the Old Testament, the central unifying concept is that God, in human history, is seeking to create for Himself a special people, a Chosen People, a people who have been separated out or who separated themselves from the rest of humanity in order to be brought into a special relationship with God, a relationship that confers both special privileges and also special responsibilities.

Except for the book of Daniel, the rest of the Hebrew Scriptures had all been written about four hundred years before the birth of Jesus, and during those intervening four centuries, this 'separatist' mentality had assumed many forms, in some ways becoming even more extreme than what we find in the Old Testament. Thus for example we find the emergence of a special group of religious folks who called themselves Pharisees. The very name, Pharisees, in

Hebrew, means ‘the separated ones.’ These were people who aimed to separate themselves, not just from humanity at large, but from the Jewish people themselves, to form a separate and completely purified subset of Jews who perfectly satisfied what they viewed as God’s requirements for personal relationship with Him by total and absolute obedience to the laws of God which they felt they had discovered by study and reflection on the Old Testament. And in their view, they were simply continuing the project of creating a people who qualified for God’s grace and blessing, while in so doing, relegating everyone else to the outer darkness, the region outside God’s love and protection.

The Pharisees were not the only group in Israel that pursued this project although they are the group about which we know the most. And the reason we know the most about them was because they were the group who most successfully represented this commitment to separation during the time of Jesus, and therefore the contrast between their particular embodiment of this desire for separation and the contrasting world view of Jesus himself.

And that brings us to the point of today’s message. Throughout all four of the Gospel accounts, the conversations and confrontations between the Pharisees and Jesus are described in order to contrast their message from the one that Jesus came to deliver. This contrast is presented in many different settings, on many different occasions, and in many different figures of speech; but the point is always the same: the good news that Jesus was introducing to the world was a fundamental change in our understanding of the relationship between God and His creation, and most particularly between God and His own children, those He had created in his own image. And what was that change, what was that new understanding, what was that final and complete revelation of God’s purposes that Jesus manifested both in his teaching and in his life? The answer is the one Jesus Himself put most succinctly in chapter twelve of John’s gospel: “I did not come to condemn the world, but to save it.” (v. 7)

Thinking about Christ’s revelation in that way also, I think, helps to explain why, in all the Gospel accounts of the history of Jesus’ three-year ministry, the Gospel writers make a point of describing how the Pharisees and others of their like mind began by being curious about Christ’s message, and then how, gradually, as it became clearer and clearer to them the utterly radical nature of his ministry, their curiosity turned into suspicion, then evolved into outrage and rancor, and finally flamed into outright hostility and persecution, a determined hatred that led ineluctably to the horrible injustices of Good Friday, and their unthinkable culmination on the Cross.

What was the reason for the magnitude and ferocity of their response? Because they had learned that Jesus had come to correct or reform their worldview? No. It was because they had learned that he had come to replace it.

In deed as well as in explicit teaching, Jesus gradually made clear to their shocked sensibilities his rejection of that world view. Far from separating himself from those the Pharisees and their ilk regarded with moral horror, Jesus deliberately associated himself with those people, with tax collectors and sinners, with prostitutes and the unclean, with the heathen Gentiles and even the hated Romans, with the unforgiven and, according to the Pharisees way of thinking, the unforgivable.

If we move ahead to the 23rd Chapter of Matthew's gospel, near the very end of his ministry, we find Jesus giving voice in the clearest possible terms to what he himself represented in opposition to his antagonists in the famous list of so-called Woes that he pronounces upon them, and at the heart of this terrible indictment, we read the following: *But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you shut up the kingdom of heaven against men...* (v. 13)

That was the very heart of Christ's Good News, of his Gospel, that God loves each and every one of His children with an infinite and eternal love, that His Kingdom is one of forgiveness and not condemnation, of family, not enemy, of reconciliation, not separation.

And that brings now at last to the parable we read at the beginning, the parable of the wheat and the tares. As we have it in Matthew, it consists of two parts: the parable itself, followed by what Matthew purports to be an explanation of the parable. And in the supposed explanation of the parable, Jesus seems to be suggesting something like a final separation of the good from the bad. How can this be reconciled with the view that I'm presenting to you this morning, that Jesus did not come to offer a new and modified version of the doctrine of separation between the deserving and the undeserving, the good and the bad, the winners and losers?

But before giving my answer, let me first say something by way of historical background. In the decades and centuries following the death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, different attempts were made to understand what it all meant, and what His life and teaching should mean for all of us. Some of those attempts tended in the direction of the understanding of universal reconciliation that I'm representing to you this morning; others tended in the direction of seeing Jesus as rather offering a new version of separation, one based not on obedience to the perceived commandments of God, but rather on personal acceptance of the

divinity of Jesus. And it cannot be denied that the latter understanding, the understanding that Christ did not come to reveal a new revelation of the relation of God to His creation, but rather to offer a new and better version of the old understanding, a new and better version of what the dividing line should be between God's children...it cannot be denied that that version of what Christ revealed about God has by and large prevailed. By and large, through Church history, we have been taught that there are winners and losers: the winners are those, not who obey a set of laws – as the Pharisees taught – but rather those who have a certain belief about Jesus and the losers those who lack those beliefs. And this same tradition has taught that those who accede to those beliefs about Jesus are rewarded with heaven, and those who do not are consigned to Hell. And that prevailing tradition has often relied upon this parable and a few others to support their belief.

But this morning, for your reflection, I'll offer a different suggestion. If this were our Bible Study class, I'd offer some linguistic and contextual reasons for my own belief, but this morning from the pulpit, I'll simply say that there are many reasons to believe that the so-called 'interpretation' of the parable that Matthew offers do not actually represent the words of Christ, but rather an addition to those words by Matthew himself.

Matthew, I believe, steeped in the Jewish theological worldview and writing for a largely Jewish audience, was one of the first of many who here and there took the liberty of trying to interpret the words of Jesus in conformity to that underlying and almost irresistible human temptation – not just Jewish, but human – the temptation to separate the good from the bad, the saved from the unsaved, the winners from the losers...with ourselves, of course, always among the winners.

Minus that second part, what we have then is a parable that simply makes the same point that Jesus made over and over again, in many other images and parables and instructions: that it is not for us to judge the inner character of others – that the final separation and adjudication of eternal outcomes, however and whenever that is to come about, should be left to the heavenly Christ, because only he knows the heart, only he knows all there is to know about each individual life, only he knows even the number of the hairs on our heads.

Forgive us our debts, we say, at the heart of our Lord's prayer, as we have forgiven the debts of others. And what we learn from that is that our forgiveness of others will be an important element in Christ's evaluation of us. Judge not, that ye be not judged tells us the exact same thing. And so does the parable of the wheat and the tares.

And so our sermon prayer for this morning, eternal Father of us all, is that you remove all trace of spiritual judgmentalism from our hearts, that you help us keep our focus on reforming ourselves rather than reforming others in the matters of eternity, that you draw us ever nearer to yourself by drawing us ever nearer to Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.